



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY
Centre de politique sociale et économique européenne Asbl

YOUNG SINGLE PARENTS IN BELGIUM

CESEP ASBL
Rue de la Pacification, 65
B-1000 BRUXELLES
Tel. : 02/230.63.96
Fax: 02/230.63.96
E-Mail : cesep@skynet.be
Web site: www.cesep.eu

1. DATA

During the last twenty years, we observe important changes in the structure of the family, notably:

- an increase of separations,
- an increase of the age in which marriage takes place,
- a tendency of children to stay longer with parents reflecting often longer education/schooling period,
- an increase of cohabitants and single parent families.

Table 1: Types of households in 1981 and 1991 in Belgiumⁱ

Households	1981		1991	
	Number	%	Number	%
Single (isolés)	837.000	23,6	1.125.000	28,8
Married	2.397.000	67,6	2.331.000	59,7
Cohabitants	88.000	2,5	139.000	3,6
Single parent households	225.000	6,3	309.000	7,9
TOTAL	3.547.000	100,0	3.904.000	100,0

The big majority of single parents families are women, reflecting the legal framework in Belgium. In fact, in case of divorce children are in principle given to the mother.

The General Population Census and Housing of March, 1st, 1991, reports 53.803 (17%) households comprising a father with child(ren) and 256.335 (83%) household comprising a mother with child(ren)ⁱⁱ.

Different studies report slightly different results according to different definitions and methodologies. However, all point out a significant increase of single parent families.

The Census reports also 24.177 households comprising a father with children and other(s), and 43.475 households comprising a mother with children and other(s). We consider that these households ought not be added to the “real” single parent family reported above. In fact, the “other” person may bring important changes in the household compared to the real single parent family. The most important implications might concern income level, the distribution of family tasks and child rearing.

It is important to analyse further the age group of the single parent households. The following tables indicate that this phenomenon becomes important after 25 years old. Longer schooling periods and job career postpone often marriage or the decision to have a child.

The following table indicates that single parent families take an important share in the age groups 25 to 50 years old. Before the age of 25 years old their importance in the same age group is very low.

Concerning single parent families aged 50 years or more, we have to note that widows might have an important share and this characteristic has important different implications (financial, social, etc.) compared to young single parent families.

Table 2: Women by age group and socio-family status in 1991

Distribution in % of the total of the age groupⁱⁱⁱ

Age	Child living with parents	Child in single parent family	Single (isolé)	Married	Cohabitant (children present possible)	One parent household	Other
0-14	88	10	-	-	-	-	2
15-19	80	14	1	1	1	0	3
20-24	45	8	8	27	6	2	4
25-29	11	3	10	62	6	5	3
30-34	4	2	7	72	5	8	2
35-39	2	2	6	75	4	10	1
40-44	1	2	6	76	4	10	1
45-49	1	1	8	77	3	9	2
50-54	0	1	10	77	2	7	2
55-59	0	1	13	76	2	6	3
60 +							
Total	25	4	13	45	3	5	5

Table 3: Men by age group and socio-family status in 1991

Distribution in % of the total of the age group^{iv}

Age	Child living with parents	Child in single parent family	Single (isolé)	Married	Cohabitant (children present possible)	One parent household	Other
0-14	88	10	-	-	-	-	2
15-19	82	14	1	0	0	0	3
20-24	60	12	8	11	4	0,1	5
25-29	23	6	14	47	6	0,3	4
30-34	9	4	13	66	5	0,8	3
35-39	4	3	12	72	5	1,5	2
40-44	2	3	12	74	4	2,2	2
45-49	1	2	11	77	4	2,5	2
50-54	1	2	11	79	3	2,4	2
55-59	0	1	13	80	2	1,8	3
60 +							
Total	30	5	10	48	3	1	3

One may observe that among women aged 30 to 50 years old, one parent household represent about 10% of the same age group. The share of men for the same age group and socio-family status is only 2%, reflecting the Belgian legal framework.

The following table indicates that about 50% of single parents are aged between 30 and 50 years old. The number of young single parents (less than 30 years old) is 25.863 units, of which 24.232 are headed by a woman.

Table 4: One parent households: Distribution by age group and sex in 1991^v

Age	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Women	Men
0-14	4	3	7	0%	0%	57%	43%
15-19	396	41	437	0%	0%	91%	9%
20-24	6.028	343	6.371	2%	1%	95%	5%
25-29	17.804	1.244	19.048	7%	2%	93%	7%
30-34	29.484	3.034	32.518	12%	6%	91%	9%
35-39	35.152	5.518	40.670	14%	10%	86%	14%
40-44	36.465	8.019	44.484	14%	15%	82%	18%
45-49	25.443	6.911	32.354	10%	13%	79%	21%
50-54	19.717	6.103	25.820	8%	11%	76%	24%
55-59	17.866	5.400	23.266	7%	10%	77%	23%
60 +	67.976	17.187	85.163	27%	32%	80%	20%
Total	256.335	53.803	310.138	100%	100%	83%	17%

One interesting aspect is to know the number of children of single parent households. About 64% of single parent families have one child.

2. ECONOMIC SITUATION OF SINGLE PARENTS

The following table indicates that young single parents are at a disadvantaged position compared to other socio-family categories. In the age group of 25-29 years old about 19% of single parents have no income and about 39% of them rely on social allocations (mainly the minimum guaranteed allowance or unemployment benefit).

Table 5: Income structure for selected types of households and age groups, 1991^{vi}

Reference person	Single (isolé)	Single parent household	Unmarried with child(ren)	Married with child(ren)
Age 25-29				
Without income	26	19	6	3
Replacement income	11	39	8	3
Income (s)	63	42	86	94
	100	100	100	100
Age 35-39				
Without income	21	14	5	3
Replacement income	13	25	6	3
Income (s)	66	61	89	94
	100	100	100	100
Age 45-49				
Without income	19	11	5	3
Replacement income	22	16	6	3
Income (s)	59	73	89	94
	100	100	100	100

3. LABOUR SITUATION

The labour situation of young single mothers is particularly difficult. The following table presents the socio-professional situation of single parent women aged 20-29 years old. It indicates that about 30% are searching for employment.

Table 6: Distribution of women aged 20-29 years old by socio-professional status, 1991^{vii}

	Brussels		Flanders		Wallonia	
	One parent household	All	One parent household	All	One parent household	All
Student	1	14	0	11	1	12
Economically not active	2	5	3	3	6	6
Searching for a first job	4	4	3	2	15	9
Searching for a job	27	9	34	10	34	13
Employed	43	50	47	69	31	51
Stopped working	2	1	3	2	3	2
Housework	1	1	1	1	0	1
Disabled	1	1	0	0	1	1
Other	()	()	()	()	()	()

The table reveals that more than 30% of young women single parents are searching for a job. The situation is worse in the Walloon region where unemployment is the highest.

Despite these problems, public policy considers that unemployment benefits and minimex (guaranteed minimum income) may constitute a disincentive to work. In fact, they compare the level of different social benefits and the level of salary.

Table 7: Net replacement rates (including cost of housing and child care), 1994^{viii}

	Single	One parent household with 2 children	Head of household with 2 children
Short term unemployment			
- minimum salary	58	84	64
- mean level salary	55	64	47
Long term unemployment			
- minimum salary	39	93	72
- mean level salary	28	70	51

4. SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The data presented above indicate that one parent households experience a high unemployment rate and lack often resources. This is particularly true for young single parents. Several studies reveal that one parent households experience poverty and insecurity^{ix}.

Table 8: Poverty and insecurity levels, 1992

	% living in insecurity (CPS norm)	% of poor (EU norm)
Single	22	4
Couple	15	6
Couple + 1 child	12	3
Couple + 2 children	9	5
Couple + 3 children	9	11
One parent families	29	10
Composed families	9	5

The annual survey on households budget presents a subjective indication of poverty. It indicates how households themselves evaluate their own situation. Again young single parents report a high level of poverty and insecurity.

Table 9: Percentage of households reporting difficulties to pay, 1997/98^x:

	Nutrition	Clothing	Heating
single person, aged 30-64 years	10	33	12
single person, aged less than 30 years	15	51	10
person alone with child less than 16 years	21	46	17
couple with child 16 years or less	2	17	4

Getting a job remains the main road to go out of the poverty trap. However, very often single parents get part time jobs or jobs which are not qualified and consequently, their income level doesn't change significantly.

Findings in several countries^{xi} indicate that a high proportion of people moving into poverty will move out of poverty in a very few years. However, most movements out of poverty are only to income levels slightly above the poverty line and many people will re-enter poverty within one or two years of leaving it.

A household could become poor because a member of it has become unemployed or because of an earner leaving the household (death, divorce, ..) or because of an increase in the number of household members (birth, ...). Demographic factors appear to be less important than employment for both entering and leaving poverty.

5. THE SURVEY

As it was indicated above young single mothers represent an important share of poor households and depend mainly on social assistance or unemployment benefits. Consequently, the Public centre for social assistance (CPAS) play an important role for the reintegration of young single mothers.

Young single mothers are also one of the main target group in many programmes aiming to reach disadvantaged women. However, as it was noted above the problems faced by aged single mothers or women in married households are very different.

The provision of child care services appears as the only common problem between these different groups, but even here we face different alternatives. A married mother or a young cohabitant mother has two alternatives to the question of child care services:

- a redistribution of family tasks inside the couple (married or not); the husband or the cohabitant taking a greater participation in child care;
- provision of better services in child care by the public sector.

Young single mothers have only the second alternative. This is one reason explaining why often young single mothers come back to their parents to form what is called in household surveys “composed families”.

Analysis of different projects funded by public authorities and the questionnaire filled by the Public centre for social assistance define the general lines of a prototype. Provided assistance aim to help the young single mother to implement its personal project. This project is structured around three steps:

- at the initial stage, the young single mother has to build its personal project both as a mother and as a full citizen;
- in a second stage, when the first step is achieved, the young single mother has to define a professional project;
- finally, she is assisted to build a network of social links with other persons or organisations.

The central point is the individualised reintegration path where the young single mother remains a full actor. Organisations provide the necessary assistance, notably:

- child care services,
- psychological support,
- training, specially as young single mothers are often early school leavers,
- job search.

A certain number of new approaches take into account the fact that children of young single households have low educational achievements and often problems in their social integration. These approaches try to build on the triangular relation: mother-child-father.

The coercive approach makes the assumption that the financial problems of young single mothers are a central point. They considers that many problems arise from the insufficient financial contribution of the father. Consequently, they aim at increasing the level and making this contribution more regular.

The co-operative approach considers that a better co-operation between the parents in child rearing may free time and financial resources for the young single mother. Consequently, she may organise better her time and make it compatible with the requirements of a job. However, this approach relies on a new way of organising rights and duties of parents towards children, and this is a long term process.

-
- ⁱ “La formation des familles: Etude prospective”: P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe; Programme de recherche en science sociales, Service de programmation de la politique scientifique, Bruxelles, 1995, p. 75.
- ⁱⁱ “Ménages et familles”: Recensement général de la population et des logements au 1er mars 1991; P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe, J. Surkyn. Institut national de statistique, Ministère des Affaires économiques, p.52.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “La formation des familles: Etude prospective”: P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe; Programme de recherche en science sociales, Service de programmation de la politique scientifique, Bruxelles, 1995, p. 69. Application du modèle LIPRO en Belgique.
- ^{iv} “La formation des familles: Etude prospective”: P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe; Programme de recherche en science sociales, Service de programmation de la politique scientifique, Bruxelles, 1995, p. 70.
- ^v “Ménages et familles”: Recensement général de la population et des logements au 1er mars 1991; P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe, J. Surkyn. Institut national de statistique, Ministère des Affaires économiques, p.73.
- ^{vi} “Ménages et familles”: Recensement général de la population et des logements au 1er mars 1991; P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe, J. Surkyn. Institut national de statistique, Ministère des Affaires économiques, p.171.
- ^{vii} “Ménages et familles”: Recensement général de la population et des logements au 1er mars 1991; P. M. Boulanger, A. Lambert, P. Deboosere, R. Lesthaeghe, J. Surkyn. Institut national de statistique, Ministère des Affaires économiques, p.178.
- ^{viii} “La politique Fédérale de l’emploi: Rapport d’évaluation 1998”; Ministère Fédéral de l’emploi et du travail.
- ^{ix} B. Cantillon: “Famille et politique sociale”; Revue Belge de Sécurité Sociale, 1/1994, Bruxelles; p. 298.
- ^x “La pauvreté subjective chez les ménages belges”; Extrait de l’enquête sur les budgets des ménages 1997/98, Institut national de statistique, Bruxelles.
- ^{xi} Chr. Heady: “Labour market transitions and social exclusion”; Journal of European Social Policy, 1997 Vol 7(2), p. 119-128.
-

Study done for the NASCENT project, 2000.

You can find more information on the project on the following web-site:
http://www.nascent.org/body_index.html