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Solo Parenting in New Zealand: Who are the Children?

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to begin to explore some of the recent trends and attributes of sole parenting in New Zealand, but from a child-centered rather than a parent-focused perspective. Reports that the proportions of children living in sole parent families have significantly increased have been the source of much concern, and even ‘moral panic’ (Pool 1996), over recent quinquennia. Indeed, Shirley *et al* (1997) recorded that sole parent households made up nine per cent of all households in 1976, and were up to 19 per cent by 1991. Advocates of family values allege that the traditional family unit is breaking down, and that this will have negative consequences for society and for our children (see Houseknecht and Sastry 1996 for examples).

Previous research into the issue of sole parent families has been largely based on census information, producing snapshot-like pictures of the situation at one point in time. This paper begins to offer a more thorough look into some of the trends and processes at work by adopting the benefits of a longitudinal, retrospective survey that traces cohorts of children through their childhood. By following different cohorts through their family experiences during childhood, we can begin to build up a picture about if and how experiences of sole parenting have changed over time, and can begin to speculate about the situation for today’s children.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Concern surrounding the issue of sole parenting is largely based on the belief that this family type is detrimental to the well-being and to the development of children. Such units are compared with families that are often based on an ideal form. Traditional functionalist thinking upholds the family as the ‘cornerstone of society’, performing important functions for both family members and for the wider community (Sclater 2000). Associated with this is the belief that the nuclear family is the type which is best able to fulfill the functions of a family within society. Segal (1983) writes that “the traditional model of the married heterosexual couple with children- based on a sexual division of labour where the husband as breadwinner provides the economic support for his dependant wife and children, while the wife cares for both husband and family- remains central to all family ideology” (p.11).

One of the basic premises behind the ideology of the nuclear family is the belief that this family form is ‘normal’ and ‘best’ for children and for society (Bernardes 1997). Substantive research into the issue of sole parent families has produced numerous opinions as to their capabilities and their affects on children. However, there is a large body of literature which speaks of the negative consequences of divorce and of sole parenting on

children. An analysis of 92 studies on children carried out by Amato and Keith (1991) found that parental divorce is associated with negative outcomes in the areas of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and social relations. Children who experienced divorce had poorer psychological adjustment, lower socioeconomic attainment, and greater marital instability as adults compared with children from continually intact families. Amato (1993) offers five explanations for these findings; the loss of the non-custodial parent, the adjustment of the custodial parent, inter-parental conflict, economic hardship, and stressful life changes.

This present paper does not seek to address the issue of child welfare within different family types, but to provide an overview of the current demographic situation so that further discussion and research into the issue may be facilitated.

DATA SOURCE

The data for this study were drawn from the New Zealand Women: Family, Employment, and Education (NZW:FEE) survey which was undertaken in 1995 by the Population Studies Centre of the University of Waikato. The NZW:FEE survey is the first comprehensive and nationwide retrospective study of women to be undertaken in New Zealand with the aim of investigating family dynamics (Dickson *et al* 1997). The survey covered topics such as partnerships, pregnancies and birth intervals, contraception, education, work histories, family and other support structures, geographic mobility, and the links between these. A main sample of 2,500 women, aged from 20 to 59 years, was drawn from about 250 clusters, using a stratified multi-stage probability sample proportional to size at each stage. This procedure was also used to select respondents for a Maori over-sample, and extra clusters were selected randomly within the Midland region to provide an over-sample for the Midland Regional Health Authority (Dickson *et al* 1997; Marsault *et al* 1997)).

A detailed assessment, internationally peer reviewed, has shown the survey data to be of a high quality (Marsault *et al* 1997). Comparison with the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings and the Household Labour Force Survey revealed that the survey reflects the profile of the New Zealand female population aged 20-59, with two minor exceptions being the under-representation of the 20-29 year age group, and an over-representation of tertiary educated respondents. At the same time, the overall amount of missing data in the survey is very small, less than one per cent for the majority of variables.

METHODOLOGY

This paper provides a brief overview of the sole-parenting situation in New Zealand over the past half-century. It adopts a birth cohort approach to the study of children and sole parent families. A birth cohort can be defined as a group of people who were born during a similar period and progress through the lifecycle together, and thus could share similar experiences (Ryder 1965). A cohort approach is useful in the analysis of children and sole parent families as it provides evidence of any changing ‘generational norms’ over time (Sceats 1999). The family situation which each child is living in will be referenced to when these offspring reach the ages of 1, 5, 10, and 15. This allows us to ascertain what proportion of a cohort have entered a sole parent family situation, and at what age this occurred. Cumulative proportions will be built up for each consecutive age, so that the family experiences of each birth cohort can be compared. In this way, more recent cohorts can be compared with earlier ones to see if there are changing patterns in age and likelihood of entering a sole parent family during childhood.

Independent Variables:

Three other independent variables were used when looking at a child’s likelihood of experiencing a sole parent family:

Mother’s Age at Birth

This variable is thought to have an influence on the future partnership record of the mother, and therefore on the likelihood of her children experiencing a sole parent family. The experiences of a cohort therefore, may be influenced by the age structure of their mothers. A link between this variable and the likelihood of entering a sole parent family may have significant implications for future trends, as the average age of a mother at birth has been increasing over recent decades (Ball 1999).

Partnership Status at Birth

Whether a mother is married, cohabiting, or in no partnership at the birth of her child is an important variable which is believed to affect the likelihood of a mother experiencing a separation, and therefore on her children experiencing a sole parent family. Dharmalingam *et al* (1996) reports that those who are in a cohabitational relationship have a higher risk of experiencing dissolution than those who are in a marriage union. This fact may also have important implications for future trends in sole parenting as rates of cohabitation have been rising over recent decades, whereas marriage rates have been falling (Dharmalingam 1999).

Ethnicity of Child

This is an important variable to consider in the context of New Zealand, which is made up of a number of different ethnic groups. Many differences exist between ethnic groups,

particularly in the area of family formation patterns and family structures (see Dickson *et al* 1997; Shirley *et al* 1997). It is important to identify what different trends are occurring in order to understand what different needs may exist for different groups within society. Due to small numbers of minority ethnic groups in the survey data, only Maori and Pakeha children will be studied.

Analytical Issues

Because of the mother-centred nature of the data, only information about children who are living with their mothers is available. Therefore, whether a child is living in a sole parent family or a two-parent family will be defined by whether the child's mother is living with a partner or not.

This definition does not take into account any other adults who may be residing in the household, and may provide extra support. Dickson *et al* (1997) showed that it is not uncommon for sole parent families to be living with other people, often other family members. Therefore, a study of the family situation and its support networks would also need to take into consideration the wider household situation, as this will influence the resources that are available to a family.

The above definition also excludes information about children who are not living with their mothers, but in another family situation, including living with solo fathers. This, however, is not thought to affect the validity of the survey in terms of sole parent family research, as the majority of children in a sole parent situation live with their mothers (McPherson 1996). Therefore, the results reflected here will be relevant for the majority of children in a sole parent family situation.

The current discussion focuses on whether a child has experienced a sole parent family living situation at some point in their childhood (up until age 15). The study does not look at the length of time spent in a sole parent family, or at multiple reoccurrences. These issues will be researched at a later date.

RESULTS

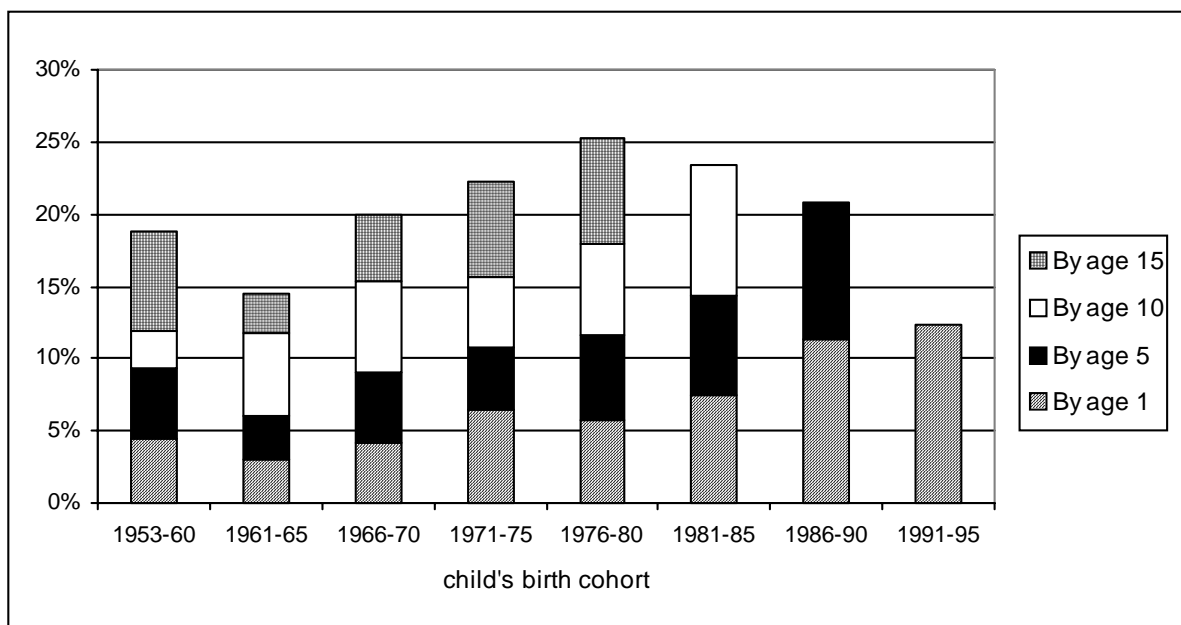
The proportion of children who experience living in a sole parent family at some point in their childhood has been steadily increasing for cohorts over the past half-century, and this rise looks set to continue (see Table 1 and Figure 1). While 19 per cent of children born between 1953-60 experienced sole parenting before the age of 15, this had risen to 25 per cent for those born in 1976-80. Proportions increased steadily for cohorts from 1953, except for a slight drop for the 1961-65 birth cohort. The more recent cohorts, which at the time

of the survey had not yet completed their childhood, recorded very large increases in the number of children experiencing sole parenting at the age groups which they had reached. These trends suggest that, when these cohorts have completed their childhood, a higher proportion will have experienced living in a sole parent family than for the cohorts before them.

Table 1: Percentage of children experiencing a sole-parent family for the first time, by birth cohort

Birth Cohort	By age 1	By age 5	By age 10	By age 15
1953-60	4.4%	9.4%	11.9%	18.8%
1961-65	3.0%	6.1%	11.7%	14.5%
1966-70	4.1%	9.0%	15.4%	19.9%
1971-75	6.4%	10.7%	15.7%	22.2%
1976-80	5.8%	11.6%	17.9%	25.2%
1981-85	7.5%	14.3%	23.4%	
1986-90	11.3%	20.8%		
1991-95	12.3%			

Figure 1: Proportion of children entering a sole-parent family for the first time at each age group, by birth cohort



Ethnicity of Child

The trend shown here, of increasing proportions of children experiencing sole parenting, occurred for both Maori and Pakeha ethnic groups. However, the results show a significant difference between Maori and Pakeha children in the proportions of each cohort who experienced living in a sole parent family (see Table 2). These results compare with other studies which have found that Maori have higher rates of sole parenting than Pakeha (Dickson *et al* 1997).

Table 2: proportion of children iving in a sole-parent family at ages 1, 5, 10, and 15, by child's birth cohort and ethnicity

Ethnicity of child	Birth Cohort	Age 1	Age 5	Age 10	Age 15
Maori	1953-60	6.5%	6.5%	9.7%	19.4%
	1961-65	4.9%	8.2%	19.7%	24.6%
	1966-70	6.4%	11.7%	19.1%	20.2%
	1971-75	10.7%	17.1%	23.6%	33.6%
	1976-80	13.2%	21.3%	30.9%	39.0%
	1981-85	19.6%	29.7%	40.5%	
	1986-90	23.7%	37.5%		
	1991-95	24.3%			
Pakeha	1953-60	4.3%	7.8%	10.3%	17.2%
	1961-65	2.3%	5.2%	10.1%	12.1%
	1966-70	2.8%	7.5%	13.1%	18.2%
	1971-75	4.9%	8.6%	13.6%	19.8%
	1976-80	3.9%	8.9%	14.8%	22.1%
	1981-85	4.7%	11.3%	19.8%	
	1986-90	8.2%	15.8%		
	1991-95	8.3%			

The proportion of Maori children experiencing a sole parent family by the time they are 15 has increased rapidly over the cohorts studied, growing from 19 per cent of children born between 1953-60, to 39 per cent of those born between 1976-80. The proportion is probably much higher for today's Maori children, as 24 per cent of children born between 1991-95 were already living in a sole parent family at the age of one year old.

Pakeha rates have been more modest, growing from 17.2 per cent of children born between 1953-60 experiencing sole parenting before the age of 15, to 22 per cent of those born in 1976-80. However, these proportions are also likely to be higher for today's Pakeha

children, as suggested by the rates which more recent cohorts had experienced at certain points of their uncompleted childhood, such as at ages 1, 5, and 10. These rates are significantly higher than those of the previous cohorts at the same points in their childhood. Eight per cent of those born in 1991-95 had already lived in a sole parent family by the age of one, compared with only four per cent of those born between 1979-80, the last completed childhood cohort in the survey.

Pakeha rates experienced a significant decline for the cohort born between 1961-65, dropping down to 12 percent, before rising again to previous levels. Maori rates did not reflect this drop, although they experienced a decline for those in the following cohort, 1966-70, dropping from 25 per cent to 20 percent, before rising again to 34 percent.

Mother's Partnership Status at Birth

The prevalence of sole parenting has also been increasing for all partnership statuses of the mother at birth. However, significant differences exist between all three (see Table 3). Children of mothers who were married at the time of birth experienced the lowest rates of living in a sole parent family of all the partnership types. The rate has been increasing, however, across the cohorts, albeit relatively slowly and with fluctuations along the way. For those born within marriage in the most recent completed cohort, 1976-80, over 20 per cent had experienced a sole parent family by the time they were 15. Again, the experiences of the more recent, uncompleted cohorts, suggest that this rate has continued to increase. A slight drop in rates for the most recent cohort, born in 1991-95, at age one does suggest that this trend may be slowing, and still fluctuating.

Children of cohabitating mothers experienced the next highest rates of sole parenting. This is consistent with previous research which has shown that cohabitating couples are more likely to separate than married couples (Dharmalingam 1999). For those born between 1976-80, over 37 per cent had experienced living in a sole parent family by the time they were 15. This can also be expected to be much higher for more recent cohorts, as for the next cohort, 1981-85, over 44 per cent had already experienced sole parenting by the age of 10, and 32.5 per cent of children aged 5 who were born in 1986-90 had also been affected. The rapid rise does show a sign of slowing however, as with those children born to married mothers. 12.6 per cent of one year olds born during 1991-95 to cohabiting mothers were living in a sole parent family, down slightly from 13.7 per cent of the previous cohort at the same age.

Not surprisingly, those children of mothers who were not in a partnership at the time of birth had a much higher likelihood of living in a sole parent family. This has increased from about 50 per cent of children in the earlier cohorts, to over 70 per cent of those born in 1976-80, and probably close to 90 per cent for the more recent cohorts. Rates dropped off

slightly for those born in the 1976-80 cohort, and, following the trends of married and cohabiting families, may do so again for the most recent cohort who had a slightly lower rate by age one than that of the previous cohort.

Table 3: Proportion of children living in a sole-parent family at ages 1, 5, 10, and 15, by child's birth cohort and mother's partnership status at birth

Union Status	Birth Cohort	Age 1	Age 5	Age 10	Age 15
No Partnership	1953-60*	33.3%	41.7%	41.7%	50.0%
	1961-65	46.7%	46.7%	50.0%	50.0%
	1966-70	43.4%	47.2%	50.9%	52.8%
	1971-75	69.4%	72.2%	73.6%	76.4%
	1976-80	61.8%	67.3%	72.7%	72.7%
	1981-85	79.6%	81.5%	83.3%	
	1986-90	78.5%	86.8%		
	1991-95	74.0%			
Marriage	1953-60	2.1%	7.0%	9.9%	16.9%
	1961-65	0.0%	3.3%	9.2%	12.0%
	1966-70	0.8%	5.6%	12.6%	17.2%
	1971-75	0.9%	5.1%	10.4%	16.6%
	1976-80	1.8%	7.4%	12.8%	20.6%
	1981-85	1.7%	7.1%	14.9%	
	1986-90	2.0%	9.5%		
	1991-95	1.8%			
Cohabitation	1961-65#	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%
	1966-70*	3.8%	15.4%	15.4%	19.2%
	1971-75	2.3%	11.4%	15.9%	29.5%
	1976-80	6.0%	15.7%	30.1%	37.5%
	1981-85	10.0%	26.2%	44.2%	
	1986-90	13.7%	32.5%		
	1991-95	12.6%			

less than 10 cases

* less than 30 cases

Mother's Age at Birth

The results show that the proportion of children ever experiencing a sole parent family at some point during their childhood has been increasing over the last half century, for all ages of the mother at birth (see Table 4). By age 15, of those children who were born in 1976-80, the most recent cohort for which we have completed childhood information, around 20 per

cent of those whose mothers were 25 or older spent some portion of their childhood in a sole parent family situation. But for those whose mothers were under 25 at time of birth the rates were significantly higher: over 30 per cent had experienced sole parenting.

Table 4: Proportion of children living in a sole-parent family at ages 1, 5, 10, and 15, by child's birth cohort and mother's age at birth

BY AGE 1		Birth cohort of child						
Age of mother at birth	1953-60	1961-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	1986-90	1991-95
<25	4.40%	3.0%	6.10%	10.40%	10.10%	13.90%	21.70%	21.90%
25-29		3.10%	1.90%	2.60%	1.90%	2.70%	5.90%	12.60%
30-34			2.90%	3.10%	3.70%	5.90%	9.20%	7.10%
35+							6.30%	6.10%
					4.80%*	3.60%*		
BY AGE 5		Birth cohort of child						
Age of mother at birth	1953-60	1961-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	1986-90	
<25	9.40%	5.80%	10.40%	15.50%	16.20%	23.90%	35.10%	
25-29		6.10%	7.40%	5.60%	6.90%	7.60%	15.70%	
30-34			10.30%	7.80%	11.20%	10.20%	15.00%	
35+						10.70%*	13.30%	
					11.90%*			
BY AGE 10		Birth cohort of child						
Age of mother at birth	1953-60	1961-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85		
<25	11.90%	12.50%	17.90%	20.30%	23.70%	34.60%		
25-29		9.20%	13.00%	10.20%	13.30%	15.20%		
30-34			14.70%	14.70%	14.20%	19.30%		
35+								
					14.30%*	18.20%*		
BY AGE 15		Birth cohort of child						
Age of mother at birth	1953-60	1961-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80			
<25	18.90%	15.90%	22.20%	27.70%	31.50%			
25-29		11.50%	16.70%	15.50%	20.60%			
30-34			22.10%	21.70%	20.80%			
35+								
					19.50%*			

* Fewer than 60 cases

When looking at the experience so far of those cohorts who have not yet completed their childhood up until age 15, it appears that the proportions living in sole parent families is

continuing to increase significantly. For those born in 1991-1995, the most recent cohort, 21.9 per cent of children with mothers aged under 25 at birth, and 12.6 per cent with mothers aged 25-29 at birth, were already living in a sole parent family situation at age one. For those children born in 1991-95 whose mothers were aged 30-34 and 35+ at birth, the proportions experiencing sole parenting by age one were 7.1 per cent and 6.1 per cent respectively, significantly lower than for the children of younger mothers. These proportions have, however, also doubled over rates for earlier cohorts, although they had dropped slightly from the 1986-90 birth cohort levels. Therefore, by looking at the high levels of sole parenting already experienced by children by age one, age five, and age ten, compared to previous cohorts, one could expect that by the completion of their childhood the total proportions would have increased further.

Children of mothers who were aged 25-29 at time of birth consistently had the lowest proportion experiencing sole parenting at some stage before the age of 15 through all the birth cohorts. This trend may be rivalled however by mothers aged 30+ at birth among the more recent cohorts, although without the completed childhood information for these cohorts we can only assume. Children born in 1991-95 and in 1986-90 to mothers aged 30+ had lower levels of sole parenting by the ages of one and five respectively than for children of mothers below 30 years. This may indicate a shift in the future as to which children are least likely to experience a sole parent family to those children of mothers who were older at time of birth.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

From the data presented in this paper, it appears that the proportion of children who experience living in a sole parent family situation at some point during their childhood has been increasing for cohorts since 1953. This trend is supported by census data which has shown that the proportion of sole parent households as a proportion of all households has been increasing. The cohort approach adopted in this paper however, has facilitated a more accurate measure of the prevalence of sole parenting within New Zealand. Sole parenting is not permanent state, but one which families move in and out of (Pool 1996). Therefore, the snapshot picture offered by census data does not provide a thorough measure of the total proportion of children who will be affected at some point. The cohort approach which traces groups of children through their childhood does, however, permit this insight.

The partially completed data for the more recent cohorts in the survey who had not reached age 15, suggests that the proportion of children who will experience sole parenting at some point in their lives among these cohorts is likely to be a lot higher than for previous cohorts. This assumption is based on the observation that at certain points of their uncompleted childhood, such as at ages 1, 5, and 10, the proportion of children who had already experienced sole parenting was significantly higher than that of the previous generation at the same point in their childhood. However, further study over time will be needed to confirm this prediction, as analyses which show that divorce is occurring earlier in a marriage (McPherson 1996) and that cohabitational unions are more likely to dissolve than a marriage union (Dharmalingam 1999), offer the possibility that first entry into sole

parenting is occurring at a younger age, and the proportions who experience it in the later stages of their childhood will drop off, thus evening up the overall proportions.

An understanding of the nature of family structures in New Zealand is an essential element in the creation of effective family and social policies. It is evident that policy cannot continue to be based on the notion of the two-parent, nuclear family type, as for a large and growing proportion of the population this is no longer a reality. Also important for policy considerations is the significantly higher proportion of Maori rates of sole parenting. Further research into Maori family systems, and trends in sole parenting, is recommended in order to better understand the particular patterns, and needs, of this group.

Some of the trends observed in this overview may have important ramifications on the future direction of sole parenting in New Zealand. The considerable increase in the proportion of children whose mother's were in a cohabitational relationship at the time of their birth who experienced sole parenting may have important implications for future rates of sole parenting. Studies show that marriage rates are declining, and are increasingly being replaced by cohabitational unions (Dharmalingam 1999). Therefore, if children of cohabitational unions are more likely to experience sole parenting than those of a marriage relationship, then the growing numbers of cohabitational unions may result in increasing proportions of children affected by sole parenting. At the same time, studies show that childbearing is increasingly occurring at a later age in the reproductive span (Ball 1999), and trends among recent cohorts noted earlier appear to show that children born to older mothers are experiencing lower levels of sole parenting than those of younger mothers. Therefore, the move to later childbearing may have a diminishing influence on rates of sole parenting.

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