

Trends in educational profiles of male lone parents. Evidence from Belgium (1990-2018)

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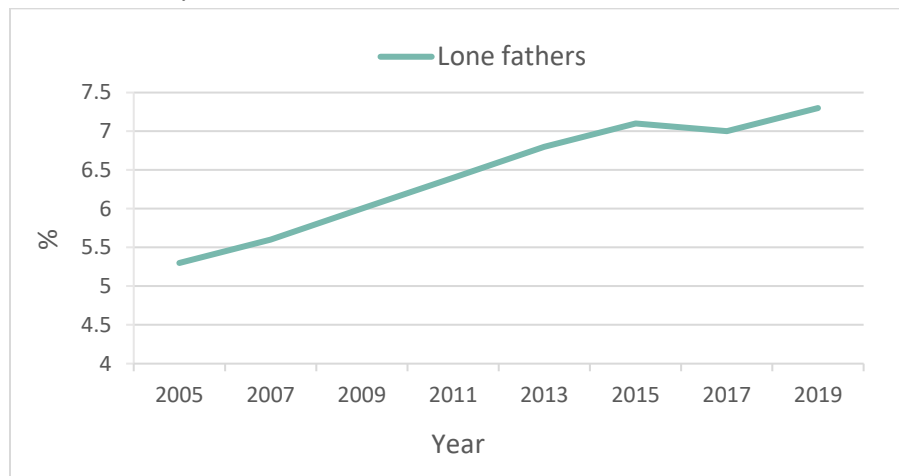
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Introduction

Lone parent families are families composed by a mother or a father and her or his minor child(ren) with no partner living in the same household. The growth in the proportion of children living in lone parent families has characterized both Europe (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2017) and the United States (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004) in recent years, with lone fatherhood increasingly becoming a common phenomenon across Europe (fig. 1).

Lone parenthood is still largely associated with socio-economic disadvantages, as well as negative child outcomes. One of the main reasons for this is that lone parenthood is more common among the low educated. While this has been well documented among lone mothers (Härkönen, 2017; McLanahan, 2004), evidence on the educational gradient in lone fatherhood is still very scarce.

Fig. 1: Trends in lone fatherhood in Europe (EU-19), 2005-2019. (% of lone fathers on male adult with children). Labour force survey data.



Theoretical framework

The Goldscheider's gender revolution hypothesis (Goldscheider et al., 2015) is a two-part process of change in the relationships between men and women. During the first half of this revolution, women entered the public sphere of the labour market, becoming economically independent and therefore in a better position to leave an unhappy marriage and to take care of their children alone. During the second half of the gender revolution, men increasingly take part in the private sphere of the household. This has also led to changes in child custody arrangements: from the dominant model of the so called "maternal presumption" to a more gender neutral one (Cancian et al., 2014). Interesting, joint custody and sole father custody, have become increasingly common not only because of the increasing interest of divorced men who desire to take primary parental responsibility for their children but also of women who want fathers to take childcare responsibilities more consistently (Greif, 1994).

While in the past the typical pathway to becoming a lone father was through widowhood, nowadays male lone parents are primarily divorced or separated men. De Graaf and Kalmijn (2006) highlight that in the Netherlands the divorce risk is higher for low educated than for higher educated men, and this effect has changed over time. In Finland, Jalovaara (2013) found that a lower level of education increased dissolution rates in cohabitation for both women and men. Several findings also support the idea that education is linked to custodial arrangements. For example, Kitterød and Lyngstad (2012) found that Norwegian mothers who are more educated than their ex-partners are particularly likely to obtain joint custody, while there is no significant association between the educational level of parents having sole father custody. In Belgium, instead, the father's educational level seems positively associated with joint physical custody (Sodermans et al., 2013). However, the proportion of fathers who live most of the time with their children after divorce is higher among the less educated (Schnor et al., 2017). And so, who are the lone fathers? From one side, the gender revolution perspective (Goldscheider et al., 2015) might suggest there is a positive correlation between education and lone fatherhood. From the other side, the general literature on socioeconomic disadvantage and lone parenthood (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018) would predict a negative correlation.

Data and Methods

In this study, we focus on educational attainment trends (1992-2012) among lone fathers with minor children resident in Belgium. Data are derived from a linkage between the National Registers for the years 1992-2012 and the Belgian Census data from 1991, 2001, and 2011 (DEMOBEL¹), obtained from Statistics Belgium. National Register data allow to precisely document over time whether men are lone parents or not, overcoming problems of attrition bias and case size often present in survey data. The data include information of the complete Belgian population on the most important demographic variables (gender, date of birth, civil status, nationality), and household characteristics (household size, municipality). Census data contain a rich set of socioeconomic variables, including the level of education of individuals at the time of the data collection. The information in the registers refer to the 1st January of each year, while information in the census has been recorded in October. Therefore, we linked the Census data (1991, 2001, and 2011) with the Register data of the subsequent year (1992, 2002, 2012).

First, we provide the descriptive statistics for our measures, comparing the educational distributions among fathers in a couple and lone fathers in 1992, 2002, and 2012. Second, we use logistic regression to examine the relationship between levels of education and the likelihood of lone fatherhood compared to fatherhood in couple in a given year. The first model includes the year of data collection to documenting the changing risk of lone fatherhood over time. A second model adds individual characteristics of fathers (educational level, nationality, and presence of a child aged 0-2 in the household). Finally, a third model includes interactions between the level of education and year to test whether the effects of education of the fathers have changed over time.

Preliminary results

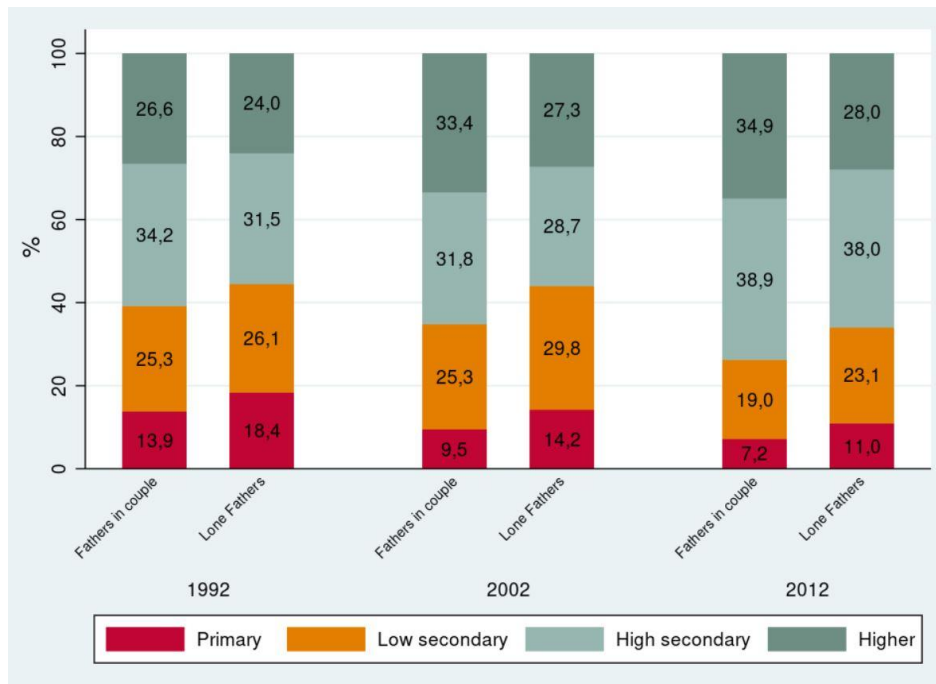
In Belgium, between 1992 and 2012, the total share of lone fathers increased steadily from 1,8% to 3,6% as a percentage of all fathers with minor children. Overall, the distribution of lone fathers' socio-

¹ https://statbel.fgov.be/sites/default/files/files/documents/bevolking/Demobel_EN.pdf

demographic characteristics has changed between 1992 to 2012, particularly regarding educational level (fig. 2). Worth noting, the proportion of lone fathers with a low educational level decreases constantly over time, and increases among the higher secondary educated between 2002 and 2012. However, compared to fathers in a couple, lone fathers are still overrepresented among the lower and underrepresented among the higher educated.

Results of the logistic regression models reveal that educational differences in lone fatherhood have increased over time, and low educated fathers are more likely to be lone parents than the higher educated. These results support the idea that lone fatherhood is concentrated among the lower social strata, as in the case of lone motherhood. Thus, more attention should be given to this population by policy makers to make sure lone fathers families receive the sufficient support to avoid social and economic disadvantages.

Fig. 2: Educational distribution among fathers in couple and lone fathers, by year.



Next steps

So far, this study only accounts for resident fathers (father in couple and lone father), i.e. fathers living with their children in the same household. We know however that many men become non-resident fathers after separation from the mother of their children and that there is a negative educational gradient in not living with the children after separation (Schnor et al. 2017). The next step is thus to include fathers with non-resident children in our analyses to provide a complete picture of the characteristics of male parents in Belgium and how these have changed over the years. Thus, in addition to presenting descriptive information on trends in lone fatherhood, we will examine the factors related to different fatherhood outcomes, estimating multinomial logit models of whether, in a given year, a man is a resident father in couple, a resident lone father, or a non-resident lone father.

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