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The positive effect of shared custody on mothers' employment after divorce or legal separation

How does mothers' employment vary by children's living arrangements after parental separation? Using a remarkably large sample of divorced or legally separated mothers aged 20 to 55 in France (60,700), INED senior researchers Carole Bonnet and Anne Solaz together with Bertrand Garbinti, a researcher at CREST-IP Paris [Centre de Recherche en Economie et Statistique-Institut Polytechnique], have shown that mothers who share physical child custody with the child(ren)'s father after divorce or legal dissolution of their civil union are more likely to be working than mothers with residential custody; that is, whose children live with them full time. Shared custody can improve mothers' family/work reconciliation and make it easier for women who were not working prior to separation to rejoin the labor market.

Increase in shared custody in France and elsewhere

While the most frequent arrangement after parental separation is still mothers having residential custody and children spending time with their father on weekends, the number of children in shared custody arrangements—that is, living part-time with their father—has considerably increased in many developed countries, especially Northern European ones. In Belgium, Sweden, and Norway, more than 1 in 3 divorcing or legally separating couples choose shared physical custody. The arrangement has also undergone “democratization”: while initially chosen by a small group of socio-economically privileged parents, it is now used by increasingly diverse families. The trend is related to an overall behavioral change in favor of more equally shared parenting, a development accompanied by public policy and legislation. In France as elsewhere, shared physical custody has become more common: according to the most recent data, from 2012, this arrangement is chosen in over 1 in 5 divorces—twice the figure for 2002.

Lone mothers at relatively high risk of poverty and unemployment after divorce

Separated mothers and their children are always at greater risk of poverty than two-parent families. Finding a new job or continuing in one after divorce spares single-parent families a drastic fall in living standards and can also keep them out of poverty. But after separation, lone mothers face time conflicts that can negatively impact their employment possibilities and chances of earning an adequate income. Lone mothers with young children are among France's least-employed groups, with an unemployment rate double that of partnered mothers: 17% versus 8% in 2018¹.

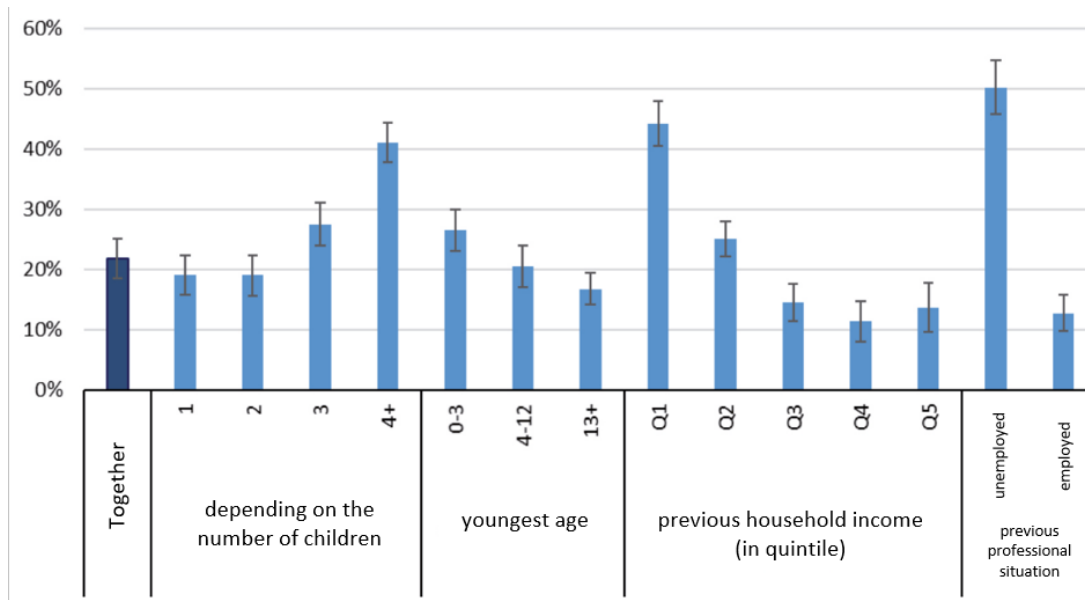
¹ <https://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/pdf-articles/actu/helene.pdf>

Mothers with shared physical custody more likely to have a job

Compared with mother's residential custody, where children live full time with her, shared physical custody has considerable positive effects on mothers' employment in the year following divorce or civil union dissolution: the employment rate of mothers with shared custody is 20 points above that for mothers whose children live with them full time. *Figure 1*, based on French income tax return data, shows that previously non-working women and women in relatively poor households are more likely to be working than not when their children are in shared custody. This holds for separated mothers with one young child and mothers with three or more children as well.

Though children's residential arrangements are not an employment policy matter, policies that favor equal parenting responsibilities for mothers and fathers, such as support for shared custody, can facilitate women's financial autonomy, and have a positive impact on the living conditions of children in single-mother households, in both the short term and potentially the long term in connection with retirement pension levels.

Figure 1. Difference in probability of being employed for women with shared custody and women with residential custody in the year following divorce or civil union dissolution.



Note: Boxes represent marginal effects and "whiskers" confidence intervals at 95%. Results are all else being equal.

Source: Comprehensive French tax return data for 2008-2010.

Reading: Mothers with shared custody and whose youngest child is at least three are 27% more likely to be working than mothers with the same characteristics whose children live with them full time.

DATA USED

This study is based on the detailed information on income, family structure, and post-divorce child residential arrangements contained in France's comprehensive income and property tax return database. Drawing on a very large sample (60,700) of mothers aged 20 to 55 who either divorced or legally ended their civil union in 2009 and were observed the preceding and following years, the authors estimated the probability of being employed after legal separation by type of child custody decided, using a model that takes account of mothers' particular characteristics and the non-random nature of child living arrangements.

For more information, see:

Carole Bonnet, Bertrand Garbinti, and Anne Solaz, 2022, [Does Part-Time Mothering Help Get a Job? The Role of Shared Custody in Women's Employment](#), *European Journal of Population*.

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Press contacts:

Email : service-presse@ined.fr

Gilles GARROUSTE, Institutional Communication - Tel: +33 (0)1 56 06 57 04

Christina LIONNET, Head of Communication - Tel: +33 (0)1 56 06 57 28

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