

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 2: Childcare

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The National Federation of Services for
Unmarried Parents and their Children

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 - ✓ opposite and same sex parents
 - ✓ grandparents and other relatives
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3. Treoir supports and promotes the rights of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
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Key Findings 2: Childcare

Introduction

This Key Findings document outlines select findings of interest concerning **Childcare** 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

Research has shown that childcare arrangements and constraints on childcare matter for both mother and child. For mothers, childcare is closely bound up with working arrangements, the timing of return to work after birth, and the nature or type of work engaged in, i.e. full-time or part-time (McGinnity et al., 2013). In all of this, women's decisions around work are highly sensitive to the prevailing policy context (Berger et al., 2005).

Studies have found that the experience of non-maternal care in the first year of a child's life is linked to emotional, social and developmental outcomes, e.g. maternal employment by the ninth month was found to be linked to lower Bracken School Readiness scores at 36 months, with the effects more pronounced when mothers were working a long week (30 hours or more), and these results held up even accounting for the quality of childcare and of the home environment (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2002).

Quality childcare, as measured by more child-focused approaches and smaller group sizes, has been associated with better outcomes in terms of children's social competence (Harrison, 2008). There is evidence to suggest that the effect of childcare quality varies by subgroup, with disadvantaged children more sensitive to variations in quality of care (Phillips and Lowenstein, 2011). Quality of care has been seen to matter for language development, though quality often has little impact on children whose home environments are not disadvantaged (Melhuish, 2003). Other relevant studies are cited in the full report.

There are a number of childcare schemes in Ireland operating with varying levels of subsidy:

- **ECCE** (Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme): this provides one free year of early childhood care and education for all children of pre-school age
- **CCS** (Community Childcare Subvention): restricted to community/not-for-profit services, this programme supports disadvantaged parents and those in low-paid employment and training or education by enabling them to avail of reduced childcare costs
- **CETS** (Childcare Education and Training Supports programme): this programme supports parents on eligible training courses and eligible categories of parents returning to work, by providing subsidised childcare places.
- **ASCC** (After School Child Care Scheme): after-school childcare places for those aged 4-13 in Primary school, available to the long-term unemployed or those who were getting a One-Parent Family Payment and who have got a job offer or have significantly increased their part-time hours

Findings

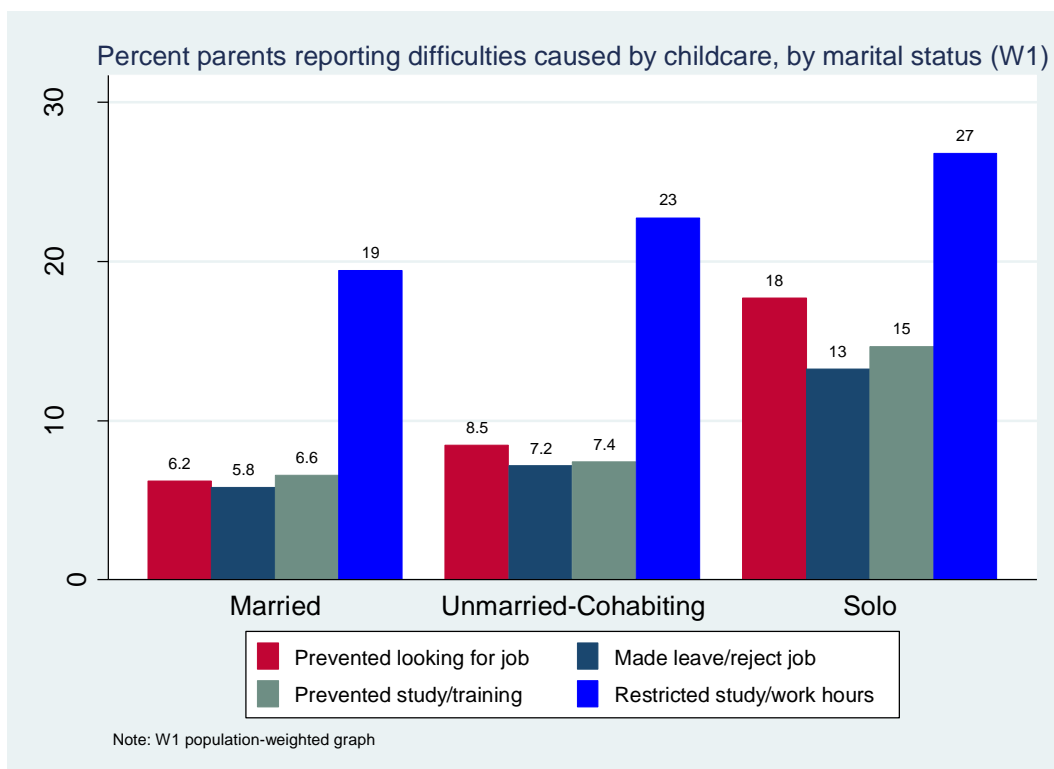
Constraints due to difficulties arranging childcare

Childcare constraints reported at wave 1 were seen to be significantly associated with outcomes for parents in terms of employment and educational improvement by wave 2. The data show:

- Difficulties arranging childcare placed restrictions on entering into work or study/training, or restricted the hours available for same, for substantial minorities of parents at wave 1
- The most widespread difficulty was a restriction on the hours available for work/study, affecting one-fifth of all parents (W1)
- These difficulties affected Solo parents disproportionately, even accounting for income and other socio-demographic differences (W1)
- Unmarried-cohabitant parents were more likely than Married parents to report that their hours available for work/study were restricted due to childcare difficulties (W1)

The distribution of reported difficulties was unequal across different types of marital status. All of these difficulties affected Solo parents disproportionately, with high proportions of Unmarried-cohabitant parents (relative to Married parents) also reporting difficulties, see Fig. 1.

Fig. 1



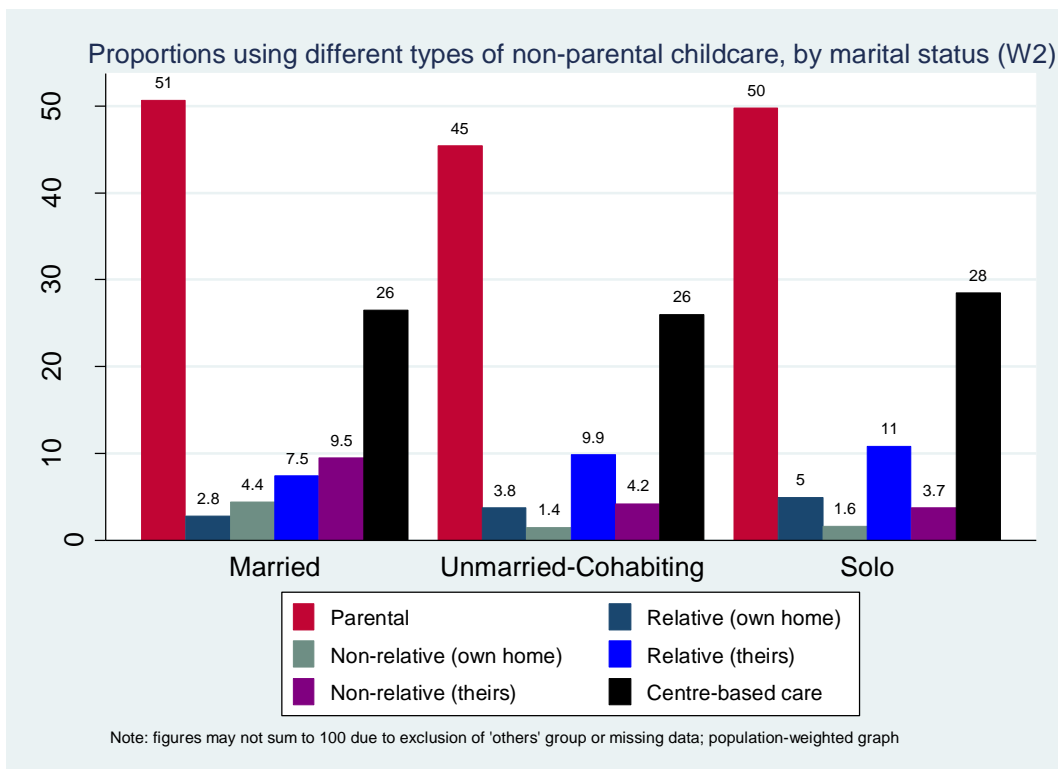
In summary, difficulties associated with childcare arrangements affected parents as follows:

- 7% of parents reported that difficulties had made them leave or turn down a job
- 8% of parents reported that difficulties had prevented study or training
- 8% of parents reported that difficulties had prevented them looking for a job
- 21% of parents reported that difficulties had restricted the hours they worked/studied

Non-parental childcare usage by marital status at wave 2

Turning to wave 2 and looking at the **main type of childcare** and variation by marital status in terms of usage (Fig. 2) we see that Married parents rely most on parental care, then on centre-based care, with about 10% using a non-relative in that person’s home (most of whom, 63%, are childminders) as their main type of care. Only about half as many Unmarried-cohabitant parents, and a smaller proportion again of Solo parents, use a non-relative, with reliance on relatives being higher among both these groups. At least a quarter of parents in each marital status group used centre-based care as their main type of care by wave 2.

Fig. 2



Of those parents using **relative care in the relative's home** at wave 2 the data show:

- 63% of parents paid no money for this
- Mean cost per week for those who did pay was €28-37 for UC and Married parents; for Solo parents it was €12
- In 75% of cases the relative was the child's grandmother
- 2 in 3 parents using this form of childcare used it for 3 days per week or less
- 1 in 5 parents using this form of childcare used it 5 days a week
- Mean hours per week using this form of childcare was 20

Of those parents using **non-relative care in a non-relative's home** at wave 2 the data show:

- In 78% of cases where this form of childcare was used the non-relative was a childminder; in 20% of cases it was a friend/neighbour
- Almost everyone paid something for this and the mean cost was €100 per week; there were no significant differences by marital status
- 31% of parents using this form of childcare used it for 5 days per week
- 30% of parents using this form of childcare used it for 2 days per week or less
- Mean hours per week using this form of childcare was 25

Looking specifically at **costs of centre-based childcare** at wave 2 we see differences in the average and median amounts spent per child per week across marital status: the median amount spent by Married parents is twice that for Solo parents (Table 2.4), however Solo parents are likely to be on subsidised childcare schemes such as the CCS (Community Childcare Subvention) which will mean that they pay smaller cash amounts.

Table 2.4: Cost per week of centre-based c'care W2 (€)

| <i>Marital status W2</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Median</i> | <i>Std dev</i> | <i>N</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|----------|
| Married | 101 | 85 | 67 | 2,188 |
| Unmarried-cohabitant | 78** | 55 | 64 | 371 |
| Solo | 58** | 42 | 50 | 382 |
| Sample | 91.5 | 72 | 66 | 2,941 |

Note: data from W2; excludes missing data on marital status variable; pop. weights applied; **significant difference from Married cost per week, $p < .01$

Parents' evaluations of childcare quality

Looking at differences in subjective evaluations of childcare quality by marital status while controlling for income revealed two significant differences:

- Solo parents were significantly more likely than Married parents to disagree that their childcare centre is “kept clean”
- Unmarried-cohabitant parents were significantly more likely than Married parents to disagree that the childcare centre staff know “a lot about children”

These findings indicate that differences in childcare quality cannot be accounted for solely in terms of income differences and provide tentative evidence that non-Married parents may be experiencing low quality childcare. Other indicators of childcare centre quality also showed negative correlations with cost per week, suggesting that cheaper (or subsidised) childcare centres may be providing poorer quality childcare.

Impacts of difficulties arranging childcare

- Restricted hours, prevention of study, or being forced to leave/reject a job due to childcare difficulties at wave 1 were all factors correlated with an increased likelihood of improving one's human capital through acquiring a higher level of education between waves; this may be due to selection effects
- Difficulties arranging childcare were seen to impact on the likelihood of parents transitioning into unemployment between waves of the study, but this varied depending on marital status
- Restrictions on hours available for work or study were significantly associated with a higher probability of moving into unemployment for Married parents; this restriction did not impact Unmarried-cohabitant parents in the same way, but it must be borne in mind that UC parents have a higher probability of moving into unemployment generally compared to Married parents, and this is not entirely accounted for by socio-demographic differences
- Prevention of study or training affected both Married and Unmarried-cohabitant parents, being associated with a higher probability of transitioning into unemployment in each case for those faced with this difficulty¹

¹ It should be remembered that the absolute number of respondents transitioning into unemployment between waves was small, affecting about 200 respondents in total.

Policy Implications

- Labour market entry for Solo parents is being restricted by difficulties arranging childcare as is potential for study or training: targeted childcare subsidies for Solo parents seeking to improve their education or actively seeking work will assist with labour market integration and with human capital acquisition. The fact that subsidised schemes already exist in Ireland, like the Community Childcare Subvention scheme (CCS), but that such problems are still encountered by parents is an issue of concern. While the latest available GUI data are a couple of years old now, questions must nonetheless be raised about the adequacy of subvention arrangements. Childcare providers participating in the CCS scheme do so voluntarily and this has implications for the adequacy of coverage with some parents potentially losing out for simple reasons of proximity if there are no participating providers nearby or within feasible travelling distance. Barriers to participation by childcare providers – for example, backdated payments to providers could cause difficulties if operating at a significant lag – should be assessed and removed where feasible. The free pre-school year (ECCE) is used by almost all parents, yet it only provides 3 hours of free pre-school per day, with parents liable for all extra costs incurred beyond this limit; there are perhaps questions to be raised here about the adequacy and resource efficiency of these arrangements
- Wide disparities exist in spending on centre-based care, with Solo parents spending far less than other groups per week and this can most likely be explained in terms of Solo parents receiving the highest levels of subsidy (and thus paying the lowest cash amounts). There is some evidence to suggest a negative correlation between cost and quality of centre-based childcare. Even though Solo parents are likely to be receiving subsidy, they are more likely to express reservations about the quality of their childcare. As poor quality care may be detrimental to children’s development, especially among the already disadvantaged (Melhuish, 2003; Phillips and Lowenstein, 2011), it may be worth considering childcare subsidies targeted specifically at Solo parents of very young children. Likewise, ongoing efforts should be made to ensure that minimum quality standards are fit for purpose and enforced across all types of childcare whether subsidised or not
- Prevention of study or training by childcare difficulties, or restriction of the hours available to parents for work/study, were implicated in parental transition into unemployment over time. This may suggest a need for more creative thinking about the provision of childcare arrangements, perhaps in the form of childcare subsidies targeted at women in work and at specific education or training programmes deemed likely to be beneficial to employment

outcomes. This is quite separate to childcare schemes such as the CETS scheme which helps women who are unemployed but wish to undertake a vocational training course or enter into a Community Employment scheme. The withdrawal in 2014 of the SOLAS (formerly FÁS) training allowance for those on One-Parent Family Payment may also be relevant here, if parents had been reliant on this to subsidise childcare arrangements while undertaking training

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