



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS N° 18

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL SEPARATION

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The diffusion of non-marital cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births are well-known phenomena in the demographic behaviour of Europe. Cohabitation is generally more fragile than marriage, even if the couple has common children. Since parental separation and living in single-parent families has important short- and long-term implications for the lives of children, we investigate parental separation from the point of view of children.

We look at how many children born in cohabitation and in marriage experience the dissolution of their parents' union, and whether these proportions have changed in time. For our analysis we use the Hungarian Generations and Gender Survey. Based on the partnership and fertility histories of mothers, we look at the life courses of children between ages 0 and 15 ($n=8244$). The period just before the transformation (1981–1988) is compared to recent years (2005–2012), by which the transitory era with turbulent changes in partnership and fertility behaviour had ended.

Our results show that the overall rate of parental separation doubled between the two periods (18% vs. 36%), and by the

latter period two out of five children live in a single-parent family for some period of time before the age of 15. Children born in cohabitation experience partnership dissolution more often than children of married couples in both periods. While the ratio of children born in cohabitation increased radically (from 3% in 1981–1988 to 35% in 2005–2012), the experiences of children of married and cohabiting parents remain distinct. Furthermore the probability of experiencing parental separation has increased equally for children born in cohabitation and in marriage (Figure 1).

A general decrease in union stability, the increasing rate of divorce and the growing popularity of premarital cohabitation as well as cohabitation as an alternative to marriage have contributed to these trends. Married parents are more likely to divorce if they cohabit before marriage, while direct marriage (marriage with no prior cohabitation) is the least likely to dissolve and an increasingly uncommon and selective phenomenon.

Figure 1. The cumulative percentage of children who experience parental separation in 1981–1988 and 2005–2012 by birth context and age

