

# **The Rise in Single Mother Families and Consequences for Children's Economic Outcomes: A study of Southern Sweden, 1905-2015**

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## **Abstract**

Single mothers make up the largest share of single parents in the present as well as in the past. They have fewer resources than partnered mothers with implications for their own well-being and their children's future. Knowledge about this transmission of disadvantages is limited for past contexts because existent research mainly covers the post-1970 period and provides limited insights into the changing influence of economic disadvantage as societies modernize and welfare states develop. We apply a long-term perspective and study the implications of growing up with a single mother in Sweden using individual-level data from the Scanian Economic and Demographic Database (SEDD) 1905-2015. We investigate the risk of poverty during childhood as well as long-term consequences of growing up with a single mother compared to other family and breadwinner configurations. Poverty is measured in relative terms. Long-term consequences are measured in terms of midlife attainment of education, occupation, and income. We test for gender differences across periods. Preliminary results from multivariate regressions show that growing up with a single mother was associated with elevated poverty risks during childhood. Both the persistence of living with a single mother as well as the age at which this was experienced matter. Growing up with a single mother was also negatively associated with midlife educational attainment, occupational status, and income. These associations persist across time despite comprehensive reforms and welfare state expansion determined to equalize later life consequences of adverse childhood experiences. For women, growing up with a single working mother was associated with better adult outcomes compared to other family and breadwinner configurations, indicating that role model influence may mediate disadvantage.

## Background

Single parenthood, particularly among mothers, is a social phenomenon that warrants special attention from both researchers and policymakers. While single parenthood has become a prevalent family arrangement across the Western world, its prevalence and characteristics vary by national context (Bernardi & Mortelmans 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado 2018). In the European Union, Sweden has the highest proportion of households with children headed by a single parent, with one in five such households fitting this category (Eurostat 2022). Single-mother families constitute 16% of all Swedish families with children under 18, while single-father families account for 5% (Statistics Sweden 2022).

A single mother is a woman responsible for raising one or more children without a co-residing partner to assist with caregiving or financial support. The pathways into single motherhood include widowhood, divorce, non-marital childbirth, single-parent adoption, or assisted reproduction. Historically, single motherhood was often stigmatized and associated with social marginalization, particularly in cases of out-of-wedlock pregnancies or abandonment. However, high remarriage rates shortened the duration of single motherhood. Since the divorce revolution and the rise of cohabitation in the 1970s, the composition of single-mother households has shifted. Many women officially recorded as "single" may in fact be cohabiting, complicating statistical interpretations of single motherhood. The likelihood of experiencing single motherhood varies across contexts depending on divorce rates, cohabitation trends, and repartnering practices. Regardless of these differences, single-mother households are consistently at a heightened risk of poverty, even in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2022).

It is well established that single mothers have less resources than partnered mothers with implications for their own well-being and the future of their children (Bird & Rieker 2008; Mattingly & Bianchi 2003; McLanahan 2004). This holds for both past and present times. Single mothers are disadvantaged, through the lack of a spouse, in terms of income, time, and social networks (Craig 2005; Vernon 2010; Vickery 1977). Theoretically, married women benefit from the pooling of resources, and the sharing of work and family responsibilities with their partner, resulting in access to more resources and less strain compared with single mothers. In contexts which emphasize the role of marriage, there may also be social stigma associated with single motherhood, especially if it is due to extramarital childbearing or divorce. Moreover, there are selection processes at play. Despite that the 20th century brought about many changes in the lives of families (e.g., smaller family size; increased female labor force participation, urbanization; and fluidity), the importance of two-parent homes grew (rather than decreased) with implications for the lives of both adults and children, and for economic inequality at the national level (Kearney 2023). Thus, the vulnerability of single mothers that independently provide for children and the intergenerational transmission of economic disadvantage continue to be issues of public concern in many countries though not as visible as before on the political agenda.

Knowledge about this transmission of disadvantages is, however, limited for past contexts because existent research mainly covers the post-1970 period and provides limited insights into the changing influence of economic disadvantage as societies modernize and welfare states develop. In this study, we apply a long-term perspective and study the impacts of growing up with a single mother in Sweden using individual-level data from the Scanian Economic and Demographic Database (SEDD) 1905-2015. We investigate the risk of poverty during childhood as well as long-term consequences of growing up with a single mother compared to other family and breadwinner configurations. Poverty is measured in relative

terms. Long-term consequences are measured in terms of midlife attainment of education, occupation, and income. We test for gender differences across periods.

### **Data and methods**

We use data from the Scanian Economic-Demographic Database (SEDD). These data consist of individual-level longitudinal information for an area in southern Sweden, including a medium-sized industrial city (Landskrona), one small town with considerable industrial activity (Kävlinge), and four largely rural, parishes. The area is not a representative sample of Sweden statistically, but it is not atypical and reflects conditions shared by most rural and semi-urban areas in the period studied. The data come from continuous population registers (a household-based register where information at the individual level is continuously updated), with information on demographic events, including migration to and from households for all individuals in the selected parishes. From 1968 onwards, individual-level information covering the entire country is available in various administrative registers at Statistics Sweden and has been linked to the historical data using unique personal identifiers introduced in 1947. Data from these registers have been linked to the historical sample, which has allowed an extension of the database along several dimensions. This means that we can follow the individuals observed in childhood in the study area all over Sweden in adulthood without any biases related to internal migration. Individuals emigrating from Sweden are censored upon departure.

We select all individuals aged 0-14 who resided for some time in the study area Landskrona or one of the five parishes between 1947 and 1967 (i.e., cohorts born 1933-1967). First, we study the determinants of poverty for all children below age 15 and explore the impact of growing up with a single mother compared to other family and breadwinner configurations. Second, we follow these children until adulthood (ages 40-49) regardless of where they lived in Sweden to analyze the impacts of growing up with single mother on socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood.

We study the period 1947-2015 for which we have information from individual tax returns about total labor-related income (including self-employment) and income from capital and real estate. Childhood poverty is measured using income in SEDD from 1947 to 1967, and economic outcomes in adulthood are measured using income data from Statistics Sweden. Additionally, after 1967 we use income data from national registers maintained by Statistics Sweden, with similar total income and various benefits relating to previous labor-related earnings (pensions, parental leave benefits, unemployment benefits, etc.). We use a relative measure of childhood poverty. Children are considered poor if they lived in a family where the income in a given year was below 60 per cent of the median income. A similar approach is taken in much of the contemporary poverty research as well as the official measure applied by the European Statistical Office (EUROSTAT). Income is defined as total gross income (before tax) from all sources, including labor-related benefits from social insurance, such as unemployment benefits and parental leave.

We select all individuals aged 0-14 who resided for some time in Landskrona or one of the five parishes between 1947 and 1967. First, we study the determinants of poverty for all children under 15. We are particularly interested in the impact of growing up with a single mother compared to other family and breadwinner configurations. Second, we follow these individuals until midlife (ages 40-49) regardless of where they lived in Sweden to analyze the effects of growing up with a single mother on socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood. In the analysis, we include different demographic and socioeconomic variables at the individual and

family levels. Socioeconomic status is measured as the social class of the family head, based on occupational information coded in HISCO and then into the class scheme HISCLASS. In the second part of the study, we identify all children who survived and stayed in Sweden after 1967. The follow-up period for the study of outcomes in adulthood starts in 1973 when the oldest cohorts were 40 years old and ends in 2015 when the youngest cohort turned 49. We measure the highest educational level and occupational status achieved in adulthood and the average income at ages 40-49. The choice of ages 40-49 corresponds to a reasonable proxy to of lifetime income.

To account for the time spent with a single mother, we select individuals that could be continuously followed for five years in one of the age groups: 0-4, 5-9 or 10-14. We apply linear probability models (LPM) to study the probability of different outcomes: (1) experiencing poverty in childhood, (2) being poor in adulthood, (3) earning a high income in adulthood, (4) occupational status attainment, and (5) obtaining a university degree (tertiary education). Estimates from LPM models are more straightforward to interpret than those from logit models. It is also more straightforward to compare LPM estimates across different subsamples (e.g., by age-group, cohort, and gender) than is the case for odds ratios from logit models.

We estimate probabilities include determinants at the family level ( $j$ ) in each year ( $t$ ), including socioeconomic status and age of the family head, single mother versus married couple, breadwinner configuration, and number of children below age 15. We also control for urban residence, observation period, income inequality in the year (Gini index), and standard errors clustered at the family level ( $\epsilon_j$ ).

### **Preliminary results**

Preliminary results from multivariate regressions show that growing up with a single mother was associated with elevated poverty risks during childhood. Both the persistence of living with a single mother as well as the age at which this was experienced matter. Growing up with a single mother was also negatively associated with midlife educational attainment, occupational status, and income. These associations persist across time despite comprehensive reforms and welfare state expansion determined to equalize later life consequences of adverse childhood experiences. For women, growing up with a single working mother was associated with better adult outcomes compared to other family and breadwinner configurations, indicating that role model influence may mediate disadvantage.