POPULATION & SOCIETIES

Three per cent of under-21s are parentless in France

*Alain Monnier and Sophie Pennec ***

Parentless children are a largely undocumented population group because they are hard to identify in the standard statistical sources (census, registration data) (see box 1). Now, however, the picture has been filled out by the "Family History Survey" linked to the 1999 population census. The survey was designed by the Insee with assistance from Ined, and covers a sample of 380,000 people over the age of 18. It provides the first-ever socio-demographic data specifically on parentless children in the 20th century, including for the oldest generations. In this article, the expression "parentless child" has its ordinary meaning as someone bereaved of at least one parent before reaching adulthood, set here at age 21 to have a consistent, whole-century definition of adulthood. Obviously, the death of a parent can be a life-changing experience even for an adult, but this study is confined to parentless children whose immediate family circumstances were radically altered before they themselves attained adulthood. Parentless children will not be gender-differentiated because there is no proven link between child gender and parental mortality (there is no male excess over female parentlessness).

◆ 500,000 parentless under-21s

The French survey data point to nearly half a million parentless under-21s in 1999 (table 1 and figure 1) in a ratio of approximately three fatherless children (359,000) to one motherless child (104,000). This may be due to averagely higher paternal than maternal ages, and even in same-age parents, fathers die earlier due to excess male mortality. Complete parentlessness—both parents deceased—is uncommon, affecting little more than one in twenty parentless children (box 2 examines the probability of losing the other parent when one has

already died). Bereavement of either or both parents is very marginal in infancy (0.5% of under-5s), but rises with age to one in thirty 10-14-year-olds, and more than one in twenty 15-19-year-olds.

◆ Fewer parentless children as the 20th century wears on

With respondents from all generations of adults, the "Family History Survey" makes it possible to reconstruct the trend share of parentless children throughout the 20th century. While the survivors of pre-World War One cohorts cannot all recall the year of their parents' death, they are a selectively-biased population bereaved later than their cohort as a whole, because a parent-child mortality link can be assumed. But a comparison of the survey findings with life table calculations [1] shows low divergence between these two

Figure 1 – Age-specific share of parentless children in France, 1999
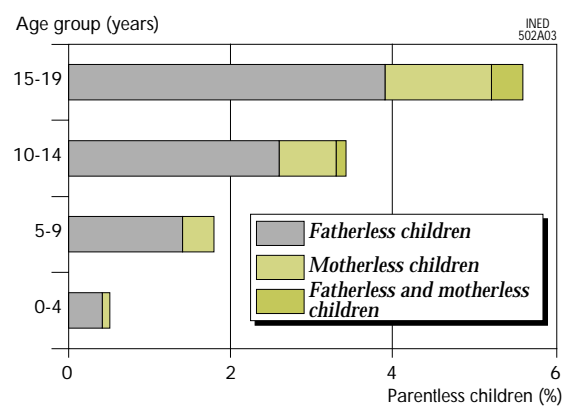
Source: "Family History Study" survey, Insee, 1999.

* Institut national d'études démographiques

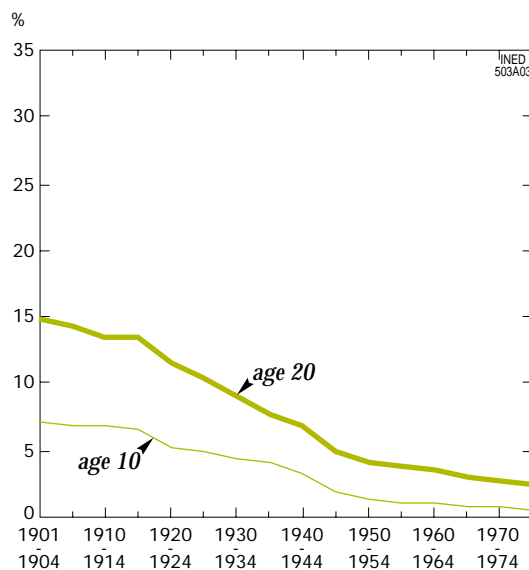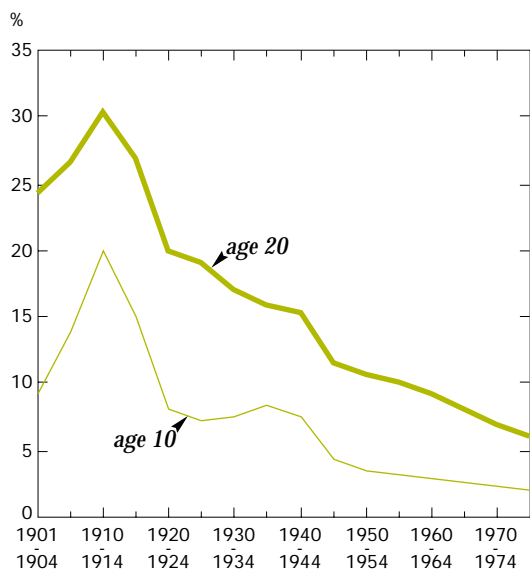| Tableau 1 - Parentless children, 1999				
	Fatherless children	Motherless children	Fatherless and motherless children	All
Parentless children (000s)				
0-4	15	3	–	18
5-9	49	13	1	63
10-14	97	26	4	127
15-19	156	53	15	224
Under 21	**359**	**104**	**25**	**488**
Share of parentless children (% of age group)				
0-4	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.5
5-9	1.3	0.4	0.0	1.7
10-14	2.5	0.7	0.1	3.3
15-19	4.0	1.3	0.4	5.7
Under 21	**2.1**	**0.6**	**0.2**	**2.9**
Source: "Family History Study" survey, Insee, 1999.				

age 10, and 17.5% by age 20. World War Two produced a fresh surge in the numbers of paternally bereaved children, but nowhere near World War One levels. Post-1950, the trend turned steadily downwards, and the share of children fatherless by ages 10 and 20 was approximately halved in a half-century. The trend in motherless children is more regular, and chiefly reflects mortality improvements, with the two wars having little impact. The thirty-year decrease in the share of parentless children (father or mother) would have been greater, however, had it not been partially offset by the trend to later parenthood, with the resultant rise in the average age of first-time parents.

◆ **Most parentless children are in lone-parent families**

Nine fatherless and eight motherless children in ten are part of what is known as a lone-parent family, i.e., comprised of the surviving parent and one or more children (table 2). But the surviving parent may also form a new union, and this is more frequent among widowers than widows (1). So, 20% of motherless children live in a family formed around a couple made up of their father and his new partner, compared to 14% of fatherless children living with a re-partnered mother. This share is age-specific for the children. Among younger children, widowhood is always recent and very few surviving parents are in a new union. The share of those living in a couple-headed family then rises up to age 15, with 25% of motherless children living with a step-mother and 17% of fatherless children with a

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(1) The terms "widows", "widowers" and "widowhood"refer to death of "spouse", whether the couple was married or cohabiting.

approaches for the oldest cohorts, narrowing to insignificance for the post-1950 birth cohorts. Reliable estimates can therefore be made of the shares of children parentless at ages 10 and 20 for all birth cohorts between 1901 and 1979 (figure 2).

The dominant events of the first half of the 20th century were the two world wars. Among the pre-World War One birth cohorts, approximately 20% of the children had become fatherless by age 10 and approximately 30% by age 20. These are extremely high figures. Among the 1920-1924 birth cohorts, growing up in peacetime, 7.5% of children were fatherless by

Figure 2 – Share of parentless children at ages 10 and 20 in post-1901 birth cohorts
Fatherless children (1)   **Motherless children (2)**

(1) children of a deceased father (mother living or deceased).
(2) children of a deceased mother (father living or deceased).
Source: estimated means of "Family History Study" survey data and life table calculations [1].

	Fatherless children family type:			Motherless children family type:		
Child's age (years)	couple	lone parent	Total	couple	lone parent	Total
0-4	4.6	95.4	100.0	11.4	88.6	100.0
5-9	14.3	85.7	100.0	8.3	91.7	100.0
10-14	12.5	87.5	100.0	19.6	80.4	100.0
15-19	17.0	83.0	100.0	25.1	74.9	100.0
Under 21	**13.9**	**86.1**	**100.0**	**19.9**	**80.1**	**100.0**

Table 2 – Parentless children by family type (%)

*Scope: children under 21 living in a family.*
Source: "Family History Study" survey, Insee, 1999.

step-father. After that age, the share declines due to home-leaving and also because the surviving parent is older and so less often forms a new union.

Note that parentless children account for 10% of all lone-parent children, and the share is significantly age-specific for the child: 2% of young children (under 4), 12% of adolescents and 20% of young adults in lone-parent families are parentless.

◆ More parentless children of manual workers than managerial staff

How far are social status group-specific mortality differences—particularly marked among males—reflected in the proportions of parentless children? For consistency's sake, this study is confined to only French-born individuals, as immigrant communities have specific mortality patterns and less readily-identifiable social class backgrounds.

Figure 3 – Share of parentless children among people aged 20-24 in 1999 by deceased parent's social status group
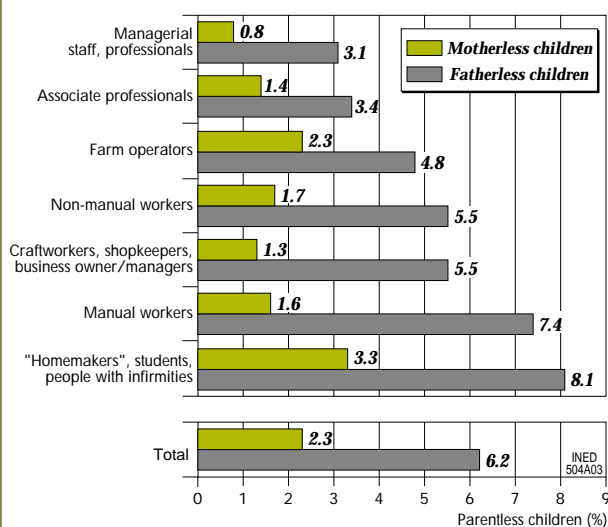
Scope: people aged 20-24 born in France.
Source: "Family History Study" survey, Insee, 1999.

Going down the social ladder, the proportion of parentless 20-24-year-olds ranges up to at least double (figure 3). There are just 3.1% fatherless children and 0.8% motherless children among those whose deceased parent was in the managerial and professional category, against 7.4% fatherless children and 1.6% motherless children of manual workers.

The gaps widen in the category of male and female "homemakers", students and people with disabilities, where the proportions rise to 8.1% for fatherless and 3.3% for motherless children. While this is a very small and heterogeneous category for males, it accounts for one-third of females all ages combined. These non-economically-active women have a higher mortality than others [2], and this has family consequences that are clearly seen here.

Inter-group differences between the two ends of the social spectrum are less marked. At 3.4%, the share of fatherless children among "associate professionals" (teachers, nurses, social workers, supervisory staff, lower management, etc.) is little higher than that among managerial staff or professionals, and stands around 5% where the deceased father was a farm operator, office worker or "craftworker, shopkeeper, business owner/manager". The gaps between social status categories are narrower where motherless children are concerned (approximately 1.5% among the children of manual, non-manual and associate professional women) reflecting the less-pronounced social inequalities in female mortality [2].

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In 1999, France still had half a million parentless children aged under 21, but this ostensibly high total number accounts for only 3% of all its 17 million under-21s, and the share of parentless children is falling steadily with the decline in adult mortality. That said, the trend among both males and females to increasingly postpone childbearing, and the resulting trend for children to have increasingly older parents, conversely increases the risk of parentlessness. The two trends could cancel each other out in the long term such that the share of parentless children would cease to decline. ◾

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Box 1

The "Family History Survey": reports of children and surviving parents

Parentless children are a population group that is hard to identify in the standard statistical sources. That may be why the most recent published study on the number of parentless children in France dates back to 1947 [3]. Parentlessness is not a personal attribute which is readily identifiable in the registration data, which is chiefly an individual statistical record. It is a potentially-occurring post-natal relationship between two individuals. Because registration records cannot include such information other than by a costly marginal annotation, the best way of collecting it is still through direct questioning of a sufficiently large representative sample of persons. That was done by the "Family History Survey" linked to the 1999 census. It provides two kinds of information about parentless children: replies to questions as to whether parents were dead or still living, and the number of children reported by people who reported their spouse as deceased. The former information is drawn from children's self-reports, the latter from those of surviving parents.

In both cases, parentlessness is reported independently of family circumstances and whatever the status of the dissolved union (marriage or non-marital cohabitation). Both types of reports in the 1999 survey have limitations, however: the former returns no data on parentless children under 18, because the survey questioned only adults; while the latter does return such data from the surviving parent's report, but by definition excludes those who are totally parentless. Also, surviving parents' reports tend to underestimate the number of parentless children due to a cluster effect: an unreported date of death will result in the omission of a number of parentless children equal to the number of children of the dissolved union. As parentless children's and surviving parents' reports do not tally exactly between ages 18 and 25, approximations had to be made through estimates.

Box 2

The loss of one parent creates a greater probability of losing the other

What is the probability of losing the other parent when one has already died? Life tables that show the age- and sex-specific probabilities of dying make it possible to measure separately the probability of becoming fatherless or motherless, as well as that of full parentlessness (which is simply the product of the first two probabilities). An actual loss of both parents higher than the theoretical probability will suggest that the two deaths are not independent, and that the second is in some way a consequence of the first. This conclusion is borne out by the "Family History Survey" linked to the 1999 census. Among the group of 1970-1974 birth cohorts, the probability of loss of the surviving parent is ten times the theoretical probability for adolescent parentless children, and still double the probability at the onset of adulthood (the very high ratios found in early infancy are non-significant, since they concern percentages which are below 1%).

What may be behind such a close link between the two deaths? The same cause of death for both parents—an accident, for example—may be one factor. The survey provides no specific information on this, but does evidence the frequency of both parents dying in the same year. However, there are very few such simultaneous deaths virtually within a year—not more than 4% of the deaths in the cohort group under review. They have no impact on the general structure of probabilities. The clue to this link between parental deaths may actually lie in a set of behaviours which Xavier Thierry has described as "fatal widowhood" [4]. Spousal bereavement sharply increases the probability of dying of the survivor, probably as a result of the loss of that spouse's attention to health or dependency care, not to mention loss of the will to carry on. The pull-factor is highly asymmetrical: a man is twice as likely as a woman to die within a year of being widowed. The same asymmetry is observable in the probability of paternal loss following maternal loss, which is also double that of the converse probability.

Table – Theoretical and actual proportions of parentless children, 1970-1974 birth cohorts

Age (years)	Actual - fatherless (%) (a)	Actual - motherless (%) (b)	Theoretical – fatherless and motherless (%) ($c = a \times b / 100$)	Actual – fatherless and motherless (d)	Ratio – actual / theoretical ($e = d/c$)
5	0.63	0.15	0.001	0.06	(58)
10	1.70	0.58	0.01	0.21	(21)
15	3.40	1.23	0.04	0.41	10
20	5.82	2.16	0.13	0.62	5
25	9.03	3.48	0.31	0.70	2

Scope: individuals born in France in 1970-1974.
Source: "Family History Study" survey, Insee, 1999.