



# QUALITY OF LIFE OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Authors: Ana Opačić

Iva Jovović dipl.soc.rad

Kristina Majstorić, mag.polit.soc



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This paper presents the results of a survey on the quality of life of single-parent families in the Republic of Croatia, which was conducted through an online survey in May 2021. The survey was conducted by the Hendl agency.

Within the concept of quality of life, various dimensions concerning single-parent families were examined, especially the availability of social support in the family, the experience of parenthood, the alignment of private and business obligations, formal support from institutions, life satisfaction, security and changes that occurred during the COVID-19 crisis. An insight into the mentioned aspects of quality of life was obtained, as well as differences in certain aspects with regard to family characteristics and socio-demographic characteristics.

The study involved 166 parents living in single-parent families, and the data analysis used descriptive statistics methods, correlation tests, and difference tests (Hi-square, t-test and one-way analysis of variance, i.e. ANOVA).

### **SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES**

166 parents participated in the study, of which 15 were fathers (9%) and 151 mothers (91%). The youngest respondent is 21 years old, and the oldest is 60 years old. The share of parents aged 18 to 34 is 21% (N = 35), and parents older than 55 have 8% (N = 13), making the most represented group of parents aged 35 to 55 (71% or N = 118).

Regarding the level of education of the respondents, most of them have completed high school (N = 92 or 55%) and higher education (VSS), (N = 49 or 30%). To these should be added the respondents with higher education, of which there are 18 (11%) in the sample. Several respondents have the highest or lowest level of education, and only three of them have primary school, and four have completed postgraduate studies.

The majority of respondents are employed, 80% of them (N = 133). Of the remaining respondents, a smaller number are unemployed (N = 14 or 8%), or in some other status. According to a subjective assessment of economic status, respondents were divided. Thus, 54% of them (N = 89) can afford it equally or more than the people in their environment; and 45% of them (N = 74) estimate that they can afford less than people in their environment.

The sample of respondents in this research is also representative from the aspect of the local environment they come from. Thus 37% of them (N = 61) come from a city with more than 100,000 inhabitants; 31% (N = 51) of respondents come from a medium-sized city with between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, and 32% of respondents come from a smaller urban and rural area (29 from a smaller city and 25 from a rural or municipality in which they live less than 2000 inhabitants).

In terms of family characteristics, all respondents live with children. Most parents live alone with their children (130 or 78%), and 22% of them live either with their parents, i.e. the children's grandparents (N = 24) or with a new partner (N = 12). Almost half of parents from single-parent

families have one child (48%, N = 79), while the rest have two children (38%, N = 64) or three or more (N = 23 or 14%).

108 parents have minor children (65%), 17% of them (N = 28) have only adult children, while the remaining 18% (N = 30) have both minor and adult children. The most common reason for single parenthood is divorce (N = 133, 80%), while other reasons are less present, due to the death of the partner (N = 18, 11%) or one's own choice.

### **INFORMAL FAMILY SUPPORT FOR SINGLE PARENTS**

We examined the informal or family support that parents receive in single-parent families through several statements that assess the involvement of the other parent (if alive), and the support of other extended family members.

The question about the involvement of the other parent in the upbringing of children was answered by 138 respondents, and in this area the parents of the respondents show the need for greater involvement of the other parent. Thus, on average, parents in single-parent families believe that the other parent is involved only 10 - 20% (M = 4.21; SD = 1.679; Min = 1, Max = 6). Although the differences between fathers and mothers in this assessment are not statistically significant, fathers' assessments are still somewhat more favorable, so they estimate that the involvement of mothers as second parents is slightly higher than mothers' estimates of fathers.

It should be noted that a higher level of involvement of the other parent is given by parents who assess their economic status as higher ( $r = 0.236$ ,  $p = 0.005$ , N = 138). Similarly, a higher level of involvement is assessed by parents who are employed (M = 4.05, SD = 1.66) compared to parents who are not employed (M = 4.92, SD = 1.61) ( $t = -2.328$ ,  $df = 136$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ).

At the same time, most of them believe that the other parent should participate more (93 or 67%; M = 1.52, SD = 0.906; Min = 1, Max = 4) and most of them want it (N = 85 or 62%; M = 1.67, SD = 1.02; Min = 1, Max = 4).

Interestingly, a higher level of involvement of the other parent would be desired by older respondents ( $r = -0.191$ ,  $p = 0.025$ , N = 138) which can be explained for several reasons. The first possible stems from the fact that older parents may have more complex life responsibilities, a larger number of children thus increasing the need for the involvement of the second child. In addition, older respondents may also have stabilized relationships with other parents and are not resistant to his involvement. Finally, the reason for this result can be found in the need for the other parent to be more involved in the child's life with greater care, especially if the years of separation have also led to emotional distancing. It was additionally confirmed that parents with more children express a greater need to include the other parent ( $r = -0.197$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , N = 138) and parents with a higher level of education ( $r = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.034$ , N = 138).

Another aspect of family support is support from the extended family, but as many as 61 parents (37%) state that no one helps them in caring for the child / children. For many parents, an important source of support is their parents (in 88 or 53% of responses) or other own families (N

= 12, 7%). A significant source of support for 19 parents (11%) are the parents of the child's father / mother. In conclusion, we can observe that grandparents are a significant source of informal family support.

More men receive support for their own families, parents who are in single-parent status for other reasons, employed parents, parents who already live with their family and parents who have only minor children in the family.

However, only those parents who already live with family members ( $F = 3.149$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.046$ ) and those parents who live with minor children ( $F = 4.231$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ) differ statistically significantly.

Family support is related to both age and economic status in a way that younger parents receive greater family support ( $r = -0.188$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ,  $N = 166$ ), and parents with a higher economic status, which is possibly related to employment ( $r = -0.186$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ,  $N = 166$ ).

As for the support of family members of the other parent, this support was expected to be rated lower on both the total sample and the subsamples. However, such support is more recognized by fathers, parents where there has been no divorce, working parents, parents living with a new partner and parents who have adult children.

Graph 2. Family support of both parents in caring for children

Of these differences, there are statistically significant differences between fathers and mothers ( $t = 4.68$ ,  $df = 164$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and between parents living in different family structures ( $F = 4.34$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). One should be careful with this last finding because it is easily possible that the parents here had in mind the family of the new partner, which of course complicates family relationships and social support.

Greater support from family members of the other parent is also expressed by those parents who have a lower economic status ( $r = -0.279$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $N = 166$ ).

Overall, parents reported that it was difficult to raise children compared to raising children in a family with both parents, and their average responses ranged from 1.97 (on a scale of 1 which means very difficult, to 5 which means very simple), with no observed differences by subsamples. As expected, parents with a larger number of children ( $r = -0.168$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $N = 166$ ), older parents ( $r = -0.211$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $N = 166$ ), and parents with lower economic status ( $r = -0.238$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $N = 166$ ).

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTING AND THE COHERENCE OF PARENTAL AND BUSINESS ROLE**

We examined the experience of parenthood with 7 statements, and calculated the total experience as the arithmetic mean of these 7 statements (with the answers on the seventh statement being recoded so that all statements were in the same direction).

Parents largely agree that their role is sometimes stressful and difficult, that it is difficult for them to reconcile family and business obligations, and that they have less opportunity for a more relaxed and relaxed life.

To a lesser extent, they recognize that they are stigmatized and that they cannot afford the children everything they need. Overall, their experience of parenthood is neither difficult nor easy, and overall estimates are even slightly lower than expected. However, slightly greater difficulties in parenting are recognized by older parents ( $r = 0.179$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ,  $N = 166$ ) and parents with lower economic status ( $r = 0.395$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $N = 166$ ).

Greater challenges in parenting are recognized by parents living alone ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ,  $N = 130$ ) compared to parents living with their family members ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ,  $N = 24$ ) and parents living with a new partner ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ,  $N = 12$ ) ( $F = 3.52$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ).

In addition to the experience of parenthood, we also examined the extent to which parents encountered situations when it was difficult for them to reconcile work and parental roles. Thus, as many as 67% of parents ( $N = 111$ ) had to find additional sources of income, 71% of them worked under much greater stress ( $N = 118$ ), and 51% ( $N = 85$ ) had to significantly slow down their career advancement.

In a slightly smaller number of cases, parents had to give up their desired career (36% or 60 of them) and even change jobs ( $N = 58$ , 35%) or work part-time (25% of parents or 41 of them). There were 39 (24%) parents who had to terminate their employment and stop working.

Only 26 parents or 16% of them did not experience any of these situations.

When we take into account all the above situations, each parent experienced on average as many as four of the seven such situations ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ,  $N = 140$ ). Interestingly, reconciling parental and work roles is more difficult for younger parents ( $r = -0.168$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ,  $N = 140$ ) in order to dynamize the labor market, which has obviously become more demanding and stressful in recent years. It is especially challenging for parents of lower economic status ( $r = 0.258$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $N = 140$ ) and those who are currently not active in the labor market ( $t = -2.67$ ,  $df = 138$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ).

## **FORMAL SUPPORT OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

An important component of social support is the formal support that people in a vulnerable social position can receive from institutions, especially in the form of social services and / or legal aid. In addition to state institutions, a significant source of support can be civil society organizations that often bring together citizens with similar life challenges.

When it comes to parents from single-parent families in our sample, most of them don't actually even need social services (112 or 67% of them) and therefore don't even use them. 22% ( $N = 37$ ) of parents express a need for social services, but estimate that they are not available. Also, most parents point out that they do not need legal aid and therefore do not use it ( $N = 108$  or 65%),

and 40 of them (or 24%), although they do not receive legal aid, express the need for it. In total, their estimates of the assistance of institutions are very low (ranging from 1 to 5, average grade  $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ), and they estimate the assistance they receive from associations only slightly better ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). Somewhat better estimates on the work of institutions have younger parents ( $r = -0.199$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ,  $N = 134$ ), and it is interesting that the work of both institutions and associations is better assessed by respondents of higher economic status (for the work of institutions;  $r = -0.368$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $N = 134$ ; for the work of associations  $r = -0.271$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ,  $N = 99$ ). As expected, divorced parents ( $M = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 1.117$ ,  $N = 105$ ) are less satisfied with the work of institutions compared to parents with other reasons for single parenthood ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.347$ ,  $N = 29$ ). ( $t = -2.029$ ,  $df = 132$ ,  $p = 0.044$ ).

Related to the satisfaction with the work of institutions is the question of what is the access to information on the rights from the law on social welfare, the law on temporary maintenance and the law on child allowance, and the procedures for their realization. The results indicate dissatisfaction of respondents whose average grade ( $M$ ) on a scale of 1 to 5 is only 2.66. At the same time, parents of lower socio-economic status ( $r = -0.335$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $N = 166$ ) and women ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 1.065$ ,  $N = 151$ ) have a lower level of information compared to men ( $M = 3$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $N = 15$ ) ( $t = 2.026$ ,  $df = 164$ ,  $p = 0.044$ ).

### **Subjective well-being of parents in single-parent families**

The last set of questions related to the assessment of subjective well-being for which a customized personal well-being index questionnaire was used<sup>1</sup>. The questionnaire contains 8 areas of life in which respondents assess satisfaction with different aspects of life on a scale from 1 to 5.

According to the respondents' assessments, parents have the lowest overall experience of safety and security in terms of the future, which is also associated with a low assessment of living standards.

Parents are most satisfied with the achievements in life, their health and, on average, life in general.

Cumulatively, respondents rate their well-being as average ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 0.775$ ,  $N = 166$ ), and younger parents ( $r = -0.197$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ,  $N = 166$ ) and respondents who have higher economic well-being have a higher welfare assessment. status ( $r = -0.508$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $N = 166$ ).

There are small differences in the assessment of subjective well-being that are not statistically significant, but certain tendencies in the differences in assessment can be read.

Fathers have higher assessments of subjective well-being than mothers, parents who are single-parent for other reasons (not divorce), employed parents, parents who do not live alone with their children, and parents who live only with minor or only adult children.

Finally, we also asked the parents about how their lives changed during the corona crisis and in which the parents were divided. Thus, 78 or 47% of the difficulties increased in them, and in 88 parents the difficulties either decreased (N = 11) or remained the same (N = 77). Mothers are almost equal in this issue, while fathers are significantly more likely to say that the difficulties have remained the same or have decreased. Difficulties have also increased for parents with lower economic status. As expected, difficulties increased for parents with minor children ( $\chi^2 = 6.96, df = 2, p = 0.031$ ).

## **CONCLUSION**

When we summarize the results of research on the quality of life of single-parent families, we can conclude that there are more or less satisfactory aspects in the quality of life of single-parent families.

Areas of quality of life in which assessments are favorable is the fact that most parents are still employed, and that a significant proportion of them receive support from their family environment.

What we can detect as poorer aspects of quality of life is lower economic status, insufficient involvement of the other parent, and extremely weak support from the other parent's family. Furthermore, it is particularly difficult for them to meet their private and business obligations, and they have therefore often experienced situations where this mismatch comes to the fore at the expense of work. The formal support they receive from civil society institutions and organizations is low, and only a small number of parents actually use social services and legal aid. It should be noted that many of them point out that there is no need for them, but this information should be taken with caution since the need is easier to see when an individual receives information about what he is entitled to or what institutions can provide.

The areas of life in which our respondents are divided are those that relate to their personal experiences, namely the stress of parenting experiences, subjective well-being, and how much their difficulties increased during the corona crisis.

Insight into the results, we can conclude that the challenge of single parenthood is easier to cope with fathers, parents of higher economic status and employed parents, parents who do not live alone with children, parents with fewer children. Younger parents have more appreciation in almost all aspects, except in the collision of private and business commitments that become more challenging for them than for older parents.

Finally, with this research, we opened up questions for future research, two of which we would like to highlight

- 1) understanding the new dynamic labor market, which today is a greater challenge for younger parents than for older parents who worked in a different labor market

2) getting to know the complexities of family structures that are becoming more complicated today and thus the understanding of social support should be approached in a more complex way. For example, a child growing up today in single-parent families there are not only two pairs of grandparents, but it can be twice as many as binuclear and restructured families are founded.