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Population & Societies

An ongoing decline in early orphanhood in France

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How many orphan children are there in France? Has the proportion of orphans decreased over the last few decades with the decline in adult mortality? Analysing different sources of information, Cécile Flammant addresses these questions and the issue of whether orphans live in more disadvantaged households than other children.

Early orphanhood—the loss of at least one parent as a child, adolescent, or even as a young adult (before age 25)—has wide-ranging consequences. In socio-economic terms, the death of a parent may lead to family hardship or worsen an already fragile situation, as premature death is especially prevalent among men in the lowest social categories [1]. This fragility has long-term repercussions. Young people who have lost a parent spend less time in education than others and have poorer self-rated health in adulthood [2]. In France, as in most developed countries, there are no general statistics on the number of orphans.⁽¹⁾ No information on parental deaths is given in censuses or civil records. In 2003, Alain Monnier and Sophie Penneac estimated the number of orphans below age 25 using data from the French national statistics bureau's (INSEE) Family Survey (enquête Famille) conducted in 1999 [3]. We can now use data from the more recent 2011 Family Survey and from the core module of the INSEE household surveys (Tronc commun des enquêtes ménages [TCM]), which exists since 2004, to update this estimate and gain a clearer picture of the family situation of orphaned minors.

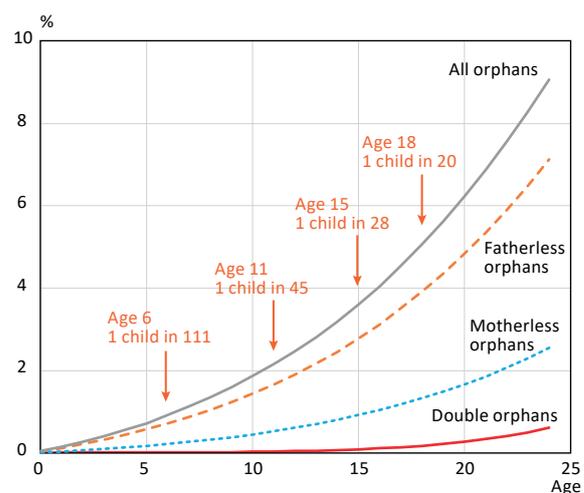
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(1) The surviving parents of orphaned children aged under 20 are entitled to the same family benefits (allocation de soutien familial [ASF]) as parents with sole financial responsibility for their children (because of separation or because the child was only recognized by one parent). However, the surviving parent is no longer entitled to this benefit if he or she repartners, so ASF data cannot be used to estimate the number of orphans.

Around 610,000 orphans under age 25 in 2015, including 250,000 minors

We used several data sources (see Box) to make three estimates of the number of children, adolescents, and young adults in 2015 who had lost one or both parents.

Figure 1. Proportion of orphans by age in 2015*



Cécile Flammant, *Population & Societies* no. 580, INED, August 2020.

* Mean of the three estimates (see Sources and Box).

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

Sources: Family Surveys, 1999 and 2011, INED–INSEE (first estimate); household survey core module (TCM), 2005–2013, INSEE (second estimate); civil records (life tables by sex for the 1990s to 2014 and numbers of births by age and sex from the 1990s to 2014), INSEE; Permanent Demographic Sample, INSEE (third estimate).

Table 1. Number and proportion of orphans by age group and type of orphanhood in 2015*

Type of orphanhood	Age group	Number	Percentage
Fatherless orphans (mother living or deceased)	0–17	194,000	1.3
	18–24	282,000	5.5
	0–24	476,000	2.5
Motherless orphans (father living or deceased)	0–17	62,000	0.5
	18–24	98,000	2.0
	0–24	160,000	0.9
Double orphans	0–17	5,000	0.0
	18–24	18,000	0.4
	0–24	24,000	0.1
Orphans (total)	0–17	251,000	1.8
	18–24	361,000	7.2
	0–24	612,000	3.3

* Mean of the three estimates (see Sources and Box). Coverage: Metropolitan France. Sources: Family Surveys, 1999 and 2011, INED–INSEE (first estimate); household survey core module (TCM), 2005–2013, INSEE (second estimate); civil records (life tables by sex for the 1990s to 2014 and numbers of births by age and sex from the 1990s to 2014), INSEE; Permanent Demographic Sample, INSEE (third estimate).

The results give figures of between 550,000 and 700,000 orphans under age 25 (average of 610,000), including 210,000 to 290,000 minors under age 18 (average of 250,000). So orphanhood is rare but not exceptional. It concerns around 2% of minors and 3% of all young people up to age 25 (Table 1). The relative frequency of the different ‘forms’ of orphanhood has remained stable since 1999. Three in four orphans have lost their father but not their mother, and almost one in four has lost their mother but not their father. Only a small minority of orphans, around 1%, are double orphans (both parents deceased).

Orphanhood increases with age (Figure 1): 0.9% of children are orphans when they enter primary school (age 6); 2.2% when they enter lower secondary school (age 11); 3.6% when they enter upper secondary school (age 15); and 5.1% when they complete upper secondary school (age 18). At age 15, there is around one orphan per class; in 1999, this was the frequency at age 11.

Later childbearing is slowing the decline in early orphanhood

Mortality of adults (and hence parents) aged 30–55 fell by a third for men and a quarter for women between 1999 and 2015. But in parallel, adults are having their children at later ages. Over the same period, mean age at parenthood increased by 1 year for women and 1.4 years for men. This means that children’s parents are slightly older, on average, so the risk of orphanhood is increased. Vital registration data can be used to quantify the impact of these two factors on orphanhood trends. If fertility timing had remained the same since

Table 2. Change in proportion of orphans between 1999 and 2015 (%)

Relative change (baseline 1999 = 100)	Ages 0–17		Ages 0–24	
	Fatherless orphans	Motherless orphans	Fatherless orphans	Motherless orphans
Total	–18.1	–14.3	–9.4	–5.5
Due to mortality decline	–36.5	–33.2	–30.3	–25.6
Due to later parenthood	+18.4	+18.9	+20.8	+20.1

Interpretation: The proportion of fatherless orphans fell by 18.1% between 1999 and 2015. The mortality decline led to a decrease of 36.5%, but delayed parenthood produced an increase of 18.4% (–18.1% = –36.5% + 18.4%). For motherless orphans, the decrease is 14.3% (–33.2% + 18.9%). Coverage: Metropolitan France. Source: Civil records, INSEE.

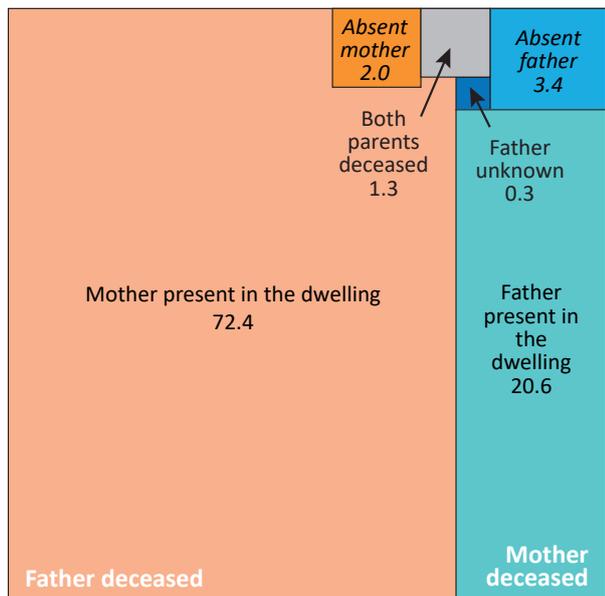
1999 and only mortality had changed, the proportion of fatherless orphans among the under-25s would have fallen by 30% and that of motherless orphans by 26% (Table 2). Conversely, if mortality had remained the same and only fertility timing had changed, the proportions both of motherless orphans and fatherless orphans would have risen by 20%. In reality, the proportion of fatherless orphans has fallen by 9% and that of motherless orphans by 5% since 1999. The decline has been larger for minors (–18% for fatherless orphans and –14% for motherless orphans) because the impact of declining adult mortality has been greater at young ages. After falling steadily throughout the 20th century [3], orphanhood has continued its downtrend in the early 21st century, but more slowly due to later parenthood, which largely counteracts the effects of lower adult mortality.

Most orphans live with a parent

Among orphans who are minors, 72% live with their mother, 21% live with their father, and just 7% do not live with a parent either because they have lost both parents (1%), or they are fatherless orphans not living with their mother (3%), or they are motherless orphans not living with their father (4%) (Figure 2). Most orphans thus live with the surviving parent, fatherless orphans (96%) even more so than motherless orphans (80%): the mother’s death is more often associated with a father who is absent (deceased or unknown) or who is alive but does not live with his child.

When orphans live with their surviving parent, they are most in a lone-parent family. The others live in a stepfamily with a step-parent. Being in a lone-parent family is more frequent for orphans living with their mother (74%) than for those living with their father (58%). Few orphans live in a ‘complex’ household comprising other people in addition to a lone-parent family or a stepfamily. The distribution of orphans by type of household is very

Figure 2. Distribution (%) of orphaned minors by family setup



Cécile Flammant, *Population & Societies* no. 580, INED, August 2020.

Coverage: Orphaned minors living in ordinary households in metropolitan France.
Source: Household survey core module (TCM), INSEE, 2005–2013.

similar to that of the general population of children who do not live with both parents.

The presence of orphaned children has little effect on family living standards

Numerous studies have shown that lone-parent families, notably lone-mother families, are at greater risk of poverty than two-parent families [4]. Lone-parent families are considered a single group, regardless of the event that led to the absence of a parent. But do families with one or more orphaned children have a lower living standard than those with no orphans? To find out, we used logistic regression models to compare their risk of having a low living standard,⁽²⁾ taking account of family structure (elementary family,⁽³⁾ lone-parent family, or stepfamily), the parent’s socio-economic status (measured by occupational category or educational level), and the age of the youngest child [5].

Looking at all types of families, those with orphans are clearly disadvantaged with respect to those without orphans: 43% of the former have a low living standard

(2) We used the proportion of families included among the 20% of poorest households in the general population as an indicator of low living standard. For each family type, the higher this proportion, the greater the risk of having a low living standard.

(3) Elementary families are those comprising a couple and their shared child(ren). By definition, there are no orphans in these families.

Table 3. Risk of low living standard for families with orphans compared to families without orphans

Family category observed	Families with orphans	Lone mother with orphans	Lone father with orphans
Family category of reference	Family with no orphans	Lone mother without orphans	Lone father without orphans
Controls			
None	2.7*	1.2*	1.3*
Age	2.7*	1.3*	1.3*
Education	1.8*	1.0	1.0
CS	2.0*	1.1	1.0
Age, ed.	—	1.1	1.1
Age, OC	—	1.1	1.0
Age, ed., OC	—	1.0	0.9
Family structure	1.4*	—	—
FS, age, ed.	1.2*	—	—
FS, age, ed.	1.2*	—	—
FS, age, ed., OC	1.1	—	—

Notes:

Age: age of youngest child; ed.: educational level; OC: occupational category; FS: family structure (two parents / lone mother / lone father).

The table presents the odds ratios (OR). With respect to the reference group, OR > 1 means that the family group being compared is more likely to have a low living standard; OR = 1 means that the risks are identical; OR < 1 means that the group being compared is less likely to have a low living standard.

* OR significantly different from 1.

Coverage: Metropolitan France, households comprising a family with at least one child under age 18.

Source: Household survey core module (TCM), INSEE, 2005–2013.

versus 22% of the latter. This represents an odds ratio (OR) of 2.7 to 1. When family structure is considered, this disadvantage is much smaller (OR = 1.4). Taking account of the family’s socio-economic status but not family structure, the disadvantage is also reduced, but to a lesser extent (OR = 2.0). When both variables are considered, the disadvantage becomes non-significant (OR = 1.1). The living standard of families with orphans is thus similar to that of other families with the same structure and social position.

Lone mothers with orphaned children are more likely to have a lower living standard than those with non-orphaned children. But after controlling for the mother’s socio-economic status, the difference between the two groups of families becomes smaller. The lower living standard of lone-mother families with orphans can thus be explained by the fact that the mothers of orphaned children are less educated and have lower paid jobs than mothers whose children are not orphaned. This disadvantage reflects social differentials in male mortality. At a given age, the mortality of male manual or white-collar workers is

higher than that of men in intermediate or higher-level occupations. Due to assortative mating, i.e. the similarity between spouses in educational level and occupational category, the surviving mothers often

belong to disadvantaged categories. The same applies to lone-father families, which also have a lower living standard, although the effect of the presence of orphans disappears after controlling for the father's educational level or occupational category.

Box. Data

To calculate the number of orphans in 2015, we made three estimates using different data sources:

1. The 2011 Family Survey

This survey was conducted on a sample of 360,000 adults (aged 18 and over) living in ordinary households. It includes questions on the father's and mother's vital status.

2. Core module of the INSEE Household surveys (TCM)

In 2004, INSEE created a core module for most household surveys. It contains questions on the presence of the father and the mother in the dwelling. The questions are asked to all household members, including the children. One response category is mother/father deceased. We used 21 surveys conducted between 2005 and 2013 to create a large sample.

3. Civil records coupled with the Permanent Demographic Sample

Civil records do not provide any individual-level data on orphans. However, given that the proportion of orphans in a birth cohort depends solely on age-specific adult mortality and the age at which adults have their children, this proportion can be calculated using aggregate data on adult mortality and fertility. A 'demographic calculation' can be made using age-specific probabilities of dying and the structure of births by age, sex, and calendar year (available on the INSEE website).

More specifically, the proportion of orphans depends on the mortality of parents, which is slightly lower than that of adults in general. We calculated parental mortality, which is not directly known, using data from the Permanent Demographic Sample (échantillon démographique permanent). The sample is a set of matched data from several sources, including civil records and the census, covering 4% of the French population. Providing data on children born to individuals and on the death of these individuals, if applicable, the sample is well suited to studying mortality by parental status (i.e. having had children or not).

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Abstract

In metropolitan France in 2015, around 610,000 children and young people under age 25, including 250,000 under age 18, had lost one or both parents. The proportion of orphans has decreased since 1999 thanks to progress in reducing adult mortality. However, the decline would have been much greater without the trend toward later childbearing, which has raised parents' mean age and hence their risk of dying while their children are still young.

More than 9 in 10 orphaned minors live with their surviving parent, generally in a lone-parent family. Families with orphans are more likely to have a lower standard of living than those with no orphans because the surviving parents of orphaned children are much more often lone-parents with a lower socio-economic status, on average, than other families. However, when family structure and socio-economic status are considered, the disadvantage of families with orphans disappears.

Keywords

orphans, lone-parent families, children, mortality, France