

The situation of single parents in the EU



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Abstract

This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, describes trends in the situation of single parents in the EU (with additional evidence from Iceland and Norway). It analyses the resources, employment, and social policy context of single parents and provides recommendations to improve their situation, with attention to the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGEPI	Aide à la garde d'enfant pour les parents isolés
AROP	At Risk of Poverty
AROPE	At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion
BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
CSR	Country-Specific Recommendation
EC	European Commission
ECB	European Central Bank
ECJ	European Court of Justice
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ESPN	European Social Policy Network
EES	European Employment Strategy
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
EU-LFS	European Union Labour Force Survey
EU-SILC	The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
IMF	International Monetary Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
SAMIP	Social Assistance and Minimum Income Protection (database)
SPIN	Social Policy Indicators database

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Single parenthood is becoming more common in the EU. The majority of single parents in the EU do well, in the sense that they have employment, do not live at-risk-of-poverty and are not materially deprived. As the majority of single-parent households are headed by women, this is in part an achievement in gender equality. Yet, compared to couples with children, single parents do have higher rates of living in a household with low work intensity, at-risk-of-poverty (AROP), or material deprivation. During the period 2010 to 2018, the situation of single parents in the EU improved: their rates of severe housing deprivation, severe material deprivation, at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion (AROPE), and very low working intensity decreased. However, at-risk-of-poverty rates did not improve.

Aim

Against this background, the aims of this study are:

- Describe trends in the situation of single parents in the EU, based on official statistics;
- Analyse the resources, employment, and social policy context of single parents in the EU. The study also describes policies on single parents in Iceland and Norway to further illustrate effective examples to follow;
- Provide recommendations to improve the situation of single parents in the EU, with attention to the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences.

Findings

Single parents have become better-resourced. Even though lower educated parents are more likely to become a single parent than higher educated parents, over time the share of single parents with a low level of education decreased and the share with a high level of education increased. In addition, particularly in North-Western European countries, both parents continue to be involved in the care for their children after separation or divorce, and an increasing number of children live equal amounts of time with both parents. This practice of joint physical custody is associated with good outcomes for the well-being of both children and parents.

Single parents have become more likely to be employed, and less likely to live in a household with a very low work intensity. However, compared to two-parent families, this employment is more likely part-time and based on temporary contracts. For an increasing number of single parents, work is not a guarantee against poverty. In-work poverty is lower in countries with employment protection, active labour market policies, paid leave, childcare, and adequate levels of redistribution.

Child support policies regulate the financial responsibilities of parents towards their children after separation. In many European countries, however, they are not highly effective in reducing poverty among single parents and their children, among other reasons because of their high level of complexity in relation to family diversity, and an interplay with means-tested benefits. Guaranteed advances on child support payments improve the effectiveness in reducing poverty among single parents, and help avoid long delays in support payments. Separating parents can retain (joint) legal custody in most cases (given that they had it prior to separation), which also suggests that the large variation across Europe in how common it is for children of separated parents to live with both parents relates to other factors. These include national norms on parenting and details of how custody law is implemented such as parenting plans and the legal presumption of joint custody.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the most important policy in promoting gender equality in the labour market and facilitating the employment of single parents, and to prevent the adverse outcomes among children of growing up in poverty. However, socially stratified use of ECEC means that this policy fails to reach in full those children and families who might benefit from it most. Enrolment in ECEC is more equal in countries that publicly provide or subsidize ECEC, guarantee a place for each child, provide higher quality, and have lower out-of-pocket fees for parents. In the majority of European countries, single-parents pay a larger share of their household income for childcare than two-parent households. Paid parental leave has the potential to increase employment among single parents and reduce their at-risk-of-poverty, and parental leave for fathers has the potential to create more gender-equal caring relations that last even when parents separate. For fathers to take up parental leave, the leave has to be non-transferable, well-paid and flexible. Yet, in the EU more than 1 in 10 working women and 1 in 8 working men are not eligible for statutory paid leave, in part due to precarious work.

Child benefits are perhaps the most effective form of redistribution to reduce poverty among single parents and working families alike. Child benefits administered through tax benefits can result in higher-income families receiving higher benefits than lower income families, thus underachieving their potential in poverty reduction. In the majority of European countries, the levels of child benefits declined relative to average wages. Periods of unemployment can be particularly challenging for single parents without a second earner to fall back on. Unemployment benefits have fallen in a small majority of European countries, and are below 75% in a large majority. Levels of minimum income protection for single parents have fallen, and are far below at-risk-of-poverty levels in all European countries but Cyprus.

The social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for single parents are still largely unknown. Based on early research findings, and lessons from previous economic crises, three risk factors for single parents were identified: school closures may be particularly difficult for single parents and their children, single parents work in sectors of the economy more strongly affected and income loss may be more difficult to compensate without a second earner, and if a period of austerity will follow this may disproportionately hurt single parents. Already, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, levels of social protection for single parents were weaker than they were prior to the Great Recession.

The European Union has limited influence on policies specifically for single parents, but has become increasingly influential in the areas of gender equality and in particular employment and social protection. The commitment to support employment and to reduce poverty is stated in the Europe 2020 strategy, was further implemented in the Social investment package, and is currently manifest in the pillar of social rights with the Directive on Work-Life Balance as an early deliverable.

An assessment of the EU policy context of single parents raised a number of prominent critiques. European integration was to be linked to increased levels of economic inequality within Member States, in important part due to spending limits and fiscal discipline in the European Semester leading to welfare state retrenchment. Gender equality was argued to have mostly been promoted to purposes of economic growth, and not considered in full. It has long been argued that employment growth in the EU alone has not been sufficient to reduce poverty. This study demonstrated that despite fewer single parents being low educated, fewer single parents living in a household with a very low work intensity, more single parents working, and greater involvement of both separated parents in the care for their child(ren), at-risk-of-poverty rates have not declined for single parents in the EU. Markets have become too precarious and unequal, and social security and in particular levels of minimum income protection were found to be inadequate and falling.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of the nuclear family of a woman and a man with their children as the dominant form of family is long outdated (UN Women, 2019). Families are diverse and always changing. This is true for individuals' life course, and for society at large. This study examines the situation of single parents in Europe, with a strong emphasis on Member States of the European Union. The study also describes policies on single parents in Iceland and Norway to further illustrate effective examples to follow.

Although the majority of single parents, and their families, fare well by the standards of commonly used indicators of economic well-being, they are more likely to live at risk of poverty or exclusion, or experience material deprivation than two-parent families. This is a reason for concern, as this not only impairs their current well-being, but also risks impairing the future opportunities for their children.

This Chapter describes trends in the number of single parents in the household, and examines their situation based on a set of commonly used indicators of economic well-being. It also sets up a central puzzle for this study: how is it possible that single parents have increased their labour market participation, but that their at-risk-of-poverty rates did not decline?

1.1. Methodology and outline of the study

The study is based on a literature review supplemented by analyses of existing indicators on single parents and on social policies for single parents. The literature review brings together a large amount of contemporary insights, and is primarily based on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and official policy reports.

The presentation of statistical data does not claim to allow for causal inferences, but to present descriptive evidence across countries and to illustrate arguments supported by the literature review. Mainly, three sources of data were used: indicators on the situation of single parents from Eurostat, policy indicators from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and policy indicators from the Social Policy Indicators (SPIN) Database. The policy indicators both from OECD and SPIN are publicly available, and based on the model household methodology. In this methodology, one or more ideal-typical families are specified (e.g. a single parent with two children aged four and seven, working full time for the national average wage), and the social policy rights of these families are determined in a number of countries. This type of indicator is preferable for comparative policy analysis (Clasen and Siegel, 2007), because variation across countries (or within countries over time) can only be attributed to differences in what the policy seeks to provide in terms of social rights to residents and citizens: the so-called policy supply. By keeping the definition of the model household(s) constant across countries, differences in the demand for a policy, or in the socio-economic composition of the population, are accounted for. To assess differences between countries in what policies intend to provide, and what rights people have, this type of indicators is superior to the commonly used enrolment rates (Sirén et al., 2020). For instance, how high the enrolment rates of children in ECEC are does not only depend on how the policy is designed (policy supply, such as the costs, or a guaranteed place), but also to factors that shape the demand for ECEC (e.g. the duration of parental leave, the economic cycle, or gender norms).

The aim of the study is to review a wide range of developments and policies and critically evaluate their effectiveness in improving the situation of single parents in the EU – given stated goals and targets. As such, this report does not advocate for a specific policy approach, or one policy over the other. Instead, it seeks to expand the scope of policy options for policy makers to choose from, with an appropriate empirical basis (Pielke, 2007). Where possible, insights are not based on single studies, but on bodies of research.

This study is organized as follows. This Chapter has provided an initial descriptive overview of the situation of single parents in the EU. The following Chapters examine explanations for the level of well-being of single parents, working from the individual level, to the labour market, to the policy level. Chapter 2, on resources, examines trends in the level of education among single parents, and joint physical custody. Chapter 3 examines trends in employment and in-work poverty among single parents, and discusses how it is possible that single parents' rates of income poverty have not improved despite rises in their employment. Chapter 4 examines policies that are specifically targeted towards single parents, while Chapter 5 examines policies that are tailored to a wider range of families but still have the potential to improve the situation of single parents. Chapter 6 reflects on early evidence on the potential consequences of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Chapter 7 describes the EU policy context of single parents, and brings together the main lessons from the study up to that point to critically assess the EU policy context of single parents. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes by presenting recommendations, organized by approaches that require long-term investments, and ones that have the potential to provide short-term solutions.

1.2. Trends in single parenthood

Single parents can be defined in a multitude of ways. The most commonly used definition considers a single parent to be living with one or more of their own dependent children, without a partner or spouse living in the household, but possibly with other family members (Duncan and Edwards, 1997). In other words, according to this definition, a single parent can have a partner as long as this partner does not live in the same household. It also allows for single parents to live with other family members, such as their siblings or their own parents (i.e. grandparents of the children in the household). This is commonly used in country-comparative analyses such as presented in this report, as it is not biased by cross-national differences in for instance the prevalence of multi-generational households (Chzhen and Bradshaw, 2012).

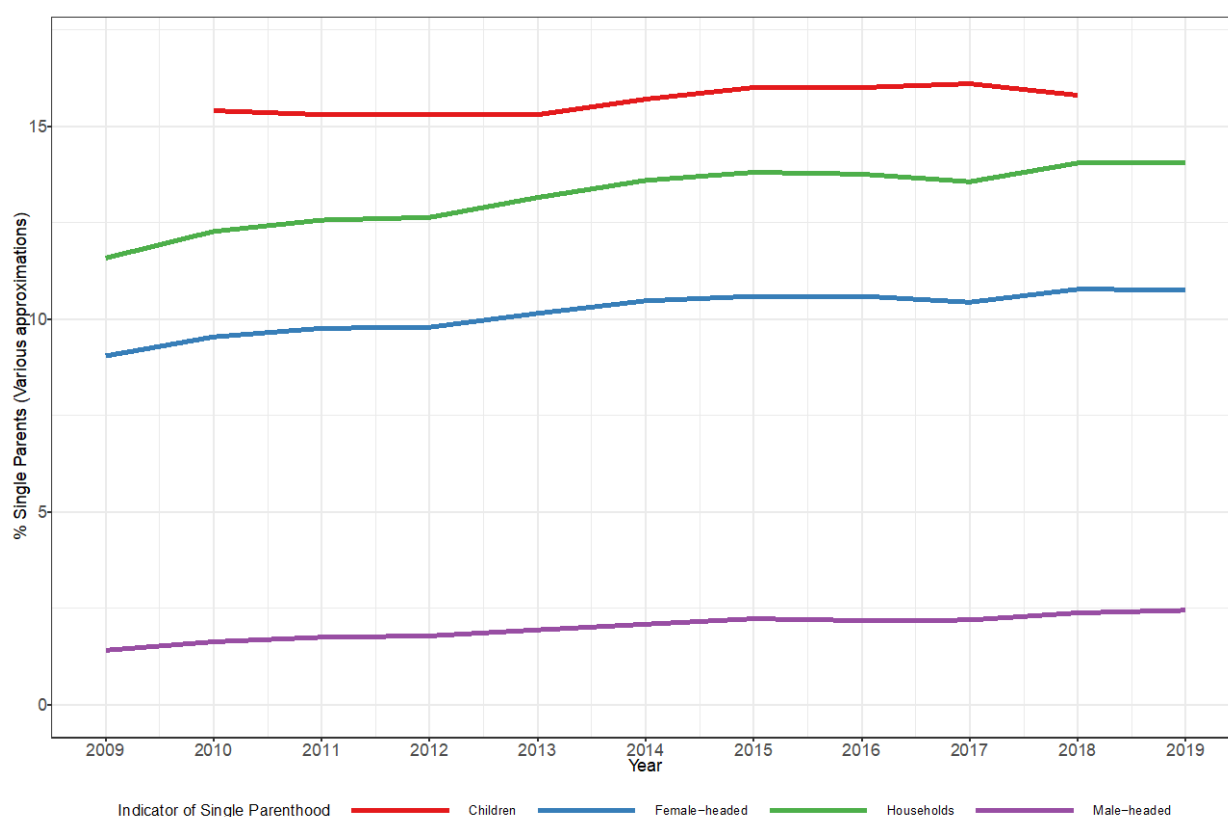
Yet, the official indicators on single parenthood that are made available in Eurostat tables do not allow to identify single parents strictly based on the definition above. As will be presented with more detail in Section 7.7.4, it is important to mention here that many of the Eurostat indicators refer to 'single adults with children' in which it cannot be explicitly identified whether these adults are the biological or social parents of the child(ren). Furthermore, many of the indicators cannot be differentiated by gender, thus in the way of the ability to examine the gendered nature of single parenthood. Finally, no confidence intervals are reported, which increases the risk of over-interpreting trends, and children living with both separated parents cannot be identified.

Nonetheless, these indicators are commonly used in official reporting on single parenthood (Jordan, Stewart, and Janta, 2019; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020), and in most cases will provide a reasonable approximation – particularly of trends within countries. These and similar indicators will

also be used throughout this report, and will be considered an approximation of the number and the situation of single parents in the EU. Most of the remainder of this study will refer to 'single parents' where relevant, except when specifically discussing the data that is presented in figures – in those cases the specific definition of the data source will be used.

In light of these limitations in identifying single parenthood in official Eurostat indicators, this Section presents trends in single parenthood based on a number of different indicators. These indicators are based on different micro-data sources (EU-SILC) and the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS).

Figure 1: Trends in single parenthood based on different indicators by gender, EU-27 average, 2009-2019



Source: Labour force survey [tables: lfst_hhnhtych (private households), lfst_hhaceday (adults), and ilc_lvps20 (children)].¹

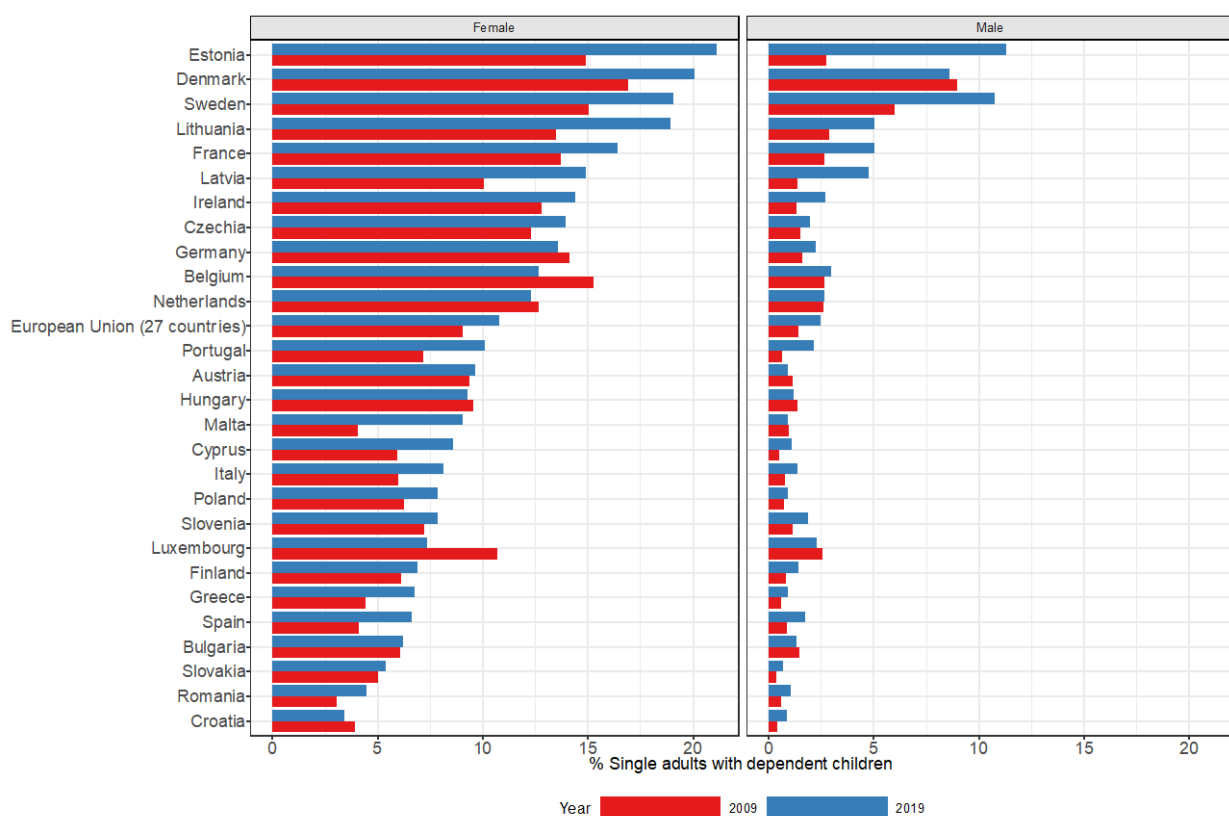
Figure 1 first shows the trends across the EU-27 of the percentage of children growing up with a single parent (red line). Here, a slight increase is observed between 2013 and 2018. Secondly, it shows private households with dependent children that are headed by a single adult, as a proportion of all households with dependent children (blue line). Between 2009 and 2019 there has been a substantial increase of the number of households with children that are headed by a single adult, from 12% to 14%. These child-based or household-based indicators cannot be differentiated by gender. Therefore, finally, Figure 1 also shows trends in single women and single men heading a household with dependent children, as a percentage of all adults with dependent children. Again, a similar trend of a rising number of single adults with children is observed, and it becomes very clear that single

¹ The data for all figures were prepared in R (R Core Team, 2020), downloaded using the Eurostat package (Lahti et al., 2017), and visualised using the ggplot2 package (Wickham, 2016).

parenthood is strongly gendered: many more households with a single adult and dependent children are headed by women (11% in 2019) compared to men (3%), although this family form has also become more common among men.

Two important conclusions can be derived from these data: single parenthood seems to be rising in the EU, irrespective of whether it is measured as the number of children growing up with a single parent, the number of private households with children headed by single adults, or the number of households with children headed by single women or single men. These findings corroborate those that are reported elsewhere, based on other data sources (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018). The second conclusion is that single parenthood is strongly gendered, as many more single women live with children than single men do. These two findings are further explored in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Single adults with dependent children, by gender, 27 EU Member States, 2009-2019



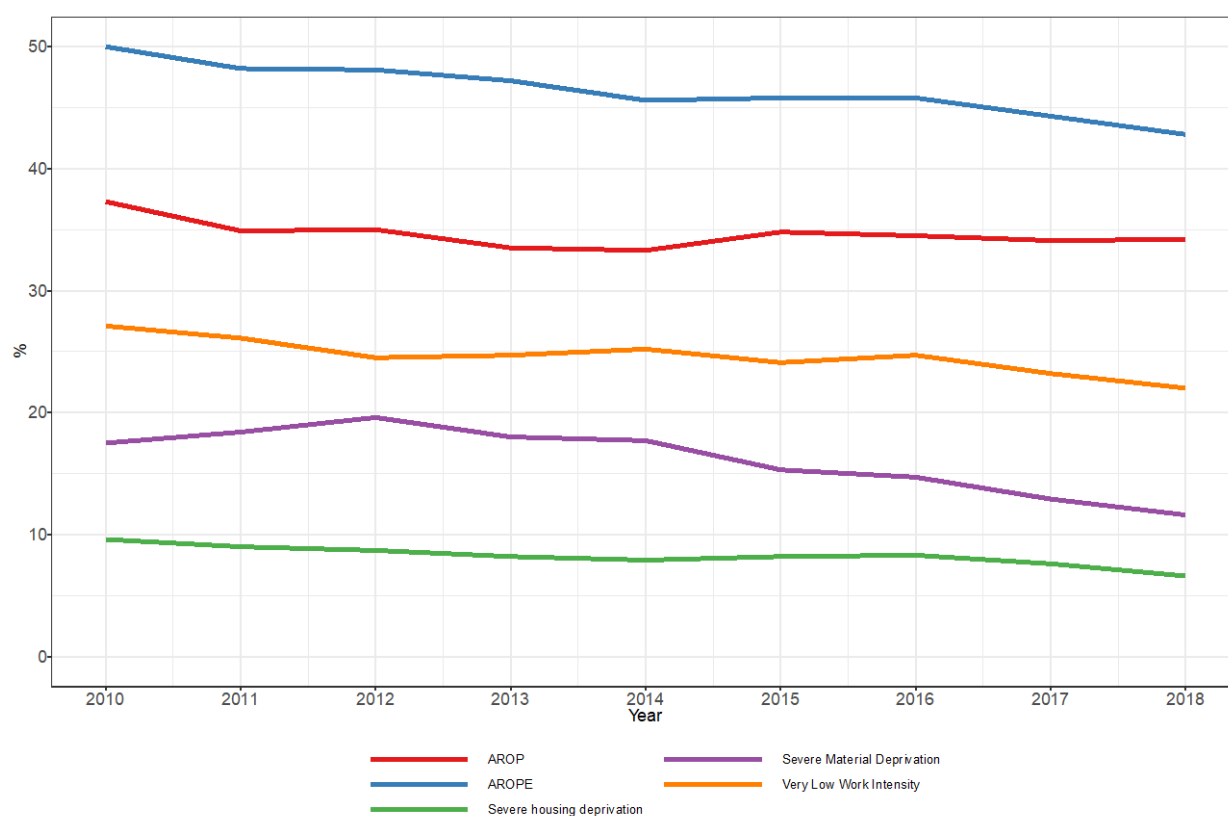
Source: Labour force survey [table: lfst_hhaceda]. Countries are sorted by the percentage of single adult women with dependent children in 2019. Data for Denmark 2010 and 2019.

The data in Figure 2 show trends in the percentage of single women and men living with dependent children across each of the 27 EU Member States from 2009 to 2019. In all countries, single women are more commonly heading households with dependent children than single men are, and in most countries these shares increased for both women and men. Exceptions are for instance the decline in the number of single women heading a household with children in Belgium and Luxembourg. Of further note is that in countries that showed the highest rise among single women with children also tend to be the countries with a high rise in the share of single men with children, such as in Estonia and Sweden.

1.3. Living conditions, poverty and deprivation

Single parenthood is becoming more common and is strongly gendered, but how are these families doing? To answer that question, Figure 3 presents trends in the main indicators of the social scoreboard of the European Social Pillar of Rights in the area of living conditions and poverty (see Section 7.3), focusing on the situation single adults with dependent children, in the EU-27.

Figure 3: Trends in poverty and deprivation among single adults with dependent children, EU-27 average, 2010-2018



Source: SILC [Tables: ilc_peps03 (arope), ilc_li03 (arop), ilc_lvhl13 (low work intensity), ilc_mddd13 (severe material deprivation), ilc_mdho06b (severe housing deprivation)].

The main indicator in the area of living conditions and poverty is the rate of people at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) – defined as people who are either at-risk-of-poverty, or severely materially deprived, or living in a household with a very low work intensity.² Each of these constituting elements are also presented separately. At-risk-of-poverty (AROP) is defined as living in a household with an equivalized disposable household income (after taxes and transfers) below 60% of the national median.³ Severe material deprivation is defined as not being able to afford 4 or more out of the

² European Commission, 'Glossary: At risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)', 2020, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_\(AROPE\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE))

³ European Commission, 'Glossary: At-risk-of-poverty rate', 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:At-risk-of-poverty_rate

following 9 items: to pay their rent, mortgage or utility bills; to keep their home adequately warm; to face unexpected expenses; to eat meat or proteins regularly; to go on holiday; a television set; a washing machine; a car; a telephone.⁴ Low-work intensity is defined as living in a household where the members of working age worked less than 20 % of their total potential during the previous 12 months.⁵ The area of living conditions and poverty in the social scoreboard finally includes the rate of severe housing deprivation, which is defined as living in a dwelling that is overcrowded, while also exhibiting at least one of the following four housing deprivation measures: a leaking roof, no bath/shower, no indoor toilet, or a dwelling considered too dark.⁶

The main indicator of the social scoreboard indicates a steady decline in the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) rate among single adults with children, from 50% in 2010 to 43% in 2018. Examining the constituting indicators suggests that the decline in AROPE is related to a decline in low work intensity (from 27% to 22%) and severe material deprivation (from 18% to 11%), rather than to a decline in the at-risk-of-poverty rate which hardly changed after 2011. In addition, the severe housing deprivation rate declined from 10% to 7%. Taken together, this evidence suggests that the situation of single parents (or, more precisely, single adults living in a household with children) improved in the EU-27 between 2010 and 2018 when it comes to absolute living conditions and social and material deprivation, while their income position relative to other households failed to improve. It is of particular importance that the at-risk-of-poverty rate did not decline even though the number of single adults (with children) who had a low work intensity declined in the same period. This will be an important focus of this study, and examined in more detail in Section 7.7.2.

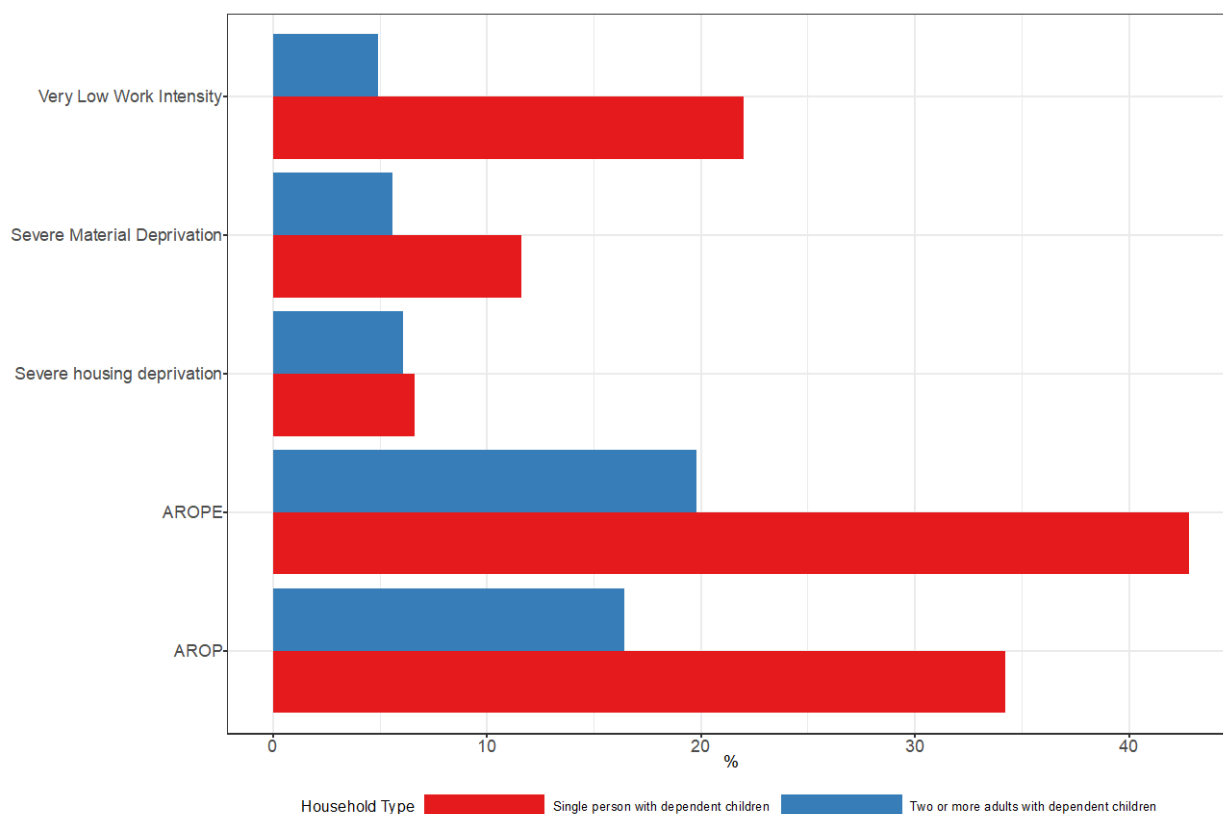
Two important classifications need to be made to this general trend. First, the levels are very high and, as shown in Figure 4, the indicators show a substantially worse situation for single-adult households with children compared to two-adult households – with the exception of severe housing deprivation. Living at risk of poverty can have severe consequences, both for parents and children, including the experience of stigma (Gaisbauer, Schweiger, and Sedmak, 2020), stress to the point that it impedes cognitive function and long-term (financial) planning (Mani et al., 2013), poor health (Nieuwenhuis, Tøge, and Palme, 2018), reduced social relations and support as well as reduced political and civic participation (Mood and Jonsson, 2016). Furthermore, growing up in poverty has severe consequences for children, hampering their development and limiting their opportunities later in life (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). Broadly put, this is because parents in poverty have more difficulties providing the children with the (material) goods and services needed for their development, and because the financial stress associated with poverty reduces the quality of parenting and family relationships (Van Lancker and Vinck, 2019). In fact, poverty and deprivation were found to be a major explanation for the disadvantage of children growing up with a single parent (Treanor, 2016; Treanor, 2018).

⁴ European Commission, 'Glossary: Material deprivation', 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Severe_material_deprivation_rate

⁵ European Commission, 'Glossary: Persons living in households with low work intensity', 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Persons_living_in_households_with_low_work_intensity

⁶ European Commission, 'Glossary: Severe housing deprivation rate, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Severe_housing_deprivation_rate

Figure 4: Various at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion indicators by family type, EU-27 average, 2018



Source: SILC [Tables: ilc_peps03 (arope), ilc_li03 (arop), ilc_li23 (arop persistent), ilc_mddd13 (severe material deprivation), ilc_mdho06b (severe housing deprivation)].

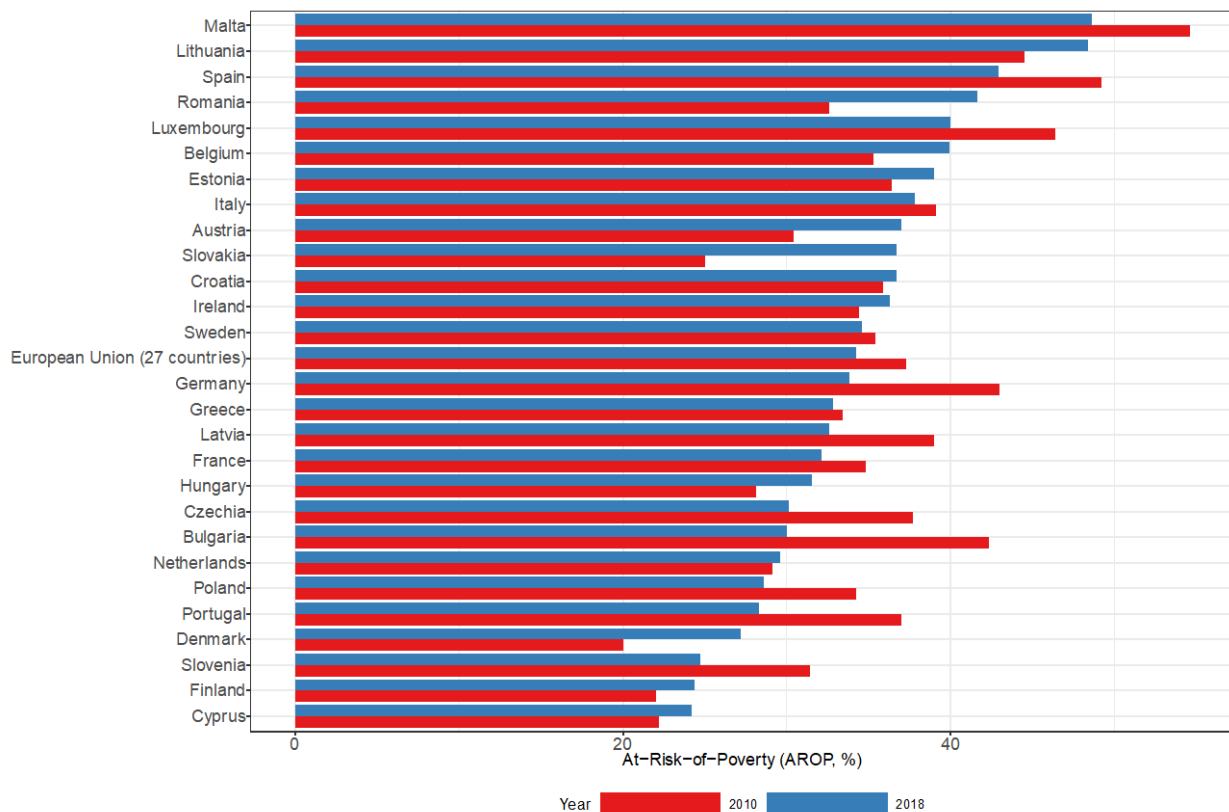
The second classification that needs to be made is that although the trends in Figure 3 were not unfavourable *on average* in the EU27, country-specific trends may vary widely. This is illustrated in Figure 5 for at-risk-of-poverty rates. These rates among single adults with dependent children declined with more than 7 percentage-points in Bulgaria, Germany, Portugal, and Czechia, while it increased with more than 7 percentage-points in Denmark, Romania, and Slovakia. Overall, in 2018, the poverty rates were highest in Malta, Lithuania, Spain, and Romania, and lowest in Cyprus, Finland, Slovenia and Denmark.

1.4. Theoretical background

The situation of single-parent families in the EU, and their greater risk to be in a disadvantaged position compared to many other families, can be explained using the concept of the *triple bind of single-parent families* (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018). The *triple bind* argues that the situation of single parents is best understood by the combined focus on their resources, on their employment, and their social policy context. The concept of the *triple bind* is well embedded in both welfare state research that typically considers factors related to family, market and state (Korpi, 2000; Esping-Andersen, 2012), and poverty research that explains poverty with individual, structural, and political causes (Brady, 2019). As

a theoretical background, this has two advantages: it acknowledges and integrates the complexity of the situation of single parents in the EU: there is not a single cause to their disadvantage, and there is a lot of diversity among single parents. Secondly, the concept of the triple bind emphasises the many ways in which single parents' situation is inherently gendered: not only are the majority of single-parent families headed by women, while doing so they also experience gendered disadvantages in terms of resources, employment, and social policies.

Figure 5: At-risk-of-poverty among single adults with dependent children, 27 EU Member States, 2009-2018



Source: SILC [Table ilc_li03]. Data for Italy and Lithuania from 2009 and 2017.

With respect to *resources*, single parents often lack a (potential) second earner and caregiver in the household. On the one hand this increases the need for the single parent to independently secure an income adequate to support her or his household, while on the other hand it increases the amount of work-family conflict – particularly if the children are still young. This is particularly gendered: women in couples take on substantially more of care work than men do – often at the expense of women's hours in the labour market. This division of care work in particular continues – or is even exacerbated – among single parents.

In addition, with respect to resources, it has long been pointed out that mothers with a lower level of education are more likely to be a single mother compared to higher educated mothers. This 'educational gradient' has been considered an important resource-based explanation for single mothers' disadvantage (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; Putnam, 2016). However, more recent studies that consider multiple country contexts suggest that single mothers' level of

education by itself fails to explain much of the disadvantage of single mothers compared to other families with children, for instance with respect to their labour market position (Härkönen, Lappalainen, and Jalovaara, 2016), poverty (Härkönen, 2018; Brady, Finnigan, and Hübgen, 2017), and the educational disadvantage of their children (Bernardi and Boertien, 2017). This evidence suggests that individualistic resource-based explanations alone cannot contribute much to understanding why single parents are doing better in some countries than in others (Brady, 2019), which indicates the importance of contextual factors such as the labour market and social policies.

Employment is a main source of income, and as will be shown in Section 3.1 the majority of single parents are active in paid employment. However, being employed provides no guarantee of adequate wages to avoid poverty (Lohmann and Marx, 2018), and single parents struggle more than two-parent families to achieve adequate work-life balance and job security (Esser and Olsen, 2018). As jobs have grown more precarious (Kalleberg, 2018) and wages more unequal, more working families face difficulties in making ends meet – in particular if they have to rely on only a single earner. Here the interplay with single parents' resources becomes evident: to the extent that single parents are more likely to have a low level of education, they are overrepresented among the lower wage jobs, that tend to provide less flexibility, all the while having to resort to only one income. Furthermore, the disadvantage single parents experience in the labour market is strongly gendered: gender wage- and earnings gaps, mothers in couples reducing their employment more than fathers (Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van Der Kolk, 2012), part-time work (Bardasi and Gornick, 2008), occupational segregation (Charles and Grusky, 2004) and discrimination in the labour market. These factors are all in the way of (in particular) single mothers' adequate employment.

Policies can be inadequate for single parents when they fail to sufficiently address the disadvantaged position of single parents, or when these policies directly or indirectly contribute to the disadvantage experienced by single parents. Analyses of various types of policies will follow in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study, so here only general principles will be introduced. An example of how policies can be inadequate to address the situation of single parents is levels of provision that are too low. It was, for instance, shown that levels of minimum income protection through social assistance fell in Europe, and seldomly reach commonly accepted levels of income-poverty (Nelson, 2013). Policies that promote a traditional breadwinner model with a gendered division of labour (Keck and Saraceno, 2013; Jenson, 2009), including overly long parental leaves, expensive or unavailable childcare, cash-for-care schemes or joint taxation, form an example of policies that contribute to the disadvantage of in particular single mothers. Such policies weaken in particular mothers' position in the labour market which makes them less prepared to be financially independent in case they become a single mother, but also such policies tend to provide less support to single mothers to combine work and family responsibilities.

Single parenthood is best understood from a life-course perspective (Zagel and Hübgen, 2018; Bernardi and Mortelmans, 2018), acknowledging that single parenthood is not a constant state but one that people move into and out of. In part, this means that much of the disadvantage experienced by single parents is created before people became a single parent, for instance while they were having children as a couple. It also means that it matters in what phase of their life people become a single parent, for instance in relation to how long in particular mothers have been out of the labour market prior to becoming a single mothers, or what the age of the children is (Harkness and Fernández Salgado, 2018).

Finally, the concept of the *triple bind* emphasises that many of the challenges faced by single parents (e.g. low level of education, precarious employment, lack of childcare options) are by no means unique to single parents – although more prevalent and more difficult to deal with. This brings into focus that policies that are not specifically designed for single parents have the potential to substantially improve their situation, without discounting the potential of more targeted approaches.

2. RESOURCES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE SITUATION OF SINGLE PARENTS

Resources are the first part of the *triple bind* of single parents (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018). These resources refer to individual characteristics of the single parents, or of their families, that can help them achieve good outcomes and well-being. Two key resources that single parents lack more often than other family types, relate to their level of education and the absence of a second potential caregiver in the household. This Chapter examines these resources.

2.1. Education

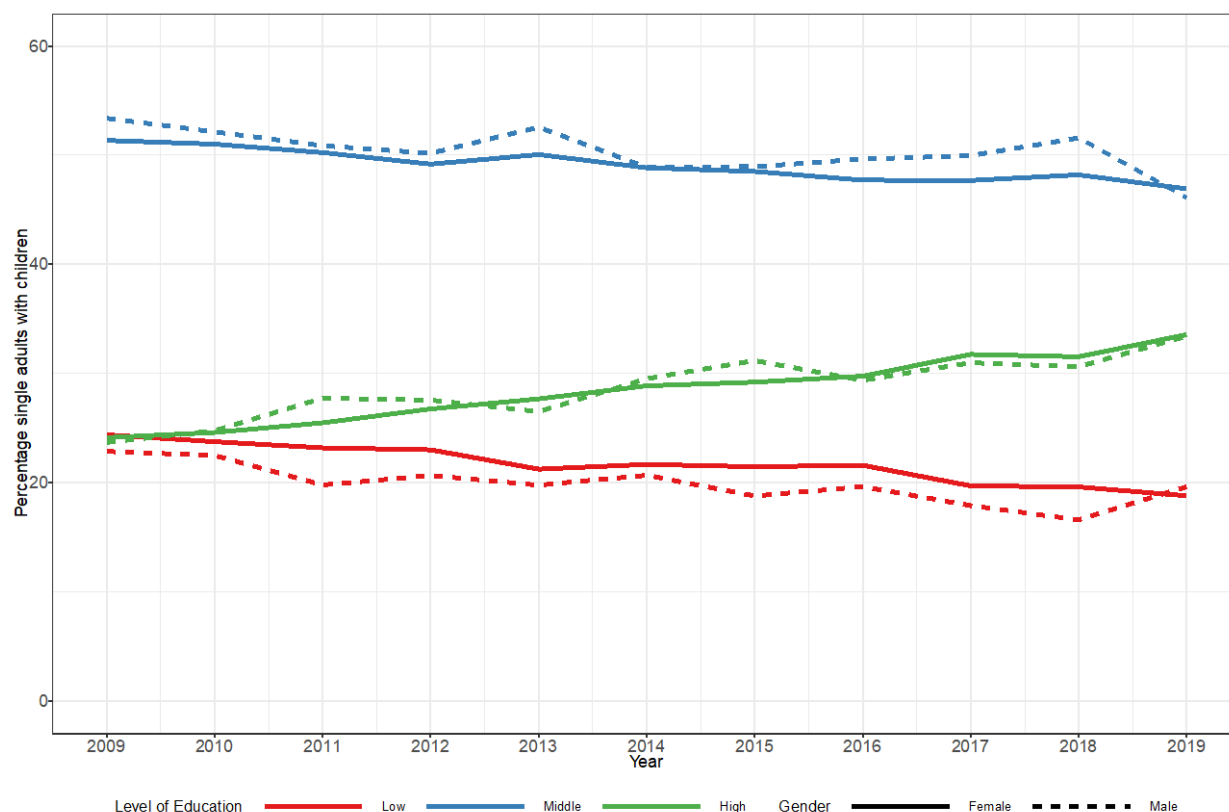
It has often been shown that single parenthood is more common among the low educated (McLanahan, 2004; Härkönen, 2018) – a pattern that holds across European countries with the exception of Southern Europe. This has long been considered as an important explanation for why single parents are more at risk of poverty, for instance because for the lower educated it is more difficult to get solid footing in the labour market to earn an adequate wage. Figure 6 shows trends in the percentage of single adults with dependent children with either a low (up to lower secondary education), middle (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) or high (tertiary) level of education. In the EU-27 on average, the percentage of low educated and middle educated single adults (in the age range between 25 and 55) with children declined between 2009 to 2019, and the percentage with a high level of education increased. The results are highly similar for single women (solid lines) and single men (dashed lines), with some indication that women are slightly more likely to have a lower level of education compared to single men.

This does not necessarily mean that a low level of education has become less associated with the likelihood of becoming a single mother or father. Single parents still – on average – have lower levels of education compared to for instance two-parent families (Härkönen, 2018). Yet, importantly these data demonstrate that over time the level of resources available to single parents, as indicated by their level of education, has been on the rise.

Yet, these findings also present a paradox. The higher levels of education among single mothers and fathers are thought to have important benefits for their situation – not least in the labour market. Yet, comparing these results to the trend in at-risk-of-poverty in Figure 3, it is relevant to note that the level of at-risk-of-poverty remained rather stable from 2011 onwards despite the marked increase of the educational levels of many single parents shown in Figure 6. In other words, an improvement of resources in the form of education is no guarantee that the economic situation of single parents also improves.

This is further illustrated by the country-specific trends in the percentage of low educated single women with children in Figure 7, in comparison to the country-specific trends in at-risk-of-poverty presented in Figure 3. The share of low educated single women with children declined substantially in Malta, Portugal and Ireland, but only in Malta and Portugal this was associated with a decline in poverty. In Ireland, not much change in poverty was observed. Furthermore, in Cyprus the percentage of low educated dropped to a very low level, yet poverty increased in the same period.

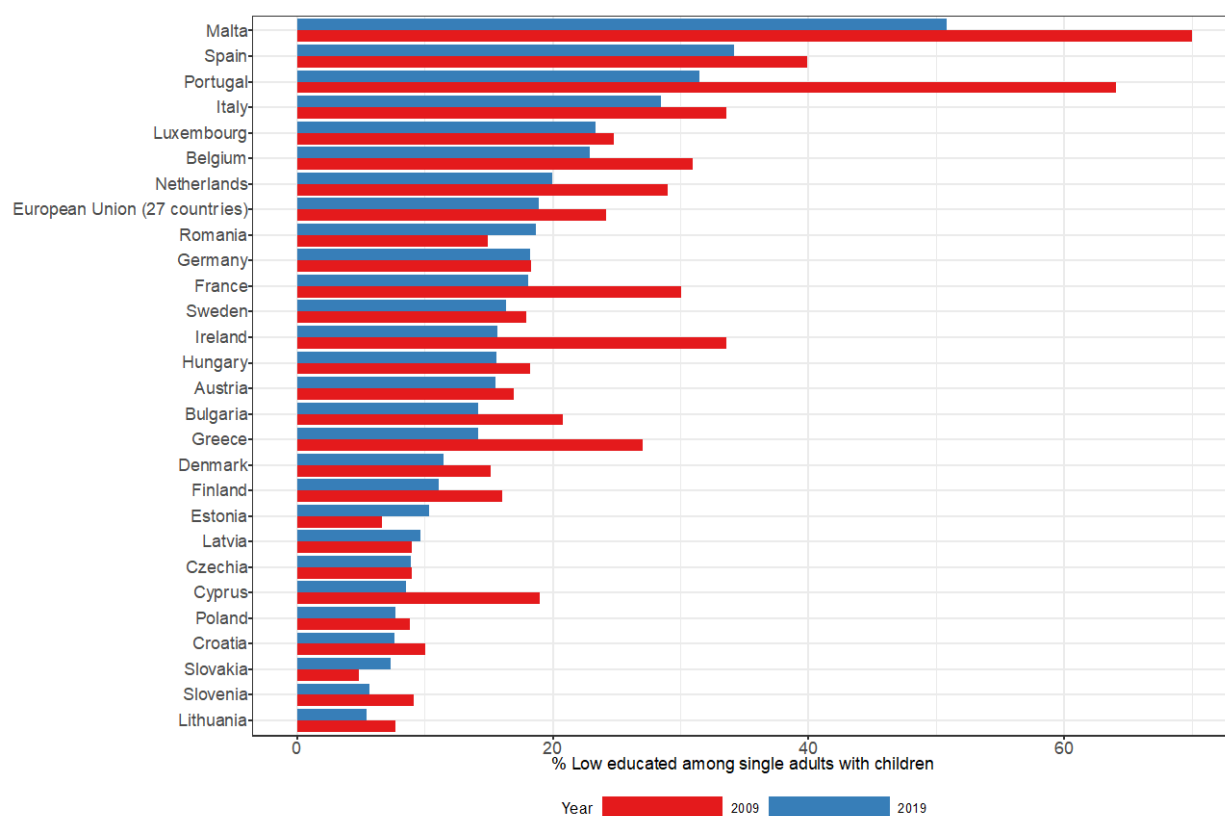
Figure 6: Level of education of single adults with dependent children, EU-27 average, 2009-2019



Source: LFS [table: lfst_hhinded]. Note: the data table includes the number of 'persons' by household type, rather than 'adults'. Hence, a selection was made of persons in the age range 25-55 to exclude most children living with their parents.

Findings like these, as well similar and more elaborate analyses in the academic literature, increasingly shed doubt on explanations of single-parent poverty based on their individual characteristics (Härkönen, 2018; Härkönen, Lappalainen, and Jalovaara, 2016; Brady, Finnigan, and Hübgen, 2017). An important implication of this finding is that merely investing in the education (and skills) of single parents is not a sufficient policy strategy to reduce poverty and improve socio-economic well-being among single parents. Instead, explanations are gaining prominence that relate causes of (and thus solutions to) poverty to structural factors such as labour markets, and political factors such as social policy (Brady, 2019). Before turning to these explanations in the following Chapters, however, the next Section examines another resource: joint physical custody.

Figure 7: Level of education of single women with dependent children, 27 EU Member States, 2009-2019



Source: LFS [table: lfst_hhinded]. Note: the data table includes the number of 'persons' by household type, rather than 'adults'. Hence, a selection was made of persons in the age range 25-55 to exclude most children living with their parents. Data for Denmark 2010 and 2019.

2.2. Joint physical custody

It was described in Section 1.4 that single-parent households often lack a second caregiver, and that the large majority of single parents are single mothers. Although this is still the case, the situation does seem to be changing in a number of countries. Increasingly, children of separated parents live with both their mother and their father, typically alternating between both homes. Joint physical custody is the family form in which children of separated parents live approximately equal amounts of time with both parents. It should be emphasized that joint physical custody is understood as a living arrangement, which is different from legal (joint) custody (Bauseman, 2002) which is discussed in Section 0. Children can live with both parents even if only one parent has legal custody, or mostly live with one parent even though both parents have legal custody. This Section seeks to examine the prevalence of joint physical custody in European countries, what its consequences are for the well-being of children and parents, and reflects on further policy implications of this development.

2.2.1. Prevalence of joint physical custody

There are no official, EU-wide, statistics on how common joint physical custody is. Nevertheless, the existing body of research provides a number of country-specific and country-comparative estimates. Although these estimates might not be fully comparable, an overview is presented in Table 1. Together, these estimates seem to indicate that in a number of countries joint physical custody is becoming more common, and is the family form chosen by around one in four, or even one in three, separating couples with children. It has also been reported that fathers' involvement increased in family arrangements other than joint physical custody (Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2000), lending further credence to the increased role of fathers in their children's lives after separation or divorce. Two studies based on surveys across Western European countries, collected between 2002 and 2010 and accumulating over half a million observations, suggest that in the EU joint physical custody is most common in North and North-West Europe (including the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Belgium and in particular Sweden), and least common in Eastern European countries (including Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Croatia, Poland, and Romania) (Steinbach, Augustijn, and Corkadi, 2020; Bjarnason and Amarsson, 2011). As such, it is no surprise that the country-specific studies brought together in Table 1 mostly represent those countries in which joint physical custody is most common.

Table 1: Overview of estimated prevalence of joint physical custody

Country	Study / Reference	Notes	Year	Estimate
Belgium	(Vanassche et al., 2017)	% of children with divorced parents	1990 – 1995	9%
"	"	"	1996 – 1999	16%
"	"	"	2000 – 2005	26%
"	"	"	2006 – 2008	37%
"	(Vanassche et al., 2013)	% of children with divorced parents	2008 – 2011	25%
"	(Sodermans and Matthijs, 2014)	% of children with divorced parents, aged 14-21	2009 – 2010	21%
Netherlands	(Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2000)	% of divorcees	Prior to 1980	1%
"	"	"	1980 – 1998	5%
"	(Spruijt and Duindam, 2009)	% of children with divorced parents	2008	16%
"	(Poortman and van Gaalen, 2017)	% of children with divorced parents	2008	20%

"	"	"	2010	28%
Norway	(Kitterød and Lyngstad, 2014)	% of separated parents	2004	10%
"	"	"	2012	25%
Spain	(Solsona and Spijker, 2016)	% of divorced couples with minor children	2007	10%
"	"	"	2012	15%
Sweden	(Fransson, Låftman, Östberg, and Bergström, 2018)	% of children with separated parents	1984	1%
"	"	"	1992	4%
"	"	"	2004	21%
"	"	"	2013	35%

2.2.2. Benefits of joint physical custody for children

As joint physical custody seems to be an increasingly common family arrangement, at least in parts of Europe, it is a pertinent question how this relates to the well-being of children. There is ample research on this question, and generally it suggests that children fare well in joint physical custody: on a number of indicators of their well-being and development children in joint physical custody fare better than children of separated parents who live only with one parent (sole physical custody) and often on par with children living with both their parents in the same household. The review of the literature here focuses on country-specific studies, country-comparative studies and meta-analyses.

Country-specific studies have the advantage that they can be more detailed, and sensitive to the specificities of the national context. At the same time, however, the measures and procedures used in these studies can vary across countries (and across studies within the same country), which stands in the way of direct comparability of these studies. In addition, the bulk of the country-specific studies on the outcomes for children associated with joint physical custody are from countries in which this family arrangement is more common, making it more difficult to arrive at EU-level lessons.

Swedish studies have extensively examined the well-being of children of divorced (or otherwise separated) parents, often using high-quality, large datasets. With respect to subjective well-being, family life and peer relations, children in joint physical custody were found to do better compared to children of separated parents who only or mostly live with one of their parents (Bergström et al., 2013). In more detail, this study also reported that 15-year olds in joint physical custody were more likely to report levels of wellbeing on par with children living with both parents, compared to 12-year olds. These findings were replicated for psychological problems among children aged 3 to 5, as reported by

both parents and the children's teachers (Bergström et al., 2018). Even the proverbial 'fifty moves a year', referring to living with both parents on a weekly basis, were found to be positively associated with the psychosomatic well-being of children in comparison to children of separated parents (mostly) living with only one parent (Bergström et al., 2015). The living conditions of children in joint physical custody were found by and large to be on par with children living with both parents, with respect to a wide range of indicators in the areas of economic and material conditions, social relations with parents and peers, health and health behaviours, working conditions and safety in school and in the neighbourhood, and culture and leisure time activities, whereas children living with only one parent tended to score worse on these indicators (Fransson, Låftman, Östberg, and Bergström, 2018; Fransson, Låftman, Östberg, Hjern, et al., 2018).

A Norwegian study found that children in joint physical custody did not differ from children of non-divorced parent with respect to externalizing problems (e.g. violent behaviour), internalizing problems (e.g. depressive tendencies), and substance abuse, although their school achievement was lower (Breivik and Olweus, 2006).

A study in the Netherlands did not find that children in joint physical custody do better than children in sole custody with respect to their well-being, fear, depression and aggression, but neither that they did worse (Spruijt and Duindam, 2009). Yet, the relationship with both parents is better among children in joint physical custody.

In Belgium, like in the countries listed above, joint physical custody is positively associated with the well-being of children (Vanassche et al., 2013). Here, however, it was also found that not all children thrive equally well in this living arrangement, in particular in relation to conflict, poor relationship quality with either parent, or when parents re-partner. Furthermore, adolescents (aged 14-21) with a conscientious personality type, with a focus on being organized, ordered and planful, were found to struggle more with the demands of living in two households (Sodermans and Matthijs, 2014).

These findings from detailed country-specific studies are corroborated in studies based on country-comparative datasets. Given the nature of this report, it should be mentioned that these comparative studies also include data on countries outside the EU, but given their consistent design across countries, important lessons can be learned from them. Across 36 countries, children in joint physical custody were able to communicate as well with their mother and *better* with their father, compared to children living with both parents (Bjarnason and Amarsson, 2011). Moreover, compared to children of separated parents living in other family arrangements (e.g. sole custody), children in joint physical custody experienced better communication with their parents. Based on the same data, joint physical custody was also found associated with children reporting higher levels of life satisfaction compared to children living only with their mother, father, or with step-parents (Bjarnason et al., 2012). Of particular note is that these benefits associated with joint physical custody were only found among families in which the children live nearly equal amounts of time (60%/40% or 50%/50%) with both parents (Baude, Pearson, and Drapeau, 2016).

Finally, a number of meta-analyses are reviewed. Meta-analyses synthesize the findings of tens or hundreds of individual studies in a systematic manner, and are often considered the highest quality of evidence. An early meta-analysis of 33 studies between 1980 and 2001 (thus, when joint physical custody was less common than nowadays) found that children in joint physical custody were generally doing better than children in sole physical custody with respect to emotional and behavioural adjustment, family relationships, self-esteem, and divorce-specific adjustment (Bauserman, 2002). Reviewing 18 studies, Nielsen (2011, p. 605) not only reports consistent evidence that the well-being of children in joint physical custody exceeds that of children in sole custody, but also adds that parents do not need to be *"especially cooperative, without conflict, wealthy, and well educated, or mutually*

enthusiastic about sharing the residential parenting for the children to benefit". The aspects of positive well-being associated with joint physical custody were later extended to also include emotional, behavioural and psychological well-being, as well as physical health and relations with parents (Nielsen, 2014). Studies that accounted for the fact that families opting for joint physical custody tend to differ from those who did not with respect to income, conflict or quality of the relationship between parents and their children, still by and large found the same benefits to the well-being of children associated with this family arrangement (Nielsen, 2018).

2.2.3. Benefits of joint physical custody for parents

Given the plethora of research on the well-being of children in joint physical custody, the literature on how the parents fare stands in stark contrast. In general terms, joint physical custody is thought to reduce parental stress and workload, and allow for improved financial resources, health and freedom (Breivik and Olweus, 2006; Steinbach, 2019). Interestingly, a study in the Netherlands found that mothers reported to experience less time pressure in relation to joint physical custody, while fathers reported more (Van der Heijden, Poortman, and Van der Lippe, 2016). In a series of qualitative interviews, mothers also reported fewer constraints with respect to combining work, family and leisure (Bakker and Karsten, 2013). A study from Sweden reported that mothers in joint physical custody had higher employment rates than mothers in sole custody (Fritzell and Gähler, 2017).

Joint custody parents reported less conflict (both current and past) compared to sole-custody parents (Bauserman, 2002), although the direction of causality should be interpreted with caution here. Post-divorce parent-child relations were found to be better (for both parents) in joint physical custody in contrast to sole custody (Bastaits and Pasteels, 2019).

Joint physical custody was further shown to help divorced parents to be socially active, including spending time with friends, neighbours and family, and participating in sports, culture and going out, and especially among mothers (Botterman, Sodermans, and Matthijs, 2015). Another study reported improved social lives for mothers and better relationships between children and their fathers (Vanassche et al., 2017).

Joint physical custody was not only found to be associated with more employment, a less stressed work-life balance, and time for leisure and social interaction. For mothers, the increased time available for leisure activities was positively associated with their well-being (Sodermans et al., 2015) and with better self-reported health (Fritzell and Gähler, 2017), and well-being of fathers (compared to separated parents in which the children solely or mostly reside with the mother) (Spruijt and Duindam, 2009).

2.2.4. Determinants of joint physical custody

Although mostly based on cross-Sectional data, and not yet very extensive, a body of research is starting to emerge on which parents are more likely to opt for joint physical custody after divorce or separation. The available research suggests two main types of determinants of joint physical custody.

First, joint physical custody seems to be associated with gender equality. It was already established that joint physical custody is common particularly in North- and West-European countries, that are comparatively more gender-equal, and less so in South- and Eastern European countries. Research

indeed seems to suggest that a (gender-)equal division of work and care between partners plays an important role. Joint physical custody was reported to be more likely, in Norway, when the division of childcare was gender-equal (rather than the mother doing most) when the couple still lived together (Kitterød and Wiik, 2017). These findings were also reported in the Netherlands (Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2000). In Sweden, a similar finding was reported with a link to policy. Among separated fathers, fathers who had taken more parental leave spent more time with their children (Duvander and Jans, 2009). Fathers in Sweden were also found to continue to take parental leave after separation from the mother of their children, albeit to a somewhat lower degree than fathers who did not separate (Duvander and Korsell, 2018).

Second, joint physical custody seems to be more common among socio-economically advantaged parents. In Norway, higher educated divorced parents are more likely than lower educated parents to report joint physical custody (Kitterød and Wiik, 2017). The same was reported in Belgium (Sodermans, Matthijs, and Swicegood, 2013), although it was noted that the social gradients in joint physical custody became less distinct as this family arrangement was becoming more common (Vanassche et al., 2017). Financial problems of either parent were found to reduce the likelihood of joint physical custody (Kitterød and Wiik, 2017). Also in the Netherlands, joint physical custody is more common among well-resourced parents (Poortman and van Gaalen, 2017).

2.2.5. Implications of joint physical custody for policy

Very little is known about whether and how the policy context affects the prevalence of, and outcomes associated with, joint physical custody. Two major areas of policy seem to be relevant here. As joint physical custody is more common among couples who had a more gender-equal division of care prior to separation, policies to promote equality in care such as paid leave for fathers (see Section 5.2) come into focus. Furthermore, changes in custody law are discussed in Section 0.

The evidence presented in previous Sections quite clearly suggests that joint physical custody is associated with various positive outcomes in terms of children's well-being, and there are some indications that it can benefit parents as well. However, from this evidence it cannot be inferred that further encouraging (or enforcing) joint physical custody to more or all separated parents in the EU will extend the associated benefits to more children. For this assertion, there are a number of reasons.

First, the research on the causal effect (or absence thereof) of joint physical custody on the wellbeing of children is not conclusive. Most of the studies are based on cross-Sectional data, and the families that are included self-selected into joint physical custody (Steinbach, 2019) and were sufficiently satisfied with the arrangement to continue. As joint physical custody is more common among resource-rich families, and in a number of studies the benefits for children's wellbeing were found to disappear after controlling for socio-economic resources of parents (Bjarnason et al., 2012; Steinbach, Augustijn, and Corkadi, 2020), this suggests that the benefits of joint physical custody relate to the background of the parents opting for joint physical custody, rather than to the family arrangement as such. Other studies, such as one using high-quality Swedish data, found that the socio-economic resources of parents only partially accounted for the positive well-being associated with joint physical custody (Fransson et al., 2016). A review of statistical attempts to account for the self-selection seem to indicate that indeed joint physical custody causes benefits to the well-being among children (Braver and Votruba, 2018).

Second, although the children in joint physical custody on average do better than children living with parents in sole custody, little is known about the heterogeneity of children of separated parents (Ivanova and Kalmijn, 2020; Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien, 2017). In other words, which children, and which parents, do well in joint physical custody? By extension, there can be important circumstances related to health, abuse, or violence in which joint physical custody is not in the interest of children and possibly the parent(s).

Finally, there is very little research on how policy reforms have affected the prevalence of joint physical custody, and in turn how those reforms affected the well-being of children in this family arrangement. The little research, for instance on changes in custody law (discussed in more detail in Section 0), is based on a limited number of countries, and in particular those countries in which joint physical custody is relatively common. As such, it is unclear whether and to what extent these findings can be generalized to other countries, in which for instance joint physical custody is less common, single parenthood is less accepted, or the policy context is very different.

2.2.6. Implications of joint physical custody for EU data and indicators

The rise of joint physical custody means that EU data and indicators pertaining to single parenthood are inaccurate on at least two accounts. First, it is often reported – and was shown in Figure 1 – that the vast majority of single-parent households are headed by women. However, these statistics do not count the increasing number of single fathers that are also equally involved in the care for their children. In other words, these statistics do not account for the fact that increasingly children of separated parents live with both a single mother and a single father (or two single parents otherwise). The implication is that the total number of single parents (understood as parents living without a partner but at least approximately half of the time with their children) might be underestimated, and that the share of single-parent households headed by women might be overestimated.

Secondly, it is unknown how joint physical custody affects the calculation of living standards, including income poverty. In calculating at-risk-of-poverty, the disposable household income is corrected for the number of household members including children. Whether and how this procedure is to account for children living about equal time in two households is not well understood, but it seems reasonable to assume that both households share some of the expenses of children. If that is the case, current estimates of poverty among single parents, and children growing up with a single parent, might be biased upwards for those families in joint physical custody.

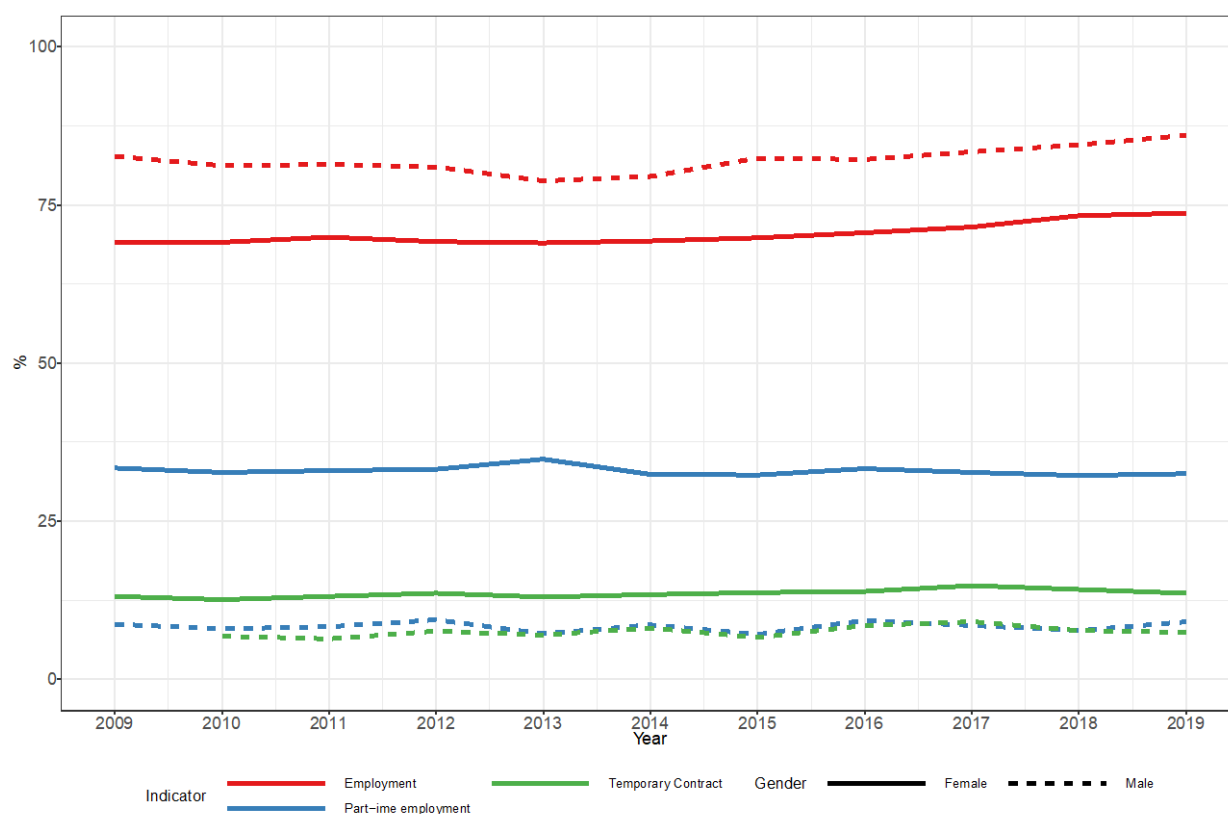
3. EMPLOYMENT

This Chapter examines the employment of single parents. Being employed is associated with a number of important benefits, including better health, a larger social network, a sense of autonomy and fulfilment, investment in skills, experience and future employability, and lower risks of poverty. Yet, it is clear that these benefits are not accrued by everyone equally. Women and single parents experience more disadvantaged positions in the labour market, that often come with more insecurity and less work-life balance (Esser and Olsen, 2018).

3.1. Employment rate, part-time employment and work intensity

Employment rates of single adults with children have been increasing in the EU-27 between 2009 and 2019, as seen in Figure 8. Among single women with children (solid lines), this increase was from 69% to 74% and for single men with children (dashed lines) this was from 83% to 86%. The employment of single women with children thus remains substantially below that of single men with children. The percentages of workers with a temporary contract and part-time employment are rather stable over time, but in particular part-time work is noticeably more common among single women with children compared to among single men.

Figure 8: Trends in employment, part-time employment and temporary contracts among single adults with children, EU-27 average, by gender, 2009-2019

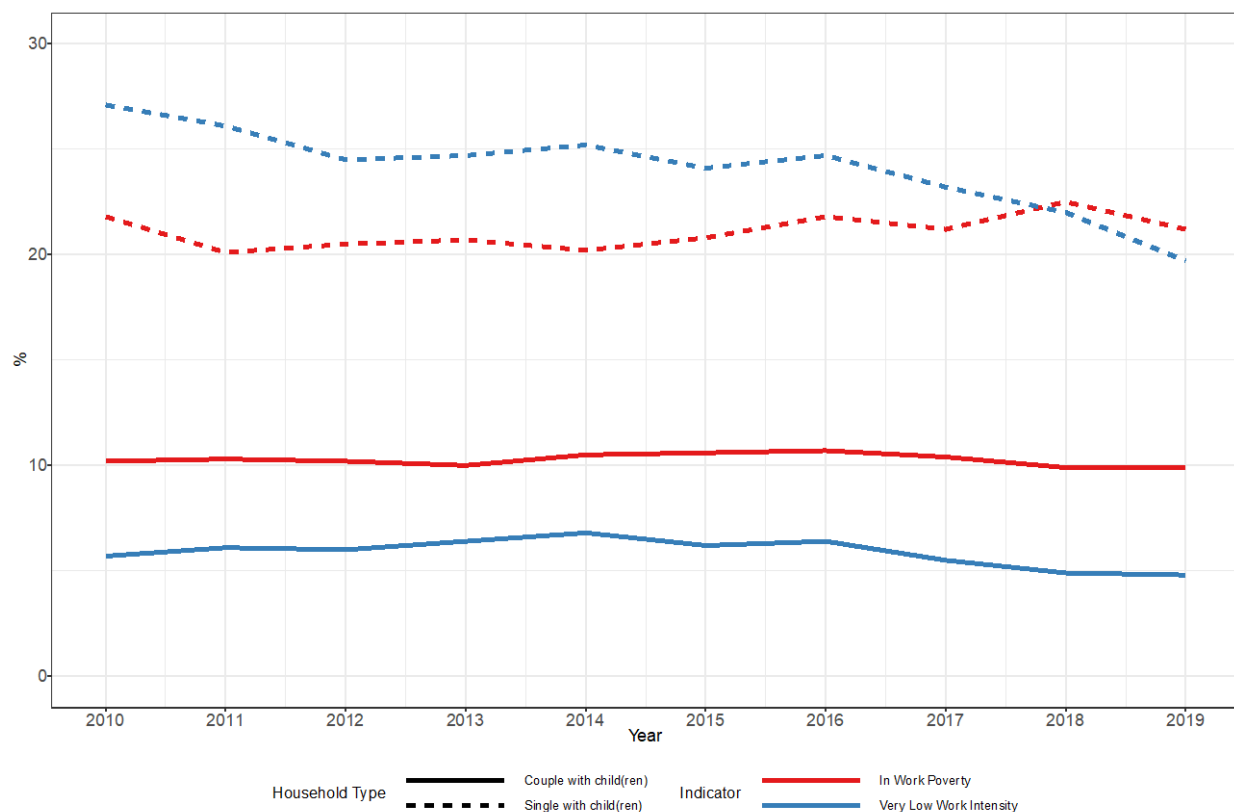


Source: LFS [Tables lfst_hheredy (employment), lfst_hhptety (part-time employment), lfst_hhtemy (temporary contract)]

3.2. Work intensity and in-work poverty

As employment is often considered an important remedy against poverty, trends in employment are further examined in Figure 9, showing rates of very low work intensity and in-work poverty by household type. Very low work intensity was already defined in Section 1.3, and in-work at-risk-of poverty pertains to the percentage of people who have been working for at least seven months during a year while their disposable household income (including both earnings and transfers, and after taxation) is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.⁷ In contrast to the data in Figure 8, these indicators are not available by gender. The comparison of work intensity and in-work poverty among single-parent and two-parent families, however, highlights how different the impact of employment is for these households.

Figure 9: Trends in very low work intensity and in-work at-risk-of poverty, EU-27 average, by household type, 2010-2018



Source: SILC [Tables ilc_lvhl13 (Very low work intensity) and ilc_iw02 (in-work poverty)]

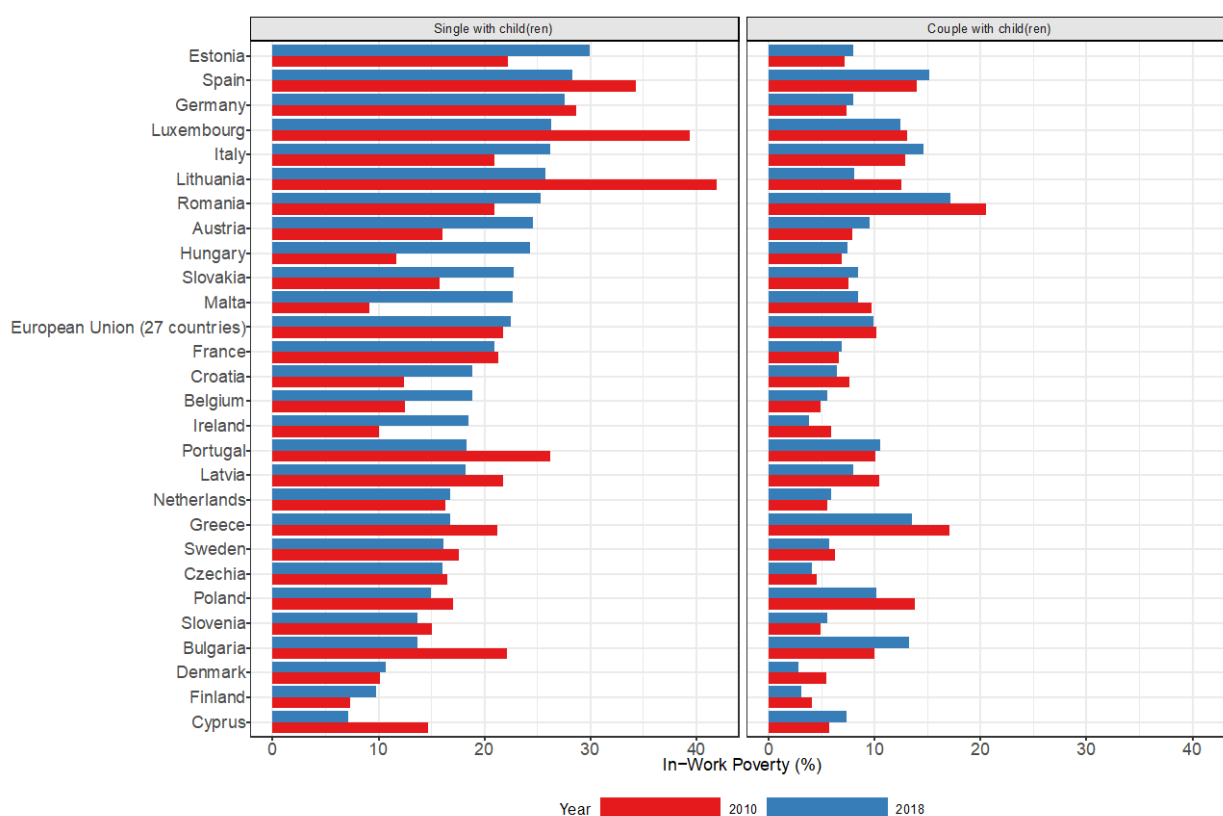
In families with two adults with children, in-work poverty remained stable and the share of households with a very low work intensity declined – particularly after 2014. For single adult households with

⁷ European Commission, 'EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) methodology - in-work poverty', 2020, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/EU_statistics_on_income_and_living_conditions_\(EU-SILC\)_methodology_-_in-work_poverty#Description](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/EU_statistics_on_income_and_living_conditions_(EU-SILC)_methodology_-_in-work_poverty#Description)

children, a somewhat different picture emerges. This is the same trend in very low work intensity as was presented in Figure 3, but here it becomes apparent that although the rate of very low work intensity is declining, single parents are substantially more likely than two-parent families to have a very low work intensity. Moreover, among single adults with children the rate of in-work poverty increased after 2011 despite the share of very low work intensity declining.

Examining country-specific trends in in-work poverty among single parents and two-parent families (strictly, given the data restrictions, singles and couples living with dependent children) in Figure 10, highlights a number of important findings. Not only are rates of in-work poverty higher among single parents compared to two-parent families across almost all Member States, the changes between 2010 and 2018 were often far more noticeable among single parents. In a number of Member States, including Lithuania, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Spain, in-work poverty declined substantially among single-parent families. In others, including Hungary, Malta, Ireland, Estonia, and Belgium, in-work poverty rose markedly.

Figure 10: Trends in in-work at-risk-of poverty, 27 EU Member States, 2010-2018, by household type



Source: SILC [Tables ilc_iw02 (in-work poverty)]

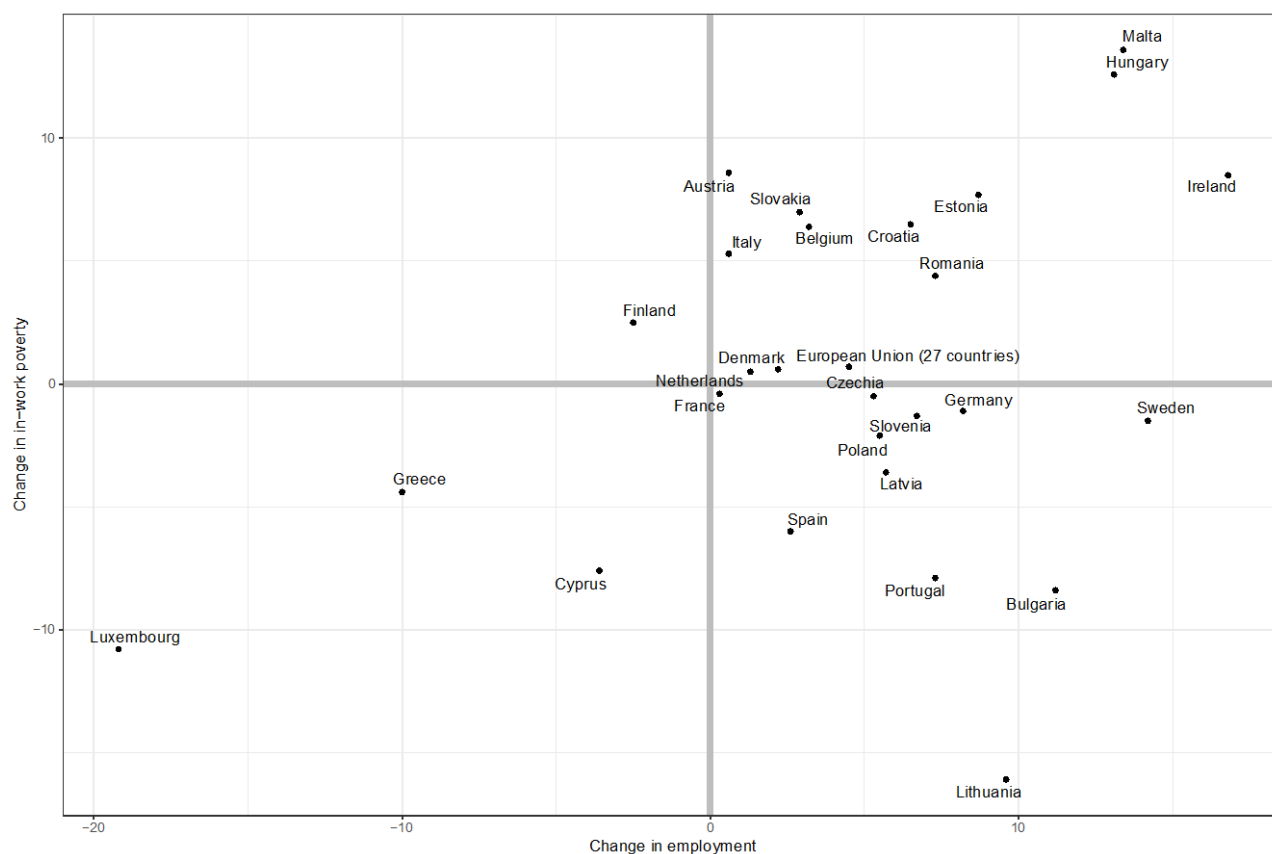
In-work poverty is related to labour market factors such as inadequate wages, part-time work, and precarious, temporary or seasonal employment, as well as to family related factors that include the number of earners and the number of household members (Lohmann and Marx, 2018). A more detailed examination of in-work poverty among single parents (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018) also showed that in-work poverty was substantially more likely among single-parent families than among

two-parent families; upon further examination this was mostly due to the two-parent families often having two earners. Among single parents, in-work poverty was more common among workers in elementary occupations, and substantially less likely among managers and professionals. Overall, in-work poverty among single parents is less common in countries that had more strict employment protection regarding the use of fixed-term contracts and temporary work agencies, better paid leave, higher expenditure on childcare, and higher expenditure on active labour market policies. Working single parents reported experiencing more job security when they had a permanent contract (compared to no or limited contractual protection of their job), and when unemployment benefits had a longer duration (Esser and Olsen, 2018). The latter finding is explained by the fact that unemployment benefits that are about to run out are a strong incentive to accept the first possible job, irrespective of its employment conditions.

Finally, with respect to in-work poverty among single parents, income redistribution plays a very important role (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018). In all countries in that study (including some non-EU countries), in-work poverty rates were higher than the rates of inadequate earnings, defined as the share of working single parents whose gross earnings were not high enough to reach above the poverty threshold. Naturally, this indicates that these families received more income transfers than they paid in taxes over their earnings, which in itself is not surprising. However, the interplay between earnings, redistribution, and in-work poverty differed markedly across countries. Several Nordic countries, including Denmark and Finland had low rates of inadequate earnings (e.g. due to employment protection and work-family reconciliation policies) matched with a moderate poverty reduction through redistribution, to end up at low rates of in-work poverty. Other countries, such as Ireland and France had very high rates of inadequate wages and matched these with very high poverty reduction through redistribution, to end up with in-work poverty rates among single parents that are on par with the Nordic countries. A third set of countries, including Luxembourg and Germany, had high rates of inadequate earnings matched with limited redistribution, resulting in comparatively high rates of in-work poverty among single parents.

Employment growth and in-work poverty are in an important way interrelated with respect to the economic well-being of single parents. For instance, if employment growth mostly results in higher rates of in-work poverty, single parents are not likely to benefit. Hence, Figure 11 presents the association between trends in employment and trends in in-work poverty in 27 EU Member States (and the EU-27 average) between 2010 and 2018. Changes in employment in this period are shown on the horizontal axis, indicating that employment rates among single parents increased in most countries (with the exceptions of Finland, Cyprus, Greece and notably Luxembourg). However, the trends in in-work poverty – on the vertical axis – were much more diverse. Countries in the lower-right quadrant of the Figure, including Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria and Lithuania, matched a growth in employment with a reduction of in-work poverty among single adults with children. Countries in the top-right quadrant, however, saw an increase in employment matched with a rise in in-work poverty. In other words, in these countries – and notably in Malta, Hungary and Ireland – the growth in employment did not allow single parents to escape being at-risk-of-poverty.

Figure 11: Association between trends in employment and trends in in-work-poverty among single adults with children, 27 EU Member States, 2010-2018



Source: SILC [Table ilc_iw02 (in-work poverty)] and LFS [Table lfst_hheredty (employment)]

Box 1: Removing disincentives for work in Hungary

Up until 2013, a number of benefits for families with children were conditional on one parent (typically the mother) not working. This restriction was abolished in 2014 with the *Act CCXXIV on the amendment of certain legal acts relating to the restructuring of childcare benefits and to the enlargement of the benefit of exemption from the payment of social contributions tax* (Monostori, 2015). As a result, mothers with a child older than one could return to work while retaining eligibility for a number of allowances. In addition, parents receiving the *childcare benefit* were now also eligible for a place in public childcare/nurseries. Before the reform, the childcare benefit acted as a form of cash-for-care scheme, in which parents either could receive the benefit or access public care.

The removal of the disincentives for work was not explicitly focused on women or on single parents, but in all likelihood, women were the most likely to benefit in terms of continued employment – and in turn this may benefit single parents who can rely on a longer work history. These possible outcomes were reinforced by protections that were put in place for working single parents, including employers not being allowed to transfer employees who are single-parent to another location (without the employee's consent, and until the youngest child reaches the age of 16), and banning irregular, over-time work, night- and stand-by shifts for single parents with children under the age of 3.

However, as was clearly shown in Figure 11 that although an increase in the employment of single parents was observed in Hungary, this was mostly in the form of in-work poverty.

4. POLICIES SPECIFICALLY TAILORED FOR SINGLE PARENTS

As was already mentioned in the theoretical framework outlined in Section 1.4, many of the challenges faced by single parents and their families are not unlike those faced by for instance two-parent families, although possibly to a greater extent, which also implies that many of the policies for these family types can be rather similar. This is, however, not to say that there are no policy areas that are specifically designed and implemented to address the unique situation of single parents. This Chapter addresses to such policy areas that are specifically designed for single parents, with a focus on child support and family / custody law.

4.1. Child support

Child support policies (sometimes also referred to as child maintenance) regulate the financial responsibilities of separating parents towards their children. Typically, an amount is set that the non-resident parent (that is, the parent where the child does not reside – traditionally often the father) pays money to the resident parent to support the expenses of caring for and raising their child or children. This is conceptually separate from alimonies, that are generally aimed at financially supporting former partners. For instance, Sweden does not have alimonies, based on the idea that all adult individuals should be financially independent, but does require child support payments.

Child support policies are generally complex, with multiple parties involved. Child support policies in 22 EU Member States are presented in Table 2. In most countries, parents, the court, and in about half of the countries public agencies are involved in determining the level of child support payments. The final responsibility for determining the support payments often lies with the court, either directly or in case the parents cannot come to a satisfactory agreement. There is great variation across countries with respect to how the levels of child support payments are to be determined, ranging from parental discretion based on informal guidelines in the Netherlands (as described in their parenting plan, see Box 3), to a rigid formula in Denmark. Furthermore, not shown in the Table, support generally ends when the child turns 18 or 21, with some exceptions for continued support for children in education (e.g. Greece, Estonia) or children with a disability (Poland), and most countries have the same child support arrangements irrespective whether parents have been married or not.

Table 2: Child support policies in 21 EU Member States

Country	Involvement in the determination of child support			Responsibility for determining support payments	Rules for determining amount of payments	Responsibility for enforcement of payments	Advance on support payments
	Parents	Court	Agency				
Austria	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	No	Parents with court approval	Formal guidelines and rules/rigid formula	Court	Yes
Belgium	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	No	Court	Mostly discretion, no fixed rules or methods	Court	Yes
Cyprus	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	Yes	Parents / Court	Court	Court / Police	Yes
Czech Republic	Yes - entry into formal system if parents cannot agree.	Yes	Yes - Socio-legal protection authorities	District and Regional Courts	Guidelines given by law	Court and Office for International Legal Protection of Children in foreign matters	Yes
Denmark	Yes - ratified by Country Governor's Office	No	Yes - Country Governor's Office	Parents or State County's Agency if parental disagreement	Rules/ rigid formula	State County's Agency	Yes
Estonia	Yes	Yes	Yes - if child is on state maintenance	Court if parental disagreement	Minimum stated by the state, additional amount according to parental income	Enforcement Service	Yes
Finland	Yes - mediated and confirmed by Social Welfare Bond	Yes (residual role)	Yes - Social Welfare Board	Parents or Social Welfare Board and court if parental disagreement	Mostly discretion, informal guidelines	Municipal Social Welfare Board	Yes
France	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	No	Court	Mostly discretion, no fixed rules or methods	Courts and Social Security Agency	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes	No	Parents or Court if parental disagreement	Mostly discretion, using 'support tables'	Court	Yes

Greece	Yes	Yes	No	Parents or Court	Rules based on parents' income	Court	No
Hungary	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	No	Parents with court approval	Rules	Court	Yes
Ireland	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	No	Parents or Court if parental disagreement	Legal guidelines but high level of court discretion	Court	No
Latvia	Yes	Yes	No	Parents or Court if parental disagreement	Mostly discretion, no fixed rules or methods	Law enforcement office	Yes
Malta	Yes - ratified by Court	Yes	No	Parents w/court supervision or Court if parental disagreement	Legal guidelines, Courts have discretion	Courts	No
Netherlands	Yes - ratified by court	Yes	No	Parents with supervision of lawyers; Court if parental disagreement or parents receiving social assistance	Mostly discretion, informal guidelines	National Collection and Support Agency;. Enforcement through a bail off; If enforcement is contested, court.	No
Poland	Yes	No	Yes - Welfare office	Parents, Local government - Welfare Office	Formal guidelines, Family Benefit Act of November 28th 2003		Yes
Portugal	Yes - entry into formal system if parents cannot agree.	Yes	No	Parents with supervision of lawyers or Court if parental disagreement	Informal guidelines for private agreements or rules defined by Court if parental disagreement .	Court	No
Romania	Yes	Yes	Yes, Commission for the Child Protection	Parents or Commission for the Child Protection, Court if parental disagreement	Informal guidelines	Court, Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities	No
Slovak Republic	Yes - confirmed by Social	Yes	No	Court	Mostly discretion,	Enforcement Service	Yes

	Welfare Bond				informal guidelines		
Spain	Yes	Yes	No	Court	Mostly discretion, using 'support tables'	Court	Yes
Sweden	Yes - confirmed by Social Welfare Bond	Yes	No	Court	Mostly discretion, informal guidelines	Enforcement Service	Yes

Source: OECD Family Database and (Skinner, Bradshaw, and Davidson, 2007).

In principle, the income from child support can make an important difference to the income position of many single parents (and single mothers in particular). Estimates indicated that if all single parents received all the child support payments they were entitled to, poverty rates among children living with single parents would be approximately halved (Skinner, Bradshaw, and Davidson, 2007). However, the reality is that child support policies do not make for very effective poverty reduction tools. Estimates from numerous studies indicate that child support payments are only associated with moderate to small reductions in poverty (Skinner, Hakovirta, and Davidson, 2012; Bradshaw, Keung, and Chzhen, 2018; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018; Hakovirta, 2011) – and that their impact is often substantially smaller than child benefits (see Section 5.3). The ineffectiveness of child support policies in reducing poverty among single parents and their children relates to four challenges.

The first is that in many countries, a majority of single parents do not receive child support payments, and even when they do the amount of child support amount often constitute only a small part of the receiving parent's disposable household income (Skinner, Bradshaw, and Davidson, 2007; Bradshaw, Keung, and Chzhen, 2018). In case of non-compliance, parents in many countries have to go to court, or an enforcement service acts upon their behalf, as shown in Table 2. This, however, does not guarantee that payments will continue, and even if so often after a substantial delay. The majority of the countries in Table 2 guarantee an advance payment in case a parent defaults, in the form of an advance paid by a public institution. These institutions typically seek to recover these advances from the defaulting parent. Such guaranteed advances are effective in reducing poverty among single parents, and to avoid long delays in support payments (Gornick and Smeeding, 2018).

The second is that child support policies struggle to keep up with increasing family diversity, as well as the rise of shared care / joint physical custody (see Section 2.2). These developments challenge the conventional, or traditional, way in which child support is often calculated – often based on the assumption of two single parents, with the child mostly living with one, and neither of the parent re-partnering (Claessens and Mortelmans, 2018). The challenges related to family diversity, and in particular re-partnering, relate to whether child support is to be paid in case the receiving parent re-partners, and if so whether or how it should be accounted for if that parent also has children with their new partner. As child support is aimed at improving the living conditions of children, the latter raises important issues of solidarity between children living in the same household (Claessens and Mortelmans, 2018; Skinner, Hakovirta, and Davidson, 2012; Meyer, Skinner, and Davidson, 2011). The challenge related to joint physical custody, for instance, includes setting the threshold of how much care each parent should provide before child support amounts are lowered. Countries set very different thresholds, ranging from 1 night per week in the Netherlands to 50% of the time in Denmark (Claessens

and Mortelmans, 2018). However, as little is known regarding the monetary impact of joint physical custody (see Section 2.2.6), the empirical basis for setting such thresholds seems thin.

The third challenge relates to the interplay between child support payments and other social protection policies. In a number of countries, including Finland and Germany, it was for instance found that any received child support payments were subtracted from means-tested social assistance the single parents might receive (Hakovirta et al., 2020). Although this can be seen as shifting the financial burden of the single parent and their children from the state to the other parent, it renders the poverty alleviation function of child support ineffective.

Finally, the fourth challenge faced by child support policies is a possible trade-off between poverty reduction and gender equality, as was raised by Skinner and Hakovirta (2020). This could for instance be the case if the child support payments form a disincentive for employment (or an incentive to opt out of employment). To illustrate this, in Norway child support payments are calculated based on the assumption that both parents have earnings – even if one of them does not. This is done as an incentive for gender equal labour market participation, but might reduce the amount of income poverty that could potentially be reduced by the child support.

There can be normative reasons that motivate the requirement of child support payments, for example based on the notion of parental responsibility towards their children – financially or otherwise – irrespective of whether parents are still together. Nevertheless, as a means to reduce poverty, the evidence indicates that these policies are not very effective. Guaranteed advances on child support payments seem to help reduce poverty, but trends in terms of family diversity, re-partnering, and joint physical custody, the interplay with means-tested benefits, and the possible trade-off between child support reducing poverty or reducing gender equality, raise the question whether child support policies are an effective and efficient means to improve the situation of single parents and their children. A natural follow-up question would be whether child support payments, in-kind contributions, and/or an equal contribution of both parents to the care is in the children's best interest, but there is insufficient evidence to answer that question with any level of confidence.

Box 2: Child support guarantee in Estonia

One important reason that child support payments are of limited effectiveness in reducing poverty among single parents, is that often the payments are not made. This was also the case in Estonia, where in 2014 about a quarter of parents did not pay their child maintenance/child support even though they had been ordered to do so by the court. The average amount of monthly child support payments was €160 (in 2013), and unfulfilled child support obligations averaged at €960. Among single parents who did receive the child support, it contributes to reducing their poverty risks (Kutsar, 2015).

As part of the new Family Benefits Act (*Perehüvitiste seadus*) that came into force in 2017, the state now would pay the court-ordered maintenance fees in case the parent who was supposed to pay failed to do so. In turn, the state would take considerable measures to collect the maintenance fee from the defaulting parent. These measures included rescinding a driver's license, limiting entrepreneurial support and publishing the list of debtors online. The law was passed with unanimous support, and its underlying rationale is that (a.) the state will be more effective to recover unpaid child support than individual single parents will be, and (b.) that the new legislative framework will also ensure that more parents will pay their child support (Vörk and Vseviiov, 2016).

4.2. Custody law

As family relations are changing, with fathers being more involved in the care for their children also after divorce or separation, custody law comes into focus. Joint physical custody, as described in Section 2.2, pertains to the practice of children of separated parents living equal amounts of time with both parents. This can be the case when both parents have legal custody, or only one, and children whose parents both have legal custody need not be living with both their parents. Hence, custody law is described here in a separate Section, with a particular emphasis on how it relates to joint physical custody.

The EU does not have competence in the area of family law, including custody, except when it relates to cross-border issues. For instance, the Regulation concerning jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in matrimonial matters and the matters of parental responsibility (EC, No 2201/2003) sets out “rules determining which court is responsible for dealing with matrimonial matters and parental responsibility in disputes involving more than one country, rules making it easier to recognise and enforce judgments issued in one EU country in another, and a procedure to settle cases in which a parent abducts a child from one EU country and takes them to another”.⁸ Matters of custody fall under the jurisdiction of the country where the child resides, or when that cannot be established, where the child currently is.

It is beyond the scope of this study to present a comprehensive overview of family law in relation to custody across all Member States, but the European e-Justice Portal provides concise descriptions of the legal arrangements regarding family responsibility, including after divorce / separation. Excerpts of these are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Custody law / family law in relation to parental divorce / separation in 27 EU Member States

Country	Description
Austria	Joint custody continues to apply following divorce or separation. However, if the parents wish to maintain joint custody as before, they must submit an agreement to the court within a reasonable period of time specifying the parent with whom the child will primarily reside.
Belgium	The legal principle is that each of the child’s two parents jointly exercises parental authority. Parents can agree on the arrangements for exercising parental authority, provided that this is in the child’s interests. Otherwise, the matter must be referred to the family court.
Bulgaria	The general rule is that both parents exercise parental rights jointly and severally. If parents do not live together and cannot reach an agreement on who will take custody of the child, the dispute is settled by the district court.

⁸ Regulation (EC) No 2201/2003 on jurisdiction, recognition and enforcement of matrimonial and parental judgments. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:l33194>

Croatia	Parents have the right and duty to provide parental care equally, jointly, and by agreement. Parents who do not live together on a permanent basis are required to agree on parental care arrangements by drawing up a Shared Parental Care Plan.
Cyprus	In the case of a divorce, the question of parental responsibility is determined by the Court, which can award it to one of the two parents, or both jointly, or to a third person.
Czechia	Parental responsibility is an obligation for both parents. A decision about care for the child is an essential condition for divorce of his/her parents. When making the decision the court will consider the interest of the child. A court may place the child into the care of one of the parents or into shared custody or joint custody.
Denmark	No description available in the European e-Justice Portal.
Estonia	If the parents are divorced or separated, they must decide how to settle further custody issues. Parents who have custody may agree on the arrangements for exercising their joint right of representation. However, changing custody arrangements, including the termination of joint custody, may only be done through a court.
Finland	Custody and access rights must always be arranged with the best interests of the child in mind and so that these rights can be exercised in the best possible way in future. The parents can make a parental responsibility agreement. If the parents cannot reach an agreement, the dispute must be taken to court.
France	Separation of the parents does not affect the rules on transfer of the exercise of parental authority.
Germany	If the parents hold joint parental custody and then separate, they will continue to have joint custody of the child, regardless of whether they are married or not. However, the Family Court can grant custody to one parent at the request of one of the parents.
Greece	In the case of divorce or separation, the question of parental responsibility is resolved by the court. Parental responsibility may be awarded to one of the parents or, if they both agree and simultaneously fix the place of residence of the child, to both parents jointly.
Hungary	Separated parents may agree on dividing the rights and obligations of parental responsibility, but they must ensure a balanced lifestyle for their child (alternating placement of the child is not possible, for instance, if the parents live too far from each other and this would place too much of a burden on the child.). The parents' agreement is approved by the court.
Ireland	Where the parents of a child divorce or "split up", custody and access arrangements can be decided by agreement by the parents. Where agreement cannot be reached, parents can apply to court where a judge can make custody or access orders.
Italy	The parental responsibility of both parents does not end following separation, dissolution, cessation of the civil effects, annulment and nullity of the marriage. The usual form of custody, which is capable of ensuring co-parenting, is joint custody whereby both parents exercise parental responsibility.

Latvia	If parents are separated, joint parental custody continues. The childcare and supervision are exercised by the parent with whom the child lives.
Lithuania	If a marriage is dissolved by mutual consent between the spouses, they are required to present to the court an agreement on the consequences of the dissolution of marriage (separation of property, maintenance payments for the children, etc.). If a marriage is dissolved on the basis of the application of one of the spouses, the application presented to the court must also indicate how the applicant will perform his or her obligations towards the other spouse and their minor children.
Luxembourg	In principle, the separation or divorce of the parents does not alter the arrangements for the exercise of parental authority, which continues to be exercised jointly by the two parents.
Malta	In case of divorce or separation, custody is determined by a court decision or settled through mediation.
Netherlands	Following a divorce, both parents retain parental authority over their children. Both continue to be responsible for raising and caring for the children. Parenthood and the associated rights and duties can also be regulated differently in the parenting plan, which is drawn up in the case of divorce.
Poland	When delivering a judgment on divorce, legal separation or marriage annulment, a Polish court is required to resolve the question of parental responsibility over a child. When resolving the issue of parental responsibility, the Polish court may take into account a written agreement between the spouses concerning the manner in which parental responsibility is to be exercised, provided it is in the best interests of the child.
Portugal	Parental responsibilities on issues of particular importance to the life of the child shall be exercised jointly by both parents. The court will determine the child's residence and visitation rights according to the child's interests.
Romania	In principle, parental authority lies with both parents jointly after divorce, or with one of the parents only if there are well-grounded reasons, regarding the best interest of the child.
Slovakia	The court has to decide on the allocation and exercise of parental rights and obligations (even when both parents continue to exercise parental rights and obligations jointly) or it can approve an agreement between them.
Slovenia	Parents who do not live together or who intend to separate must come to an agreement on the custody of the children they have together, and do so in the interests of those children. They may agree to retain equal custody of their children, to give custody to one of the parents or to split the children between them. If they are unable to come to an agreement on the matter themselves, a social services centre assists them to do so.
Spain	In the event that the parents separate, divorce, split up or do not live together, all the rights and duties regarding minors, in relation to their persons and their property, belong to both parents, except in exceptional circumstances. If the parents live apart, parental authority will be exercised by the parent with whom the child lives.

Sweden

If the parents get divorced, the joint custody continues without the court's needing to take any decision on this in connection with the divorce.

Source: text in this table are excerpts cited from <http://e-justice.europa.eu> (lightly edited for length)

Common patterns in these national laws on custody is that both parents can retain custody or parental responsibility upon divorce or separation, given that they had it prior to separation (typically through marriage or recognition of the child), that an agreement has to be made by parents that need to be approved, overruled, or set (in case parents cannot come to an agreement) by the court, and that the child's interests are to be leading. Notably, given this broad-level similarity, the practice of joint physical custody varies widely across EU Member States. This suggests that factors other than custody law also play an important role in promoting or inhibiting joint physical custody.

This is, of course, not to say that the details of custody law do not play a role. Studies from a number of countries indicate that the details custody law and how it is implemented in legal practice, indeed seem to matter for joint physical custody.

In Spain, a 2005 reform in divorce law allowed for joint physical custody, which up to then could only be arranged informally if both parents agreed (Solsona and Spijker, 2016). In 2010, however, a reform in the Catalan Civil Code went a step further to actively encourage parents to exercise joint physical custody and shared parenting (similar initiatives were taken in the regions of Aragon, Navarre and Valencia). When considering the child custody regime, judges need to consider the bond between both parents and their child(ren), time spent with the children, ability of both parents to ensure the well-being of the child, the attitude of both parents to cooperate, the view of the child, agreements made by the parents prior to the separation, and the location of both parents' new homes in relation to the child's activities (Solsona and Spijker, 2016). In addition, parents are expected to draw up a parenting plan, stipulating where children will usually live, arrangements around holidays, types of education and activities for the children and the parental obligation to share information. Even though these arrangements do not require parents to opt for joint physical custody, they were designed with the purpose of making both parents reflect on their caring responsibilities and to encourage joint physical custody. An evaluation of court decrees on custody arrangements among formerly married, heterosexual parents showed that in the years after the implementation of the new Catalan Civil Code, joint physical custody went up from 17% to 26% of divorces where children were involved (Solsona and Spijker, 2016). This evaluation thus suggests that the reform in the Catalan Civil Code encourage parents to reflect on their roles after divorce, which resulted in more parents opting for joint physical custody.

Evidence from a number of other countries points in a similar direction. Norway saw a marked rise in the percentage of children of divorced parents who live in joint physical custody. This was, in addition to changing norms on parenting practices, attributed to policy reforms that include deducting the costs associated with parent-child contact from child support payments and making it easier for non-married fathers to adopt joint legal custody (Kitterød and Wiik, 2017). In 1995, Belgium adopted joint legal custody as the default option, and in 2006 joint physical custody must be considered first by a judge in case parents cannot agree on the living arrangement of their child(ren) upon separation, which is associated with a substantial rise in the number of children living equal amounts of time with both parents (Vanassche et al., 2017). The implementation of new custody law in the Netherlands, and evaluations thereof, are discussed in more detail in Box 3.

Box 3: Presumption of joint custody as the default legal arrangement in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands a new law was implemented in 2009 with the aims to reduce the harmful impact of divorce on children, and to encourage joint physical custody (Poortman and van Gaalen, 2017). This entailed strengthening the post-divorce position of fathers, and a provision that children whose parents both have legal custody have *“the right to equal care and upbringing by both parents”* (ibid. p. 532).

As part of the new law, separating parents of minor children were now required to draw up a parenting plan. This binding parenting plan is required to detail plans regarding the division of care, child support, and how the parents are to communicate important matters regarding the child. Perhaps because the parenting plan already was used prior to the reform, albeit not mandatorily, an evaluation showed that the new law changed little in terms of procedures of family outcomes regarding the parenting plan, and did not affect child well-being (De Bruijn, Poortman, and Van der Lippe, 2018). After the reform, however, separating parents were more likely to draw up a parenting plan, to revise it, and although it was associated with more tension, parents were less likely to report severe levels conflict.

In the immediate years around the implementation of the new law, joint physical custody rose from 20% to 28%. However, it should be noted that this living arrangement was already on the rise already prior to the reform, and that a return to about 20% was shown a few years later (however, the latter finding was based on a different type of data and therefore possibly not completely comparable).

It was furthermore found that joint physical custody was more common among well-resourced single parents, including the higher educated and working. This in part relates to the fact that it can be a more expensive living arrangement, for instance in relation to housing, and the need for more furniture and toys (Bakker and Mulder, 2013). Joint physical custody was furthermore found to be a less stable living arrangement compared to sole physical custody with the mother or the father. Instability related to factors that included a lower level of education among both parents, issues of child well-being, and a number of gendered factors: the length of the father's commute (but not the mothers), and re-partnering of the father (and, again, not the mother) (Poortman and van Gaalen, 2017).

5. POLICIES FOR ALL FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

This Chapter, in complement to the previous, examines four policy areas that are not specifically designed for single parents, but for all parents / families with children (early childhood education and care, parental leave, and child benefits), or for all workers (income protection through social security and minimum income protection). As will be discussed further, these policies have a strong potential to improve the situation of single parents, but often their implementation is inadequate.

Box 4: Targeting within universalism in France and Norway

An important nuance is to be made regarding the distinction between policies specifically targeted at single parents, and policies for all families with children. Even within the framework of types of policies that are for all families with children, single parents might receive additional benefits. This might be considered a form of targeting within universalism. This nuance is illustrated based on policies in France and Norway.

A number of policies in France are targeted to single parents (and in some cases, low-income families) specifically (Eydoux, 2015). Yet, it is clear that these are based on, or supplements to, policies from which other families with children can also benefit. Examples include a supplemental allowance for single parents, a maternal wage providing payment above the minimum wage, and childcare services through the AGEPI scheme (*'Aide à la garde d'enfant pour les parents isolés'*) that target single parents with children under 10. Furthermore, as part of the national family allowance fund, childcare centres are required to accept at least 10% of children from low-income families.

France furthermore provides a number of targeted policies at the local level. Local family benefits offices ensure the payment of child support / maintenance payments, including a minimum guarantee to the caring parent and the ability to collect overdue payments from the other parent (up to two years back). As a second example, the Institute for Education and Practical Training in Paris provides to jobless single parents a combination of extended childcare options and jobseeker support, and this combination is associated with an 85%-95% return to work (Eydoux, 2015). These targeted policies have been deemed comprehensive, but at the same time complex (ÖSB, 2015).

Norway takes an approach that also can be considered 'targeting within universalism' (Hagerupsen, 2017), which means that as far as possible the country addresses the situation of single mothers/fathers by means of universal services (childcare, guaranteed after child's age of 1) and benefits (national insurance scheme such as unemployment, sickness, disability and parental leave; family allowances and cash benefit for families with small children; and means-tested housing allowance and social assistance). These universal benefits are complemented by a number of benefits that are tailored to the unique situation of single parents, and include a transitional benefit, a childcare benefit, an educational benefit, and a moving grant to take up work. On top of these benefits, Norway implemented a family coordinator to help navigate families to access the fairly large number of services and benefits in the areas of parental employment, housing, family economics and social inclusion of children (Raab, 2017).

5.1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is among the most important type of policy for supporting female labour force participation (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). It contributes to providing equal opportunities for children (Cunha and Heckman, 2009), and prevents or counters the negative consequences of growing up in poor or otherwise disadvantaged households (Leseman and Slot, 2014). For ECEC to be effective, it has to be available, affordable and of good quality (Gambaro, Stewart, and Waldfogel, 2015; Sirén et al., 2020; Yerkes and Javornik, 2019).

The benefits of (being able to use) childcare for in particular mothers' employment are manifold. Not only does ECEC allow more women to be employed (Akgunduz and Plantenga, 2018), but also longer hours (Andringa, Nieuwenhuis, and Van Gerven, 2015) and in better-paid occupations (Pettit and Hook, 2009; Korpi, Ferrarini, and Englund, 2013). Public childcare was further found associated with a more gender equal distribution of care tasks among (heterosexual) couples (An and Peng, 2016; Hook, 2010), and with a smaller motherhood-wage penalty (Halldén, Levanon, and Kricheli-Katz, 2016). As a combined effect, public childcare is further associated with women (in couples) earning a larger share of their household income (Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van der Kolk, 2019), thus fostering their economic independence (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019; Nieuwenhuis, 2020) and reducing their poverty risks (Förster and Verbist, 2012; Misra, Moller, and Budig, 2007). Although these findings do not specifically or exclusively pertain to single parents, the employment and earnings of mothers in couples represent not only economic independence, but also an investment in future employability if at some point they would become a single mother.

When it comes specifically to single parents, the share of single mothers having used formal childcare for their youngest child was similar to the share of partnered mothers in most EU countries (Van Lancker, 2018) – likely a consequence of a substantial share of single mothers having used the childcare when their children were young and when they were still together with the father of their children. Moreover, having used childcare was associated with a greater likelihood to be employed, and fewer single parents who indicate that they are not working or working part-time because of structural constraints (Van Lancker, 2018). Moreover, among working single parents, ECEC and other dual-earner/dual-carer policies were found associated with better work-life balance (Esser and Olsen, 2018) and self-reported health (Nieuwenhuis, Tøge, and Palme, 2018).

It is a well-known phenomenon that ECEC is used to a lesser extent by parents who have a weaker position in – or larger distance from – the labour market. This is often referred to as the 'Matthew effect' in childcare (Van Lancker, 2014). Enrolment is for instance lower among children of lower educated (Van Lancker and Ghysels, 2016) or lower income parents. (Ghysels and Van Lancker, 2011). This is highly important, because it renders ECEC less effective particularly among those who might benefit the most from it, both with respect to the parents and to their children (Vandenbroeck, 2020). An understanding of what factors promote more equal use of childcare / ECEC seems to be emerging. Merely increasing spending does not universally reduce inequality in ECEC use (Van Lancker, 2018), which suggests that the details of policy implementation matter. Enrolment was more equal (with respect to parental background) in countries that (Van Lancker and Ghysels, 2016):

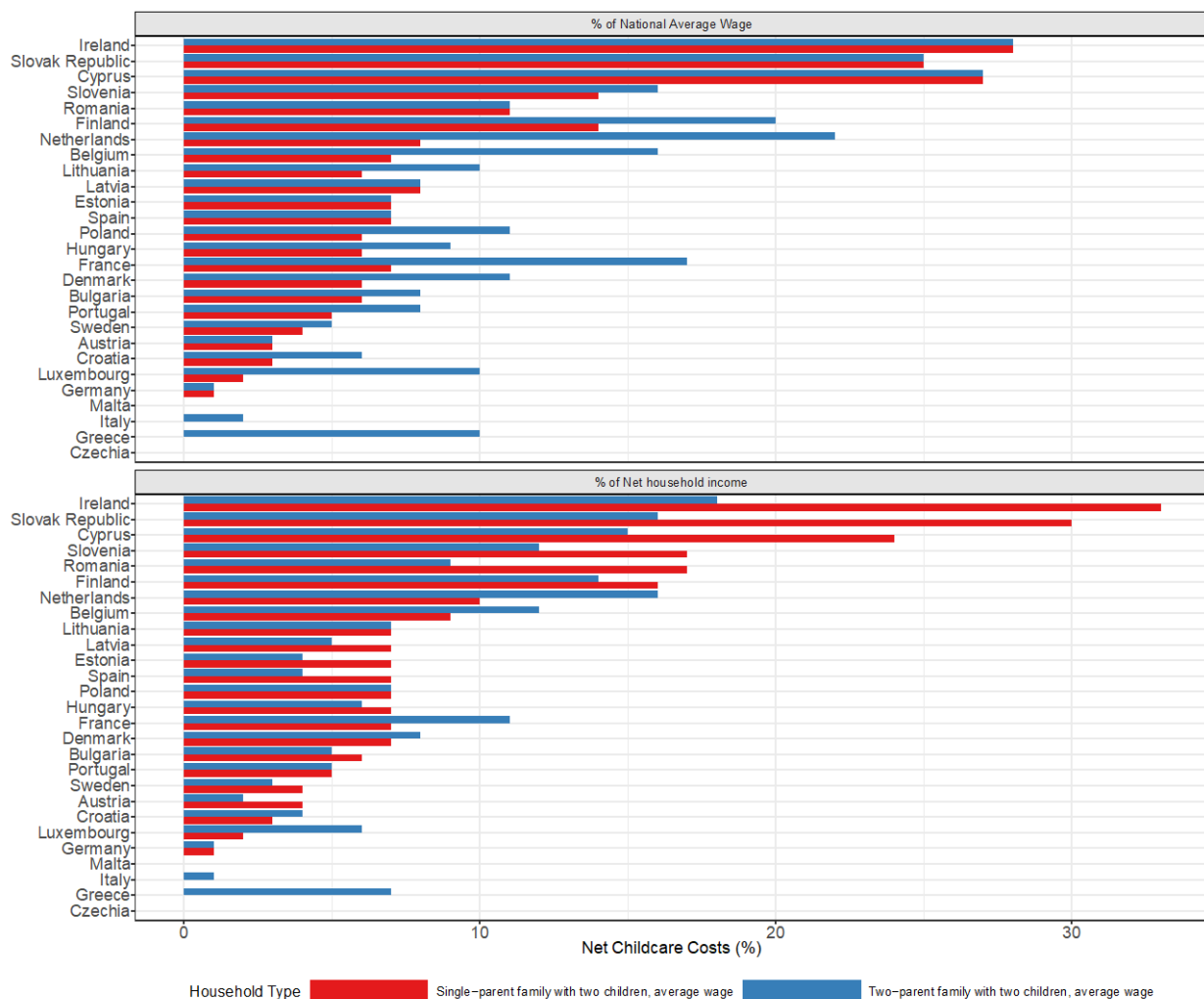
- Had a public or subsidized supply of ECEC services;
- Guaranteed parents/children a place in an ECEC centre;
- Lower out-of-pocket fees;
- And in countries in which parents perceived the quality of ECEC as higher.

Interestingly, countries' norms about motherhood did not affect the (in)equality in use of ECEC, suggesting that policies really can make an impact.

For ECEC policy to be effective, it also comes down to the details of policy implementation. Childcare-related challenges can occur in case no flexible care is available for parents who are required to work nonstandard working hours – and in particular for working single parents without second caregiver (Moilanen et al., 2016; Yerkes and Javornik, 2019). There is substantial regional (or otherwise sub-national) variation in childcare enrolment rates that are not captured by national indicators. Local variation in the availability of places in ECEC centres matters (Schober, 2020). Even when large numbers of childcare places are available, at the local level a long distance to the nearest available childcare centre can still be prohibitive for in particular mothers' employment (Yerkes and Javornik, 2019; Emery, 2020).

Looking in more detail at the costs of ECEC for single parents, Figure 12 shows the costs of childcare in European countries, based on data from the OECD. The data compare the net costs (after tax deductions and benefits are accounted for) for a single parent earning the national average wage, and for a two-parent, dual-earner family (both earning the average wage). The top panel expresses the net childcare fee as a percentage of the national average wage (this accounts for differences between the countries in exchange rates and purchasing power). It shows that user fees for ECEC are very high in for instance Ireland, Slovakia and Cyprus, and low in for instance Austria and Germany. Furthermore, it shows that in most countries the user fees are higher for the two-parent family compared to the single-parent family: this is either because user fees are means-tested on the household income (the dual-earner two-parent family has a higher income) or because single parents receive additional benefits.

Figure 12: Single parents' out-of-pocket expenses for ECEC, EU Member States



Source: OECD Benefits, Taxes and Wages [Table NCC]

Yet, an additional comparison is of importance. In the bottom panel, the user fees are expressed as a percentage of the disposable/net household income of the two-parent and single-parent families. Here it becomes clear that in a number of countries, including notably again Ireland, Slovakia and Cyprus, but also in Finland, Spain and Austria, single parents pay a larger share of their household income compared to otherwise similar two-parent families. In other words, although single parents tend to pay equal or even lower fees for ECEC, in a number of countries it poses a sometimes substantially larger burden on their household economy (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

5.2. Paid parental leave

Paid parental leave can benefit single parents by facilitating them to combine work and family responsibilities, and by strengthening women's economic independence – also before they become single mothers. Paid parental leave and early childhood education and care (ECEC) are often considered

to be part of the same category of work-family reconciliation policies, but where ECEC supports gender equality mostly by allowing women to enter the labour market, paid leaves have the additional function of encouraging men to take on more care roles. This, too, can benefit the situation of single parents in the long run.

Overall, the introduction of paid maternity, parental, and/or childcare leaves have been associated with an increase in female labour force participation, particularly among mothers (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017; Pettit and Hook, 2009; Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van Der Kolk, 2012). However, overly long periods of parental leave – particularly when it is unpaid – have been found to be a mechanism of exclusion for women of the labour market (Pettit and Hook, 2009; Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van der Kolk, 2017).

5.2.1. Parental leave for single parents

Specifically focusing on single parents, parental leave is positively associated with their employment. Single parents were found more likely to take leave particularly in countries that provided a longer duration, and taking leave is most strongly associated with increased employment later in life in countries that did not offer longer than 50 weeks of leave and in countries that provided higher rates of wage replacement (Van Lancker, 2018). In other words, the duration of parental leave can be a double-edged sword, in the sense that very long periods of leave encourage more single parents to take leave, but also reduce their likelihood of employment later in life.

Although there is a clear evidence base that overly long leave is a mechanism of exclusion of women from the labour market (Pettit and Hook, 2009), little evidence exists on how long is exactly too long. Some studies, not exclusively focused on single parents, have suggested around 100 weeks (Thévenon and Solaz, 2013; Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van der Kolk, 2017), while the study focused on single parents suggested 50 (Van Lancker, 2018). However, these studies were either not designed to find the exact optimum duration of parental leave, nor did they account for the fact that this optimum duration likely relates to contextual factors such as wage inequality, whether the leave is paid by the employer or collectively, occupational differences, employer-provided provisions over and above national legislation, and how much leave is taken by fathers. These issues need to be taken into account before it can be addressed with confidence how long parental leave is too long.

Nonetheless, the benefits of paid leave for single parents can extend beyond their employment. As long as parental leave was comprised of adequate levels of wage replacement, it is associated with lower poverty risks among single parents, in part because it raised their employment rates (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Misra, Moller, and Budig, 2007). Here too, very long periods of leave rendered its poverty-reducing effect less effective (Misra, Moller, and Budig, 2007). Moreover, better-paid leave, instead of long periods of unpaid leave, were not only found to reduce single parents' risk of poverty but also increase their chance to reach a middle-class income (Byun, 2018).

5.2.2. Parental leave for fathers

Fathers spend substantially less time than mothers on care tasks and housework, although their involvement is increasing (Hook, 2006; Hook, 2010). It was argued that men and fathers taking up more care roles is required to further the process towards gender equality in both care and work (Esping-Andersen, 2016). Yet, in part, paternity leave (or, more generally, parental leave for fathers), can play an

important role in improving gender equality in the home. Fathers taking leave has been found associated with numerous benefits, including higher female labour force participation, increased relationship stability, the self-reported health of the fathers, and more involvement of the fathers in their children's lives – also later in their life-course (Duvander and Jans, 2009; Bartova and Keizer, 2020). Initially, mostly fathers in the Nordic countries were found to increase their take-up of leave (Eydal et al., 2015), in particular in Sweden, Norway and Iceland, and with Denmark and Finland lagging behind. In other countries, fathers are now also taking parental/paternity leave at moderate rates, including Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, albeit still at much lower levels and typically shorter durations than mothers (Karu and Tremblay, 2018).

A number of design features of parental leave policies are found instrumental in encouraging and facilitating fathers to take more leave. First, perhaps the most effective feature is the reserved portion of the total leave for the father – the so-called 'use it or lose it' feature, or non-transferable leave. If the father does not take that portion of the leave, the family loses these rights. Second, it matters greatly to what extent the leave is paid, as many families cannot afford to have their income substantially reduced for longer periods of time. The level of wage replacement matters for women, but as men on average contribute larger shares to the household incomes of couples compared to women across European countries (Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van der Kolk, 2019), a low level of wage replacement might matter more for the couples' decision regarding parental leave for fathers than for mothers. Perhaps most importantly, countries either reserving months to fathers or having a high rate of wage replacement are not very effective in increasing fathers' taking of leave: it is the combination of both policy design features that is most effective (Karu and Tremblay, 2018).

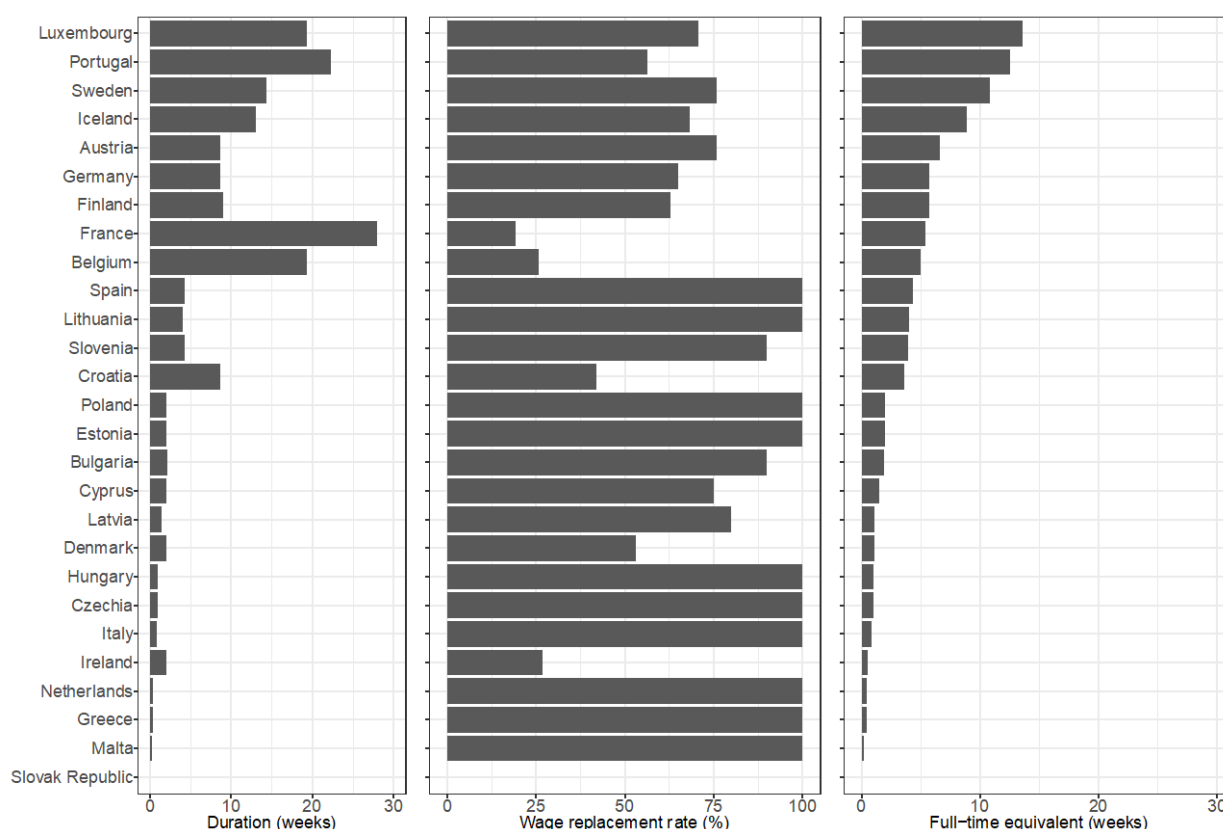
Yet, even in Sweden, Iceland and Norway, countries that combine high replacement rates and reserved months of leave for both parents, take-up among fathers continues to fall behind that of women. Three reasons for this were cited (Gornick, 2016). First, gendered norms among both men and women about who is supposed to provide care. Such norms vary widely across Europe (Knight and Brinton, 2017), which suggests that no immediate results can be expected from implementing Nordic-style leave for fathers in other parts of Europe, and that long-term, consistent policy efforts are required to sort the desired effects. Secondly, work-place practices and expectations matter, with managers often deciding on the 'final availability' of leave arrangements – even in the context of national legislation (Chung, 2020). A recent evaluation of why take-up of leave among fathers is low 10 years after a reform in Germany to provide fathers with 2 reserved months of leave, fathers were found to cite lack of organizational support (in addition to financial constraints to the family) (Reimer, 2020). This might indicate the importance of how the leave is paid for: by the employer or through collective means. Thirdly, take-up of leave by fathers is heavily classed, with higher rates among fathers with higher levels of income and education. Indeed, low levels of wage replacement might even less able to support low-income families, thus further increasing socio-economic inequality in who is able to take parental leave (Gornick, 2016).

Parental leave can play an important role in encouraging more gender equal roles among heterosexual couples, but also facilitate the care roles of single fathers. In Sweden, for instance, where parents can take their parental leave until their child turns eight years old, fathers were found to continue taking leave even if they did not / no longer live together with the mother of their child(ren) (Duvander and Korsell, 2018).

Given the importance of fathers taking parental leave, in relation to fostering gender equality in both care and work, and to promote continued involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, the data in Figure 13 show leave policies for fathers, based on the two key dimensions listed above: the duration of leave that is reserved for fathers (left panel), and the average rate of wage replacement (middle

panel), and these two indicators are combined to the full-time equivalent duration of leave reserved for fathers (right panel, 10 weeks of leave paid at 50% correspond to 5 weeks of full-time equivalent leave). It should be noted that fathers might be entitled to longer periods of leave, for instance if part of the leave can be shared with the other parent. The Figure shows that countries that have very high replacement rates of nearly 100% also tend to have relatively short durations of leave reserved for fathers. This is for instance the case in Malta (1 day), Greece (2 days) and the Netherlands (2 days, in 2018). The longest duration of leave reserved for fathers is in France, yet this was matched with a low rate of wage replacement. Overall, the longest full-time equivalent duration is in Luxembourg, Portugal, Sweden and Iceland.

Figure 13: Parental leave reserved for fathers, EU Member States, 2018



Source: OECD Family Database. Note: The indicators in this data for the Slovak Republic are 0, indicating no leave rights reserved for fathers. Countries are sorted by the value of full-time equivalent leave (right panel)

Two final caveats regarding these data have to be made. First, these policy indicators do not show that many new parents are not eligible for these parental leave rights. A recent report published by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (O'Brien et al., 2020) showed that 34% of all women and 23% of all men (aged 20-49) in the EU would not qualify for statutory parental leave. Relating these findings to Figure 13, it should be noted that in both Luxembourg and Portugal, despite their long durations of full-time equivalent leave reserved to fathers, non-eligibility was comparatively high. For the largest part, non-eligibility was because they were not employed. Nevertheless, also among those who were employed, and for whom wage replacement presumably matters most, 12% of men and 10% of women would not be eligible for parental leave. In most cases, this was because these workers were self-employed or did not meet work-related requirements such as the duration of employment history.

The latter is particularly important, given the rise of precarious employment discussed in Section 3.2. Rates of ineligibility for men were particularly high in Greece, Ireland, Belgium, Cyprus and Portugal. Among workers, ineligibility was also more common among the lower educated and those in the age range 20 to 24.

Secondly, these data do not specifically account for the leave rights for single parents – in part because such data is not available in a manner suitable for statistical comparison across countries. Based on preliminary data (hence not presented here), a recent publication was nonetheless able to indicate two patterns of relevance here (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2020). First, single parents generally have similar rights as parents in couples, with single parents generally receiving the same rates of wage replacement and sometimes receiving slightly longer durations of leave. Second, any rate of wage replacement below 100% is much more consequential for single parents compared to dual-earners. The logic is simple, but pertinent: a replacement rate of for instance 75% often represents a substantial cut of 25% in the income of a single-parent household, yet when dual-earning parents alternate in taking leave at the same replacement rate, their (already higher) household income is only reduced by 12.5% (everything else equal). In other words, analogue to the findings reported regarding out-of-pocket expenses of ECEC in Figure 12, even if the rights for single parents are similar on paper to those of parents in couples, taking periods of leave might be of greater consequence to their household economy.

5.3. Child benefits

Of all redistributive policies, child benefits are likely the most effective in reducing income poverty among single parents and their children. In contrast to child support policies, which were described in Section 4.1 and constitute private transfers between households, child benefits represent public transfers to parents. Often, child benefits have a universal character in the sense that all or most parents are eligible.

Child benefits are associated with substantial reduction among single parents (Gornick and Smeeding, 2018; Gornick and Jäntti, 2012; Bradshaw and Finch, 2002; Chzhen and Bradshaw, 2012; Bradshaw, Keung, and Chzhen, 2018). The effectiveness of child benefits extends to single parents in employment (Morissens, 2018) and to two-parent families, even though there are some indications that child benefits reduce poverty more strongly among single parents than among couples with children (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

There is a long-standing debate on what the optimal design of child benefits (and other transfer-based benefits) would be. This debate takes place along the lines of ‘universalism versus targeting’ (Korpi and Palme, 1998). Whereas targeting refers to the notion of using redistributive budgets mostly to ‘target’ low-income families, or in this case single-parent families, exclusively to achieve the highest degree of poverty reduction, the notion of universalism refers to the idea that particularly in the long-run redistribution is most effective if all families along the income distribution can qualify for benefits. The reason for this is that if also high-income families with children are eligible for child benefits, these benefits will be more familiar and popular among voters, less stigmatizing, and the administration less complex which reduces non-take-up. As a result, more families in poverty will actually receive the child benefits, and overall the received amount will be higher.

Examining a broader set of policies, a more universal – rather than low-income targeted – design of redistributive policies was more effective in reducing poverty among single parents (Brady and Burroway, 2012). On the other hand, specifically focusing on child benefits, low-income targeting (e.g. provide additional child benefits after a means-test) can improve the poverty reduction through child benefits, if the overall redistributive budget remained sufficiently high and indeed low-income families received the highest amount of child benefits (Van Lancker and Van Mechelen, 2015; Van Lancker, Ghysels, and Cantillon, 2015). Regarding the latter, in a number of countries including Spain, Greece and Latvia, it were actually the higher-income families who received higher benefits – typically though tax benefits awarded to these families. These countries were described as “underachievers” (Van Lancker and Van Mechelen, 2015) in terms of poverty reduction through child benefits. A later study corroborated the possibility that high-income families received higher child benefits, and using more recent data found this to be the case in Greece and Switzerland (Marchal and Van Lancker, 2019).

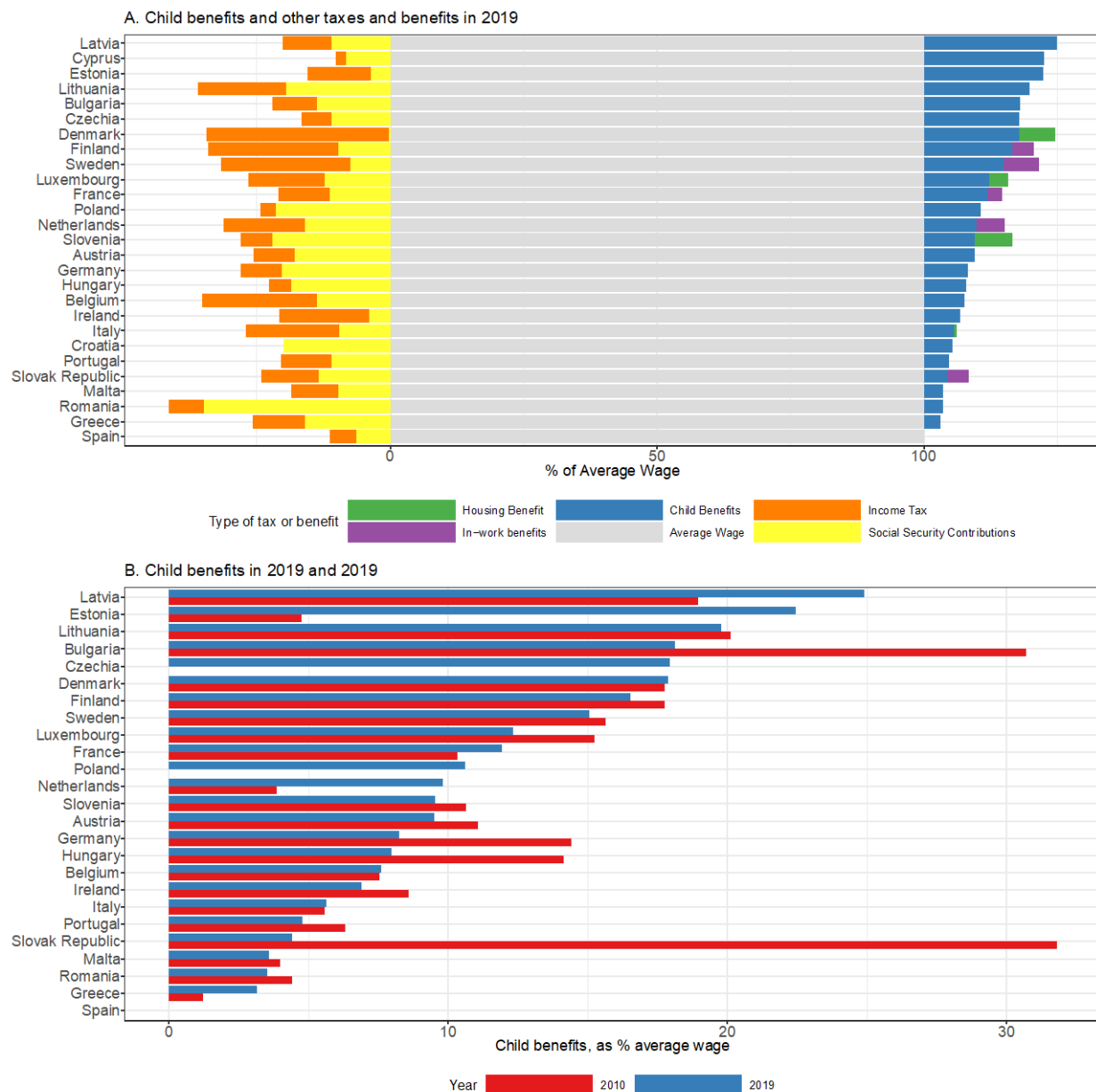
As high child benefits are associated with the traditional breadwinner model in social policy making (Korpi, 2000; Lewis, 1992), it should be noted that there is some evidence that extensive child benefits can be a disincentive for female labour force participation (Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van Der Kolk, 2012; Gauthier, 1996; Thévenon, 2011). This seems particularly the case with ‘cash-for-care’ schemes, in which families who opt not to use public childcare receive a compensation for the public expenses that would otherwise have been incurred (Bungum and Kvande, 2013; Hiilamo and Kangas, 2009; Rummery, 2009).

The data in Figure 14 show the child benefits, as well as possible other benefits, received by working single parents across EU Member States. The primary purpose of these data is to demonstrate that child benefits make up a sizeable part of the household income of working single parents, and the change in child benefits over time. The secondary purpose is to show the relevance of child benefits for working single parents relative to other benefits they might receive. The single parents on which these data are based are assumed to work full time, at the national average wage, and have two children aged 4 and 7.

Panel A shows the estimated child benefits, alongside other benefits the single parent might receive and taxes and social security contributions that are paid, and are expressed as percentages of the national average wage (that is why the ‘average wage’ category is exactly 100 in each country). In 2019, child benefits were a sizeable addition to the household income (in addition to wages) in many European countries, up to 25% of the average wage in Latvia. Spain was the only country that did not provide child benefits at this level of earnings. In Latvia, Cyprus and Estonia, the amount of child benefits even exceeded the amount of income taxes and social security contributions paid. Moreover, the figure shows that in most countries child benefits are the only benefits these single parents receive, and that in the other countries the amounts of child benefits are more substantial than the in-work benefits or housing benefits.

Panel B shows developments in child benefits between 2010 and 2019, again expressed as a percentage of national average wage. The data from 2019 are the same across panels A and B. The data show that in a number of countries child benefits were introduced or expanded to at this level of earnings, including Czechia and Poland, or that the levels were substantially increased such as in Estonia and the Netherlands. In the majority of countries, however, child benefit levels for single parents earning the average wage had declined since 2010, and substantially so in the Slovak Republic, Bulgaria, Germany and Hungary.

Figure 14: Child benefits and other benefits for working single parents, EU Member States, 2010-2019



Source: Own calculations based on output from the OECD tax-benefit model. Model version 2.2.1. Calculations based on a single parent, assumed to be working full-time at the national average wage, with 2 children (aged 4 and 7). Housing costs are assumed to be 20% of their wage. Countries are sorted by the value of child benefits in 2019. Cyprus and Croatia are not included in Panel B, because of missing data.

5.4. Income protection

Even though the majority of single parents are employed, their rate of employment is increasing, and likelihood of living in a household with a very low work intensity is decreasing, there can always be periods of unemployment or inactivity. In increasingly precarious labour markets, with lower degrees of employment protection, it is in fact more likely for a person to experience such period(s) (Kalleberg, 2018). This applies to singles and single parents just as well as it applies to people living in a couple. Yet, without a second earner in the household but with children to provide for, the consequences of a period of unemployment can be more severe for single parents without adequate social protection. Hence, in the final Section of this Chapter, two redistributive income protection policies are examined: unemployment benefits, and minimum income protection.

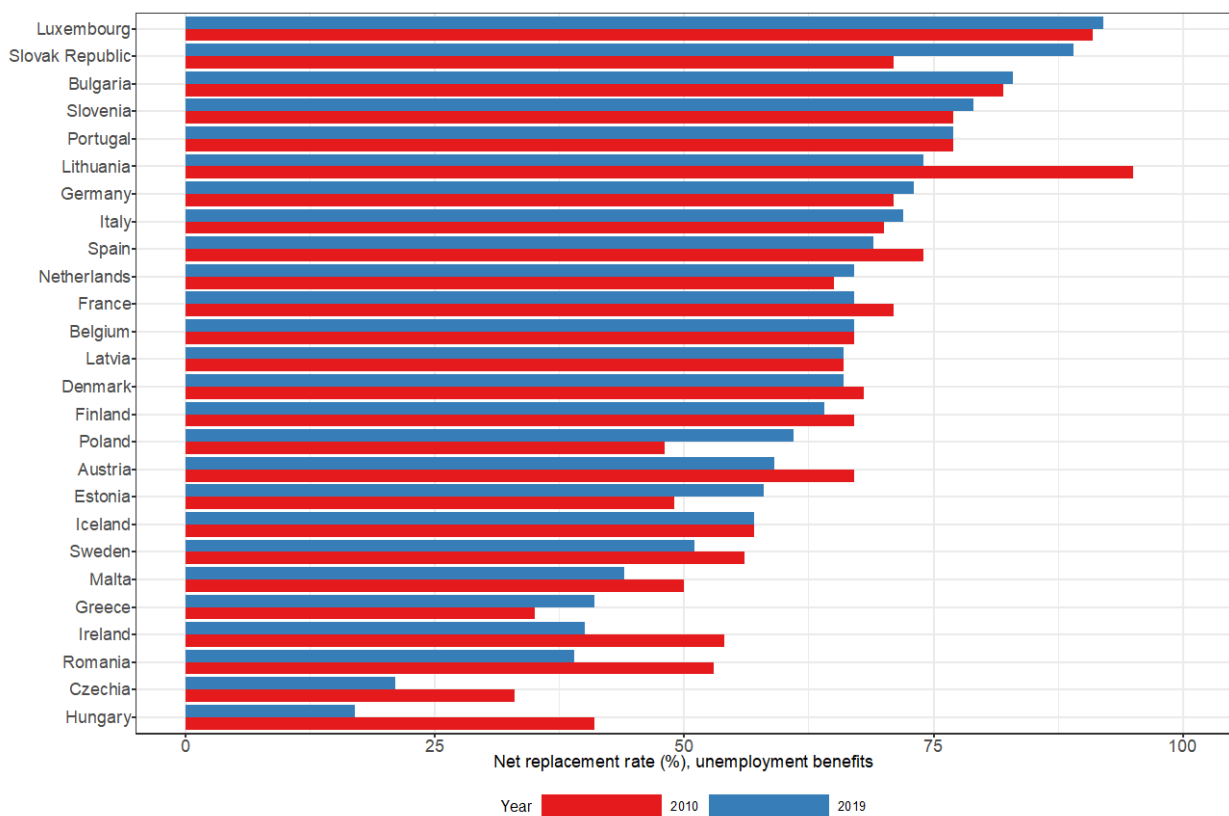
5.4.1. Unemployment benefits

Unemployment benefits are a form of social security, which means that rights and entitlements are based on contributions people make while working. During spells of unemployment, members of insurance funds may be eligible to payments at a percentage of their previous wage. As rights are derived from a contribution history, often unemployment benefits are not means-tested or conditional on the income of a partner or other household members.

The insurance-based nature of social security also represents one of the reasons why it is important to achieve gender equality in the labour market, not only in terms of who is working, but also in terms of working hours and wages. Women being more likely to be inactive, or to work fewer hours for lower wages, not only impairs their economic independence in the immediate sense, but also means that women are less likely to be eligible for 'first class' social security, and more likely to have to resort to 'second class' social assistance (Lewis, 1992). This also pertains to women (and men) developing a contribution history prior to being a single parent.

The data in Figure 15 show that the replacement rates of unemployment benefits vary widely across European countries, ranging from over 75% (in 2019) of the last-earned wage in Luxembourg, the Slovak Republic, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Portugal, to less than 25% in Czechia and Hungary. It could be that some countries provide higher replacement rates for a brief period after becoming unemployed, and most countries provide lower replacement rates after longer durations of unemployment (until the eligibility ends, as (almost) all of these unemployment benefits are time-limited).

Figure 15: Net replacement rates of unemployment benefits, EU Member States, 2010-2019



Source: OECD.stat. Calculations are based on a single adult with 2 children, who has been unemployed for 6 months. Prior to unemployment, this person earned the national average wage. Values represent net replacement rates, thus accounting for tax benefits and not including housing benefits. Countries are ranked based on the replacement rate in 2019.

Secondly, the replacement rates changed in the period between 2010 and 2019, with increases in for instance the Slovak Republic, Poland, and Estonia. Yet, in a larger number of countries there were decreases in the net replacement rates of the unemployment benefits, notably in Lithuania, Ireland, Romania, Czechia and Hungary. Such declines in replacement rates need not always be the result of policy reforms, as often nominal amounts or income replacement ceilings are not updated for inflation or increases in average wages, which effectively reduces replacement rates.

Box 5: Increasingly inadequate unemployment benefits in Sweden

Sweden is known as a country with an extensive welfare state and strong commitment to promoting gender equality in the labour market. Regarding the latter, it provides well-paid parental leave to both mothers and fathers, and guarantees high quality childcare places at very low prices (see Figure 1) – family policies that are known to also benefit the economic position of single parents. Nevertheless, poverty among single parents – as well as singles without children – rose sharply between the early 1990s and the 2000s.

A recent study showed that the decline of adequacy of unemployment benefits in that period played an important role in explaining the rise in single parents' poverty (Alm, Nelson, and Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Stricter qualification criteria and higher fees resulted in fewer unemployed qualifying for these social security payments, and among those who did income replacement levels diminished. These changes were in part the result of active policy reforms, and in part by not updating income replacement ceilings. In particular in the dual-earner Sweden, where income standards are set by a large share of households with two incomes, the unemployment benefits were no longer enough to keep households without a second earner above the poverty line in times of unemployment.

This finding is relevant on at least two accounts: it demonstrates how policies typically tailored at unemployment benefits can be of great importance for single parents and by extension for gender equality – also in a society like Sweden that continues to strongly commit to promoting gender equality. Secondly, the fact that singles without children and single parents were affected in a similar manner – in contrast to couples and two-parent families who were hardly affected by these reforms – demonstrates the importance of considering family diversity when evaluating and planning policy reforms: a form of mainstreaming family (Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

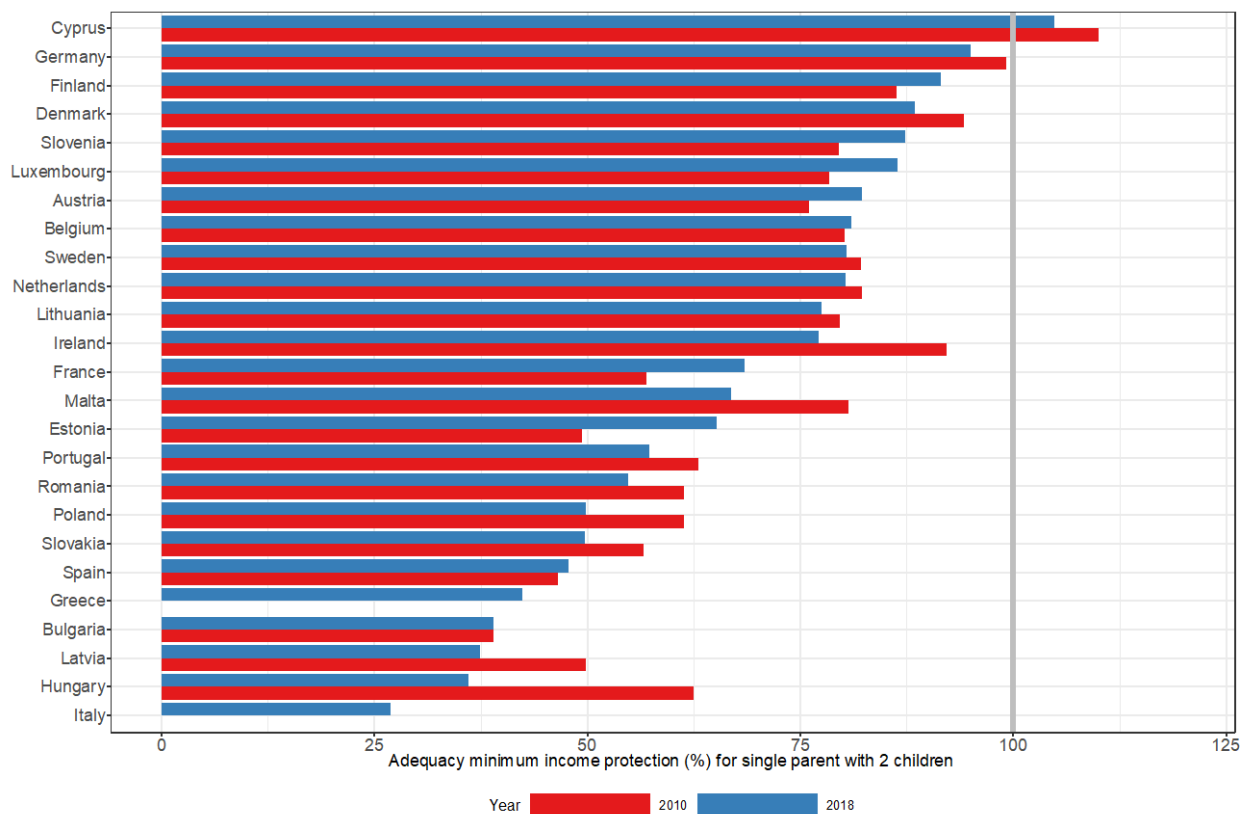
5.4.2. Minimum income protection

As not everyone is eligible for unemployment benefits, these benefits are time limited, and not everyone was employed to begin with, it is also important to examine what level of income is guaranteed to single parents who are out of work and do not qualify for unemployment benefits. This level of minimum income protection is determined by the combined set of benefits a person can receive, and typically consists of social assistance benefits, and can be complemented with for instance housing benefits, and in the case of single parents also with child benefits. These benefits are typically means-tested, and thus depend on the income(s) of other household member(s). The rights are not based on contribution histories, but on citizenship or residency. Minimum income protection reflects the absolute minimum level of income guaranteed by the state. It was argued that as levels of minimum income protection levels have fallen below commonly accepted poverty levels throughout Europe, these policies can no longer be considered adequate policies against poverty (Nelson, 2013). Hence, this is examined here for single parents.

The data in Figure 16 represent the level of minimum income protection for a single parent with two children (aged 4 and 7), and the level of adequacy is expressed as a percentage of the national at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) threshold (60% of median household income) for this family type. An adequacy rate of 100% would mean that this household type would live exactly on the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (indicated by the vertical grey bar). Yet, as the data show, minimum income protection rates fall below

the poverty threshold in all EU countries with the exception of Cyprus. It is furthermore clear from the data in Figure 16 that levels of minimum income protection for single parents fall far below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold in a great number of countries. Single parents who had to resort to minimum income protection in 2018 in for instance Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary and Italy, lived at subsistence levels below 50% of the national at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Finally, in the majority of EU countries, the adequacy of minimum income protection levels fell between 2010 and 2018.

Figure 16: Adequacy of minimum income protection for single parents, EU Member States, 2010-2018



Source: Social assistance and minimum income protection (SAMIP) database as part of the Social Policy Indicator (SPIN) database (Nelson et al., 2020) and Eurostat [table ilc_li01]. Data for Greece 2010 were missing.

Two classifications need to be made regarding the adequacy of minimum income protection. The first is that the analyses in Figure 16 assume that the single-parent families had to rely on minimum income protection for a full year (or longer). In case they needed this only for part of the year, their incomes could of course be higher. Nonetheless, these data suggest that even short periods on minimum income protection can pose serious financial challenges. Secondly, these analyses assume that families receive all the benefits that they are eligible to. Yet, it is well-known that the number of people who actually receive benefits is far below the number of people who are eligible. This non-take-up is particularly high with these means-tested social-assistance benefits, because they are stigmatized, complex (because of the means-test) and because people do not have the knowledge or skills to apply for the benefits (Dubois, Ludwinek, and European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2015; Van Oorschot, 1991; Kleven and Kopczuk, 2011; Hernanz, Malherbet, and

Pellizzari, 2004). The bottom-line is that minimum income protection in the EU is inadequate to prevent or reduce poverty among single-parent families.

Box 6: Coordination of policy complexity in Germany

The number of benefits and other policies available for single parents is large. In this report alone, single parents were shown to have to relate to custody law, and to potentially benefit from child support, childcare, parental leave, child benefits, unemployment benefits and minimum income protection, and this list could be expanded. Non-take-up has been described as a problem, and this is particularly the case in the context of policy complexity.

Also in Germany, single-parent families receive a wide variety of benefits. These include unemployment benefits, payments for unexpected expenses, housing benefits, child benefits, a child maintenance advance, paid parental leave, and tax deductions for working single parents. A review of good practices (Zagel, 2015) highlighted a number of projects to improve the situation of single parents in Germany. With the aim to promote single parents' employment, these projects were initiated by a confederation of the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs, The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, and the Federal Employment Agency. The program "Reconciliation of family and working life for single parents" funded projects in alliance with local actors to better understand the specific position of single parent. The program "Networks of effective assistance for single parents" targeted the structural level to coordinate the service provision to single parents, for instance through job centres. The "Developing employment opportunities for single parents" project targeted employers to improve the image of single parents as good workers.

The evaluation of these projects resulted in a number of lessons that are important for dealing with the policy complexity mentioned above. First, action should be based on a comprehensive understanding of the situation of single parents, and how their challenges are often multidimensional. Second, the barriers to employment faced by single parents were not individual deficiencies, but of a structural nature. Examples included lack of availability of part-time work and childcare during non-standard working hours. And third, given the complexity of both the structural barriers and the complexity of the number of policies and actors involved, activation into employment was more effective if the support of multiple actors was actively coordinated (Zagel, 2015).

6. COVID-19

Many lives are directly or indirectly affected by Covid-19, and this is also the case for single parents and their families. In which ways single parents are uniquely affected, however, remains largely unseen in policy documents and the early studies that are appearing on the social consequences of Covid-19. Yet, if one thing has become clear, it is that Covid-19 is all but the 'great leveller', and that it exacerbates inequalities along the lines of community, work, and family (Fisher et al., 2020).

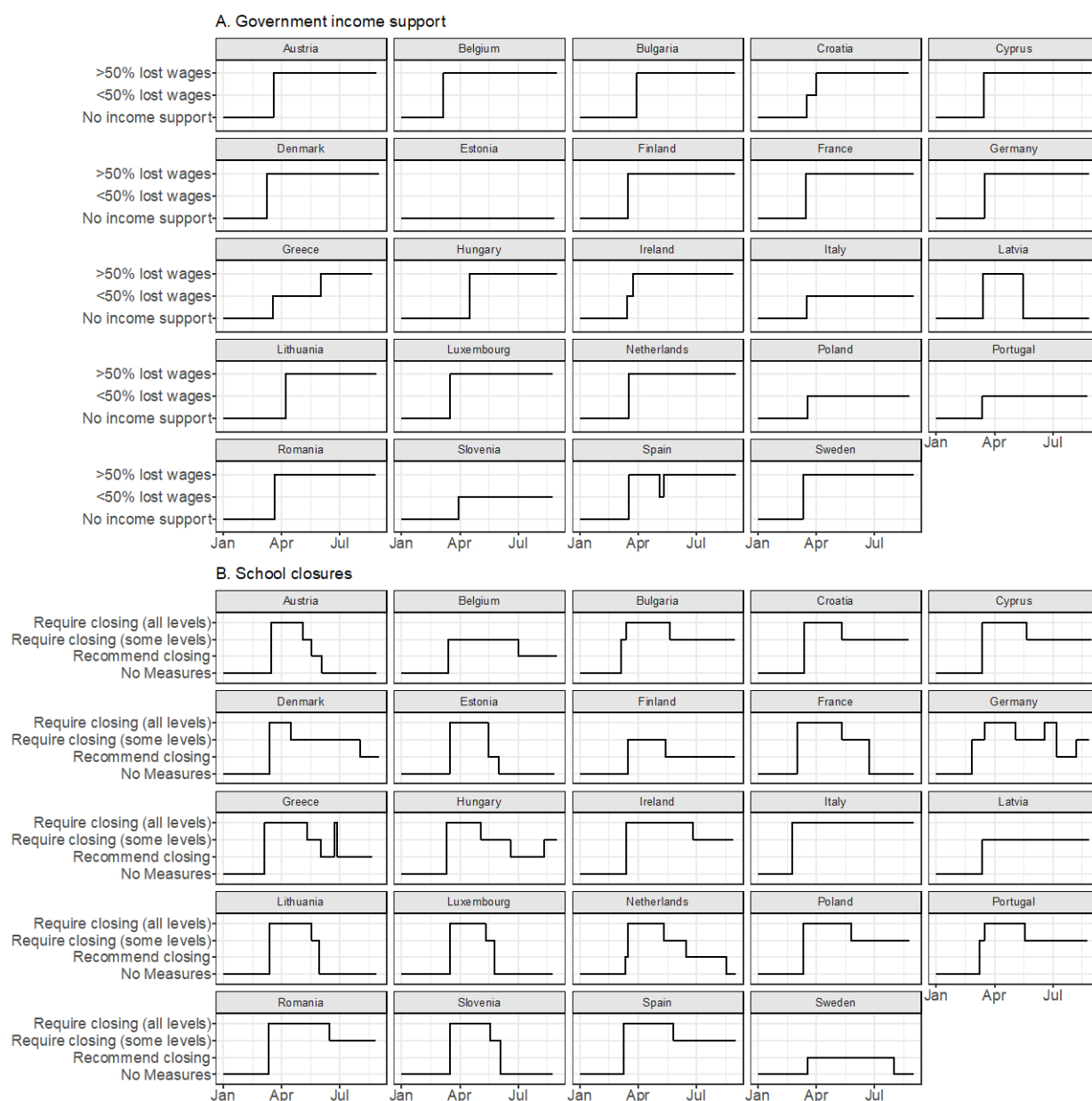
There are currently no systematic databases available describing the policy responses in the EU related to Covid-19 specifically for single parents. Nevertheless, single parents are also affected by the more general policy measures. Therefore, Section 6.1 highlights trends in how countries responded in terms of two areas of key importance to single parents, and complements this general overview with a review of policies specifically geared to single parents in a number of countries. Section 6.2 highlights some of the research on how single parents are affected by Covid-19. Finally, in Section 6.3, some lessons are drawn from the previous economic recession.

6.1. Policy response to Covid-19

The data in Figure 17 provide a high-level overview of two key government responses to Covid-19 that are of particular relevance to single parents. These broad indicators, of course, do not capture in detail how these responses were implemented, but do provide a general overview of the timing and intensity of these responses across European countries. The panel at the top indicates whether governments provide income support in the form of wage replacements, differentiating between no support, replacing less than half of the lost wages, and replacing more than half of lost wages. According to this data, almost all countries provided some level of income support. Estonia is the only exception. Most countries replaced at least 50% of lost wages, but Italy, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia replace less than 50% (in the most recent observations). Latvia is currently the only country that has reversed the level of income support from over 50% to no income support in recent months. Although these data do not pertain to single parents specifically, it is important to point out that an income replacement of less than 50% is likely inadequate for most single parents without a second earner to fall back on.

The lower panel shows government measures regarding school closures, indicating no measures, a recommendation to close schools, a requirement to close schools at some levels, and the requirement to close schools at all levels. Most countries have seen a period during which schools at all levels were required to close and more recently relaxed these restrictions. Belgium, Finland, Latvia and Sweden are the only countries in which a full closing of the schools at all levels was not mandated at any moment (up to now). Closing of the schools has profound consequences for both children and parents, which is elaborated upon in the next Section.

Figure 17: Policy responses to Covid-19: Income support and school closures, EU Member States



Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2020). Presented data are the most recently available when the data were extracted on 1 September 2020.

The Council of Europe created an overview of the policy measures implemented by European countries to promote and protect women's rights in relation to Covid-19. To complement the general overview in Figure 17, excerpts from this overview are presented in Table 4. This table is limited to policies implemented explicitly for parents, and described as such. Other measures can be relevant to single parents as well, of course, but are beyond the scope of this examination. The overview was complemented by information from the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) that compiled a set of Flash Reports on socio-economic policy responses to Covid-19 – these reports are cited separately.

Table 4: Measures taken by EU Member States to support parents and single parents during Covid-19

Country	Description
Austria	Access to advance maintenance payments by the state for single parents has been simplified (acceleration of the procedure, no application for execution required).
Belgium	The government established a system of automatic payment of child support, and introduced an exceptional parental leave for the care of children under 12.
Bulgaria	Extension of support targeted to the most vulnerable groups of parents, but the take-up of this measure has been quite low. Parents on unpaid leave in relation to caring for children under 12 received a one-off allowance (Bogdanov, 2020).
Cyprus	Introduced "special leave" for parents in the private sector, with a slightly higher allowance for single parents.
Czechia	Increased the benefit available to a parent who is unable to work.
Estonia	Local governments are obliged to guarantee childcare for parents working in essential occupations.
Germany	Compensation for parents who cannot work due to the closing of childcare and schools (Hanesch, 2020).
Ireland	Parents are not required to pay childcare fees during the COVID-19 crisis, and childcare providers receive financial support to assist with staff and ongoing costs during the closure period.
Italy	Extraordinary leave and a bonus for parents.
Latvia	Parental benefits that expire during the state of emergency are extended for the duration of the state of emergency.
Lithuania	Parents may receive paid sickness benefit to look after a young child at home
Luxembourg	Extension of special leave (normally limited to 18 days), and extension of expired childcare-service voucher contracts.
Romania	Free days may be granted to one of the parents for the supervision of children, with an allowance of 75% of the basic salary.
Slovakia	Throughout the crisis, parents who have lost their entitlement to parental leave allowance should continue to receive the contribution.

Slovenia	One of the parents in the case of a justified absence from work due to childcare (up to grade 5) is entitled to compensation equal to 80% of salary.
Spain	Right to the adaptation of working hours and reduction of the working day (with the proportional reduction of their salary).

Source: Table contains excerpts (slightly edited for length) from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/promoting-and-protecting-women-s-rights> and ESPN Flash Reports.

Table 4 shows that in quite a number of countries measures were taken to support parents, and in a select number of countries also specifically single parents. Typical ways in which parents were supported include extensions of parental leave (or alternatives, such as receiving sickness benefits in relation to childcare), including the automatic extension of the duration of parental leaves to achieve a level of continuity in the situation of parents during these challenging times. For single parents specifically, Austria and Belgium implemented advances to child support payments, to ensure easier administration of this form of income support to single parents.

6.2. Potential risk factors for single parents during Covid-19

At the time of writing, there is little high-quality research available that specifically examines the impact of Covid-19 on the situation of single parents. Yet, based on the theoretical frame used, and the evidence presented, a number of specific risk factors can be identified with respect how single parents might be disproportionately affected.

The first potential risk factor pertains to home schooling. As schools (partially or fully) closed and transitioned to online modes of teaching, as shown in Figure 17, this posed a tremendous challenge for all working parents who were now expected to actively participate in the education of the child(ren) to a much larger extent. However, it is not hard to see how for single parents it may be an insurmountable juggle to combine home schooling (and other forms of care) with working – whether they were working from home as well, or still had to go in to work (Power, 2020). This poses a risk factor for single parents who cannot afford to miss too much work. At the same time, the closing of the schools and ECEC further raises pertinent questions with respect to the wellbeing and development of children, in particular in relation to evidence on the importance of school lunches for children growing up in poverty, and the detrimental effects of long interruptions in schooling for children in socio-economically disadvantaged families (Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020). One study found single-parent families at greater risk of “digital vulnerability”: not having access to internet or computer in the home (Mikolaj, Keenan, and Kulu, 2020). Children from single-parent families were found to devote less time to schooling from home (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2020).

The second potential risk factor pertains to the position of single parents in the labour market. Having to rely on a single income, becoming unemployed can be far more consequential to the economic wellbeing of single parents than to dual-earner couples. In particular single mothers were found likely to be employed in sectors that were closed down due to Covid-19 (Blundell et al., 2020). An income replacement of less than half of lost wages, as shown in Figure 17 to be the case in a number of

countries, may simply be inadequate to protect in particular single parents from poverty or other financial problems. Moreover, as was shown in Section 3.1, single parents have a high likelihood of working in part-time employment or based on temporary contracts – and single mothers substantially more so than single fathers. This poses a double risk in times of economic downturn: workers on temporary contracts are at higher risk of becoming unemployed, and might be less likely to meet the eligibility conditions of unemployment benefits, thus having to resort to social assistance that provide inequality levels of income protection to single parents basically throughout the EU. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, levels of social protection for single parents were weaker than they were prior to the Great Recession.

The third potential risk factor pertains to how parenting itself might be affected for single parents in myriad ways. This risk factor has not been examined systematically, but raises pertinent questions. For instance, how is joint physical custody (see Section 2.2) affected by Covid-19? Are rules and guidelines regarding physical distancing, or visiting people outside the household, difficult to comply with for children living in two households? When such rules and guidelines are formulated, are single parents even explicitly taken into consideration? Anecdotal evidence from the Netherlands shows how seemingly smart regulations regarding Covid-19 can be rather consequential for single parents: supermarkets only allowed in people who were unaccompanied, even refusing single parents who brought their child for whom they did not have care (Fisher et al., 2020). How the double burden of work and care work out for single parents during Covid-19 is largely unknown. A case study on the mental health among the German population, found that the initial high levels of anxiety declined in the overall population during the first month of the Covid-19 situation, but for single parents these levels did not dissipate (Naumann et al., 2020).

Taking a perspective broader than single parents alone, evidence is emerging on how Covid-19 puts strong pressure on gender equality in work and care. For instance, the initial results of a study in the Netherlands suggests that although fathers increased their care work slightly, mothers did so much more – thus resulting in a larger gender gap in care work (Yerkes et al., 2020). In Italy, the burden of the extra work regarding housework and childcare resulting from Covid-19 was mostly carried by women (Boca et al., 2020). A recent study showed how women reduced their working hours 4 to 5 times more than men, and that ‘telecommuting’ did not change this gendered pattern (Collins et al., 2020).

6.3. Lessons from the previous economic crisis

The consequences of Covid-19 extend far beyond the economy, but it is clear that also the economic consequences and impact on public finances will be dire. As such, it can be helpful to examine what the consequences were of previous periods of economic downfall, with the ‘Great Recession’ as a case in point. Outcomes of that recession may not necessarily be the same in the current situation, but lessons can be learned about what potential risk factors should be monitored.

First, the Great Recession had strongly gendered consequences. Initially, the financial crisis that started in the United States in 2007 hit jobs in sectors where men were overrepresented, including construction and manufacturing. In particular older women increased their labour force participation, presumably to compensate for income losses. The gender gap in employment decreased, the share of dual-earner households decreased and this proportion of household reliant on women’s incomes increased (Rubery, 2015). After this initial phase, however, strong austerity policies were implemented

to recover, and compensate for, the public expenditure involved with bailing out banks and supporting Member States. This turn in policies from a Keynesian approach based on high public expenditure to counter the financial crisis, to austerity to address public indebtedness (ETUI, 2014), affected women to a substantially larger extent than men (Rubery, 2015). On the one hand, this was the case due to budget cuts in the public sector, where women are overrepresented, reducing the number of employed and the wages among the employed. On the other hand, this was due to deregulation of employment conditions in low-skilled sectors.

Second, the austerity policies that followed the public indebtedness described above, had further consequences for the degree of social protection offered by European welfare states. Although welfare states in Europe have been under pressure since the 1980s, the financial crisis accelerated this process. Particularly welfare states in Southern Europe were put under additional financial pressure (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, and Chung, 2017). This has put the progress on gender equality policies on pause in a number of countries, including the introduction of expansion of paid leave for fathers in Spain and Italy (González Gago and Segales Kirzner, 2014; Verashchagina and Capparucci, 2014), as well as the provision of public care services for elderly (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014). The further emphasis on means testing in benefits presents a disincentive for in particular women's employment as second earner (Ferreira, 2014). Austerity has further been linked to tightening of eligibility conditions for unemployment benefits, their income replacement levels, and their duration, as well as lowering of the levels of minimum income protection. In Section 0 these were described as inadequate in nearly all European countries relative to the official at-risk-of-poverty thresholds. In part, this was motivated to increase work incentives, but as was noted in the recent evaluation of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) in the EU Member States *"paid work alone may not be sufficient to avoid poverty, if it is poorly paid and of low quality. Especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis, deregulation of working conditions has raised concerns about worsening quality and remuneration of work, and the negative consequences for in-work poverty"* (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020, p. 41).

Thirdly, austerity following the Great Recession has had a marked impact on child poverty, including (although not limited to) among children growing up with single parents (Cantillon et al., 2017). The impact of the crisis on child poverty and material deprivation was particularly large in Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Spain and most so in Greece (Chzhen, Nolan, et al., 2017). An evaluation of the mid-term consequences of the Great recession on (families with) children, resulted in four main lessons on what conditions helped children and families navigate the crisis in their countries relatively well (Chzhen, Handa, et al., 2017). The first lesson is that poverty and deprivation related to policy and labour markets, and can thus be affected by policy and legislation. Much of the financial burden on children of the financial crisis was brought about through reduced labour market participation of parents, in particular hurting vulnerable groups including single parents whose employment conditions were precarious and employment contracts temporary. For example, some of the most severely hit countries Italy, Greece and Spain weakened employment protection of workers (Nolan et al., 2017). Second, higher levels of income protection and income transfers present in a country prior to the crisis helped protect families against income poverty and at-risk of poverty. For instance, prior to the crisis Ireland achieved relatively low rates of child poverty through an extensive child benefit package (Nolan and Maître, 2017), and Belgium temporarily increased levels of unemployment benefits (Vinck, Van Lancker, and Cantillon, 2017). Hungary, in contrast, facing monetary constraints and changing political ideology, matched tax benefits to families with children to reduced levels of family benefits and social assistance. In combination with workfare style activation policies, increased conditionality of benefits and abolishing a reduction of social assistance, this rendered the Hungarian welfare state substantially less effective in reducing poverty (Gábos and Tóth, 2017). The third lesson was that benefit transfers were

not only a public expense, as automatic income stabilizers (e.g. unemployment benefits that start providing income to workers when they lose their job, thus automatically compensating for downward macro-economic trends) maintained purchasing power of families at high(er) levels, thus securing demand for the products of struggling companies. Here, of course, anti-cyclical stimuli also played an important macro-economic role. Finally, austerity measures came at the expense of working-age families with children, for instance in the form of marked decreases in spending on family benefits, while expenditure on pensions was safeguarded or even increased.

Box 7: Austerity in Greece

It was mentioned that the impact of the Great Recession on child poverty and material deprivation was particularly large in Greece (Chzhen, Nolan, et al., 2017). Of course, Greece was among the countries hit hardest by this recession, but there is by now also consensus that the social costs of the austerity measures imposed by the European Troika (the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)) outweighed any short-term or medium-term benefits to growth (Matsaganis, 2017; Nolan et al., 2017; Blanchard and Leigh, 2013).

During the crisis years, in part following the bail-out programmes, social spending was cut by 18% (Mouriki, 2015), and a number of welfare programmes were cut altogether. These included all non-contributory family allowances, family allowances for working parents, and subsidised housing. Needless to say, these cuts did not only affect single parents. In the whole population the at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) rate increased from 28% in 2009 to 36% in 2013. Poverty among single-parent families was substantially higher (28%) than among two-parent families (22%), and during the crisis child poverty rates increased from 23% in 2010 to 29% in 2013, while material deprivation rates among children escalated from 10% in 2004 to 24% in 2014.

7. EU POLICY CONTEXT

The influence of the European Union in the area of social policy has increased during recent decades, aiming to raise employment rates, improve working conditions, reduce poverty and exclusion, and ensure adequate social protection. Although the initiatives taken in these areas tend to target broader shares of the population and do not pertain exclusively to single parents, their relevance for single parents is evident. Some were also partially motivated by the rise of the number of single-parent families.

These overarching initiatives at the level of the EU are too encompassing to consider their influence as a whole on the situation of single parents. Nonetheless, the general direction of these initiatives, and the policies with which they are associated, can be assessed critically based on the lessons learned in this study up to this point. This Chapter briefly outlines major developments and initiatives that are of immediate relevance to the situation of single parents in the EU, and concludes with a critical assessment based on the evidence presented in the previous Chapters.

7.1. Europe 2020 strategy

The Europe 2020 strategy, currently at the end of its life-cycle, was agreed upon by Member States at the June 2010 European Council. It was launched in response to the then-ongoing economic crisis, that had left Member States' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) diminished and many without jobs, and also cited globalisation, pressure on resources, and population ageing as challenges. The Europe 2020 strategy set targets in the five areas: employment, research & development, climate change & energy, education, and poverty and social exclusion.⁹ In particular the targets related to fostering inclusive growth, i.e. to increase employment and to reduce poverty and social exclusion, are of immediate relevance to single parents. These targets were considered interrelated, with the Commission explicitly citing to increase employment rates as a means to reach the target of reducing poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2010). The target to have 75% of the population in the ages between 20 and 64 in employment has been met for men, but not for women. Similarly, as was shown in Figure 8, this employment target has also been met for single fathers, but not for single mothers. Trends in poverty are behind the target – with respect to the whole population and as was shown in Figure 3 also with respect to single parents.

To achieve these targets, the Europe 2020 strategy came with seven 'flagship initiatives', of which here in particular the European platform against poverty and social exclusion is of direct relevance, aiming to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are shared equally. The European platform against poverty and social exclusion explicitly mentions single parents as a risk group for poverty and exclusion and calls on Member States to *"define and implement measures addressing the specific circumstances of groups at particular risk" and "to fully deploy their social security [...] systems to ensure adequate income support ..."* (European Commission, 2010, p. 19).

⁹ European Commission, 'Europe 2020 - Overview', 2020, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators>

Stronger economic governance was considered necessary to foster sustainable growth and public finances (European Commission, 2010). Country-specific recommendations (CSR) could be issued to individual Member States, integrated in the process of the European Semester: an annual cycle to guide economic policy coordination among EU Member States. The goals of the European Semester are to avoid excessive government debt, to prevent excessive macroeconomic imbalances, to support structural reforms to create more jobs and growth, and to boost investment.¹⁰ It was acknowledged that further inclusion of women in the labour market was required to meet the Europe 2020 employment target, and in 2017 the European Semester issued country-specific recommendations to Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Austria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia with the aim to increase female labour force participation. These CSRs pertained to early childhood education and care (ECEC), removing work disincentives for second earners and the reduction of the gender pay gap (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

7.2. Social investment

In 2013, the Social investment package was adopted by the European Commission, attempting to provide social protection that is both more efficient and effective in response to ongoing challenges related to poverty, social exclusion and high unemployment, as well as economic crisis and demographic changes (mostly population ageing).¹¹ The social investment perspective on social policy making was described as based on three dimensions: the new risk dimension, the investment dimension, and the service dimension (Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011). Whereas welfare states were evolved around 'old' social risks such as unemployment, old age, and ill health and disability, the new risk dimension reflects the challenges of providing adequate social protection to a wider range of social risks that include single parenthood – as well as reconciling work and family, lack of continuous careers, precarious employment, and low or obsolete skills (Bonoli, 2005; Bonoli, 2013). The investment dimension represents "policies designed to strengthen people's skills and capacities and support them to participate fully in employment and social life"¹², and has been described as aiming to "prepare" people for economic independence so that welfare states have less economic adversity to "repair" (Morel, Palier, and Palme, 2012). The service dimension, finally, refers to the emphasis on achieving policy goals by means of public services rather than income redistribution (Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011).

Although single parents were not explicitly mentioned in the Communication from the European Commission on the social investment package (European Commission, 2013), a number of features are highly relevant to single parents and their families – not least because it explicitly acknowledged the gender dimension in economic disadvantage. This is also represented in the key policy areas in the

¹⁰ European Commission, 'The European Semester: why and how', 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/european-semester-why-and-how_en

¹¹ European Commission, 'Social investment', 2020, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044&langId=en>

¹² European Commission, 'Social investment', 2020, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044&langId=en>

Social investment package that include education (see Section 2.1), quality childcare (analysed in Section 0), healthcare, training, job-search assistance and rehabilitation.

7.3. European Pillar of Social Rights

As part of the political priority to have a deeper and fairer economic and monetary union, the European Pillar of Social Rights was jointly signed by the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council on 17 November 2017, at the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg, Sweden. It seeks to deliver new and more effective social rights in three main areas: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market, Fair working conditions, and Social protection and inclusion, that together comprise 20 principles in the areas of access to education (see Section 2.1), gender equality, equal opportunities, active support to employment, secure and adaptable employment (see Chapter 3 on employment), fair wages, employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals, involvement of workers, work-life balance, a healthy work environment, childcare and support to children (see Sections Section 0 and 5.3), social protection and unemployment benefits (Section 0), minimum income (Section 0), old age income and pensions, health care, inclusion of people with disabilities, long-term care, housing, and access to essential services. It is notable that gender equality and opportunities are explicit principles in the Pillar of Social Rights. These, and many of the other principles, are of direct relevance to single parents, and were examined in this study in the Sections as indicated above.

7.4. Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers

One very concrete deliverable of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the interest of single parents was the adoption of the Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers. The Directive, which was passed by the European Parliament in April 2019, entered into force on 1 August 2019¹³. Member States now have three years to adopt the laws, regulations and administrative provisions necessary to comply with the Directive.¹⁴ This directive comprises a set of legal and policy measures, with the aims of:

- better supporting a work-life balance for parents and carers;
- encouraging a more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women; and
- addressing women's underrepresentation in the labour market.¹⁵

¹³ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158>

¹⁴ European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=9438>

¹⁵ European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=9438>

Based on the gendered nature of single parents, their gendered disadvantage in the labour market, and their struggle to combine work and family without a second caregiver and/or earner in the household – as introduced in Section 1.4 – the situation of single parents can be argued to benefit from this Directive to the extent that the aims are achieved. As it was only recently adopted, and Member States have three years to adopt national legislation to be in compliance with the Directive, it is too early to present an empirical evaluation of the outcomes of the Directive on Work-Life Balance for the situation of single parents in the EU. However, a lot is known about whether and how single parents can benefit from the specific policies covered in the Directive, and these were analysed extensively in this study. The Directive requires Member States to implement (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2019):

- Leave for fathers or second parents of (at least) 10 working days around the birth of their child. This is paid leave, but the wage replacement can be subject to a 6 months service requirement.
- Parental leave of 4 months for each parent, of which 2 months are non-transferable. There is no requirement in the Directive that any of this leave to be paid.
- Carer's leave of 5 days per year, to provide care for a relative or a person living in the household.
- Right to request flexible working arrangements, for all care-givers and all (working) parents of children up to the age of 8.

In addition, the Directive provides for a number of non-legislative measures, notably to protect parents against discrimination, encourage that family leaves and measures to improve work-life balance are used with greater gender balance, remove economic disincentives for second earners, and to ensure that Member States make better use of European funds to provide better care services (including both childcare, out-of-school care and long-term care).

7.5. Other legislative and policy developments

As part of, and in addition to, these major policy developments described in the Sections above, a number of legislative developments at the level of the EU have the potential to benefit the situation of single parents. This Section is based on information presented in the fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

In an attempt to reduce gender inequality in the labour market by enforcing transparency, including the gender wage gap that penalizes single mothers in the labour market, a Directive 2014/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 amending Directive 2013/34/EU as regards disclosure of non-financial and diversity information by certain large undertakings and groups was adopted.¹⁶ This Directive has now been implemented in legislation in all EU Member States, and requires large companies (with over 500 employees) to disclose information regarding equal treatment in terms of diversity of staff, which can (but does not strictly have to) pertain to gender equality. With

¹⁶ Directive 2014/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 amending Directive 2013/34/EU as regards disclosure of non-financial and diversity information by certain large undertakings and groups, OJ L 330, 15.11.2014, p. 1–9, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014L0095>

respect to gender equality, the Directive comes with recommendations that pertain to the reporting by gender of for instance parental leave entitlements and temporary contracts. These are important indicators to monitor, as leave is substantially less taken by fathers, and as was shown in Figure 8 single mothers are substantially more likely than single fathers to be working on temporary contracts.

Gender mainstreaming is the practice that *"involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination"*.¹⁷ Although the European Commission committed itself to a dual approach, in which gender mainstreaming is applied to all policies, in combination with specific policies targeted at improving gender equality, gender mainstreaming is not fully integrated in the European policy process. The Europe 2020 strategy (Section 7.1) shows no general commitment to gender or gender mainstreaming, unlike its predecessor the Lisbon agreements which in part was reflected in its targets and monitoring thereof (Jacquot, 2017; Hubert and Stratigaki, 2016). Gender mainstreaming is also limited in the European Semester (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). In addition, the EU budget remains gender blind, and only 1% of the European Social Fund (ESF) was estimated to be put towards promoting gender equality (ibid.).

7.6. Monitoring the situation of single parents in the EU

An important part of the European project, and integral to a number of the abovementioned initiatives, is the systematic monitoring of social progress in the EU. As part of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), jointly established measuring instruments ensure comparability and structured analysis of (statistical) indicators across Member States. The majority of the statistics presented in this study were facilitated by this, in the form of ready-made tables made available by Eurostat.

The targets set in the EU2020 strategy included the goal to increase employment rates to 75% of the population in active age (between 20 and 64) and to lift 20 million people out of poverty. Formally, these targets were not differentiated by gender nor by single parenthood, although as has been shown in this study the statistical indicators for employment and at-risk-of-poverty are indeed available for single parents specifically.

The European Pillar of Social Rights is supported by a social scoreboard, that "will monitor the implementation of the Pillar by tracking trends and performances across EU countries in 12 areas (related, but not one-on-one corresponding, to the principles listed in Section 7.3) and will feed into the European Semester of economic policy coordination".¹⁸ These areas are (1) education, skills and lifelong learning, (2) gender equality in the labour market, (3) inequality and upward mobility, (4) living conditions and poverty, (5) youth, (6) labour force structure, (7) labour market dynamics, (8) income, including employment-related, (9) impact of public policies on reducing poverty, (10) early childhood care, (11) healthcare, and (12) digital access. The relevance of these areas for single parents has become clear from this study. Yet, although most of these areas are covered by multiple indicators, none allow

¹⁷ European Institute for Gender Equality, 'What is gender mainstreaming', 2020, available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>

¹⁸ European Commission, 'Social scoreboard', 2020, available at: <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/>

for examining the situation for single parents specifically (where relevant, most can be differentiated by gender).

7.7. Critical assessment

In an evocative analysis of the economic consequences of European integration, it was concluded that “... one’s economic standing in an integrated Europe now depends more on one’s household than one’s country ...” (Beckfield, 2019, p. 215). As the economic inequality among citizens and residents of EU Member States decreased, inequality among households within Member States increased. Although this analysis did not explicitly examine the situation of single parents, it can also be seen in the current study that single parents in Europe are economically behind many other households, and more reliant on the welfare state to function well. As such, it is an important finding that the trend in inequality within countries was, to an important extent, linked to European integration. Both political and economic integration were found to be inductive to welfare state retrenchment rendering the redistributive capacity of the welfare state less effective. In part, this was due to a process called blame avoidance (Vis and Van Kersbergen, 2013), in which national politicians can point at the EU when defending unpopular measures. This fits in with analyses of the power and influence of supra-national organisations promoting markets over nation states (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, and Chung, 2017; Deacon, 2007). Indeed, the EU itself played a role too, with spending limits in the Maastricht convergence criteria, the Single European Act, pro-market rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), and the fiscal discipline in the European Semester (Beckfield, 2019; Stiglitz, 2017). The “*Commission’s policy scripts in this area include limiting benefit duration, restricting eligibility, and reducing benefit levels. The aim is to use the public insurance system to incentivize attachment to the paid labour market*” (Beckfield, 2019, p. 100).

7.7.1. Taking gender equality seriously

Although the European Commission, in addition to EU Member States, unequivocally have taken actions that have the potential to improve gender equality in the labour market, these actions are not without its share of criticism. Three lines of critique are discussed here.

The first line of critique is that the support for more gender equality has mostly been used instrumentally to achieve other outcomes, including reaching the employment targets. This focus on gender equality in economic terms and with respect to women’s labour force participation, however, overlooks other aspects of gender equality, such as gender equality of care roles within the household. For instance, it was demonstrated that as the concept of “reconciliation of work and family” was incorporated into the European Employment Strategy (EES), its meaning shifted from sharing care roles within the household between men and women, to a market-oriented meaning related to increasing the number of tax payers and the creation of flexible jobs (Stratigaki, 2004; Morel, Palier, and Palme, 2012).

The second line of critique pertains to a degree of ambiguity in policy developments regarding gender equality. In this light, Daly (2011) observed contradicting developments. On the one hand there are

clear developments in European social policy towards individualism. These include providing individualized rights for children to a place in childcare, expanding the number of childcare places outside the home, and providing individualized parental leave rights to fathers. Derived rights, such as widower pensions, are increasingly abolished, and there is a reduction of subsidies to one-earner families. In a number of countries, particularly single mothers have become less eligible for stay-at-home benefits based on their status of single parent alone. On the other hand, however, there have been clear policy developments towards *familization*. These include the support for part-time work for in particular mothers (sometimes in combination with part-time leave entitlements), extending payments related to care, endorsement of maternal childcare, and the continuation of the family or household as a basis for benefit eligibility. These contradicting tendencies can be observed between countries, but also within some countries. In conclusion, the developments in European social policy are indeed moving away from “breadwinning and housewifery” (p. 19), but towards a model that is characterized as a “dual earner, *gender specialized*, family model” (Daly, 2011, p. 19, emphasis added).

A third line of the critique is that the commitment to gender equality is not put into practice sufficiently. For instance, after the Great Recession there has been more emphasis on employment policy, and less on promoting gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). Cuts in the public sector during times of austerity had, possibly unintended but very real, consequences for the employment opportunities and conditions of particularly women (Rubery, 2015). And finally, the newly adopted Directive on Work-Life Balance for parents and carers requires Member States to implement non-transferable parental leave for fathers, but does allow it to the Member States to set the level of wage replacement. To the extent that Member States choose to provide low or no levels of wage replacement, as is already the case in the Dutch implementation of the Directive, it is likely that take-up among fathers will be low (Karu and Tremblay, 2018) and socially stratified.

7.7.2. Promoting employment growth to reduce poverty?

Promoting employment growth has indeed been a long-term and increasingly explicit goal in the EU, as was discussed above, in part with the aim of producing positive social outcomes such as to reduce income poverty. Yet, when it comes to single parents, the results in this study indicate that this has not been an effective strategy for reducing income poverty (AROP).

It has long been recognized that despite increased employment rates in the EU, trends in poverty are ‘disappointing’ (Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011; Jenkins, 2020). Even the marked rise of women’s employment rates in recent decades have only to a limited extent reduced poverty rates (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2020). This can be understood as the result of at least three developments. First, employment growth was among people who lived in households that already were above the poverty line, although this mechanism will be likely among couples than among single parents. Second, an increasing number of single parents live in poverty even though they are working: in-work poverty (Lohmann and Marx, 2018; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018). Third, employment growth has in part been achieved by means of a combination of financial incentives and active labour market programs. Earned income tax credits are supposed to ‘make work pay’, but there are indications that this have come at the expense of the income position of single parents out of employment (Cantillon, Collado, and Van Mechelen, 2018). Active labour market policies aimed at single parents were found to be associated with higher employment in this group, but no reduction of poverty (Jaehrling, Kalina, and Mesaros, 2015). Indeed, the implementation of active labour market policies in the context of social investment were described as ‘workfare’ rather than seeking to promote quality jobs with adequate pay (Bonoli, 2012). The policy

implication of in-work poverty, and the disappointing trends in poverty despite employment growth among single-parent families, is the continued need for redistribution.

7.7.3. Inadequate minimum income protection for single parents

The rise of single parenthood, alongside the rise of female labour force participation, obsolete skills or low-skilled workers, and migrant workers, have long been considered as ‘new social risks’ (Bonoli, 2005; Morel, Palier, and Palme, 2012), in the sense that the traditional pillars of the welfare state protecting against ‘old social risks’ as sickness, old age and unemployment, are not considered well-equipped to address these risks. However, support for these new social risks, such as policies to combine work and family, are often implemented in ways that avoid spending increases (Bonoli and Natali, 2012). An example is the regulation of parental leave, and requiring employers to carry the financial burden. In contrast, in light of concerns about population ageing and the voting power of the elderly population, expenditure towards the elderly population (pensions, healthcare, sickness pay, disabled, and survivor benefits) increased even during the Great Recession, while expenditure on the working-age population (family and children, unemployment, housing, and social protection benefits) stagnated (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, and Chung, 2017). It was shown throughout this study, and in particular in Section 0, that social protection and minimum income protection in many European countries fails to avoid poverty for many single parents and their families. This is particularly salient, as poverty among pension-age population has been declining since the 1980s in most EU countries, while working-age poverty stagnated or increased (Ebbinghaus, Nelson, and Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Welfare states that provide a more balanced provision of social protection to people in different stages of their life-course – rather than prioritizing one group over an other – were found to achieve better social protection overall (Birnbaum et al., 2017).

7.7.4. Inadequate monitoring of the situation of single parents in the EU

As was already introduced in Section 1.2, there are severe limitations to Eurostat indicators with respect to their ability of monitoring the situation of single parents in the EU. This is demonstrated in Table 5, showing the Eurostat tables that were used in the first Chapter (additional tables are used throughout this report, and these have the same – but no additional – limitations in identifying single parents), the official description, and its limitations to identify the number of single parents.

Table 5: Approximations of 'single parents' in Eurostat tables

Description	Limitation(s)
Number of private households by household composition, number of children and age of youngest child [lfst_hhnhtych]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Single-parent households" can only be approximated as a household with a "Single adult with children", in which it is unknown whether these children are the parent's own. • Single parents living with other adults (e.g. multi-generational or multi-unit households) cannot be identified.
Number of adults by sex, age groups, number of children, age of youngest child and household composition [lfst_hhaceday]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown whether these 'adults' are the parents of the children in the household. • Single parents living with other adults (e.g. multi-generational or multi-unit households) cannot be identified.
Share of children (aged less than 18) living with their parents by type of household [ilc_lvps20]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relates children to their parents, but cannot be used to infer the number of single parents or single-parent households. • Single parents living with other adults (e.g. multi-generational or multi-unit households) cannot be identified. • Cannot differentiate by gender.
People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by income quintile and household type [ilc_peps03]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In these tables, it is unknown whether a "single person with dependent children" are the parent of these children. • Count both the adults and the dependent children in the percentage of people at risk of poverty (and other outcome measures). • Single parents living with other adults (e.g. multi-generational or multi-unit households) cannot be identified. • Cannot differentiate by gender.
At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold and household type [ilc_li03]	
Persistent at-risk-of-poverty rate by household type [ilc_li23]	
People living in households with very low work intensity by income quintile and household type [ilc_lvhl13]	
Severe material deprivation rate by income quintile and household type [ilc_mddd13]	
Severe housing deprivation rate by household type [ilc_mdho06b]	

Source: SILC and LFS [multiple tables, indicated in description column]

What is clear from the tables and indicators presented in Table 5 is that none explicitly identifies the number/share of single parents or single-parent households, based on the definition given in Section 1.2. Typical limitations are that it is unknown whether the (single) adults in the households are the actual parent (biological or otherwise) of the children, and that single parents living with other families in multi-unit or multi-generational households cannot be identified and are therefore excluded. The former is likely to present only little bias, but the latter might introduce more bias. A more detailed analysis using the micro-data from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) showed that including single parents living in multi-unit or multi-generational households produces higher estimates of single-parent households – particularly in Southern European (including Spain, Greece, Italy, and Malta) and Eastern European (including Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia) countries (Chzhen and Bradshaw, 2012).

In addition to these issues of identifying single parents in the official statistics, two additional caveats need to be made regarding these official indicators. First, although these data are based on surveys, Eurostat does not report margins of error in these estimates. Small changes over time, or differences between countries, may be observed that are within the error margin, but it is unknown how large this margin is (Goedemé, 2013). Care should be taken not to overinterpret small deviations from general patterns in the data, particularly when studying smaller sub-groups such as single parenthood by gender, or single parenthood in countries separately. Second, a conceptual limitation of the indicators is that these do not account for more recent developments in society such as the rise of joint physical custody, a subject that was introduced in Section 2.2.

Monitoring the situation of single parents specifically is important. First and foremost, as the indicators inform the policy making process through the European Semester, not being able to differentiate indicators by family form, hampers the ability to monitor and adjust policies where needed. Secondly, although many of the indicators do indeed monitor social conditions that are important for single parents, such as education, employment, childcare and poverty reduction through redistribution, it has become clear that trends that are favourable in society need not necessarily improve the situation of single parents to the same extent. In short, the situation of single parents is poorly monitored in key instruments that feed into the policy making process in the EU.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Single parenthood is becoming more common in the EU. The majority of single parents in the EU do well, in the sense that they have employment, do not live at-risk-of-poverty and are not materially deprived. As the majority of single-parent households are headed by women, this is in part an achievement in gender equality. Yet, compared to couples with children, single parents do have higher rates of living in a household with low work intensity, at-risk-of-poverty (AROP), or material deprivation. During the period 2010 to 2018, the situation of single parents in the EU improved: their rates of severe housing deprivation, severe material deprivation, at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion (AROPE), and very low working intensity decreased. However, at-risk-of-poverty rates did not improve.

Single parents have become better-resourced. Even though lower educated parents are more likely to become a single parent than higher educated parents, over time the share of single parents with a low level of education decreased and the share with a high level of education increased. In addition, particularly in North-Western European countries, both parents continue to be involved in the care for their children after separation or divorce, and an increasing number of children live equal amounts of time with both parents. This practice of joint physical custody is associated with good outcomes for the well-being of both children and parents.

Single parents have become more likely to be employed, and less likely to live in a household with a very low work intensity. However, compared to two-parent families, this employment is more likely part-time and based on temporary contracts. For an increasing number of single parents, work is not a guarantee against poverty. In-work poverty is lower in countries with employment protection, active labour market policies, paid leave, childcare, and adequate levels of redistribution.

Child support policies regulate the financial responsibilities of parents after separation towards their children. In many European countries, however, they are not highly effective in reducing poverty among single parents and their children, among other reasons because of their high level of complexity in relation to family diversity, and an interplay with means-tested benefits. Guaranteed advances on child support payments improve the effectiveness in reducing poverty among single parents, and help avoid long delays in support payments. Separating parents can retain (joint) legal custody in most cases (given that they had it prior to separation), which also suggests that the large variation across Europe in how common it is for children of separated parents to live with both parents relates to other factors. These include national norms on parenting and details of how custody law is implemented such as parenting plans and the legal presumption of joint custody.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the most important policy in promoting gender equality in the labour market and facilitating the employment of single parents, and to prevent the adverse outcomes among children of growing up in poverty. However, socially stratified use of ECEC means that this policy fails to reach in full those children and families who might benefit from it most. Enrolment in ECEC is more equal in countries that publicly provide or subsidize ECEC, guarantee a place for each child, provide higher quality, and have lower out-of-pocket fees for parents. In the majority of European countries, single parents pay a larger share of their household income for childcare than two-parent households. Paid parental leave has the potential to increase employment among single parents and reduce their at-risk-of-poverty, and parental leave for fathers has the potential to create more gender-equal caring relations that last even when parents separate. For fathers to take up parental leave, the leave has to be non-transferable, well-paid and flexible. Yet, in the EU more than 1 in 10 working women and 1 in 8 working men are not eligible for statutory paid leave, in part due to precarious work.

Child benefits are perhaps the most effective form of redistribution to reduce poverty among single parents and working families alike. Child benefits administered through tax benefits can result in higher-income families receiving higher benefits than lower income families, thus underachieving their potential in poverty reduction. In the majority of European countries, the levels of child benefits declined relative to average wages. Periods of unemployment can be particularly challenging for single parents without a second earner to fall back on. Unemployment benefits have fallen in a small majority of European countries, and are below 75% in a large majority. Levels of minimum income protection for single parents have fallen, and are far below at-risk-of-poverty levels in all European countries but Cyprus.

The social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for single parents are still largely unknown. Based on early research findings, and lessons from previous economic crises, three risk factors for single parents were identified: school closures may be particularly difficult for single parents and their children, single parents work in sectors of the economy more strongly affected and income loss may be more difficult to compensate without a second earner, and if a period of austerity will follow this may disproportionately hurt single parents. Already, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, levels of social protection for single parents were weaker than they were prior to the Great Recession.

The European Union has limited influence on policies specifically for single parents, but has become increasingly influential in the areas of gender equality and in particular employment and social protection. The commitment to support employment and to reduce poverty is stated in the Europe 2020 strategy, was further implemented in the Social investment package, and is currently manifest in the pillar of social rights with the Directive on Work-Life Balance as an early deliverable.

An assessment of the EU policy context of single parents raised a number of prominent critiques. European integration was to be linked to increased levels of economic inequality within Member States, in important part due to spending limits and fiscal discipline in the European Semester leading to welfare state retrenchment. Gender equality was argued to have mostly been promoted to purposes of economic growth, and not considered in full. It has long been argued that employment growth in the EU alone has not been sufficient to reduce poverty. This study demonstrated that despite fewer single parents being low educated, fewer single parents living in a household with a very low work intensity, more single parents working, and greater involvement of both separated parents in the care for their child(ren), at-risk-of-poverty rates have not declined for single parents in the EU. Markets have become too precarious and unequal, and social security and in particular levels of minimum income protection were found to be inadequate and falling.

8.1. Policy recommendations for long-term investments

This Section recommends five long-term investments that can be made to improve the situation of single parents in the EU.

1. **Promote gender equality in care and work.** Single parents do better in societies that promote equality of gender and equality of class (Cooke, 2018). This highlights that many of the challenges faced by single parents are structural in nature, and that societies in which family diversity is rising, require structural changes to ensure that individuals in various family forms – including but not limited to single parents – have the capabilities to be and do well. The improvement of the situation

of single parents requires a strong and active commitment to promoting gender equality in care just as much as in work.

2. **Reconsider the gendered nature of single parenthood.** It has often been argued that the majority of single-parent households are headed by single mothers. This is still the case in most, if not all, countries in the European Union. However, fathers are increasingly involved in care tasks, including after they separated from the mother of their child(ren). Children living with both separated parents seem to benefit from this living arrangement, and so do the parents. There is huge potential in further increasing father's care roles to improve gender equality and the economic and social well-being of single mothers.
3. **Mainstream family diversity.** In a number of instances, it was shown how the situation of single parents is affected differently by policies than the situation of two-parent families is. An example, from Section 0, is that although single parents tend to pay less in absolute terms for childcare, the out-of-pocket fees still represent a greater burden in their household in a number of countries, simply because they do not have a second earner. Similarly, income replacements rates below 100%, whether it is for unemployment benefits or parental leaves, have a larger impact on the household finances of single parents (and other single-earner families). Such diversity of outcomes across family types are often unnoticed in description and analyses of policies. Analogue to gender mainstreaming, in the implementation and evaluation of benefit levels, eligibility conditions, and costs of public services, it should consistently be considered that single earners face different needs and challenges compared to dual earners.
4. **Reduce at-risk-of-poverty rates among single parents through other means than employment growth.** Employment can be highly beneficial to single parents, particularly if it is supported adequately. Yet, the general strategy of stimulating employment has not delivered on improving the at-risk-of-poverty rates of single parents. Reducing poverty through employment requires better jobs, not necessarily more. If adequate employment conditions, wages, and support are ensured, fewer single parents might require social security or social assistance benefits. However, reducing benefits to maintain or increase work incentives has been linked to lower quality jobs and insufficient household incomes, in particular for single parents without a second earner.
5. **Improve monitoring the situation of single parents in the EU.** Monitoring social indicators is an important part of the European project. With regards to the situation of single parents, monitoring can be improved on at least four accounts:
 - a. Improve identification of single parents in Eurostat indicators. Indicators used to monitor the situation of single parents cannot explicitly separate 'parents' from other adults living with children, often cannot be differentiated by gender, and fail to identify single parents living in multi-generational households (see Section 7.7.4).
 - b. Report confidence intervals with Eurostat indicators. Particularly when monitoring relatively small groups in society, such as single parents, statistical indicators are potentially subject to sampling bias (see Section 7.7.4).
 - c. Include indicators on joint physical custody. To monitor how single parenthood is changing it is pertinent to have knowledge on how common joint physical custody is, what policy conditions can facilitate it, and how it relates to the employment and economic well-being of single parents. It may also contribute to more accurate at-risk-of-poverty statistics regarding (children living with) single parents (see Section 2.2.6).

d. Monitor the (non-)eligibility and (non-)take-up of benefits and services among single parents. To understand the effectiveness of policies, it is not only important to monitor who uses these policies (such as the enrolment rates in childcare), but also who does not take up the policy even though they were eligible. As it is known that these levels tend to be higher among vulnerable groups that require complex policy arrangements, monitoring (non-) eligibility and non-take-up is pertinent for understanding policy effectiveness for single parents (see Section 5.2).

8.2. Policy recommendations for short-term improvements

The recommendations in this Section are based on the results of this study, and in part are implementation of the directions of thought presented in the previous Section. These recommendations may result in improvements of the situation of single parents in relative short term, but of course achieving durable social change tends to require longer term, consistent policy effort.

6. **To facilitate joint physical custody, examine and remove removing barriers.** Member States can work to remove potential barriers that make separated parents refrain from having their child(ren) living with both parents. There is little research on this subject, so a systematic examination of barriers to joint physical custody would be called for first. Examples of such barriers include not being able to register a child on multiple addresses, and public housing / housing benefits that are based on the number of rooms in a home but assume that the child only lives with one parent. Similarly, benefits of which the amount depends in the number of household members should assume that children in joint physical custody fully live with both parents (see Section 2.25).
7. **To support families with joint physical custody, expand joint legal custody.** Among separated parents who have their child(ren) living with both parents, joint legal custody can emphasize equality in responsibility and decision making, and can be crucial in situations of medical or other emergency. Although there is insufficient evidence to infer that expanding joint *legal* custody will also increase joint *physical* custody in a way that benefits children and parents, there is no evidence that it hurts the wellbeing of children and there are some studies that indicate a positive potential (see Section 0).
8. **To reduce in-work poverty, make employment protection legislation stricter.** This in particular applies to better protect people on fixed-term contracts and working for temporary work agencies. This is associated with an increase of the sense of job security among single parents, and to reduce the level of in-work poverty (see Section 3.2).
9. **To make child support more effective, Member States can guarantee an advance on support payments and exclude child support payments from means testing.** The implementation and administration of child support policies has become increasingly complex, and their poverty reduction tends to be rather limited – to an important extent due to parents defaulting in their child support obligations. A state-guaranteed advance on child support payments (to be recovered from the defaulting parent) helps better reduce poverty, and saves single parents from having to go through complex, expensive and time-consuming legal procedures. When child support payments are included as income for means-tested benefits, this reduces the poverty-reducing function of child support or the means-tested benefit, and increases the complexity of administering both (see Section 4.1).

10. **To achieve more equal and higher enrolment in ECEC, ensure public provision subsidies, guarantee a place to each child, ensure quality and lower out-of-pocket fees.** It is furthermore important to ensure local availability, and flexibility to cater for non-standard working hours. Enrolment in ECEC is beneficial to gender equality, the employment of single parents, and the development of children, but its effectiveness is reduced by unequal enrolment. An option to achieve equitable out-of-pocket fees for single parents is to set these as a percentage of household income. This way, as for instance implemented in Sweden, the childcare is affordable to all families, presents a similar financial burden for all families, and the implementation and execution of this policy is relatively simple because the rules are the same for everyone (see Section 0).
11. **To increase fathers taking parental leave, implement leave that is well-paid, non-transferable, and flexible.** Fathers taking parental leave is important to create more gender-equal care roles, gender equality in the labour market, and to foster a greater involvement of fathers in care for their children that continue into single parenthood. Any wage replacement rate below 100% is an incentive not to take parental leave, and can be prohibitive particularly for low-income families (see Section 5.2).
12. **To reduce at-risk-of-poverty rates, raise minimum income protection to at least the level of the poverty line.** Currently, the levels of minimum income protection are below the poverty line in nearly all European countries, often far below it, and the levels have been falling further in the last decade (see Section 0).
13. **To make various existing benefits more effective, address non-eligibility and non-take-up by easing eligibility criteria and application procedures.** Non-eligibility is high in a number of policy areas, including parental leave and unemployment benefits. This renders these policies less effective, and makes more families resort to the minimum income protection that is inadequate. An important source of non-eligibility is formed by insufficient working histories in relation to part-time work (highly common among in particular single mothers) and increasingly precarious labour markets. Non-take-up is known to be high, particularly for means-tested benefits (such as minimum income protection) and among vulnerable groups (see Section 5.2 and Box 3).
14. **To protect single parents against the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, expand existing social protection measures.** This includes extending parental leaves, protecting employment for single parents who cannot go to work due to care responsibilities, and replacing lost wages at rates that are high enough for all single parents to avoid poverty (see Section 6.1).
15. **To alleviate the consequences of school closures for children of single parents, ensure that all children can fully participate in online learning / home schooling.** This includes guaranteeing every child their own computer, as well as fast and reliable internet. This is particularly important as children growing up with a single parent, because of their greater risk of poverty, perform less well in school (see Section 6.2).

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This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, describes trends in the situation of single parents in the EU (with additional evidence from Iceland and Norway). It analyses the resources, employment, and social policy context of single parents and provides recommendations to improve their situation, with attention to the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences.

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