

## **Family structure and child health, a comparison of France and the UK**

Lidia Panico, Institut National d'Etudes Demographiques

Olivier Thevenon, Institut National d'Etudes Demographiques

A large body of literature has shown marked differences in the average level of child well-being across different family structures. Findings suggest that children living with two married parents are relatively advantaged; children living with two cohabiting unmarried parents generally have slightly worse outcomes than those living with married parents; while those living with a lone parent fare the worst (for reviews see Amato and Keith, 1991a; Amato and Keith, 1991b; Amato, 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004). Although studies examining cognitive, educational and behavioural outcomes are more numerous, there is some evidence of differentials in physical health (Harknett, 2009).

Family structure may have a more detrimental effect on child health if in combination with other hardships, such as poverty. On the other hand, families experiencing other disadvantages may be already experiencing more significant sources of risk for their children's health. This may vary by country: different social policies across countries may modify these effects. Socio-economic differences could influence union formation and parenthood in a number of ways. Disadvantaged women may become mothers at younger ages, single, or experience union separation, lower levels of social support, greater stress and time constraints, which would in turn affect child health. Therefore, the *interplay* between family structure and socio-economic inequalities may be crucial to consider when studying outcomes for children.

International comparative research is an emerging area of population research. Recent approaches analyse data at an individual level and compare two countries in detail, rather than look at aggregate data for several countries. Most such comparative work has been between the US and UK. Furthermore, the relationship between family structure and outcomes for children or parents has been less studied in a comparative manner, even though family policies differ significantly across developed countries (Thevenon, 2011). In this paper, we consider whether family structure works in combination with socio-economic status to produce health inequalities in postnatal outcomes in the UK and France.

Hypotheses concerning the interplay between socio-economic background, family structure and child outcomes have been tested in the US and, to a smaller extent, the UK. However, these relationships might differ in France: compared to the US and the UK, family and welfare policies differ significantly in France; the concentration of certain family structures within more disadvantaged socio-economic groups is not as marked as in the US and the UK; and socio-economic inequalities in health may be smaller in France. Thus, the mediating role of family structure in explaining health inequalities might differ between France and UK.

## Context

The proportion of French and British children living with a lone parent has been increasing: in the UK, the proportion of all children living with a lone parent has gone from 5% in 1960 to 25% in 2006 (ONS, 2010). In France, while the proportion of lone parent families was stable until the early 1980s, it climbed from about 10% in 1982 to 18% in 2005 (Chardon et al, 2008). In both countries nearly a quarter of children live with two unmarried cohabiting (ONS, 2010; INSEE, 2008).

While there are demographic similarities, family policy differs across the two countries. Both British and French policies focus on employment for lone parents to protect them from poverty (Eydoux and Letablier, 2009), but in the UK this is not supported by help with childcare, a policy emphasis in France (Fagnani, 2002). The French social system aims to compensate *all* families for the cost of raising children, irrespective of their socio-economic profile or family status (Thevenon, 2009), while in the UK public aid concentrates on the poorest to maintain their standard of living at the threshold of poverty (Thevenon, 2011).

Policies aimed at the pre-natal, post-natal and early childhood period vary in particular between the two countries. For example, French mothers benefit of a pre-natal maternity leave of 6 weeks for a first child, increasing up to 24 weeks for a third child. This can be shortened by 3 weeks if agreed with by a doctor. In contrast, in the UK there is no minimum period of leave before birth, although part of the post-natal maternity leave can be used up before the birth if wished. Post-natally, French maternity leave is generally shorter (going from 10 weeks for a first birth to 22 weeks for a third child), however, there is a minimum of 6 weeks leave from birth. Furthermore, maternity leave can be augmented with a parental leave allowance up to 3 years, largely unpaid unless under certain conditions. In the UK, maternity leave can be up to 52 weeks, however, the minimum is only 2 weeks post-birth. An important post-natal difference is the availability of childcare. In France, childcare can begin early (infants can be received at nursery from 3 months), and the mix of types of care arrangements, subsidies fees, and tax breaks for childcare expenditure (up to a certain amount) is in contrast with Britain, where the childcare offer is more dispersed, especially in infancy, and, in spite of some new schemes, substantially more expensive. Access to free schooling by age 3 is almost universal in France. While this is changing in the UK, formal schooling does not begin until age 5.

Perhaps because of these differing policies, combined with different demographic profiles of French lone mothers (French lone mothers are older and less likely to be never-married), the concentration of lone mothers in the most disadvantaged groups seen in the UK and the US does not seem to apply to France as much. This may be because combining childcare and paid employment is relatively easier in France than the UK. As a result, in 2000 three quarters of French lone mothers were employed or looking for a job, compared to 40% in the UK, the highest and lowest levels in Europe, respectively (Chambaz, 2001). While poverty is an issue for French lone mothers, it is not the pervasive feature of British lone parenthood: in

France, 27% of lone parents were classed as poor (Chambaz, 2001). In the UK, only 10% of lone parents were never poor and 60% were *always* poor by their child's fifth birthday (Panico et al, 2010).

While we do not limit ourselves to comparing lone parents in the two countries, there is much less data describing the socio-economic background of unmarried cohabiting parents in France. In the UK, unmarried parental cohabitation is linked to slightly lower socio-economic status than stably married parents (Panico et al., 2010). In France, older evidence shows that this might not be true (Kiernan and Lelievre, 1995).

In this paper we aim to exploit differences in family and welfare policies in the UK and France to explore how they may affect: (1) the variation in child outcomes across family structures, and (2) the interaction between family structure and socio-economic background in relation to child outcome. We carry out analyses at two time points: we explore post-natal outcomes to look at the effect of pre-natal policies; and during infancy to look at the effect of policies during the post-natal and early years.

### **Data**

This paper focuses on two birth cohorts, the British Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and the French Etude Longitudinale Francaise depuis l'Enfance (Elfe). The **MCS** involves over 19,000 households containing an infant born in the UK during 2000 to 2002. So far, sweeps of data collections relate to ages 9 months, 3, 5 and 7 years. Most data is collected through interviews with the mother, although a separate interview with their co-residential partner is also carried out. **Elfe** is France's first large scale birth cohort study. It follows roughly 19,000 babies born at a nationally representative sample of 344 maternities recruited from mid-2011 for a year. Data collected at maternity ward includes information taken from medical notes, including birthweight, gestational age, and other relevant information. Roughly 2 months and 1 year following the birth, a telephone interview was conducted collecting more in-depth data on socio-economic status, family living and childcare arrangements, etc. These sweeps of data will be available imminently.

### **Measures**

We look at two data points. A first set of analyses focus on postnatal outcomes, notably birthweight, modelled both in a continuous manner and as a binary variable to distinguish low birthweight babies. Future work will extend to the post-natal, infancy period. Outcomes from the 2 months and 1 year questionnaire for Elfe, and the 9 month sweep for MCS, will be explored once the Elfe data is available in early 2014.

Both the MCS and Elfe contain rich data on the socio-economic characteristics of the household. Parental income, education and age, along with employment status and occupational class, will be key variables. Childcare arrangements and parental leave will also be explored.

### **Analytical strategy**

For our initial analyses, **Objective 1** is to characterise differences in birth weight and low birth weight across family structures. **Objective 2** explores whether family structure works in combination with socio-economic status to produce health inequalities in postnatal outcomes. This will initially be explored through interactions with key socio-economic markers. Results will be interpreted with a comparative light.

### **Initial results**

In weighted analyses, mean birthweight (3334 grams in Elfe and 3405 in MCS) and the proportion of low birthweight babies (3.9% in Elfe and 4.7% in MCS) are comparable in the two samples. After weighting, the Elfe sample appeared more advantaged than the MCS sample in a number of comparable markers of socio-economic background variables, such as maternal education, young maternal age at birth, and occupational class. Socio-economic gradients in birthweight and low birthweight appeared to be similar in both samples (see figure 1 for birthweight).

Initial analyses suggest striking similarity in raw birthweight by family structure at birth, with babies born to cohabiting unmarried parents having lower birthweights than those born to married parents. Children born to unmarried non-cohabiting parents appear to have the lightest birthweights. In France, we further distinguish between cohabiting parents who are in a civil union, and cohabiting parents who are not in a civil union. The latter appear to have lower birthweights than the former. In the MCS, markers of socio-economic background (maternal education and occupational class) explained much of these differentials, together with maternal age. In the fully adjusted model, there were no significant differences between married and the two unmarried groups. On the other hand, in Elfe these socio-economic variables did not have a strong effect in explaining differences. Half of the difference between the married and the cohabiting parents in a civil union (“Pacs”) was explained by the latter’s younger age profile. Other differences remained largely unexplained.

An interaction term testing the interaction between family structure at birth and maternal education did not appear to be significant in Elfe, but were strongly significant in the MCS sample.

### **Future work**

This work is on-going. Final results will use more numerous and sophisticated measures of socio-economic background, (included in the second wave of Elfe), and will include more interaction terms. Outcomes at infancy will also be explored.

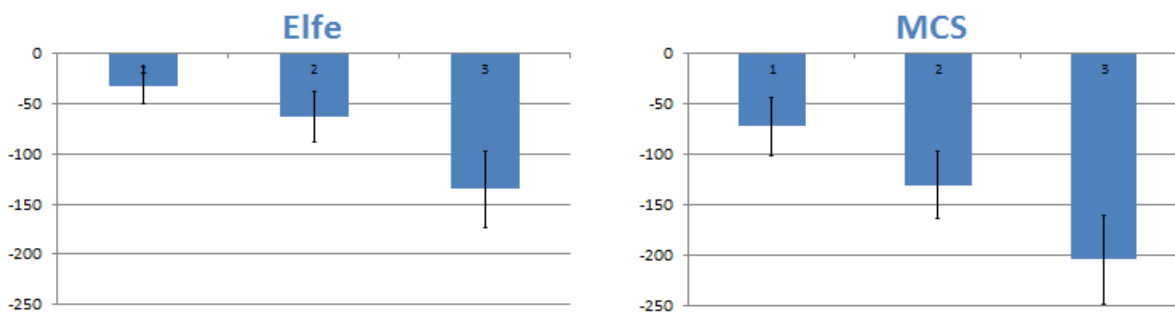
Table 1: Linear regression coefficients, birthweight by family structure at birth.

Comparison group is the married group

Family structure at birth	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Un-adjusted	Maternal age	Parity	Maternal ed & occupation	Models 2+3+4
<b>Elfe</b>					
Pacs - cohabiting	-50**	-48**	-25*	-50**	-27*
Cohabiting	-69**	-65**	-50**	-65**	-41**
Non-cohabiting	-103**	-98**	-96*	-97**	-86**
<b>MCS</b>					
Cohabiting	-54**	-29**	-27*	-40**	0.5
Non-cohabiting	-106**	-69**	-77**	-66**	-16

\*\* p<0.001 \*p<0.05

Figure 1: Mean birthweight by a vulnerabilities score<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> A vulnerability score was created by assigning 1 point for each of the following, relating to the mother: age under 25; low or no educational qualifications; single at birth; no profession.

## Bibliography

- Amato, P. R. and Keith, B. 1991a. "Parental Divorce and Adult Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal Of Marriage And The Family* 53:43-58.
- . 1991b. "Parental Divorce and the Well-Being of Children: A Meta-Analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 110:26-46.
- Amato, P. R. 2000. "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62:1269-1287.
- Chambaz, C & Martin, C (2001) Lone parents, employment and social policy in France: lessons from a family-friendly policy. In Millar, J & Rowlingson, K (eds) *Lone Parents, Employment and Social Policy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Chardon, O; Daguët, F; and Vivas, E (2008) Les familles monoparentales. Des difficultés à travailler et à se loger. *Insee Première* N°1195.
- Dinh, Q. C. (1998) "Les inégalités sociales de la mortalité infantile s'estompent ", *Économie et statistique* n° 314.
- Harknett, K. (2009) "Why are Children with Married Parents Healthier? The Case of Pediatric Asthma" *Population Research and Policy Review* 28: 347-365.
- Eydoux A., Letablier M.-T. (2009) Familles monoparentales et pauvreté en Europe : quelles réponses politiques ? L'exemple de la France, de la Norvège et du Royaume-Uni . *Politiques sociales et familiales*, n° 98.
- INSEE (2006) Bilans Démographique 2005. INSEE Première.
- INSEE (2008) Femmes et Hommes : regards sur la parité –édition 2008. Paris : INSEE.
- Kiernan K, and Lelièvre, E. (1995) Devenir parent hors mariage en France et en Grande-Bretagne : les différentes facettes d'un statut particulier. *Population*, 3: 821-827.
- McLanahan, S and Sandefur, G. 1994. *Growing up with a single parent - what hurts, what helps?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McLanahan, S and Percheski, C, 2008, Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 34.
- Panico, L., Bartley, M., Kelly, Y; McMunn, A; and Sacker, A (2010) Changes in family structure in early childhood. *Population Trends*. 142: 78-92.
- Panico, L. (2012). *Family structure and child health: a longitudinal approach* (PhD thesis, University College London).
- Sigle-Rushton, W. and McLanahan, S. 2004. "Father absence - a critical review." in *The Future of the Family*, edited by D. P. Moynihan, L. Rainwater, and T. Smeeding: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Steele, F, Sigle-Rushton, W. and Kravdal, Ø. 2009. "Consequences of Family Disruption on Children's Educational Outcomes in Norway." *Demography* 46:553-575.

Thévenon O (2011) Family Policies in OECD Countries: Comparative Analysis. *Population Development Review*, 37(1): 57-87.