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Public Health
England

Official Statistics

Statistical commentary: children living with parents in emotional distress, March 2021 update

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New in this update

This statistical commentary explains the content of the data release on the proportion of children living with parents in emotional distress, for the period 2018 to 2019. It is based on [UK Household Longitudinal Study](#) main survey (wave 9) and therefore it does not include the [COVID-19 survey data](#).

Parental emotional distress (in [mothers](#) and [fathers](#)) can lead to mental health problems including anxiety or depression in children. It is associated with an increased risk of behavioural and emotional difficulties in later childhood and adulthood.

This update includes new data on the proportion of children living with either one or both parents reporting symptoms of emotional distress overall. Living with at least one parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress is broken down by:

- family type (lone parent or couple parent family)
- work status (working or workless family)

This release also includes:

- data tables for all indicators, including estimates for previous years
- full background and method document

All indicators are based on self reported questionnaire data.

The term ‘workless family’ is used when a child is living in a family where no adult (parent or guardian) is in paid employment. This definition applies to both ‘lone parent’ and ‘couple parent’ families as a child can live with a different parent or guardian throughout the year or from one wave of the survey to the next.

Main findings

This update shows that for the period 2018 to 2019 in England:

- around 1 in 3 children lived with at least one parent reporting emotional distress – this measure includes children living in either a lone or couple parent family
- around 1 in 4 children lived with a mother (in either a lone or couple parent family) reporting emotional distress
- around 1 in 7 children lived with a father (in either a lone or couple parent family) reporting emotional distress
- around 1 in 22 children lived with 2 parents reporting emotional distress – this measure includes children living in couple parent families only

All 4 indicators show an increase on the data reported for the period 2017 to 2018.

Children living in couple parent families were more likely to live with a parent reporting emotional distress if both parents were out of work.

Summary

This summary adds to the main findings in relation to:

- change over time in the overall indicators
- differences by family type and work status

Confidence intervals are not provided for the indicators and differences in proportions may not be statistically significant.

Parental emotional distress: change over time

There was a 1.2% point increase in the proportion of children living with at least one parent reporting emotional distress, compared to the period 2017 to 2018. This is the fourth consecutive study wave showing an increase for this indicator – a rise from 25.6% in the period 2014 to 2015 and now at 31.6%.

The proportion of children living with a mother reporting emotional distress increased by less than 1%, from 23.6% to 24.1% in the most recent study wave. This was also the fourth consecutive increase, beginning with a figure of 19.1% for the period 2014 to 2015.

The proportion of children living with a father reporting emotional distress increased from 12.5% to 14.2%, a change of 1.7% in the most recent study wave. This was the third consecutive increase, beginning with a figure of 11.4% for the period 2015 to 2016.

The proportion of children living with 2 parents reporting emotional distress increased from 3.6% to 4.5% in the most recent study wave. This was the third consecutive increase, beginning with a figure of 3.3% for the period 2015 to 2016.

Parental emotional distress: family type and work status

Children living in workless households between 2018 to 2019, were more likely to have a parent reporting emotional distress regardless of family type.

Almost 6 in 10 children (58.5%) living with 2 parents out of work, had at least one parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress. This compared to 3 in 10 (29.0%) for children living with 2 parents where at least one is in paid employment.

For children in lone parent families, the difference between working and workless families was less pronounced.

For just over 4 in 10 children (41.3%) living with a lone parent who was unemployed, the parent reported symptoms of emotional distress. This compares to 35.4% for children living with a lone parent in paid employment.

Background and further information

This publication provides an estimate of the proportion of children whose parents are experiencing emotional distress. It also provides information on the role that being a lone parent and being not in work play in parental mental health.

These data are based on the self reported 12-item General Health Questionnaire as collected in the [Understanding Society Longitudinal Study](#) from 2010 to 2018. Further details about the methodology are available in the supplementary information in this publication and from the Understanding Society survey documentation. Further analysis and findings are available from [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families - indicators and evidence base](#) published by [Department of Work and Pensions](#).

Responsible statisticians: Stephen Cole, Danny Yip, Gabi Price

Product leads: Cam Lugton, Julia Verne

For queries relating to this publication, please contact mhdnin@phe.gov.uk

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