Coping with union dissolution

Single motherhood and multigenerational coresidence in Europe
**ABSTRACT**

Single motherhood is on the rise throughout the Western world. Theory suggests that public support to single mothers is inadequate in some contexts, so that single mothers rely on kin support instead. This study explores an intense form of kin support: coresidence with one’s own parents. Combining census and survey microdata from 29 European countries, we provide a detailed description of single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence. The data reveal large geographical variation in coresidence, with the lowest prevalence in Northern and Western Europe and the highest in South-Eastern Europe. Moreover, coresidence is a temporary arrangement in the former regions but a more permanent one in the latter. Finally, coresidence has declined in almost all countries with data from the past half century. These findings corroborate cultural and institutional theories of kin support for single mothers. The findings also contribute to the debate about changes in living arrangements.

---

A slightly different version of this chapter has been submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal as Hogendoorn, B., and Härkönen, J. (2021). Single motherhood and multigenerational coresidence in Europe.
Coping with union dissolution

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Single motherhood has become a widespread phenomenon in many European societies today. Although cross-national differences persist, with the prevalence ranging from less than 10 percent in some Southern and South-Eastern European countries to more than 20 percent in Ireland and the United Kingdom, single motherhood has increased across the continent and is likely to remain at high levels (Fokkema and Liebrouer 2008; Härkönen 2017; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018). Mothers and their children spend increasingly more time in single-mother families (Heuveline et al. 2003), more still than during the 19th century (Van Poppel et al. 2013), as separation and divorce have soared and widowhood has almost disappeared as a pathway into single motherhood. This development has large consequences. Single mothers face the dual role of provider and caregiver, which contributes to work-family conflict, a higher risk of poverty, and compromised physical and mental health (Meier et al. 2016; Misra et al. 2012; Williams et al. 2008).

To cope with these challenges, single mothers often resort to external support from public policy and from parents or other kin (Esping-Andersen 1999; Hao and Brinton 1997; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018). Research has mostly focused on support from public policy. Single mothers have been found to fare better in countries that support them in their provision and caring roles, through longer periods of paid parental leave, greater childcare coverage, better access to housing, and more generous public transfers (Brady and Burroway 2012; Kulu et al. 2021; Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015; Misra et al. 2007, 2012). At the same time, this research has found that public policy is insufficient to get single mothers on par with partnered mothers. Since single mothers do not have a partner who can supplement the household income with an additional salary, childcare services and housing consume a larger part of their household income – even if provided at a reduced fee (Ferrari et al. 2019; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2020).

Much less is known about support by kin members and, in particular, coresidence with one’s own parents. While studies from the United States (Pilkaukas 2012; Pilkaukas et al. 2020; Piontak 2016), East Asia (Yeung and Park 2016), and Latin America (Esteve et al. 2012) have shown that multigenerational coresidence is a common living arrangement of single mothers, estimates from Europe are limited to a handful of countries (Albertini et al. 2018; Das et al. 2017; Kiernan et al. 1998, p. 133; Reher 1998, p. 126). This is remarkable for several reasons. For one, multigenerational coresidence may be an important source of support for single mothers in Europe, as public support is typically inadequate. Furthermore, multigenerational coresidence features in a number of major demographic theories. The narrative of the Second Demographic Transition holds that the diffusion of self-expressive values through Europe induces not only a rise in single motherhood, but also a variety of living arrangements and a decline in family solidarity (Lesthaeghe 2010; Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe
1986). Work on welfare regimes acknowledges that public intervention may reduce the dependence of single mothers’ welfare on multigenerational coresidence and on family relationships more generally (Esping-Andersen 1999; Saraceno and Keck 2010; Thévenon 2011). Studies of kin systems argue that the transition into single motherhood may activate dormant kinship ties to exchange support, including coresidence, and that this activation varies across contexts (Albertini and Kohli 2013; Bengtson 2001; Laslett 1988).

The lack of European evidence on single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence is possibly due to a lack of data. European surveys seldom aim to record extended-family households, because it is assumed that these households are rare (Esteve et al. 2012, p. 715). Moreover, the few surveys that do record extended-family ties have sample sizes that are too small to focus on subpopulations such as single mothers (Esteve and Reher 2021, p. 696). This is unfortunate, as studies of the transition to adulthood and people in old age show that family support is key in certain areas of Europe (Albertini and Kohli 2013; Arundel and Lennartz 2017; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008; Liu and Esteve 2021; Reher 1998; Saraceno and Keck 2010; Schwanitz and Mulder 2015). These findings, combined with the fact that single mothers are a particularly vulnerable population, call for further examination of single mothers’ reliance on multigenerational coresidence and its variation across contexts.

This study aims to improve our understanding of multigenerational coresidence among single mothers in Europe. We pool data from several large cross-national datasources – the European Social Survey (ESS), the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), and the International Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-I) – to describe the prevalence, stability and trends in single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence in up to 29 European countries. These countries cover a variety of institutional and cultural contexts (Esping-Andersen 1999; Reher 1998) and, importantly, include Eastern European countries, which are often are left out of such comparisons.

First, we estimate the prevalence of coresidence with one’s own parents in 27 countries. Since levels of single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence in a country reflect its levels of multigenerational coresidence more generally, we compare these figures to those of partnered mothers and single women without children. Next, we estimate how stable multigenerational coresidence arrangements are in the 19 countries with sufficient case numbers. The stability of multigenerational coresidence offers cues on whether this living arrangement is a temporary response to an acute need or a more permanent solution. Interestingly, estimates of the stability of single mothers multigenerational coresidence are scarce in national studies (Albertini et al. 2018; Das et al. 2017; Pilkauskas 2012) and, to our knowledge, absent in comparative studies. Finally, we ask how multigenerational coresidence has developed over historical time, focusing on 10 countries that with such data. Recent scholarship has shown
that multigenerational coresidence has increased among young adults across the globe (Esteve and Reher 2021) and findings from the United States have suggested a similar increase among children with single mothers as well (Pilkauskas et al. 2020; Pilkauskas and Cross 2018). We describe whether similar trends are found in Europe.

5.2 BACKGROUND

Single motherhood is associated with two events: partnership dissolution of mothers and childbirth to single women, as widowhood has become a rare pathway to single motherhood. Partnership dissolution accounts for about 85% of the prevalence of single motherhood in Europe (Andersson et al. 2017, Table A-29b; Hübgen 2020, p. 6) and, despite recent increases in shared custody, mothers typically remain the parent with the prime residential and care responsibility for children (Kalmijn 2015). The combination of caregiving and provision roles is a key concern of single mothers (Freeman and Dodson 2021; Richards and Schmiege 1993) and leads to various adverse outcomes. Multigenerational coresidence may help to alleviate these strains and has been shown to reduce the risk of poverty, facilitate spending on children’s education, and improve maternal health (Amorim 2019; Mutchler and Baker 2009; Raymo and Zhou 2012; Shirahase and Raymo 2014).

Although European evidence of single mothers’ living arrangements is scarce, evidence of living arrangements in general abounds. This literature indicates that multigenerational arrangements in Europe are uncommon in global perspective, yet highly varied when zooming in. Multigenerational households make up 0.1% of all households in Northern Europe, 0.7% in Western Europe, 2.8% in Southern Europe, and 8.6% in Central and Eastern Europe (authors’ calculations of Iacovou and Skew 2011; see also Glaser et al. 2018; Liu and Esteve 2021; Murphy 2008; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Most European research on intergenerational coresidence has focused on coresidence from the viewpoint of either young adults or elderly people (Albertini and Kohli 2013; Arundel and Lennartz 2017; Esteve and Reher 2021; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008; Schwanitz and Mulder 2015). The key finding of this research is that Northern European and South-Eastern countries occupy the extremes in multigenerational coresidence among the youth and elderly.

The variation in intergenerational coresidence has been explained from two strands of theory. Cultural-historical theories highlight a North-South and an East-West axis. Northern and North-Western European societies emphasize residential autonomy, which is observed in early home leaving and few multigenerational households (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Fernández Cordón 1997; Iacovou 2010; Iacovou and Skew 2011; Van den Berg et al. 2021); the Nordic countries and the Netherlands represent an extreme version of this model. Southern European countries, instead, emphasize life-long intergenerational bonds and realize these through coresidence (Albertini and Kohli 2013; Reher 1998, 2021). Household structures also
vary between West and East, reflecting historical patterns of household formation (Hajnal 1965, 1982). South-Eastern European countries represent the other extreme, with multigenerational households far more common than elsewhere (Iacovou and Skew 2011), though countries like Czechia, Estonia, and Slovenia also share characteristics with Western society (Jappens and Van Bavel 2012; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008).

Theories of welfare institutions propose a pattern that roughly overlaps with these axes. Northern and North-Western states “defamilize” their citizens by generous welfare provision and the creation of markets, crowding in emotional and practical support to family members but crowding out intensive support such as intergenerational coresidence (Brandt and Deindl 2013; Igel and Szydlik 2011; Stephens et al. 2015). Southern European states, instead, build on the expectation of the family as the primary welfare provider (Esping-Andersen 1999; Reher 2021; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Eastern, and especially South-Eastern, European states provide a heterogeneous welfare mix, but their common denominators are underfunded social insurances and the mass privatization of public housing without well-developed housing markets, forcing some citizens into family coresidence (Aidukaite 2011; Hantrais 2004; Stephens et al. 2015).

Estimates of the prevalence of multigenerational coresidence provide a cross-sectional snapshot. These snapshots mask the flux in multigenerational living arrangements: a given prevalence of coresidence could stem from many single mothers living with their parents for a short period of time but also from few single mothers living with their parents for a long time. This difference in theoretically meaningful. According to the idea of the latent kinship matrix (Bengtson 2001; Riley and Riley 1993), geographic variation in kin support is driven not by the presence of kin ties but by their latency. In Northern and Western Europe, kin ties are believed to be dormant and kin support non-normative, except in times of crisis, including the transition into single motherhood (Albertini et al. 2018). Consequently, one would expect unstable coresidence as a temporary solution to an acute need. In Southern Europe, kin ties are more visible due to a cultural preference for togetherness (Iacovou 2010), whereas in Eastern Europe, they may arise in response to poor institutional support (Sobotka 2008). There, one would expect stable coresidence as a longer-term solution.

Research on the stability of multigenerational coresidence is limited to a handful of countries, and we are not aware of any comparative work. This research shows that a non-negligible share of single mothers in the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States live in a multigenerational household at some point, yet that these arrangements tend to be short lived (Albertini et al. 2018; Das et al. 2017; Guzzo 2016; Pilkauskas 2012; Piontak 2016). In the US, of all women who lived with their parents upon the birth of a child, a fifth lived without them the next year (Piontak 2016, Table 1). In the Netherlands and Sweden, roughly half of the mothers who moved in with their own parent(s) after separation had left a year later, and the
far majority had moved out within two to three years (Albertini et al. 2018, Table 2; Das et al. 2017). These figures lend preliminary support to the idea of latent kinship, as single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence in these societies is typically short-lived, but they also suggest that cross-national differences in this dynamic are likely.

Finally, we ask how multigenerational coresidence has developed over historical time. The historical trend in Western countries through the 20th century has been toward fewer multigenerational households (Ruggles 2007; Ruggles and Heggeness 2008, p. 256). Some have interpreted this as support for modernization theory, which predicts a convergence to the norm of nuclear families (Goode 1963). However, data from recent periods show a global resurgence in young adults’ multigenerational coresidence, albeit with large regional variation (Esteve and Reher 2021), a trend attributed to longer education, the postponement of family formation, housing shortages, increased demands for grandparenting, and better opportunities for realizing a preference for multigenerational living (Albuquerque 2011; Easthope et al. 2017; Esteve and Reher 2021; Kye and Choi 2021; Ruggles and Heggeness 2008). The question is whether these trends generalize to single mothers. Data from the United States show a revival in single mothers’ intergenerational coresidence (Pilkauskas et al. 2020), yet data from Japan (Shirahase and Raymo 2014) and from Latin America (Esteve et al. 2012) show little change between the 1970s and 2010s.

It remains unknown how single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence has developed in Europe. Theoretical arguments predict a decline. First and foremost, the Second Demographic Transition has been diffusing across Europe (Fokkema and Liefbroer 2008; Lesthaeghe 2020; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). This diffusion is believed to be underlain by a change toward self-expressive values, including the need for independence (Abramson 2014; Lesthaeghe 2020). In addition, living standards and support for working mothers have increased over time, increasing the affordability of residential independence (though housing costs have increased disproportionately in some countries, see Dewilde 2021). Furthermore, Europe has witnessed a steady decline in agriculture, which has historically driven the need for coresidence (Ruggles 2009). The predicted decline in coresidence finds some preliminary support in a study of eight European countries, which found that women aged 18-34 became less likely to live as single mothers in an extended-family household between 1980 and 2000 (Schwanitz and Mulder 2015). However, because of a limited age range, increases in the age of motherhood, and changes in single motherhood as a share of the total population, it is unclear whether these results imply a decrease in single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence.
5.3 METHOD

5.3.1 Data and measures
Comparative research on multigenerational coresidence has been hampered by the availability of micro data, especially as case numbers are low in some countries. To address this issue, we employed data from four cross-national data sources – the European Social Survey (ESS), the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS), the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), and the International Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-I) – that we use in different parts of the analysis. The ESS is a biennial survey that covers the noninstitutionalized population aged 15 and over, collected between 2002 and 2018. Participating countries use a standardized questionnaire of social conditions and attitudes, including a small section on household composition. The GGS is a longitudinal survey, though for population representativeness we only use the first wave, that covers the noninstitutional population aged 15 to 79, with the first wave collected between 2002 and 2013. Participating countries use ex-post harmonized questionnaires with extensive information of household composition and family relationships. The EU-SILC is an annual survey with a four-year rotating panel design that covers the noninstitutionalized population aged 16 and over, collected between 2004 and 2018. European Union member states and associated countries use ex-post harmonized questionnaires with extensive information of incomes and living conditions, including minimal information on household composition. The IPUMS-I provides samples of national censuses that cover the entire resident population, with the censuses that we use collected between 1971 and 2016. The census data include ex-post harmonized information about household composition and other demographic characteristics. The sampling designs of all data sources are provided in Table A.37 of the Appendix.

The dependent variable of interest was multigenerational coresidence. This variable was measured as the presence of a mother, her children, and at least one of her parents or parents-in-law within the same household. In the ESS and GGS, respondents listed all household members and indicated their own relationship to them, including “parent, parent-in-law, partner’s parent, stepparent”. In the EU-SILC, the household head indicated all parent-child relationships in the household or all first- and second-degree relationships to the head, sometimes supplemented with information from a national kinship register. It is unclear whether parents included parents-in-law (Eurostat 2019), but these will be rare in single-mother families. In the IPUMS-I, family relationships came from pointer variables, which establish relationships between all household members via links to the household head (see Sobek and Kennedy 2009). In the samples we selected, parent-child relationships were identified using strong linkage rules supplemented with various weaker rules. Sometimes grandparents did not include grandparents-in-law, but this was probably a minor problem for single-mother families. The ESS, GGS, EU-SILC, and IPUMS-I each included biological, step-
Coping with union dissolution

adoptive, and foster relationships. The identification of family relationships is provided in Table A.38.

The unit of analysis was the single mother. Single mothers were defined as women aged 21-65 with at least one resident child under 21 and without a coresidential partner, irrespective of marital status. The age limits were chosen to not confuse mothers in the focal generation with their parental generation in the multigenerational analysis. Throughout the analysis, we compared single mothers to partnered mothers and to single women without children. Partnered mothers are a natural reference, since partnership dissolution is the most common pathway into single motherhood. Single women without children provide another informative reference, as the shift toward self-expressive values and advances in assisted reproductive technology will likely increase childbirths to single women.

The microdata were supplemented with country-level variables, based on cultural and institutional theories of multigenerational coresidence. Childcare coverage was measured as the percentage of children below age three who receive more than thirty hours of formal childcare per week. Thirty hours is a widely used cut-off that should enable mothers to work without depending on informal arrangements (e.g., Yerkes and Javornik 2019). Public transfer adequacy was measured as the guaranteed minimum income for single-parent families. It was calculated as the sum of all public transfer entitlements of a family with one unemployed adult aged 40 with full work capacity and two children aged 4 and 6, and expressed as a percentage of the national median disposable income (e.g., Nelson 2013). Housing access was measured as the percentage of the adult population renting a house or living in a house under mortgage, as opposed to outright ownership. It indicated the ease in obtaining housing via the (social) rental sector or the mortgage market (Mulder and Billari 2010; Stephens et al. 2015). Personal autonomy was measured as the country-level median on a latent factor of autonomy (Rudnev et al. 2018; Schwartz 1992), based on the items “importance of new ideas and creativity”, of “making own decisions”, of “following traditions and family customs”, and of “living in secure surroundings”. Intergenerational solidarity was measured as the percentage of people who agree that it is the duty both of “parents to do their best for their children” and of “children to provide long-term care for their parents, even at the expense of their own well-being” (Conkova et al. 2018). All variables were obtained for the year closest to 2011 – the midpoint of our dataset – or averaged over the surrounding years. Childcare coverage and housing access were taken from Eurostat (average 2010-2012), public transfer adequacy from the OECD Benefits and Wages database (2013), personal autonomy from the ESS (average 2008-2014), and intergenerational solidarity from the European Values Study (2008). Country scores are provided in Table A.40.
5.3.2 Cross-sectional analysis

The cross-sectional analysis was the most extensive of this study. It was based on pooled data from the ESS rounds 1 to 9, the GGS wave 1, and the EU-SILC cross-sectional component. We selected all countries and rounds that drew a probability sample of individuals – samples of households were included only if design weights were available –, with parent-child relationships available for all household members, and with at least 20 cases of coresiding single mothers. This resulted in a dataset covering 45,990 single mothers in 27 European countries between 2002 and 2020 (see Table A.41).

The analysis had various aims. First, we showed the prevalence of single motherhood and described the characteristics of single mothers. To ensure that the country comparisons were not distorted by differential data availability, scores were adjusted for differentials in the survey year, survey year squared, and original data source. Then, we reported the share of single mothers living in multigenerational coresidence. Observed shares were obtained using the same procedure as before. Composition-adjusted shares were obtained by additionally adjusting for differences between single mothers, partnered mothers, and single childless women in terms of age, age squared, immigration, college degree, health limitation, ever married, and the number of resident children. These composition adjustments allowed for a better comparison of the coresidence rates between single mothers, partnered mothers, and single childless women; the latter category in particular was much younger and in an earlier stage of the transition to adulthood. Lastly, we linked multigenerational coresidence to country-level characteristics. This was done by regressing the composition-adjusted prevalence of coresidence on the country-level variables. We incorporated the uncertainty in the coresidence estimates using meta regression with restricted maximum likelihood random effects (Lewis and Linzer 2005). Design weights were applied throughout the analysis.

5.3.3 Panel analysis

The panel analysis was based on the EU-SILC longitudinal component. We selected countries with complete parent-child relationships, with at least 20 cases of single-mother households dissolving, and with either person samples or household samples. While the inclusion of household samples might cause selectivity in terms of mothers’ living arrangements, we felt it was justified since this part of the analysis concerned the stability of a given arrangement rather than the prevalence of household types among all households. This resulted in a dataset covering 13,014 coresiding single mother person-years in 20 European countries between 2004 and 2018 (see Table A.42).
Table 5.1 Overview of the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross sectional</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>ESS, GGS, EU-SILC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2002-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross sectional</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2008-2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel</td>
<td>Person-year</td>
<td>EU-SILC</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2004-2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis aimed to show the stability of support between single mothers and their parents. Ideally, we would follow mothers’ living arrangements over time, but the longitudinal component of the EU-SILC rarely traces split-off households to their new address (Iacovou and Lynn 2013). Instead, we utilized the fact that interview rates of household members who remained at the old address were high and that it was possible to derive which persons left the household from the enumeration list. We selected coresiding single mothers in each wave and observed whether their households remained intact or dissolved from that wave to the next. Partnership transitions were not considered dissolutions, and mothers whose children moved out or turned 21 were excluded since they no longer formed part of the population of interest. We thus obtained the hazard of household dissolution over all person-years. No design weights were applied because these were not available in the longitudinal EU-SILC.

5.3.4 Time-series analysis

The time-series analysis was based on census data provided by IPUMS-I. We selected samples with parent-child relationships identified at high certainty and consistently available over at least two consecutive rounds. We supplemented the census data with the EU-SILC cross-sectional component from countries that drew a sample of individuals or design-weighted households and that counted at least 20 coresiding single mothers per year. This resulted in a dataset covering single-mother populations in 10 European countries between 1971 and 2016 (see Table A.43).

The analysis aimed at showing historical changes in multigenerational coresidence. For the IPUMS-I data, we reported the share of single mothers in multigenerational coresidence as observed in each country-year. For the EU-SILC data, we reported a five-year moving average to reduce the variability caused by the lower case numbers. Because the age distribution of the overall populations (including non-single mothers) may have changed over time, we age-standardized them to the 1999 French population before calculating the single-mother coresidence rate. Design weights were applied in each country-year. Table 5.1 gives an overview of the data and analysis.
5.4 RESULTS

5.4.1 Single mothers in Europe

We start by describing the prevalence of single motherhood. Figure 5.1 shows single mothers as a share of all working-age women, as a share of all mothers, and as a share of all single women. The figure shows that single motherhood in the female working-age population ranges from 4% in Italy and Greece to 12% in Iceland and the United Kingdom. Zooming in on mothers reveals that a non-negligible share of European mothers raise children without a coresidential partner. In Southern and South-Eastern Europe, about one in eight mothers is single. The prevalence is higher in other countries, with particularly high figures observed in the Baltic countries and the United Kingdom, where a quarter of all mothers is single. Zooming in on single women reveals a similar pattern. In Southern and South-Eastern Europe, about one in five single women live with a child under 21. This figure again is higher in the other countries, and in the Baltic countries, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Iceland, one in three single women raise children.

How do single mothers fare? Table 5.2 describes several demographic characteristics. The table shows that single mothers are relatively disadvantaged compared to partnered mothers and single childless women. They have attained less education, experience more difficulty in making ends meet, and are more likely to have poor or very poor health in all countries. The disadvantage is more complex for paid work. Where the division of labor is less gendered, single mothers have similar or lower employment rates than partnered mothers; where the division is more gendered, single mothers have higher employment rates than partnered mothers (Pailhé et al. 2021; Van der Lippe et al. 2018). The table also reveals that the single-mother population is more similar to partnered mothers than to single childless women. Single mothers and partnered mothers tend to be older and are more likely to have been married than single childless women. This reflects previous work that most single mothers have transitioned into that state via the dissolution of a partnership, rather than childbirth during singlehood. Single childless women are typically in earlier stages of the transition into adulthood and many have probably never left the parental home. Besides, the table reveals cross-national variation. For instance, income hardship in some Southern and Eastern European countries is greater than that in Northern and Western Europe. Educational attainment follows a similar pattern, except that the Baltic (higher) and German-speaking countries (lower) deviate from their regions. Mothers in Southern Europe have more often been married than those in Northern and Western Europe, with the countries in Eastern Europe taking a middle ground, reflecting the cultural importance of marriage.
**Figure 5.1** Prevalence of single motherhood in Europe of the 21st century

Source: European Social Survey, Generations and Gender Survey, and European Union Income Statistics on Income and Living conditions; own calculations.
Table 5.2 Characteristics of single mothers across Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single mothers</th>
<th>Partnered mothers</th>
<th>Single childless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In paid work</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever married</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>North</th>
<th>West</th>
<th>South</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Central/Baltic</th>
<th>South-East</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|       | Source: European Social Survey, Generations and Gender Survey, and European Union Income Statistics on Income and Living conditions; own calculations. |       |       |

|       | Source: European Social Survey, Generations and Gender Survey, and European Union Income Statistics on Income and Living conditions; own calculations. |       |       |
5.4.2 Prevalence of multigenerational coresidence

We now turn to our outcome of interest. Figure 5.2 shows the observed and the composition-adjusted prevalence of multigenerational coresidence. In light of the differences between single mothers, partnered mothers, and single childless women, we discuss here the composition-adjusted prevalences. Everywhere, single mothers are more likely than partnered mothers to coreside with their parents. In most countries, they are less likely than single childless women to coreside with their parents, though the difference is small in the Baltic and South-Eastern European countries. The average prevalence of intergenerational coresidence across countries is 16% for single mothers, 7% for partnered mothers, and 23% for single childless women. Additional analyses (not reported) confirm that these figures are not an artefact of the population structure, in which the percentage of grandparents alive varies between single and partnered mothers or between countries (Leopold and Skopek 2015). The figures thus support the idea that single mothers are in a vulnerable situation and rely on their parents for help.

Figure 5.2 further reveals enormous regional variation in single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence. Coresidence is rare in Northern Europe, where the composition-adjusted prevalence ranges from virtually 0% to 3%. It is also infrequent in Western Europe, where it ranges from 3% to 7%. Coresidence is more common Southern Europe, where it ranges from 21-28%, and in Central Europe and the Baltic countries, where it ranges from 14-31%. However, coresidence is most widespread in South-Eastern Europe. About 39% of single mothers in Croatia and Romania coreside with their parents, and this figure reaches 48% in Bulgaria.
Figure 5.2 Prevalence of multigenerational coresidence among mothers in Europe

Notes: Composition-adjusted for within-country differences between single mothers, partnered mothers, and single childless women in terms of age, age squared, immigration status, college degree, marital history, disability, and resident children.
Source: European Social Survey, Generations and Gender Survey, and European Union Income Statistics on Income and Living conditions; own calculations.

There is also variation, albeit less, within the regions. In Northern Europe, single mothers’ coresidence is higher in Iceland than in the other countries. This may relate to Iceland’s insular character, whereby family dynamics have developed distinctly from the other Nordic countries (Aassve et al. 2013; Jónsson 2021). In Western Europe, Ireland appears as a country with a higher prevalence of coresidence, resonating previous work on the presence of the Catholic church and its orientation toward family-provided welfare (Iacovou 2010; Reher 1998). Austria also stands out with its relatively high share of coresidence and nearly absent – or even reversed – gap between single and partnered mothers, an exception noticed by other authors as well (Schwanitz and Mulder 2015). In Central Europe, coresidence is less common in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovenia. These countries share a history with their Germanic neighbors, embrace more liberal family values, and their welfare states are significantly stronger than those of the other countries in the region (Sobotka 2008), though the low prevalence in Latvia comes as a surprise.

These patterns appear to be in line with cultural-historical and institutional theories of multigenerational coresidence. To further examine this, Figure 5.3 plots the results of a series of macro-level regressions. The figure shows that geographical variation in coresidence follows
geographical variation in cultural and institutional characteristics. Coresidence is more prevalent in countries with lower public transfers, limited access to housing, less importance of personal autonomy, and stronger norms of intergenerational solidarity. In fact, access to housing alone explains 85% of the cross-national variation in single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence. The other indicators also explain large percentages, with the exception of childcare coverage. All variables are statistically significant for single mothers, partnered mothers, and single childless women. However, the living arrangements of single mothers correlate more with their context than those of partnered mothers, as witnessed by steeper slopes. For instance, a 10 percentage points increase in access to rental housing or mortgages is associated with a 3 percentage points decrease in single mothers’ coresidence and a 1.5 percentage points decrease in partnered mothers’ coresidence. The arrangements of single mothers rather follow a pattern similar to that of childless single women, indicating that becoming and remaining independent is difficult when institutional support is poor and family ties extend through adulthood.

This yields the following interpretation. Single mothers in Northern and Western Europe may coreside with grandparents because they are unable to secure independent housing, because they can expect to rely on their parents, and because family embeddedness is positively valued. Single mothers in South-Eastern Europe cannot expect to move in with their parents, but they are able to secure housing, and this enables them to fulfill their need for independence. These cross-national patterns are similar for partnered mothers, but because their need for support is less pronounced and norms for coresidence less permissive, the resulting coresidence rates are lower. The pattern is also similar for single childless women, but because this group has not experienced family formation and is typically in an earlier stage of the transition to adulthood, everywhere a larger share (still) live with their parents.
Figure 5.3 Country-level correlates of multigenerational coresidence

Notes: Multigenerational coresidence adjusted for compositional differences between single and partnered mothers and across countries. Slopes estimated using meta regressions.
Source: European Social Survey, Generations and Gender Survey, and European Union Income Statistics on Income and Living conditions; own calculations.

5.4.3 Stability of multigenerational coresidence

Thus far, we have presented a snapshot of single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence at a given moment. We now zoom in on the stability of these arrangements over time. Table 5.3 shows the annual household dissolution rates of single mothers who live with their parents. A first observation from the table is that multigenerational coresidence is far more transient in Northern and Western Europe (except Austria) than in Southern, Central, and Baltic Europe, and especially South-Eastern Europe. For instance, in Belgium, 33% of single mothers’ multigenerational households dissolve from one year to the next, compared to 17% in Italy, and 6% in Bulgaria. If we are willing to assume a constant dissolution hazard, the survival function will follow an exponential distribution with a median of $\ln(2)/\lambda$, so that the median duration of multigenerational living would be 2.1 years in Belgium, 4.1 years in Italy, and 11.6 years in Bulgaria. This illustrates that in regions where multigenerational coresidence is less prevalent, it is also shorter lived. In Northern and Western Europe, coresidence seems to be used as a temporary solution, while in South-Eastern Europe, coresidence appears to be a longer-term arrangement.
Another observation from Table 5.3 is that the stability of multigenerational living among single mothers is similar to that among partnered mothers and single childless women. In the majority of countries, the difference in stability is not statistically significant. Only in Italy, multigenerational households of single mothers are less stable than those of partnered mothers and single childless women, and in Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria, they are somewhat more stable than those of single childless women. It is possible that the lack of statistically significant differences is due to small sample sizes (e.g., given a dissolution rate for single mothers of 11 per 100 person-years, 5,000 observations per country, five times as many partnered as single mothers, a power level of 0.80, and a significance level of 0.5, only dissolution rates below 8 or over 14 per 100 person-years are statistically significant). However, previous work has also shown that interactions of family systems with new family behaviors, such as single motherhood, are highly context dependent (Caltabiano et al. 2019). Further examination of the stability of single mothers’ multigenerational households vis-à-vis partnered mothers and childless single women would therefore require greater detail than we can offer here.
5.4.4 Time-series analysis

In the last section of this article, we address the changes in multigenerational coresidence over historical time. Figure 5.4 shows the share of single mothers who coreside by year. Though the time series cover a limited number of countries and periods, the trend is clear: multigenerational coresidence has declined in almost all countries during the past half century. The two countries with the longest time series available are illustrative in this respect. In Greece, 31% of single mothers coresided with a parent in 1971, and this percentage steadily declined to 18% in 2001. In France, too, the percentage declined from 9% in 1982 to less than 4% in 2011. The only countries where single mothers are increasingly living with their parents are Portugal and Romania. In Portugal, multigenerational coresidence among single mothers increased between 1981 and 1991, after which it stabilized. Other authors have proposed that this trend reflects an increased need for grandparenting, following a rise in mothers’ labor participation without additional childcare services (Albuquerque 2011). In Romania, single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence steeply increased from 1992 to 2002, a trend observed in various other demographic groups as well (Glaser et al. 2018; Schwanitz and Mulder 2015). This trend likely relates to the collapse of the communist regime, which resulted in widespread unemployment, massive housing shortages, the disappearance of public childcare, and a substantial lowering of pensions (Castiglioni et al. 2016). Doubling up, often in self-built family homes, proliferated and has remained important since (Soaita and Dewilde 2021; Stephens et al. 2015).

The trends of single mothers were paralleled by those of partnered mothers but not those of single childless women. Partnered mothers, too, witnessed declines in multigenerational coresidence in almost all countries. In Portugal and Romania, where coresidence increased, the increase was slightly less strong among partnered mothers than among single mothers. Together this suggests that cultural explanations, such as the diffusion of a preference for independent living or norms surrounding family coresidence, or institutional explanations, such as increased wealth and support for working mothers, hold for both single and partnered mothers. A different picture is observed for single childless women. Single childless women witnessed a decrease in multigenerational coresidence in France, Italy, Slovenia, and to a lesser extent Estonia, neither a decrease nor increase in Lithuania, and an increase in Poland, Greece, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. The latter trends correspond to those observed among the general young-adult population (Esteve and Reher 2021), yet they seem to contradict the trends among mothers, a finding we return to in the discussion section.
Remarkably, the trends in multigenerational coresidence extend through recent decades. Single- and partnered-mother populations in the countries that we have data from – France, Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, and Lithuania – have all become less likely to live with a parent between 2000 and 2016. These trends have occurred despite substantial increases in the longevity of grandparents, even at advanced ages (Rau et al. 2008), which have been argued to result in greater coresidence (Albuquerque 2011; Bengtson 2001). The general pattern is thus one of a sustained decline in multigenerational coresidence among mothers in Europe.

5.5 DISCUSSION

Single motherhood has been on the rise across Europe and, by the 21st century, single motherhood has become a common demographic state. Single mothers face the dual role of provider and caregiver. Previous work has shown the importance of public support for dealing with these role demands. However, the absence of comparative data has hampered attention to kin support and, in particular, coresidence with one’s own parents.

In this study, we pooled several large-scale cross-national data to provide a demographic description of single motherhood and multigenerational coresidence in Europe.
We found that (i) the prevalence of multigenerational coresidence is lowest among single mothers in Northern and Western Europe, intermediate in Southern, Central, and Baltic Europe, and highest in South-Eastern Europe, (ii) geographic variation in coresidence coincides with geographic variation in public transfer adequacy, access to housing, the value of personal autonomy, and norms of intergenerational obligations, (iii) coresidence is a temporary arrangement in countries where it is rare and a longer-term arrangement in countries where it is widespread, (iv) coresidence has declined in all countries with data from the past half century, except in Portugal and Romania, and (v) the findings for single mothers are more comparable to those of partnered mothers than to those of single childless women, except that single mothers experience more difficulties than partnered mothers and are therefore more likely to coreside with their parents.

Our study contributes to scholarship on single motherhood and multigenerational coresidence. First, we presented the first cross-national comparison of single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence in Europe. The generally low levels of multigenerational coresidence in some parts of Europe may have led to an assumption of its limited importance on a continent with greater public support than in many other regions of the world. We find that this assumption holds in Northern and Western European countries, but that the situation is different in many Southern and Eastern European countries. These findings support Reher’s (1998, 2021) distinction between weak-family and strong-family countries, with the former characterized by interventionist public policy and intergenerational bonds that disappear in adulthood and the latter by a reliance on limited public support and lifelong intergenerational bonds. The findings also shed light on Eastern Europe, showing that single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence there exceeds that of some East Asian countries like Taiwan (Chen 2016) or Korea (Park et al. 2016). These countries continue to receive less attention than Western European ones, which leads to an underestimation of European heterogeneity and an underappreciation of the centrality of family in the lives of single mothers.

Second, we conducted the first cross-national comparison of the stability of multigenerational living arrangements. Multigenerational living is a temporary solution for single mothers in Northern and Western Europe, where between one quarter and half of their multigenerational households dissolve within one year, but is much more stable in Eastern Europe, where about one in ten dissolves annually. This suggests that cross-national variation in the prevalence of multigenerational coresidence is driven by the duration of those arrangements and less influenced by the fraction of single mothers who enters such arrangements. If this is the case, it would corroborate previous evidence that, even in weak-family societies, many people temporarily return to the parental home at some point in their life (Albertini et al. 2018; Das et al. 2017; Guzzo 2016; Pilkauskas 2012; Piontak 2016). Interestingly, single mothers and their comparison groups – partnered mothers and single
childless women – often showed small and statistically non-significant differences in the stability of multigenerational living. In countries where multigenerational coresidence is unstable, it is likely a temporary solution for an acute need. In countries where it is stable, it can reflect chronic needs or preferences, such that coresidence facilitates long-term social exchange between children, mothers, and grandparents.

Third, we demonstrate trends in single mothers’ multigenerational coresidence. With the exception of Romania and Portugal, the prevalence of multigenerational coresidence has declined in the ten Western, Southern, and Eastern European countries that provided data, and this decline held for both single and partnered mothers. This finding corresponds to the long historical trend in multigenerational coresidence (Ruggles 2007; Ruggles and Heggeness 2008, p. 256) and supports the idea that Europe continues to progress into more advanced stages of the Second Demographic Transition (Fokkema and Liebfroer 2008; Lesthaeghe 2020; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). At the same time, the trends for mothers are contradicted by the trends for single women without children, as is also apparent in the recent resurgence in multigenerational living among young adults in other parts of the world (Esteve and Reher 2021). The difference between women with and without children could indicate that dependence on parents has increased in early stages of the life course but has decreased in later stages. Such idea would be in line with the notion of emerging adulthood, in which the transition to adulthood has become prolonged due to longer education, the postponement of family formation, and housing shortages (Easthope et al. 2017; Esteve and Reher 2021; Kye and Choi 2021). Family formation may have become less attainable while also having turned into a stronger marker of adulthood (Benson and Furstenberg 2006; Billari and Liebfroer 2010; Schwanitz 2017; Settersten 2007). As a result, the roles of partner and parents today may impart a stronger sense of independence and stricter norms of self-reliance.

Of course, our focus on multigenerational coresidence does not tell the whole story. Throughout this article we have treated coresidence as an arrangement that enables downward support from grandparents to mothers. This idea is supported by empirical work, which shows that in the majority of multigenerational households single mothers moved in last (Smits et al. 2010), grandparents are the household head (Dunifon et al. 2014; Harvey et al. 2021; Ruggles and Heggeness 2008), and grandparents have the highest income (Mutchler and Baker 2009; Verbist et al. 2020). Nevertheless, in a substantial minority, grandparents themselves are disadvantaged and coresidence is mutually beneficial (Shirahase and Raymo 2014; Verbist et al. 2020), suggesting that support also flows upward.

In addition, family members may provide support other than coresidence and this support varies contextually. A growing literature shows that the welfare states of Northern and Western Europe crowd out intensive support, like coresidence, but crowd in emotional and practical support (Albertini et al. 2007; Albertini and Kohli 2013; Brandt and Deindl 2013;
Herlofson and Brandt 2020; Igel and Szydlik 2011; Jappens and Van Bavel 2012; Stephens et al. 2015). It is therefore well possible that single mothers in those regions coreside with family less often yet may receive more practical help, monetary transfers, or occasional grandparenting assistance. Small-scale studies, indeed, suggest that single mothers frequently receive such support (Goodsell et al. 2015; Timonen et al. 2011), and residential proximity is the norm throughout Europe (Isengard 2013). Furthermore, support may be given not only by grandparents but also by other kin. Societies vary greatly in their orientation toward kin categories, and there is some evidence of substitution between kin members in the provision of support (Mulder and Van der Meer 2009; Murphy 2008). The extent to which single mothers benefit from such support and how this has changed historically is at this moment unknown. Our data did not allow us to examine the role of other kin due to low case numbers, but future research could do so by utilizing the increasing availability of data from population registers (Kolk 2017).

Finally, the question arises of how societies will accommodate future demographic and policy trends. Single motherhood continues to rise, and our results indicate changing residential norms for mothers. Changing norms and preferences may also apply to their family members, for whom coresidence is costly, strains family relationships, and at times compromises health (Kaschowitz and Brandt 2017; Verbakel et al. 2017; Verbist et al. 2020; White and Rogers 1997). Indeed, caregiving is often done out of obligation rather than joy (Brandt 2013), and many believe that the state should financially support caregiving, also in societies where the family is the main welfare provider (Albertini and Kohli 2013; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008). Nevertheless, public policy has crumbled in some countries during recent decades, through reductions in welfare generosity (Nelson 2013), an emphasis on labor market activation (Marchal and Van Mechelen 2017), and the financialization of housing (Dewilde 2021), and there are few signs that the tide is turning. These developments may affect future trends in single motherhood and multigenerational coresidence in Europe.