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Children's experiences of mothers' partnership dissolution and re-partnering: differences between union types and cohorts

The diffusion of non-marital cohabitation and childbearing are well-known phenomena of recent changes in fertility and partnership behaviour in Europe. Hungary has also witnessed profound demographic changes, especially after the transition. Partnership dissolution and the re-partnering of parents have important implications for the lives of children involved.

We investigate changing partnership behaviour from the point of view of children and focus on children's experiences of single parenthood and stepfamilies. How often do children born in cohabitation or marriage experience the dissolution of their parents' union? How often do children live in stepfamilies due to the re-partnering of their mother? Have the experiences of children changed since the 1980s?

The first and the fourth waves of the Hungarian Generations and Gender Survey (2001 and 2012) are used for the analysis. A child database has been created ($n=8244$) by restructuring the partnership and fertility histories of female respondents, and two synthetic cohorts (1981–1988 and 2005–2012) are compared. We look at the life course of children between aged 0 and 15 with the help of the life table method (cumulative survival functions).

Our results show that changes in partnership behaviour have crucial impact on children's experiences of family life. During the analysed period the ratio of children born in cohabitation has increased from 3% to 35%. The ratio of children experiencing the dissolution of their parents' relationship has doubled since the 1980s (from 18% to 36%). Children born in cohabitation experienced partnership dissolution more often than children of married couples in both periods. Between 2005 and 2012, 40% of children experienced living in a single-mother family and 16% experienced living in a step-family, while between 1981 and 1988 the corresponding figures were only 21% and 12%, respectively.