

Single-parent families: Category at increased risk of poverty

Romana Galić, univ.spec.act.soc.

Darija Zubić, Master of Psychology

Summary

There are very few scientific researches on family structure, especially on single-parent families, and they do not follow the rapid changes within the family structure. Therefore, we can draw conclusions on problems and difficulties in single-parent families based on a small number of researches conducted. Society is expected to provide families with the greatest protection and support possible, regardless of the type of family, so that they can fully fulfill their tasks and responsibilities within the community (Maleš, 1999). However, the society's response to the needs of families, and especially of single-parent families, is not quick, strong or effective enough. Apart from the phrase "single-parent family", other phrases were once used in professional literature as synonyms, such as: "abandoned" or "incomplete family", "deficient family", "broken family", "truncated" or "fractional family". However, due to their stigmatization and negative connotations, such phrases have since been abandoned. Today, phrases with a narrower meaning are used, for instance "single parent", "one parent", "parent without a spouse" and "parent living alone" (Piorkovska-Petrović, 1990). According to the Social Welfare Act (OG 157/13, 152/14, 99/15, 52/16, 16/17 and 130/17), a single parent is a parent who takes care of their child and supports them on their own, and a single-parent family is a family made up of a child or children and one parent. According to the postmodern paradigm, language use is of great importance (Ajduković, 2008), and according to Rabateg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović (2003), the term "single-parent family" is the most appropriate one, as it is value-neutral and points to what single parents have in common, which is the fact that one parent raises a child alone.

Key words: family, single-parent families, the phenomenon of child poverty

Sažetak

Znanstvenih istraživanja o obiteljskoj strukturi, posebno o jednoroditeljskim obiteljima, je vrlo malo i ne prate brze promjene unutar obiteljske strukture. Stoga, o problemima i teškoćama u jednoroditeljskim obiteljima možemo zaključivati na temelju malog broja provedenih istraživanja. Od društva se očekuje da obitelji, neovisno o kojem se tipu obitelji radi, pruži najveću zaštitu i potporu kako bi ona mogla u potpunosti ispuniti svoje zadaće i odgovornosti unutar određene zajednice (Maleš, 1999). No, društvo na potrebe, posebno jednoroditeljskih obitelji ne odgovara dovoljno brzo, snažno i djelotvorno. Nekada su se, u stručnoj literaturi uz izraz jednoroditeljska obitelj, kao sinonim koristili različiti izrazi kao što su: napuštena ili nekompletna obitelj, deficijentna obitelj, razorena obitelj, krnja ili nepotpuna obitelj. No, radi stigmatizacije i negativog prizvuka danas su takvi nazivi napušteni. Koriste se neki izrazi koji su po svom značenju uži, npr. samohrani roditelj, roditelj samac, jedan roditelj, roditelj bez bračnog partnera, roditelj koji živi sam (Piorkovska – Petrović, 1990). Prema Zakonu o socijalnoj skrbi (NN 157/13, 152/14, 99/15, 52/16, 16/17 i 130/17) samohrani roditelj je roditelj koji sam skrbi za svoje dijete i uzdržava ga, a jednoroditeljska obitelj je obitelj koju čine dijete, odnosno djeca i jedan roditelj. Prema postmodernističkoj paradigmi velika je važnost uporabe jezika (Ajduković, 2008), a prema Raboteg-Šarić, Pećnik i Josipović (2003), termin "jednoroditeljske obitelji" je najprikladniji, jer je vrijednosno neutralan i jer ističe ono što je zajedničko samohranim roditeljima, a to jest činjenica da jedan roditelj sam odgaja dijete.

Ključne riječi: obitelj, jednoroditeljska obitelj, fenomen siromaštva djece

Introduction

Family is the pillar of every society and is as such the focus of attention of scientists from different scientific disciplines. Although they differ in terms of determining the basic characteristics of family, most scientists agree that biological and social reproduction of life represent the basic functions of family. Family has always been the primary community whose task has been to provide optimal conditions for the growth and the development of a child (Maleš, 1999).

Family is a community made up of spouses or cohabiting partners, children and other relatives living together, earning a living, obtaining profit in some other way and spending it together (Social Welfare Act OG 157/13, 152/14, 99/15, 52/16, 16/17 and 130/17).

Constant transformations of society lead to a transformation of family which gradually changes itself and its roles, as well as adjusts to social requirements and needs. During the development of society, family has quite successfully resisted various challenges put before it (economic, political, cultural, etc.). Each of said challenges represented a new test of family adaptability as the structure, value and functions of family were continuously put to the test (Ljubetić, 2006). Some of said changes in the family structure include: a decrease in the number of marriages entered into, an increase in the number of divorces, a decline in fertility rates, a decline in fertility in marital unions, an increase in age when one enters into the first marriage, a greater propensity of couples to cohabit, an increase in the number of children born out of wedlock, an increase in the number of employed women (mothers), new marriages after divorce (Raboteg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović, 2003), and families in which children grow up with one biological parent and a stepmother or a stepfather (Ljubetić, 2006).

There are very few scientific researches on family structure, especially on single-parent families, and they do not follow the rapid changes within the family structure. Therefore, we can draw conclusions on problems and difficulties in single-parent families based on a small number of researches conducted. Society is expected to provide families with the greatest protection and support possible, regardless of the type of family, so that they can fully fulfill their tasks and responsibilities within the community (Maleš, 1999). However, the society's response to the needs of families, and especially of single-parent families, is not quick, strong or effective enough. Apart from the phrase "single-parent family", other phrases were once used in professional literature as synonyms, such as: "abandoned" or "incomplete family", "deficient family", "broken family", "truncated" or "fractional family". However, due to their stigmatization and negative connotations, such phrases have since been abandoned. Today, phrases with a narrower meaning are used, for instance "single parent", "one parent", "parent without a spouse" and "parent living alone" (Piorkovska-Petrović, 1990). According to the Social Welfare Act (OG 157/13, 152/14, 99/15, 52/16, 16/17 and 130/17), a single parent is a parent who takes care of their child and supports them on their own, and a single-parent family is a family

made up of a child or children and one parent. According to the postmodern paradigm, language use is of great importance (Ajduković, 2008), and according to Rabateg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović (2003), the term “single-parent family” is the most appropriate one, as it is value-neutral and points to what single parents have in common, which is the fact that one parent raises a child alone.

One of the biggest challenges faced by single-parent families are problems of economic nature. Studies show that single-parent families are at increased risk of poverty, as well as clearly point to numerous harmful factors of life in poverty, both for parents and for the development of a child.

There is no universal or single definition of poverty. According to the Scottish Poverty-Information Unit (BBC, 2005, Bejaković, 2005), people are poor whenever they do not have enough resources for their material needs, and whenever their conditions exclude them from active participation in activities considered commonplace within the society. Poverty is manifested in a variety of ways, including a lack of income and resources necessary to ensure sustainable existence, as well as hunger and malnutrition, poor health, unavailability or limited access to education and other basic services, an increase in mortality, including mortality from illness, homelessness, inadequate housing conditions, unstable environment, social discrimination and isolation (Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020).

Method

This review paper also contains commented data on the rates of single-parent families and poverty for Croatia and the European Union. The results are based on the data collected during the census (2011) by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, as well as on Eurostat research data (2015) and the results obtained during previous researches on the topic in question.

Results and discussion

Single-parent families

The European Union

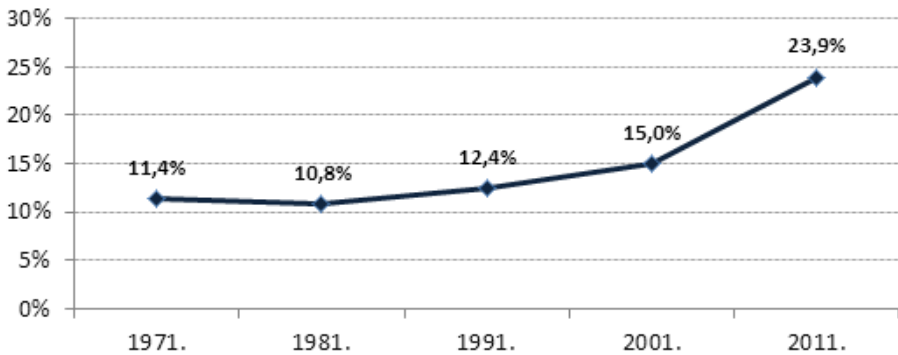
The nuptiality rate in the European Union dropped from 7.9 to 4.2 per 1,000 inhabitants from 1964 to 2014, while the divorce rate increased from 0.8 to 1.9 in the same period.

Eurostat data (2015) show that 40% European Union children are born out of wedlock, while the share of single-parent families amounts to 16% (Eurostat, 2011).

Out of the total number of families in the European Union, 13.4% are mothers with children, while 2.6% are fathers with children. The highest number of single-parent families in the total number of families with children was found in Latvia (40%), followed by Estonia (30.73%) and Lithuania (30.21%). The lowest number of single-parent families was found in Cyprus (12.77%), Greece (14.53%) and the Netherlands (17.74%).

Republic of Croatia

Over the last three decades, the total number of families in the Republic of Croatia showed a significant decrease in the share of married couples with children, as well as an increase in the number of single-parent families. The share of single-parent families (according to Croatian censi) is shown in Graph 1.



Graph 1 Share of single-parent families throughout the years

It is apparent that, according to population censuses in Croatia, the proportion of single-parent families was 11.4% in 1971, 10.8% in 1981, 12.4% in 1991, and 15% in 2001 (Puljiz and Zrinščak 2002). According to the census data for 2011 from the Central Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of single-parent families amounted to as much as 23.9% of all families.

There are five times more single mothers than fathers in single-parent families, i.e. 19.6% of all Croatian families are mothers with children, and 3.8% are fathers with children. Furthermore, there is an increasing number of children born out of wedlock. Although data for the Republic of Croatia are not as high as in some other countries in Western Europe (about 30%), an increasing trend is evident. Namely, the number of children born out of wedlock in Croatia ranged from 5-7% from 1960 to 1999 (Akrap and Živić, 2001), while in 2003 it was 10.1% (CROSAT, 2005), and in 2014 it was already 17.3% (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia, 2015).

The Risk of Poverty in the EU

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2015), the average rate of the risk of poverty for the European Union in 2014 was 17.2%, and Croatia was ranked eighth according to height of this rate, in the group of countries with an above-average risk of poverty (19.4 %). The highest rate of the risk of poverty in 2014 was found in Romania (25.4%), followed by Spain (22.2%), and Greece (22.1%). The rate of the risk of poverty in Croatia is 19.4 percent. The lowest rates of poverty risk were recorded in the Czech Republic (9.7%), the Netherlands (11.6%), and Denmark (11.9%).

According to age and sex, the poverty rate is highest in people aged 65 and older (23.1%), and it is higher in women than in men. According to a research done by Carlson and Concoran, (2001), single mothers with children are five times more likely to live in poverty than children with married parents.

The Impact of Poverty on Children in Single-Parent Families

Along with the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty, we are also increasingly faced with the infantilization of poverty, i.e. the increase in the number of poor children. According to Šučur (2001), the reason for the increase in the number of poor women and children is most often found in the increase of single-parent families. The risk of poverty for single-parent families is above average, and the rates of infant poverty in single-parent families are four times higher than those in two-parent families.

The phenomenon of child poverty is extremely total, and the consequences of experiencing life in poverty may have more far-reaching and greater consequences on children than on adults. Child poverty is not just the state of the present, but it is also a danger of growing up in, and being doomed to, poverty. Also, according to the findings of Dobrotić, Pećnik, and Baraen (2015), children growing up in single-parent families are faced with a greater risk of lower educational outcomes and of leaving the education system early than children growing up in two-parent families.

The responsibility and duty of each community is to take care of and to care for the most vulnerable groups of society. The society directs special care towards the well-being of children. In 2013, the Croatian UNICEF Office initiated and facilitated the implementation of a comprehensive survey on poverty and well-being of pre-school children in our country, and the authors of the research are Prof. Zoran Šučur, PhD, Mirjana Kletečki Radović, PhD, Olja Družić Ljubotina, assistant professor, and Zdenko Babić, associate professor. In addition to the data on the spread of the risk of poverty among pre-school children in Croatia, the living conditions of pre-school children in the most unfavorable financial situations were also analyzed in detail; namely those of the children from families who receive social assistance. According to the results of this research in 2012, 20.5% of pre-school children lived below the relative poverty threshold, more than 15% of poor pre-school children lived in urban areas in single-parent families, while the propor-

tion of this group of children in rural areas was 3 times smaller. Furthermore, the results showed that 65% of children in poor families lived in villages, that 68% of families with pre-school children who receive social assistance lacked money for food, that 62% of pre-school children from poor families lived in the country, and that 39% of them in the city do not attend kindergarten because the parents cannot afford it; that almost 1/4 of poor preschool children live in households where no one is employed, and that nearly 1/3 of children with developmental difficulties in families who receive social assistance have difficulty accessing rehabilitation services. This data is clearly visible in Table 1.

Table 1. Some of the results of the research on the poverty and well-being of pre-school children (Šućur, Kletečki Radović, Družić Ljubotina, and Babić, 2013)

| | % |
|---|------|
| Preschool children below the poverty threshold | 20.5 |
| Children in urban areas in single-parent families | 15 |
| Children from poor families in the country | 65 |
| Poor children from households where no one is employed | 25 |
| Roma children who lack in most things necessary for child development | 50 |

According to the aforementioned UNICEF research, pre-school children living in poverty are highly materially and socially deprived in all areas required for optimum development (Šućur et al., 2015). Health services and other expert services in the community are often unavailable to poor families in rural areas outside city centers. Low-income families cannot afford adequate food, shelter, and other material goods that aid a child's healthy cognitive and social development (Hanson, McLanahan and Thomson 1997, Hill et al. 2001; all cited in Carlson and Concoran, 2001).

The economic status of neighborhoods and schools that give bad examples and create social situations of alcoholism, drugs, and aggressive behavior affect the development of the child (Obradović and Obradović, 2006). Moreover, poverty and economic stress may lead to inadequate upbringing, which bears negative consequences for child development and adjustment (Conger et al., 1994, Dodge, Petit, and Bates 1994, cited in Carlson and Corcoran, 2001).

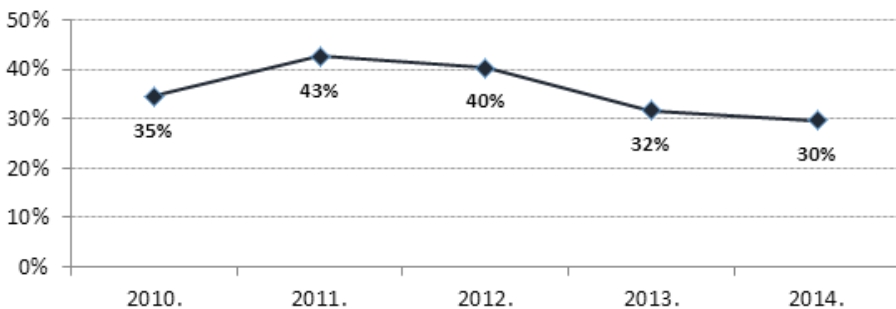
Financial Status and the Risk of Poverty in Single-Parent Families

When discussing the financial status, although material difficulties proved to be a mediator in the relationship between single parenting and psychological well-being, and the quality of life of the parents, it is important to note that the very structure of single-parent families further contributes to the likelihood of the development of material hardships. Single-parent families face more risks such as poverty, discrimination in employment, economic deprivation, and low income, but also poor accessibility and information, social network shortcomings, and inadequate social support. Thus, the relationship between single-parenthood and these factors is complex and multidimen-

sional. At the same time, financial status is an important determinant of the well-being and quality of life. The aforementioned unfavorable social circumstances pose a threat to the needs of members of single-parent families and may lead to unfavorable consequences on the personal, family, and community level. This suggests that single-parent families, along with balancing their professional and family lives, low levels of education, and insufficient social security coverage (Bonoli, 2005) represent a group of new social risks (Ajduković, 2008).

As previously mentioned, one of the increased risks in single-parent families is the risk of poverty. According to the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (Bejaković, 2005), people are poor if they do not have enough resources for their material needs and are excluded from active participation in activities that are commonplace in society. Poverty is thus manifested in a variety of ways, including a lack of income and resources necessary to ensure sustainable existence, as well as hunger and malnutrition, poor health, unavailability or limited access to education and other basic services, an increase in mortality, including mortality from illness, homelessness, inadequate housing conditions, unstable environment, social discrimination and isolation (Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020, 2014).

A Eurostat survey has shown that single parents in Europe have, on average, a 23% lower standard of living compared to all families with children, i.e. a 27% lower standard in relation to the entire population (Raboteg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović, 2003). The results of the Central Bureau of Statistics (2015) show that single-parent families have a significantly higher poverty rate than full families, and that it ranged from 34.6% to 29.6% between 2010 and 2014. According to a research done by Carlson and Concoran (2001), single mothers with children are five times more likely to live in poverty than children with married parents. Rates of the risk of poverty from 2010 to 2014 in single-parent families in the Republic of Croatia, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), are shown in graph 2.



Graph 2. Rates of the risk of poverty from 2010 to 2014 in single-parent families in the Republic of Croatia, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2017).

The results show that the single-parent poverty risk rate reached its peak in 2011 (a high 43%) and gradually decreased thereafter, to 30% in 2014.

Economic status is an important mediator of influence on family structure and child development; the family structure/economic status correlation and poor income have been proven to have adverse effects on children, as reflected in poor academic achievement, behavioral problems, and worse health (Duncan and BrooksGunn 1997, as cited in Carlson and Concoran, 2001).

Additionally, economic status has emerged as an important factor in parent well-being in single-parent families, manifesting through psychological problems (such as anxiety and depression), physical health, and quality of life in general, which impacts the overall family functioning.

According to a meta-analysis of 67 studies (Amato, 2001; Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2006), if the single parent is the mother, adverse effects of poorer economic status in the family manifest through: lower sociability, lower child self-esteem, an increased number of emotional issues, a higher level of unacceptable behavior, and poor academic achievement of children.

Social support as a solution

Positive effects of social support in almost every aspect of life have been the subject of long-standing research. One of the early definitions presents social support as a means secured through interaction with others and as a buffer against stress (Cohen, Wills, 1985, as cited in Karačić, 2012). A large number of studies indicate that people with a well-developed social support network are of better physical health than those with fewer social relations (Karačić, 2012).

Social support contributes to well-being both directly and indirectly, acting as a factor of protection from acute and chronic stress (Pećnik and Raboteg-Šarić, 2004). The reduction of stress and its adverse effects occurs in two ways: people with high levels of social support can assess a stressful situation as being less threatening than people with lower levels of social support, because they know that there are other people who are willing to help; social support improves the person's ability to cope with a stressor because of access to providers of various forms of emotional, practical, or material assistance (Pećnik and Raboteg-Šarić, 2004).

Economic pressures, business demands, household demands, and informal social support are reflected in the quality of parental behavior in single-parent and two-parent families (Leinonen et al., 2003, as cited in Pećnik and Raboteg-Šarić, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that a series of studies show that social support is an important factor or protection against adverse effects of stress on parenting itself (Pećnik, 2003, as cited in Pećnik and Raboteg-Šarić, 2004).

In the context of single-parent families, social support may manifest through emotional support (e.g. after divorce and the accompanying stress), but also through entirely practical support at the level of society. Such support may manifest through:

- Accessible high-quality services for children and families that enable family and work reconciliation;
- Early childhood institutions as an investment in children that will result in improved educational, social, and employment outcomes
- Customized and flexible forms of work for single parents
- An improved support/alimony system
- Targeted family benefits through the social protection system (e.g. upgrading of single-parent family benefits, universal child allowance, housing allowance, etc.)
- Employment assistance, single-mother homes, financial aid, sick child care, parent-child workshops, etc.

Earlier research (Cairney et al., 2003; Cohen and Dekel, 2000) has confirmed that this form of social support in particular may play a significant role in the relationship between family structure and psychological well-being and/or the quality of life of parents of single-parent families.

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