

# Childhood family structure in 16 European countries

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# Abstract

In the last 50 years we have seen great changes in family dynamics with rates of separation and re-partnering increasing across Europe. Previous research has primarily focused on adults but less is known about how these family demographic changes have affected children's family structure. From previous studies we know that there are regional differences in children's propensity to experience parental separation, re-partnering as well as being born to a lone mother. A link between maternal education and children's risk of experiencing certain family transitions have also been found, but the evidence are mixed and the educational gradients are not always clear. In this thesis, I use data from the Harmonized Histories dataset on 16 European countries to find which family structures are the most common for European children and how they vary across regions and by maternal educational level. I use sequence and cluster analysis to identify the set of family structures which best captures the family life course of children up to age 15. I partly find similar results as previous studies with regard to the regional differences and educational gradient in family structure. New findings show that there is a North/South divide in the propensity of children to remain with their original parents throughout childhood as well as experiencing parental separation and stepfamily formation. Further, I corroborate previous findings on the relationship between maternal education and childhood family structure as well as provide new results. One important finding is that children of highly educated mothers who experience parental separation are more likely than children of less educated mothers to remain with a single mother rather than to enter into a new stepfamily. This holds for most European regions. In sum, this research contributes to the field of family demography by analyzing children's longitudinal family structure and by incorporating both country of residence and socioeconomic background. It highlights the need for incorporating the entire life course of children, as well as the geographical and socioeconomic context for a more complete understanding of how family demographic changes have played out for European children.

**Keywords:** child outcomes, Europe, comparative, divorce, stepfamily, sequence analysis