Watch them Grow

Unmarried-cohabitant and Solo parenthood in Ireland

An analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland infant cohort data
Waves 1 and 2

Key Findings 1: Marital Status, Family Transitions and Solo Parents

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Key Findings 1: Marital Status, Family transitions and Solo Parents

Introduction

This Key Findings document outlines select findings of interest concerning **Marital Status, Family transitions and Solo Parenthood** presented in Treoir's report on the first two waves of data from the infant cohort (collected at 9 months and again at 3 years) of the *Growing Up In Ireland* (GUI) Study, entitled *Watch them Grow: Unmarried-cohabitant and Solo parenthood in Ireland*.

The report focuses on primary caregivers (PCGs) and their infant children, exploring differences in outcomes across a range of domains, including parental health and parenting, child health and wellbeing, childcare, work and welfare. In doing so, the report employs the tripartite scheme used by Kiernan to distinguish marital status categories as follows (Kiernan, 2005) :

- **Married**: those who were 'ever married' and currently cohabit with a partner
- **Unmarried-cohabitant (UC):** this category comprises only those who indicated they were 'never married' and all of these respondents have cohabiting partners
- **Solo:** this group combines single parents, none of whom cohabit with a partner, whether they were 'never married' or whether they are lone parents who are now separated, divorced or widowed

Complete details of the methodology and findings can be found in the full report which is available for download on the Treoir website at **www.treoir.ie.** The report was researched and written by Dr Owen Corrigan and generously funded by the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme. Other Key Findings documents are also available free to download on the Treoir website covering a range of topics. The complete collection of Key Findings documents covers:

- **KF1: Marital Status, Family Transitions and Solo Parents**
- **KF2: Childcare**
- **KF3: Parents' Health and Parenting**
- **KF4: Child Health and Wellbeing**
- **KF5: Work and Welfare**
- **KF6: Crisis Pregnancy**

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Context

Gennetian has identified four broad theoretical paradigms that have been used to explain the impact of family structure on parent and child outcomes including stress theory (Gennetian, 2005). This perspective hypothesizes that changes, such as divorce, remarriage, relocation or unemployment, redefine family roles (Gennetian, 2005).

Evidence has shown that mothers who exit cohabitant relationships with biological fathers or enter co-residential relationships with non-biological fathers reported higher levels of parenting stress than mothers in stable cohabitant relationships (Cooper et al., 2009). Also, mothers who enter cohabitant relationships with biological fathers report lower levels of parenting stress than mothers who remain single (Cooper et al., 2009). Family transitions, stress, parent outcomes and child outcomes are often related in a complex and interdependent manner. Studies have shown that maternal stress is implicated in children's behavioural problems, suggesting that measures aimed at reducing maternal stress may improve child well-being (Osborne and McLanahan, 2007).

Studies have demonstrated that a major part of the effect of family structure on child outcomes has to do with availability of economic resources (Gennetian, 2005; Thomson et al., 1994). Mothers' resources account for most of the associations between transitions and parenting stress, and mothers with high levels of education are less affected by family type transitions than mothers with lower levels of education (Cooper et al., 2009). Economic constraints are likely to impact on the decisions that parents make in terms of their engagement with the labour market and with childcare arrangements. Poor single mothers may choose to forego formal childcare arrangements and thus spend more time caring for their child themselves than do Married or Unmarried-cohabitant parents, as evidence from the US and UK suggests (Kalenkoski et al., 2007).

A feature of the literature in the Irish context has concerned difficulties experienced by lone mothers in terms of accessing employment and accessing appropriate childcare arrangements that would allow them to take up employment (McCashin, 1996). Attitudes and aspirations of lone mothers towards work were seen to be generally positive, a finding that more recent research has reiterated (McCashin, 1996; Murphy et al., 2008).

Family structure cannot be seen simply as a static construct defined by presence/absence of marriage and/or presence/absence of father. Even in single-parent families there may be a continuum of contact with the other parent (usually the father), ranging from frequent social contact with the child and forthcoming financial support to complete absence of any contact. It has been shown that children who grow up apart from their biological fathers do less well, on average, than

children who grow up with both biological parents; they are less likely to finish high school and attend college, less likely to find and keep a steady job, and more likely to become teen mothers (McLanahan, 1999).

A meta-analysis of 63 studies has shown that fathers' payment of child support was positively associated with measures of child well-being (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Single mothers have been seen to be twice as likely as their married counterparts to experience financial hardship and also to suffer from poor self-esteem and lack of support, as a result of which their propensities towards depression are greater (Brown and Moran, 1997). Other relevant research is cited in the full report.

Other recent policy changes relevant to families, specifically single-parent families, concern changes to tax credits. The One-Parent Family Credit (OPFC) (which was available to both parents where the child lived with each of them for part of the year) was abolished on January 1st 2014 and a new tax credit, the Single Person Child Carer Credit (SPCCC), which imposed more demanding eligibility conditions and operational rules, was introduced. The SPCCC can be granted to a primary claimant who is caring for a child/children on their own for the whole or greater part of the year (more than 6 months). A primary claimant can surrender his or her entitlement to the credit in favour of a secondary claimant, provided the child (or children) lives with that person for more than 100 days in a year and the person meets all the other qualifying conditions. The main difference between the Single Person Child Carer Credit (SPCCC) and the One-Parent Family Credit (OPFC) is that both parents could claim the OPFC if the child or children lived with each of them for part of the year whereas only one parent can claim the SPCCC in a tax year.

The new requirement that the child live with the secondary claimant for more than 100 days in a year presents a serious obstacle to 'primary claimants' (i.e. single parents themselves who may not be working) surrendering their entitlement to the tax credit to a secondary claimant, e.g. the non-resident father (NRF) of their child. Not being able to avail of this tax credit will have material implications for NRF earnings (where the OPFC was being claimed prior to 1st January 2014 and the NRF is now not eligible for SPCCC) and thus for maintenance payments paid for the upkeep of their children. The SPCCC amounts to €1,650 in 2014 and also entails a €4,000 extension in the standard tax rate band, increasing it from €32,800 to €36,800.[1]

[1] All information on tax credits taken from this site (accessed March 2014): http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/money_and_tax/tax/income_tax_credits_and_reliefs/one_parent_family_tax_credits_and_reliefs.html

Findings

Using the three-category marital status variable we explore transition into and out of different family types over time. Overall, the proportion of households reporting transition into different types of family arrangement was low, just under 1 in 10 reported a change in family type status. Comparing transitions into different types of family arrangement from W1 to W2 (wave 1 to wave 2) the data show (see Table 1 below):

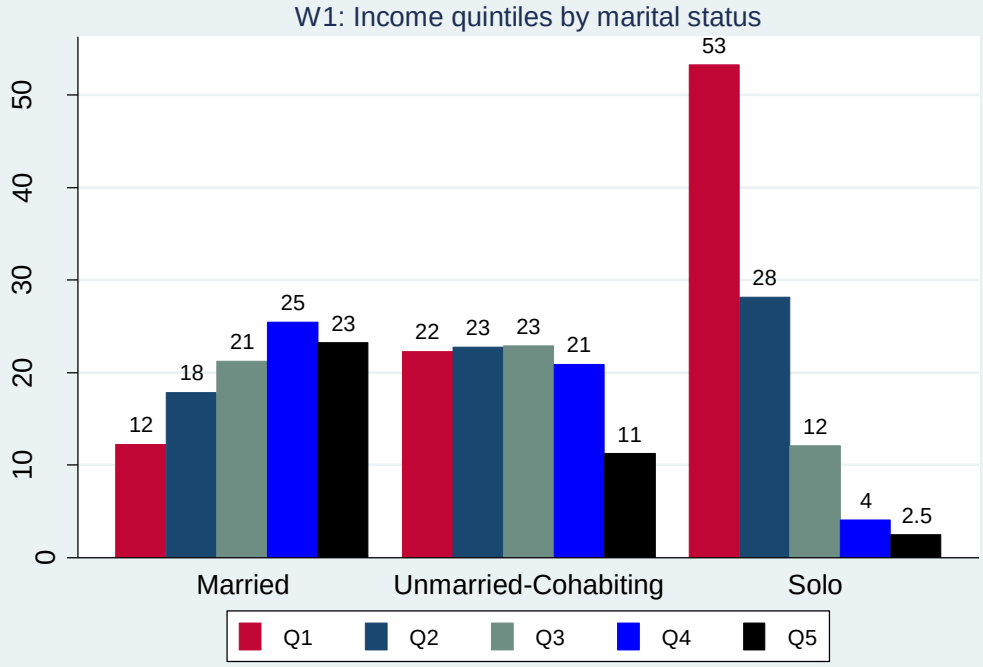
- The Unmarried-cohabitant category showed the most flux: 66% of those who were UC at W1 remained in this category at W2, while 23% were Married and 11% had become Solo parents
- Among Solo parents, 82% of those who were Solo at W1 remained so at W2, while 5% moved into the Married category and 13% transitioned into Unmarried-cohabitancy
- There was little movement out of the Married category between waves

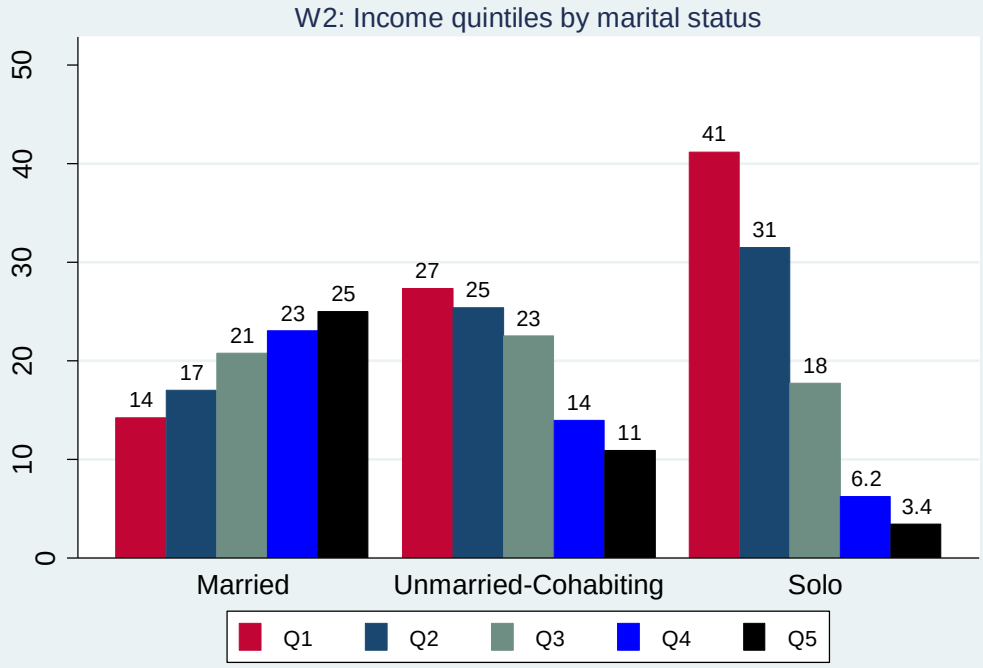
Table 1: Change over time in marital status, W1 to W2

		Wave 2			
Wave1	*Married*	*Unmarried Cohabitant*	*Solo*	*Total%*	*Total N*
Married	97	0.3	2	100	6848
Unmarried-Cohabitant	23	66	11	100	1707
Solo	5	13	82	100	1057
Total %	74	11.4	14.4	100	-
Total N	7140	1286	1186	-	9612

Note: population weighted graph; figures are row percentages

There are differences in, for example, the income composition and the educational profile of different marital status groupings by waves of the GUI study, see Fig. 1. These can partly be accounted for by flows in and out of different marital status categories over time, however they also reflect real changes in education and income levels. The income graphs shows that more Unmarried-cohabitant parents are in lower income quintiles at wave 2 than was the case at wave 1. Solo parents are heavily concentrated in the lower income quintiles at both waves. The education profile of Solo parents is poor but shows improvement over time.





Note: wave-specific population weights applied

Fig. 1

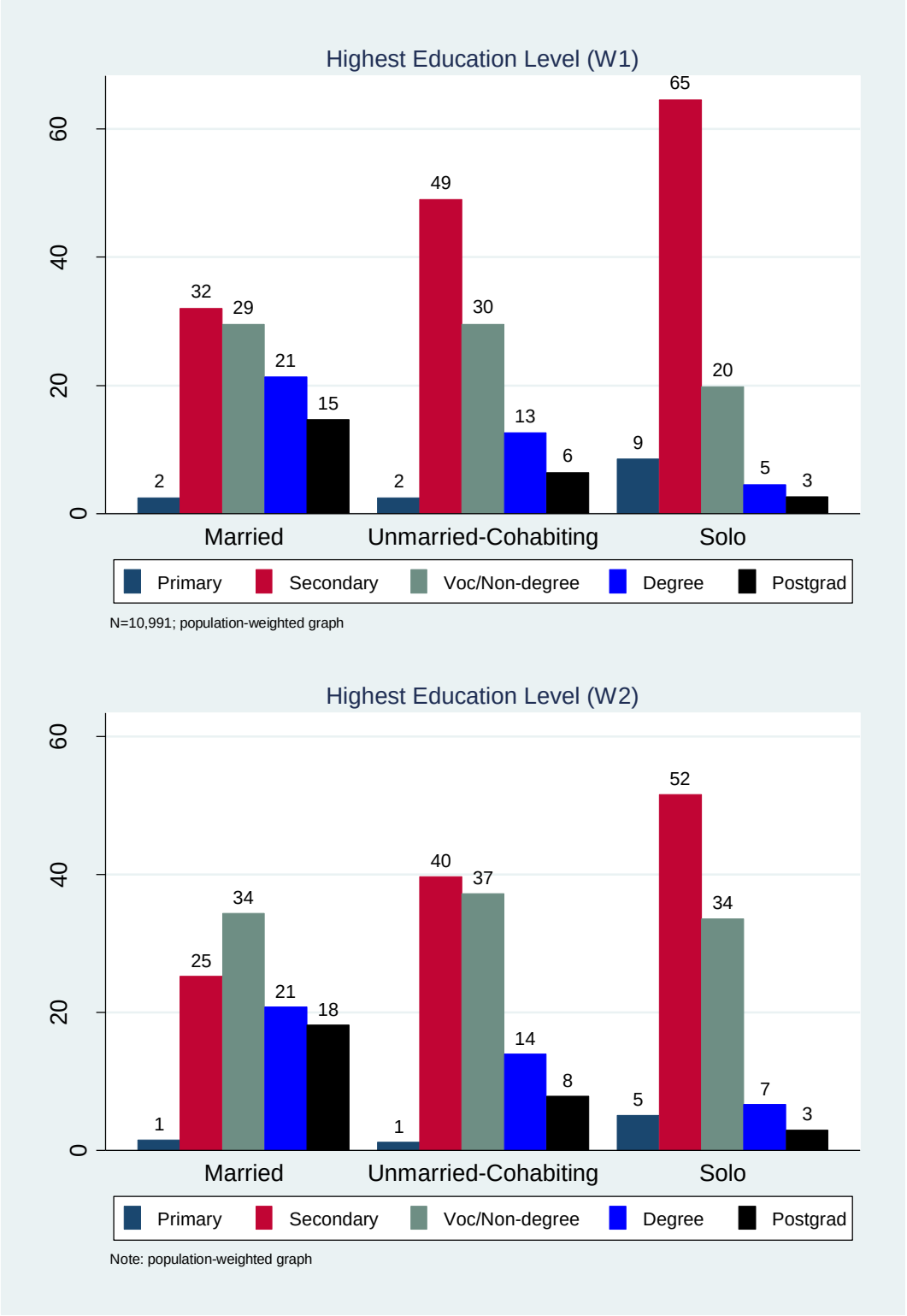

Highest Education Level (W1)
0
20
40
60
2
32
29
21
15
2
49
30
13
6
9
65
20
5
3
Married
Unmarried-Cohabiting
Solo
Primary
Secondary
Voc/Non-degree
Degree
Postgrad
N=10,991; population-weighted graph
Highest Education Level (W2)
0
20
40
60
1
25
34
21
18
1
40
37
14
8
5
52
34
7
3
Married
Unmarried-Cohabiting
Solo
Primary
Secondary
Voc/Non-degree
Degree
Postgrad
Note: population-weighted graph

Fig. 2

Impacts of family transitions on parents

Using data from both waves of the GUI study allows for examination of the impacts of different types of family transition on outcomes for parents, such as scores on an index of depression collected in the GUI data. Controlling for other relevant factors associated with depression scores, the findings show:

- Transition into Solo parenthood from Unmarried-cohabitant parenthood is weakly associated with a change in depression scores (higher scores) over time
- Transition into Married parenthood from Unmarried-cohabitant parenthood is associated with a change in depression scores (higher scores) over time

Exploring the structure of the Solo parent grouping

Solo parents are often conceived of, and are referred to in this report, as a distinct group. However this does not necessarily imply homogeneity within that group and any assumption of homogeneity may conceal a breadth of diversity and complexity. To add nuance to discussions of Solo parents a cluster analysis was performed on a basic set of variables capturing differences in income, education, employment status, cohabitation history, family size and age of parent, allowing for identification of distinct subgroups of Solo parents. Cluster analysis is a simple technique that groups cases together on the basis of similarities. The analysis identified 5 characteristic subgroups of Solo parents. These groups were accorded illustrative names as follows:

Table 2: Subgroups of Solo Parent population

Group No.	*Illustrative Group Name*	*Proportion (%) of 'Solo' parent grouping*	*Unweighted N*
1	Strivers	26	246
2	Thrivers	11.5	115
3	High-Fliers	4.7	45
4	Strugglers	50	509
5	Poor Single Mothers	8	105
Totals		100	1,020

Note: proportion column uses population-weights

Table 2 records the names and relative size of each subgroup. These names are merely descriptive, interpretive and suggestive, they should not be taken to accord fixed identities to the members of these subgroups. Likewise individual respondents may or may not 'fit' with the broad brush average picture of each subgroup. Using these subgroup categories we can begin to build a picture of the characteristic differences between subgroups. Table 3 shows differences in education levels and living arrangements by subgroup. Most of those (55%) in the most populous subgroup – Strugglers – have Secondary education as their highest level of education, while a substantial proportion (37%) of those in the High Fliers group have Postgraduate education as their highest level. Different subgroups also appear to have distinctive living arrangements, with 27% of Poor Single Mothers living with their parents, compared to 5% of High Fliers. About 1 in 3 parents in the Strivers, Strugglers and Poor Single Mothers subgroups live in local authority housing.

Table 3: Select descriptive statistics for Education levels and living arrangements by Solo parent subgroup, column percentages (%) with highest row percentages highlighted

	Strivers	*Thrivers*	*High Fliers*	*Strugglers*	*PSM*
Education (highest)					
Primary	3	0	0	5	14
Secondary	52	32	29	55	44
Vocational non-degree	37	50	14	32	34
Degree level	6	10	20	6	5
Postgraduate	2	7	37	3	3
Accommodation					
Homeowner	22	38	76	13	17
Private landlord	33	45	10	40	18
Local authority	34	8	3	36	29
Parents					
(rent paid)	5	5	3	7	18
(rent-free)	<1	5	2	2	9
Claiming rent supplement	26	25	2	33	8

Note: population-weighted table; 'homeowner' refers to 'owner-occupied'; Accommodation section does not display some of the less populous categories of home tenure status; 'rent supplement' refers to 'rent or mortgage supplement'; highest row % highlighted

There are significant differences between subgroups on other indicators that can be found in the full report. Table 4 presents select indicators for illustrative purposes. In summary, broad difference between subgroups could be characterised as follows:

- Strivers and Thrivers are generally labour market active with low to middling earnings, and they differ in terms of their education, earnings, frequency of home ownership, and use of welfare benefits and other social supports, with Thrivers generally earning more and having higher levels of education on average
- High Fliers are very well educated and have high levels of income, with generally single-child families and majority home-ownership, though they are small in absolute numbers in the wave 2 GUI data (N<50) comprising less than 5% of the population of Solo parents with infant children
- Strugglers and Poor Single Mothers (PSM) are not generally active in the labour market, have a high reliance on welfare benefits, tend to have larger families and a greater reliance on social housing or, in the case of the PSM group, to live at home with their parents; they are relatively young with poor education levels and low earnings; combined, these two groups account for 58% of the population of Solo parents with infant children
- There are statistically significant differences between subgroups of Solo parents on numerous indicators to do with health, income, child development, etc. (see Table 4 for a brief selection; significant differences are highlighted in **bold** text)
- For example, parents in the Strugglers group are significantly younger on average, at 28.7 years, than parents in the groups of Strivers, Thrivers or High Fliers. In the latter subgroup the average age of parents is 36 years old
- Also, for example, comparing Strugglers to Thrivers or High Fliers there are statistically significant differences in terms of the child's gestational age at birth, with Strugglers giving birth sooner on average than parents in the other two groups

Table 4: Mean on select continuous indicators by Solo parent subgroup

Indicator	**Strivers** *Mean*	*SE*	**Thrivers** *Mean*	*SE*	**High Fliers** *Mean*	*SE*	**Strugglers** *Mean*	*SE*	**PSM** *Mean*	*SE*
Equivalised h'hd income (€)	**13,488.08**	(116.9)	**18,345.66**	(169.9)	**29,868.41**	(1609)	9,177.90	(69.2)	**4,386.86**	(198.5)
Socio-behavioural difficulties (SDQ)	10.63	(0.369)	**8.52**	(0.55)	8.64	(0.968)	10.14	(0.28)	9.09	(0.56)
Gestational age at birth (weeks)	39.57	(0.177)	**40.01**	(0.185)	**40.14**	(0.256)	39.27	(0.14)	39.46	(0.205)
Birth weight (grams)	3,416.07	(53.17)	3,409.76	(58.46)	3,425.11	(92.42)	3,312.10	(38.7)	3,354.68	(63.55)
Age of PCG	**29.92**	(0.472)	**30.96**	(0.699)	**36.03**	(1.231)	28.73	(0.35)	28.23	(0.81)
Num. of children in h'hd (not study child)	**0.71**	(0.064)	**0.35**	(0.074)	**0.15**	(0.057)	1.05	(0.05)	1.09	(0.148)
Depression score	3.62	(0.319)	**3.16**	(0.434)	3.68	(0.783)	4.18	(0.27)	3.46	(0.478)
Pianta parenting scale: Conflict score	16.82	(0.471)	16.72	(0.584)	**14.15**	(0.937)	17.52	(0.34)	16.63	(0.825)

Note: Text in **bold** indicates significant difference to reference group (#4, pink column) at p<.05; population weights applied; cells are group means for continuous indicators

Part II

Solo parents and Non-resident Fathers

Contact with non-resident fathers (NRFs) matters for mother and child outcomes. Financial support and frequency of NRF contact impacts on measures of child wellbeing and also on outcomes for the mother, in terms of mental health and behavioural indicators.

Contact with fathers

General

- About 1 in 3 Solo parents had no contact with the non-resident father (NRF) by wave 2
- Of those Solo parents whose child had daily contact with the father at wave 1, about half (55%) still had daily contact at wave 2
- Of those who had no contact at wave 1, 74% still had no contact by wave 2

Financial contribution

Table 5 shows change over time in the patterns of financial contribution made by NRFs.

- Over half of NRFs (54%) made no financial contribution to the upkeep of their child at W2 while about 1 in 3 NRFs (35%) made a regular financial contribution
- Overall, 8% of Solo parents experienced a reduction in the frequency of financial contribution from the NRF over time
- Of those who were making a regular contribution at W1 the majority (65%) continued to do so at W2
- One fifth of those making a regular contribution and over one quarter of those making payments 'as required' at W1 were making no financial contribution whatsoever by W2

Table 5: Change over time in frequency of non-resident parent's financial contribution

	W2				
Frequency of non-resident parent's financial contribution (W1)	*Never*	*Regular contribution*	*Payments as required*	*Total %*	*Total N*
Never	82.6	11.6	5.9	100	418
Regular contribution	20.2	65.2	14.6	100	276
Payments as required	27.0	50.4	22.6	100	95
Total %	53.7	35.4	10.9	100	-
Total N	435	273	81	-	789

Note: figures may not sum to 100 due to rounding and due to exclusion of small number of DKs; population weighted table

Impacts on children and mothers

Children's physical abilities

- Improvement in the quality of the mother-father relationship over time was associated with better outcomes in terms of child physical development by age 3
- Where the quality of the mother-father relationship improved over time, children at age 3 were (2.2 times) more likely to be able to throw a ball overhand and (1.6 times) more likely to be able to grip a pencil in the correct fashion

Mother's stress and depression

- Frequency of child contact with father was associated with mothers' stress at wave 2, where more contact predicted lower stress scores (relative to those who had no contact)

Work and education effects of NRF contact

Transition into unemployment

- In families where the *frequency of father-child contact increased over time* there was a greatly reduced risk that a previously employed Solo mother would transition into unemployment. Why this might be the case is not entirely clear from the available data, though it may be the case that increased father-child contact in some way reflects greater sharing of parental duties, acting as a protective effect against maternal transition into unemployment. Further research is needed on this point

Unpaid Maternity leave

- For Solo mothers who had been working before birth, a reduction between waves in the frequency of financial contribution from the NRF significantly predicted an unpaid maternity leave *9.6 weeks shorter in duration* than for those who experienced no such reduction

Policy Implications

Part I: Marital Status, Family transitions and Solo parents

- The identification of subgroups within this category, and the detection of statistically significant differences between subgroups on key socio-demographic and wellbeing indicators for parents and children, is a finding that should inform the future research agenda in this area

- The 5-way typology advanced here may be helpful in the more precise targeting of interventions aimed at Solo-parent families and in the formulation of policy relevant to Solo parents. For example, the finding that children in the Poor Single Mothers group are more likely to be overweight than children in other groups of Solo parents may be useful in the provision of dietary advice and support by health professionals, who may identify Poor Single Mothers on the basis of characteristics identified in this analysis, e.g. being relatively young and being more likely to live at home with their parents. Other groups, specifically the reference category group of Strugglers, were seen to be more likely on average to score higher on an index of depression, which may be useful information for relevant support services given that we also know the characteristics associated with being a 'Struggler', e.g. having a relatively large family while being relatively young and being unlikely to have a labour market attachment, perhaps due to childcare-related difficulties. These are merely illustrative examples, but the identification of group differences may be useful in other ways as regards the development of potential interventions

- The identification of potential impacts of marital status and family type transitions on depression outcomes for parents suggests a role for readily available advice and support to parents who may be undergoing such difficult and challenging life transitions. Findings such as these are timely, following the recent establishment of *Tusla* the Child and Family Agency in January 2014. This agency is responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children and represents a major reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services, also incorporating some psychological services and a range of services responding to domestic, sexual and gender based violence. The agency should be supported in addressing not just the challenges raised by different types of family but also those posed by transitions between family types

Part II: Solo parents and Non-resident Fathers

- The finding that increased father-child contact and improved quality of parents' relationship may be beneficial to both child development and maternal health underscores the relevance of facilitating the involvement of NRFs in their family's lives where practicable and removing barriers to shared parenting wherever they might be found. In this regard, recent changes to tax credits may be viewed as a barrier to shared parenting where they limit the ability of NRFs to contribute maintenance payments (see Policy Context section for this chapter and see next point below)

- Strengthening women's and children's entitlements as regards securing a financial contribution from a non-resident father – as well as improving awareness and knowledge of the legal rights and protections already in place and ensuring that such rights are adequately enforced – may help to remedy the infrequent or absent contributions that appear to be characteristic of the Solo parent group. At the same time it must be acknowledged that many NRFs may simply have been unable to pay, given the challenging economic climate at time of data collection (early 2011). In the current context the One-Parent Family Credit – a tax credit – was abolished on January 1st 2014. A new tax credit, the Single Person Child Carer Credit, which imposed more demanding eligibility conditions and operational rules was introduced. These changes seem likely to have made it very difficult for primary carer single parents to surrender their entitlement to the credit to a secondary claimant, e.g. the non-resident father of their child. The new requirement that the child live with the secondary claimant for more than 100 days in a year presents a serious obstacle to sharing the entitlement. This in turn has material implications for NRF earnings and thus for maintenance payments. In light of the results presented here, serious questions must be asked about any policy which makes it even less likely that NRFs will meet their maintenance payment obligations. Future research should attempt to establish empirically the impact of these tax credit changes on NRF maintenance payments

- The finding that NRF financial contributions impacts on the duration of unpaid maternity leave taken should feed into policymakers' considerations around maternity leave for working Solo parents

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