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Population Health

New Partnerships Improve Life Satisfaction for Single Mothers

Single mothers often experience poorer mental health and lower life satisfaction due to increased stress, financial insecurity, and less support in everyday life. A study by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and Tilburg University reveals that new partnerships can improve the life satisfaction of single mothers, especially through increased financial resources. Long-term partnerships increase satisfaction compared to more frequent partner changes, and despite financial advantages, a new partner does not usually bring relief around household chores to the household.

Rostock, Germany. Ideally, a family is a protective space, a social network, and a team that supports each other. But what happens when children are raised by a single mother instead of two parents? Single mothers in particular can face significant challenges regarding their mental health and overall life satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that compared to two-parent families they have poorer mental health and are less satisfied due to increased stress, financial insecurity, and smaller social networks. A recent study researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) and Tilburg University showed how starting a new partnership can affect the health and satisfaction of single mothers.

Phillipp Dierker, author of the study and doctoral student at MPIDR, along with his co-authors Mine Kühn and Mikko Myrskylä (MPIDR), compared the situation of single mothers in Germany and the UK for their study. "We compared data from these countries because the social systems for single parents are different. In the UK, the net cost of caring for a child is generally higher, and single mothers are more likely to face unemployment and poverty compared to those in Germany." However, this does not mean that the situation of single mothers in Germany is good," emphasizes Dierker. The study used data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) from 1984 to 2020 and from the British Household Panel Study and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHL) from 1996 to 2020. To be included in the study, the mother, children (under 18) and a new partner had to live together in the same household.

Greater life satisfaction through financial relief

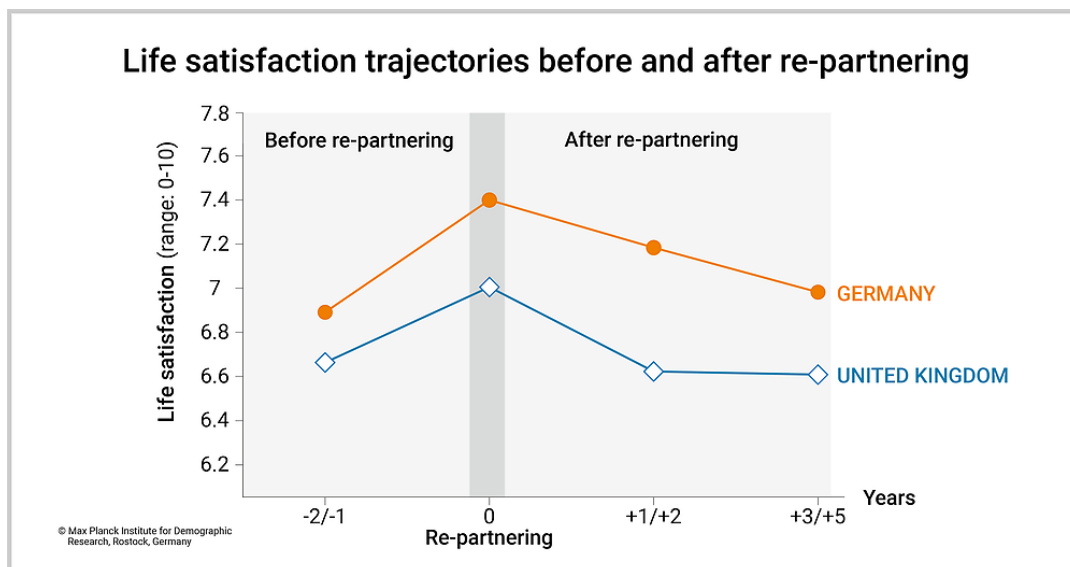
"We used longitudinal data to examine how the arrival of a new partner in the household affects mothers' mental health and life satisfaction. One initial hypothesis was that mothers' well-being would increase due to increased social, emotional, and financial resources. However, the opposing hypothesis suggests that there would be more conflict with a new partner in the household, for example, because they would not get along with the children or would bring their own children from



previous partnerships," explains the researcher. Dierker also noted that frequent partner changes could also be a burden for the mother.

In Germany, mothers' life satisfaction was improved with a new partnership, mainly due to increased income. In the United Kingdom, the positive correlation was also observed. "The data show that the improved financial situation, along with emotional support, significantly contribute to a better perception of one's own situation," the scientist explains.

When comparing single mothers who maintain a long-term relationship with mothers who frequently change their relationship status, mothers in long-term relationships report higher on life satisfaction. In Germany, mothers who separate or change partners within five years of starting a relationship have significantly less decline in life satisfaction than in the UK. "We attribute this to the fact that state support for single mothers is lower in the UK, while child support costs are higher. The unstable availability of resources may therefore place a greater burden on mothers in the UK than in Germany," says Dierker.



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Single parents in both countries do have more financial resources when they start a new partnership. "However, for mothers, a new partner generally does not relieve them of household chores in either country. On the contrary, they spend even more time doing household chores. Additional Financial resources and the feeling of financial security are currently the only contributing factors that can explain substantial parts of the increase in life satisfaction after a new partner," summarizes Dierker. This highlights how much more difficult the situation is for single parents and that they need much more institutional support than is currently the case in either country. The overall conditions for financial independence of single parents, such as reliable child care, need to be established to enable them to engage in gainful employment.



About MPIDR

The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) in Rostock investigates the structure and dynamics of populations. The Institute's researchers explore issues of political relevance, such as demographic change, aging, fertility, and the redistribution of work over the life course, as well as digitization and the use of new data sources for the estimation of migration flows. The MPIDR is one of the largest demographic research bodies in Europe and is a worldwide leader in the study of populations. The Institute is part of the Max Planck Society, the internationally renowned German research organization. www.demogr.mpg.de

This press release and figure can be downloaded at www.demogr.mpg.de/go/repartnering

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