



# Growing up unequal: does the context matter? An examination of child and family inequality from a cross-national perspective

## 1. What is the study's purpose?

The aim of the study is to examine the role of family dynamics and maternal employment in exacerbating childhood inequalities in the UK, Ireland and Denmark. Specifically, this research focuses on three questions which are dealt with in three separate studies. The main research questions are as follows:

### » Are children's family dynamics socially stratified? (Study 1)

The first study examines whether three family dynamics thought to be important predictors of children's outcomes – family structure (defined as married, cohabiting, step family, divorced and never married lone parent, early childbearing and large family size – are socially stratified in Ireland, the UK, the US and Denmark. To date, empirical research on this topic has concentrated on a narrow range of countries, or where cross-national comparisons are conducted, and has focused on limited aspects of children's family circumstances.

### » Does the association between family structure and children's outcomes (educational and social-emotional) vary across countries? (Study 2)

The second study examines the association between family structure and children's outcomes in the UK, Ireland and Denmark. While much research has explored the association between family structure and children's outcomes in single-country studies, this issue is rarely examined within a cross-national

framework. It is therefore unclear whether the effects (if any) of family structure transitions differ between stronger and weaker welfare states.

### » How are changes in mothers' employment status related to children's social and emotional outcomes? Is this association homogeneous across family structure and policy context? (Study 3)

The third study examines how changes in mothers' employment status relate to children's social and emotional outcomes. Relatively few studies have examined how changes (i.e. job loss) in mothers' employment status influence children's outcomes. It is also unknown whether the degree to which governments facilitate maternal employment or compensate for job loss results in a differential impact of employment status on children's outcomes.

This Research Briefing summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of these three studies.

## 2. How was the study undertaken?

### 2.1 Selection of countries

The selection of countries for this study was based on two factors. As follows:

- » First, the UK, Ireland and Denmark represent different historical, cultural and policy settings. In terms of welfare typologies, the UK is usually categorised as a 'liberal' welfare state, characterised by limited service provision for

families and high levels of social inequality. Ireland is usually placed in the same category as the UK, but with more conservative family policies. For example, in relation to maternal employment, policy makers have tried to balance incentives for women's work with supporting a mother's choice to stay at home, leading to conflicting policy provision and a focus on cash payments as opposed to subsidised services. Denmark is categorised as a classic social democratic model, characterised by universal family support aimed at advancing the principles of equity and social cohesion. As a result, Denmark has one of the highest proportions of working mothers and one of the lowest rates of child poverty in the EU. This variance is important for understanding whether levels of childhood inequality differ between countries with varying levels and types of support for families.

- » Second, the datasets on children and families that are available for these countries are highly comparable and use similar measures of children's outcomes. Furthermore, the rich data also allow us to account for a wide range of parental resources and processes.

In addition to the three primary countries already mentioned, the first study also includes the United States (US), as relevant data are available, and the US is a useful comparator case in the study of family dynamics. No information on children's outcomes is included in this dataset; it is therefore excluded from Study 2 and Study 3.

## 2.2 Data

- » Data collection for the **Growing up in Ireland Study** (GUI) began in 2007 and contained information on a sample of over 8,500 nine-year-old children and their families. Participants were selected through a random sample of over 900 schools in Ireland. These children were followed up at age 13 years (wave 2: 2011). Data from both waves were used for the current study.
- » The **Danish Longitudinal Survey of Children** (DALSC) began in 1995 and data from interviews with mothers and fathers are available for 1995 (children aged 6 months); 1999 (children aged 3.5 years); 2003 (children aged 7.5/8 years), and 2007 (children aged 11 years). Participants were randomly selected from a national register of

children born to mothers with Danish citizenship between September and October 1995. The current study focused on waves 3 and 4, when the children were seven and 11 years old, respectively.

- » The **UK Millennium Cohort Study** is a longitudinal study of children living in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland who were born in 2000. The participants were selected from a random sample of electoral wards, disproportionately stratified so as to ensure adequate representation of all four UK countries, and deprived areas. In this study, waves 4 and 5, when the children were 7 and 11 years old, respectively, were utilised.
- » In Study 1, data were also drawn from the 2012 **US Current Population Survey Fertility Supplement**. This survey provided demographic information on women aged 15–45. A sample of 3,043 10/11 year-olds was drawn from the Current Population Survey (CPS) micro-data, along with linked data on their mothers' education, age at first birth, partnership status, and number of children.

## 2.3 Measures

- » Study 1 used maternal education as the main variable of interest (measured as less than lower secondary school, upper secondary, and third level). Educational gradients in family structure (married, cohabiting, step family, divorced lone parents, and never married lone parents), family size and early childbearing were then examined.
- » Study 2 and Study 3 focused on children's outcomes. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) measures children's social and emotional adjustment. It is a 20-item scale, from which each child is given a total score and a score on four sub-scales of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity symptoms, and peer relationships (Goodman, 1997). A higher total score indicates more social and emotional problems. All three studies measured SDQ scores at two time points – ages nine years and 13 years in the GUI, and ages seven years and 11 years in the DALSC and MCS. This measure was used in Study 2 and Study 3.
- » The measures of educational outcomes were more differentiated across the three samples. The MCS used the BAS (British Ability Scale) verbal similarities scale to measure cognitive ability at age 11 years, and the BAS word reading assessment scale at age seven years. In the GUI, the

Drumcondra Reading Comprehension test was the measure of cognitive ability at age nine years and the measure of cognitive ability at age 13 years was the Drumcondra Verbal Reasoning Test. A language comprehension test was only measured at age 11 years in the DALSC. These measures were used in Study 2 only.

- » A range of family and parenting variables were included in the analysis of Study 2 and Study 3 in order to account for factors that may be related to both family structure/ maternal employment and children's outcomes. These included income (measured as relative poverty); maternal time investments (measured as how often the primary caregiver and the child spend time going on outings, reading together, sitting down for a meal together etc.); harsh parenting (measured as how the primary caregiver disciplines the study child e.g. shout, smack, bribe etc.); maternal depression (measured as whether the primary care giver was ever treated for depression or anxiety); maternal education; gender and age of the study child and number of siblings; mother's age at first birth, and mother's employment history.

## 2.4 Statistical methods

- » Study 1 was a descriptive analysis and used multinomial logistic regression and linear regression to examine the distribution of family structure, family size and mother's age at first birth across maternal education.
- » Study 2 used linear regression to examine the association between family structure (married, cohabiting, step family, divorced lone parent, never married lone parent) and children's outcomes using cross-sectional data (wave 1 GUI, wave 4 DALSC and wave 5 MCS). A lagged dependent variable approach was used to test whether changes in family structure affect children's outcomes over time. This involved using linear regression to predict children's SDQ score at time 2, while controlling for their baseline SDQ score at time 1.
- » Study 3 also utilised the lagged dependent variable approach to assess how stability and changes in mothers' employment status (continually working, continually not working, started working, and stopped working) were associated with social and emotional outcomes.

## 2.5 Limitations

- » Information on fathers was not included in the study. The GUI did not have information on non-resident parents, and only limited information was available for the DALSC and the MCS. As a result, no information on any fathers (resident or non-resident) was included in the analysis as it would automatically exclude children in lone-parent households, who were the primary focus of the study.
- » The older age of the Irish children may contribute to a differential effect of family-level factors on outcomes when compared with the UK and Danish samples. Nevertheless, where possible, the results for nine-year-olds and 13-year-olds (GUI) and the results for both 11-year-olds and seven-year-olds (DALSC and MCS) were compared. Overall, these results did not differ, indicating that the associations were not stronger or weaker for older children.
- » A three-country study such as this does not provide the basis for a formal assessment of the effectiveness of a particular policy provision in equalising children's outcomes, but it does provide a check on whether outcomes across the three states were as one would expect given the policy context.

## 3. What are the key findings?

### 3.1 Inequalities in children's family dynamics

- a. The results show that early childbearing, divorce, step family formation and lone parenthood are found to be more common among mothers with lower levels of education, therefore working to the disadvantage of children in low socio-economic families.
- b. Smaller family size, which is thought to be beneficial to children, tends to be concentrated among the least educated in Denmark and Ireland. Furthermore, family instability tends to depress family size in the UK, Ireland and Denmark, and so points to an additional indirect mechanism by which sibling numbers are reduced among children in low socio-economic families.
- c. The US is an outlier and shows a mutually reinforcing pattern of social inequality in all three family dimensions examined.

### 3.2 Family structure and children's outcomes

- a. Results show that differences in children's educational outcomes across family structure are not found in Denmark, but a negative association is found in the UK and Ireland.
- b. Controlling for the background characteristics and resources of parents explained much of the negative associations found for Ireland and the UK. In other words, the relationship status of parents does not have a direct influence on children's educational outcomes. Its main role is to mediate the influence of parental background (income and education) rather than act as a primary cause of poor educational attainment.
- c. A small negative relationship (0.1 of a standard deviation) between relationship breakdown (divorce/separation) and non-cognitive outcomes is found in all three countries. This remains when the background characteristics and resources of families were accounted for, thus indicating that resources matter less for this aspect of childhood inequality.

### 3.3 Maternal employment transitions and children's social and emotional outcomes

- a. Results show that non-employment (UK) and stopping work (Ireland) have a negative association with children's social and emotional well-being.
- b. Accounting for changes in income or maternal time investments did not explain these associations.
- c. No significant results for non-employment or stopping work are found for the Danish sample. In all three countries there is no association between taking up employment and children's social and emotional outcomes.
- d. This study does not find a differential association for employment transitions by maternal education, household poverty status or family structure.
- e. Supplementary analysis of the GUI data shows that the negative effect of stopping work is explained by increased parent-child conflict.

## 4. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. **The relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and family dynamics is more multidimensional and less uniformly negative than recent literature suggests.** Although family structure and early childbearing are socially stratified in a manner that works to the disadvantage of low-SES children, small family size is sometimes an equalising influence, partly because of its association with family structure. Therefore, family size should be given more attention in research on the social stratification of children's family circumstances.
2. **Parents' resources, particularly income and education, matter more for children than the relationship status of their parents.** Indeed, differences in children's educational outcomes across family structure are not found in Denmark, a country characterised by strong support for families. For children's social and emotional outcomes, controlling for parental resources and other parenting factors also explains much of the negative association found for divorce and step-parent family formation. Nevertheless, the longitudinal analysis shows a small negative effect of relationship breakdown on this aspect of children's development in all three countries. This suggests that the effects of family structure changes on children's social and emotional outcomes is more psychological in character and therefore less resource dependent. However, more research on the long-term impact of family structure transitions on non-cognitive outcomes is required.
3. **Maternal job loss and non-employment have a small effect on children's social and emotional outcomes, but are not found in all countries examined.** Overall, maternal employment does not have a strong influence on children's outcomes. Indeed, other family factors such as maternal depression and maternal education are much stronger predictors of children's social and emotional well-being. However, the results for Ireland suggest that the negative effects of job loss are not explained by changes in household income. Rather, they are associated with the stress and strain associated with employment loss and job insecurity and its effects on family relationships. As this effect was only found in Ireland, it may be

attributed to the economic climate during the data collection period. The effects of employment transitions on child outcomes do not differ between one- and two-parent families. From a policy perspective, further research is required in light of wide-ranging reforms of social assistance benefits and the introduction of ‘activation’ requirements for lone parents in the UK and Ireland. Much more detailed analysis that accounts for job quality and employment history is required in order to understand this issue more clearly.

**5. What are the recommendations?**

Bearing in mind the limitations of the study, a number of key recommendations are outlined below.

**1. Policy makers**

**Addressing resource deprivation**

- » Policies aimed at addressing disparities in parental resources are likely to reduce inequalities in children’s outcomes in Ireland and the UK. This recommendation is supported by the results from Denmark which show much narrower differences in children’s outcomes across a wide range of socio-economic indicators. Policies may directly affect resources via more generous cash benefits to low-income families, or indirectly, via increased rates of maternal employment made possible through stronger family-friendly policies.
- » Policy makers should focus on addressing disadvantage through early and continued investment in education. Maternal education was found to be an important predictor of other parental resources and children’s outcomes. Therefore, effort to address educational disadvantage is likely to be an effective policy intervention to improve child and family well-being. The extension of the free pre-school year in Ireland is a positive development.

**Supporting parents and families**

- » Parenting skills and parental well-being were found to be important predictors of children’s social and emotional outcomes for all social groups. Therefore, the expansion of universal and targeted parenting support programmes would be beneficial policy initiatives. Interventions aimed at improving parenting skills may provide a buffer against the negative consequences of family structure or employment transitions on children’s social and emotional outcomes.

**2. Future research**

These studies make a number of contributions to understandings of childhood inequality. Nevertheless, they also raise many questions that are not within the scope of the current study to address. The following topics were identified and could be addressed in future research:

- a. Cross-national differences in early childhood inequalities.
- b. The influence of family size on children’s social and emotional outcomes.
- c. The effects of lone parent employment on household income and children’s outcomes in the context of recent welfare reform.

**6. What are the benefits of the study?**

Up to now, most comparative research on childhood inequality has focused on the association between parental education and children’s outcomes, with little reference to the role of intermediate family-level risk factors in the transmission of (dis)advantage from parents to children. Therefore, this study sought to contribute to the literature by focusing on the role of family dynamics and maternal employment in exacerbating inequalities in childhood. The study complements comparative research of childhood inequality, which shows that cross-national differences in the links between family origins and children’s outcomes do emerge and that more generous welfare states may play a role in mitigating disadvantage in childhood. This is most clear in the case of Denmark. The implication of these findings for future cross-national studies is that in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the origins of childhood inequality, it is necessary to include a wider variety of family-level risk factors and examine their association with multiple domains of child well-being. Consequently, better understandings of how inequalities in children’s life chances arise will assist governments in implementing more effective policies that ameliorate the negative effects of disadvantage in childhood. Identifying and testing such policy effects is a challenge for future research, but the growth in high-quality data on children and their families from birth until adulthood presents many opportunities.



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