

With the Father or the Mother? Determinants of Parent-Child Coresidence after Union Dissolution

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an upward trend of dependent children growing up in single-parent households, including those headed by men, in most European countries (Nieuwenhuis 2020). Previous research extensively investigated factors associated with the formation of single-mother families (Berrington 2014; Gonzalez 2005). In contrast, limited attention has been given to understanding the factors leading to fathers instead of mothers coresiding with their children following union dissolution (Cancian et al. 2014) and whether the residential agreements on children are the result of both paternal and maternal characteristics (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

In this paper, we investigate to what extent the *combined economic characteristics of both parents determine whether children coreside with the father or the mother following union dissolution*. Most previous studies have primarily focused on formal custody arrangements using survey data, thereby only covering a selected part of separations (e.g., Sodermans, Matthijs, and Swicegood 2013). To overcome this limitation, we use Belgian population data and focus on actual living arrangements by looking at the parent-child registered address, which usually corresponds to the primary residence in the majority of cases (van der Wiel and Kooiman 2019).

Over the past decades, in cases of divorce or separation, the most common living arrangement for children, when they did not reside with both parents, was living with their mother (e.g., Bernardi, Mortelmans, and Larenza 2018). This was in line with traditional gender norms that saw mothers as better caretakers of children, especially within families with young children. However, in more recent times, factors such as changes in policies, family law and social norms, resulted in mothers no longer being the favourites in custody decisions. Rather today the principle of the “best interest of the child” is followed, despite differences across countries (Letablier and Wall 2018). For example, in Belgium, the general rule applied is to prioritize the best interests of both the children and the parents in determining the most appropriate residence arrangement according to several criteria (Declerck 2015). This includes considering factors such as the financial resources of parents, the characteristics of children and the preferences of children.

Literature on custody arrangements after separation has found the formation of single-parent families to be related to *socio-economic factors* and *bargaining power*. In absolute terms, socio-economic resources are assumed to determine whether separating parents have adequate means to support the new family. Comparing sole mother and sole father custody, Goldscheider et al. (2015) found that low level of individual income for mothers reduced their likelihood of becoming the resident parent after separation. Also, Juby et al. (2005) found a positive relation between household income and sole father custody.

Socio-economic resources may be important in relative as well as absolute terms (Thaning and Hällsten 2020). For example, control over financial resources may help parents achieve

the desired custody outcomes as they might be seen as more reliable (especially in the case of fathers) and more able to support the new household. Literature often points out that shared custody is more common when both parents have greater economic resources because it is more expensive than sole custody (e.g. Juby, Le Bourdais, and Marcil-Gratton 2005). On the other side, having more economic resources for the father than the ex-partner was found to support sole father custody. Similarly, employment status indicates parents' financial independence, resulting in an advantage in the bargaining process. Goldscheider et al. (2015) found that in couples where the mother was receiving public assistance and the father was employed, the likelihood of the child living with the father was greater. At the same time, a parent with a relatively higher level of education can have an advantage in navigating the legal system, making him or her more likely to live with their children after union dissolution.

The theoretical arguments regarding socio-economic resources and bargaining power lead to two expectations in terms of which parent (the father or the mother) will become the resident parent after separation. First, we expect residential parenthood to be associated with a higher level of individual income. Second, we expect that the parent with more relative individual income will be more likely to be the resident parent after separation.

2. Data and methods

Data. Survey data are often unable to capture detailed parental status changes and residential moves with children after union dissolution, especially for men because of event rareness and selection and attrition bias. Register data provide a unique opportunity to identify this population of separated fathers and mothers with minor children and the parent-child living arrangements following union dissolution. This research uses information from the National Population Registers (2017–2018), and Tax Registers (2017) provided by Statistics Belgium. The National Population Registers offer detailed information on the complete Belgian population for the most important demographic variables (e.g. gender, date of birth, nationality, place of residence) and household characteristics (household size, number, age, and gender of children); while tax register data (IPCAL) provides information on individual income (annual net taxable income).

Sample. Our sample consists of 11,250 men and 11,250 women who were living together with joint children aged 0 to 17 as of 1 January 2017 and later separated throughout the year, and in which one parent became the resident parent after separation. Separation was defined based on the place of residence of the parents. A parent was considered a *resident parent* when he or she was residing in the same household as one or more minor children but without any other adults; while a parent was considered a *non-resident parent* if he or she was residing in a different household without the former partner and their children. Although our data do not allow us to identify *dual residence* living arrangements, our proportions of (single) resident fathers and mothers for 2018 are in line with those shown by Nieuwenhuis (2020) which are based on 2019 Labour force survey data.

Variables. Individual income is the key explanatory variable and corresponds to each parent's annual net taxable income received during the year before separation. This measure ranges from €0 to €55,000 (or more) at €5,000 intervals. We coded this variable according to 4 income levels: low (€0 - €15,000), lower middle (€15,000 - €30,000), upper middle (€30,000 - €45,000) and high (more than €45,000). Control variables include age (18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+ years old), region of residence (Brussels, Flanders, Wallonia), nationality (Belgian vs.

Other), age of the youngest child living in the household (0-2, 3-5, 6-10, 11-17), total number of minor children (1, 2, 3+) and gender of children living in the household (Both, Only boys, Only girls). All measures were lagged by one year to reflect the parental characteristics at the time of the decision on new family living arrangements.

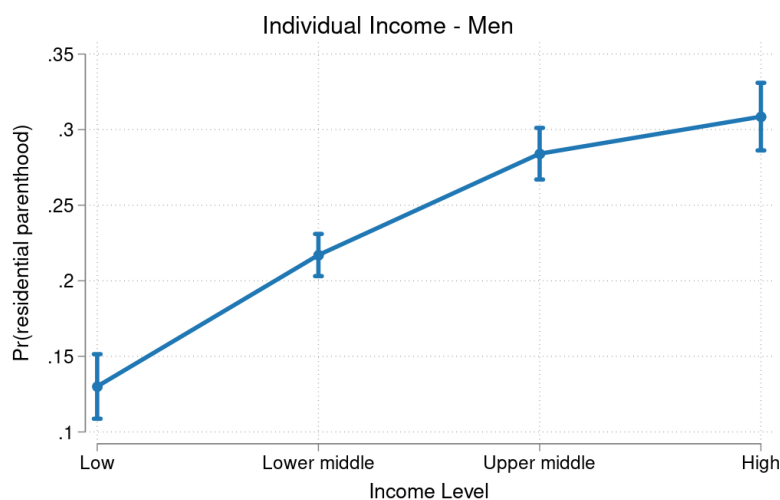
Methods. Descriptive statistics provide insights into the lagged demographic, economic, and household characteristics of *resident fathers and mothers* (Appendix, Tab. A1). We then estimate linear probability models to predict who becomes the resident versus the non-resident parent after union dissolution according to his/her individual income (Fig. 1). In other words, our dependent variable indicates whether children live with the mother (0) or father (1) after separation. Additionally, we use interaction terms to account for the combined effect of both parental individual incomes (Thaning and Hällsten 2020) (Fig. 2).

3. Results

Descriptive results show gender differences in resident parents' characteristics in the year before union dissolution (Tab. A1). In general, we observe that men are older compared to women, and have higher incomes. Particularly, while the majority of *resident fathers* (55%) have at least an upper middle income (over €30,000 per year), the vast majority of *resident mothers* (74.5%) have at most a low middle annual income (less than €30,000 per year). In terms of children's characteristics, men who become resident parents tend to have older children (55% have children aged 6 or more). Women who become the resident parent, instead, more often live with children aged 0-2 (24%) or 3-5 (30%) and in families with 3 or more minor children (14% vs. 11% of men).

Comparing the probability of becoming the resident parent rather than the non-resident, our findings support the importance of financial resources in the living arrangement decision (Fig. 1). Compared with a low level of individual income (€0 - €15,000 per year), fathers with a *high level* (more than €45,000 per year) are more than twice as likely to coreside with their children after separation.

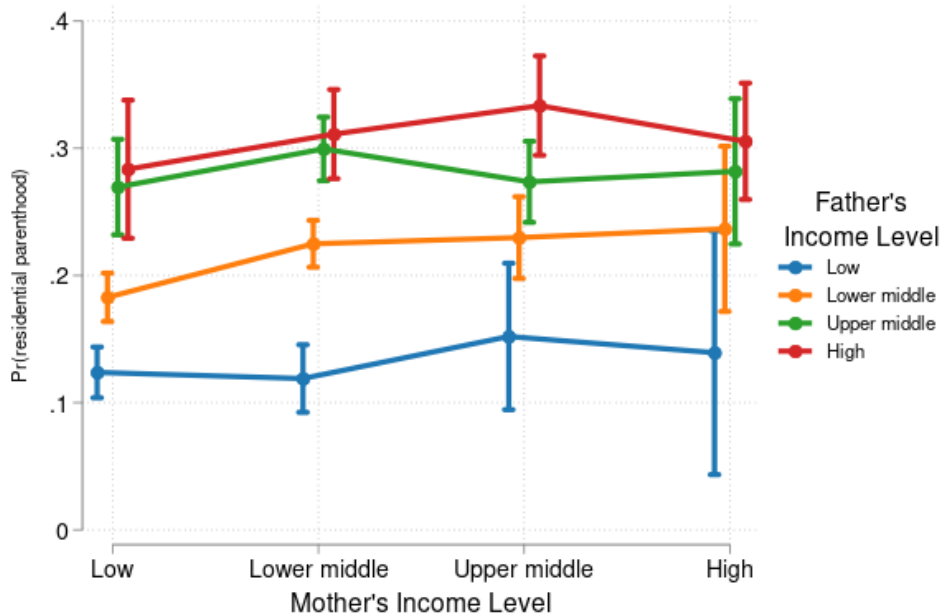
Fig. 1 Effect of individual income on the probability of coresiding with children after separation for men



N= 22,500. Control variables: age, region of residence, nationality, age of the youngest child living in the household, total number of minor children, gender of children living in the household

However, our findings show no statistically significant interaction between own and partner's individual income (Fig. 2). The only exception is represented by fathers with a *lower middle* level of income (€15,000 - €30,000). More interestingly, the father's income seems to matter much more than the mother's.

Fig. 2 Effect of own and partner's individual income on the probability of coresiding with the father after separation



N= 22,500. Control variables: age, region of residence, nationality, age of the youngest child living in the household, total number of minor children, gender of children living in the household

4. Conclusions and next steps

While previous research primarily focused on the characteristics of the parent who becomes the (single) resident parent after union dissolution, our study adopts a couple-based approach to investigate the combined effect of both parental characteristics. Our results show that economic resources (individual income) matter in the parent-child coresident decision among separating couples. However, our results do not provide strong support for the hypothesis that a higher relative income gives some advantage in living arrangements negotiations. It might be then that other mechanisms are at play. Thus, in subsequent analyses, we will include additional information on both parents (e.g., distance from grandparents' place of residence, repartnering after separation, etc.) which could shed more light on the decision of parental living arrangements after union dissolution both in absolute and relative terms.

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Appendix

Tab. A1 Resident fathers and mothers in 2018. Individual and partner characteristics in the year before union dissolution.

Characteristics		Resident Father %	Resident Mother %	Total %
Age	18-29	8.0	21.9	18.6
	30-39	46.5	52.7	51.3
	40-49	38.0	23.7	27.1
	50+	7.5	1.7	3.1
Partner's age	18-29	18.0	12.9	14.1
	30-39	56.0	47.0	49.1
	40-49	24.7	33.4	31.4
	50+	1.4	6.8	5.5
Type of union	Cohabiting	45.3	46.6	46.3
	Married	54.7	53.4	53.7
Region of residence	Brussels	5.9	10.4	9.4
	Flanders	58.5	53.0	54.3
	Wallonia	35.6	36.6	36.4
Nationality	Belgian	94.1	86.9	88.6
	Other	5.9	13.1	11.4
Individual income	Low	9.3	34.3	28.4
	Lower middle	35.9	40.2	39.2
	Upper middle	31.4	18.3	21.4
	High	23.4	7.2	11.0
Partner's individual income	Low	25.2	19.9	21.2
	Lower middle	43.2	41.1	41.6
	Upper middle	22.3	23.7	23.4
	High	9.3	15.3	13.9
Age youngest resident child	0-2 years	14.1	24.0	21.7
	3-5 years	30.8	30.2	30.3
	6-10 years	37.2	31.0	32.5
	11-17 years	17.9	14.8	15.5
N minor resident children	1	42.2	48.2	46.8
	2	45.4	39.4	40.8
	3+	12.4	12.3	12.4
Gender resident children	Both	33.3	29.7	30.5
	Only boys	34.3	36.1	35.7
	Only girls	32.5	34.2	33.8
N		2,652	8,598	11,250