



Quality of life in Europe: Families in the economic crisis

Executive summary

Introduction

The European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), provides a reliable picture of the living conditions and the social situation of Europeans before and during the economic crisis. But how has the crisis affected families with children? Children are more at risk of poverty or social exclusion than the overall population in a majority of countries; hence, it is important to understand how the crisis has affected households with children. This report describes the changing quality of life across the EU for different types of families with children and compares their living standards and social situation. Families are divided into two main groups:

- lone-parent families, working or not, and living alone or with relatives;
- couples with children, both dual and single earners, and again, living as a family unit or with other relatives.

Potential patterns that may be related to different family policy approaches are identified by looking at differences between four groups of countries, classified on a spectrum from those with the most flexible family policies to those with the most traditional policies.

Policy context

The economic crisis has led to a deterioration of living and working conditions in many Member States and has increased inequalities between countries and groups of people. Those already vulnerable are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion. Growing inequality is also apparent between families: whether a child lives in poverty depends, in part, on the type of family in which it grows up. It is against this background that the EU's Social Investment Package calls for Member States to focus on simple, targeted, conditional social investment. The aim of this report is to help policymakers identify the types of families with children that need to be targeted.

Key findings

Most lone parents work, mostly full-time. The proportion of working lone parents has changed little since 2007 in the EU28 overall, but in the most 'traditional' group of countries, the proportion of working lone parents has decreased. Many of these countries have been substantially affected by the crisis, which may explain the increase in jobless lone parents.

Lone parents living with relatives were more likely to be unemployed in 2011 than in 2007. This may reflect a structural change in families: lone parents who lost their jobs may have had to move in with their families.

Families in jobless households are those most likely to find it difficult to make ends meet, and are also more likely to face economic difficulties now than in 2007. Jobless lone parents are facing difficulties everywhere, but more often in the most traditional and in the partially traditional countries, their proportion having doubled in the latter group since 2007.

Dual-earner families are the least likely to have financial difficulties, and there has been no significant worsening for this group since the crisis. More families had difficulties paying for accommodation and for utility bills in 2011 than in 2007. Jobless families are most at risk of debt.

The rate of jobless families facing a high level of deprivation has increased significantly since 2007. While the most 'flexible' countries have the lowest average levels of deprivation, families who are out of work in these countries still face high levels, despite the adequate benefits that characterise these countries.

Lone mothers, whether working full time or part time, work fewer hours than lone fathers or men in dual- or single-earner couples. Lone mothers are also more likely

to feel that their job is insecure than lone fathers who are, in turn, working more hours in 2011 than in 2007.

Most lone mothers, and mothers who are part of a couple, would like to work if they could choose their working hours, with over 50% of economically inactive mothers preferring to work part time. While most mothers in full-time work would prefer to work less, most single mothers working part time would like to increase their hours.

The conflict of work and family life has increased in all types of households with children. Lone parents working full time experience work–life conflict most often.

Employment plays an important role in parents' subjective well-being. Lone parents who are not working have the lowest life satisfaction and are the least happy.

While life satisfaction and happiness have not changed significantly overall since 2007, parents in jobless households have felt a decrease in both, jobless lone parents in the most flexible countries experiencing the greatest decrease.

For couples with only one earner, in the most traditional group of countries the earning partner enjoys greater life satisfaction and happiness than the stay-at-home partner, while in the most flexible group the latter has greater subjective wellbeing. In the mixed-flexible group and in the mixed- traditional group little difference is found.

Having a job is important for the mental well-being of lone parents in all country groups. This is true even in countries where generous benefits are provided for jobless parents and where staying at home is often voluntary. Lone parents who are not working have lower mental well-being in the most flexible countries than elsewhere.

Parents in the mainly traditional countries experience greater social exclusion than elsewhere, but jobless parents have the greatest exclusion everywhere. For jobless lone parents, social exclusion is greatest in the most flexible countries.

Lone parents living with relatives feel a high degree of social exclusion despite living with others.

Lone parents remain less satisfied with their life than others, when income is controlled for: hence, while income and employment status are important for their subjective well-being, other (social) factors matter too. Importantly, the reduced life satisfaction of lone parents living with their extended family remains, suggesting that while family may provide some protection in terms of income, this is not enough to improve subjective well-being.

The lower levels of life satisfaction experienced by grandparents who live with their children's families disappear after income is controlled for, suggesting that the family structure provides support for older people as long as this living arrangement is voluntary, rather than a necessity due to lower income.

Policy pointers

Targeted actions are needed to help lone parents into work since, even in the most flexible countries with their adequate level of benefits, families in which nobody works face high levels of deprivation.

Getting people who have been recently made redundant back into work as soon as possible must be a policy priority to avoid the risk of disadvantage becoming entrenched.

Flexible working hours should be made more widely available: over 50% of inactive mothers would like to work part time, and most mothers in full-time work would prefer to work less.

Going to work should mean that both parents are financially better off; this entails such issues as assistance with childcare costs.

Boosting social cohesion, social integration and social cooperation should be high on the policy agenda: these factors critically influence how individuals are affected by the new social risks, and how individuals, their communities and countries achieve economic prosperity.

Measures are needed to help families combine work and care commitments, through an integrated system of leave, care and workplace support for parents of young children.

Parental-leave systems are needed to encourage more fathers to take and share leave, and to facilitate their engagement with domestic responsibilities.

Further information

The report, *Quality of life in Europe: Families in the economic crisis*, is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/studies/tn1306013s/index.htm>

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