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Public Health
England

Official Statistics

Statistical commentary: Children living with parents in emotional distress, 2019 update

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1. New in this update

Parental emotional distress can lead to mental health problems including anxiety or depression. It is associated with an increased risk of later behavioural and emotional difficulties in children.

This commentary presents data on the proportion of children living with parents reporting symptoms of emotional distress in England for the period 2016 to 2017.

This update includes new data on:

- the proportion of children living with either 1 or both parents reporting symptoms of emotional distress overall
- the proportion of children where at least 1 parent reports symptoms of emotional distress by family type and work status

Trend data between the period 2010 to 2011 and 2015 to 2016 has also been updated due to changes in survey methodology.

This commentary is accompanied by:

- data tables for all indicators
- full background and method document

All indicators are based on self-reported questionnaire data.

2. Main findings

This update shows that for the period 2016 to 2017 in England:

- around 1 in 3 children lived with at least 1 parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- over 1 in 5 children lived with a mother reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- around 1 in 8 children lived with a father reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- 1 in 28 children lived with both a mother and father reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- there was an increase in the proportion of children living with parents in emotional distress for all indicators compared to data reported between 2015 and 2016
- children were more likely to live with a parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress if both parents are out of work

3. 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 different.

3.1 Parental emotional distress: change over time

The proportion of children living with at least 1 parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress increased from 26.5% between 2015 to 2016 to 29.0% between 2016 to 2017, an increase of 2.5%.

An increase of 2.1% was recorded for the proportion of children living with a mother reporting symptoms of emotional distress. The proportion increased from 20.2% between 2015 to 2016 to 22.3% between 2016 to 2017.

The increase for the proportions of children living with a father or both mother and father reporting symptoms of emotional distress between the period 2015 and 2016, and 2016 to 2017 was less than 1%.

3.2 Parental emotional distress: family type and work status

The proportion of children living with a parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress varied by family type. In the period 2016 to 2017, the proportion of children living with a parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress was highest if no parent was in employment.

Around half of all children (50.6%) living in couple-parent families where neither parent was in work had at least 1 parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress. This is compared to around a quarter of all children (26.4%) living in couple-parent families where at least 1 parent was in work had at least 1 parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress.

For lone-parent families where the parent was not in work, 37.0% of children were living with their parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress. For lone-parent families where the parent was in work, 34.2% of children were living with their parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress.

4. 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 2017. Users should also note that the Understanding Society Wave 8 data release (November 2018) included some minor changes to data from previous waves. 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: Sulia Celebi, Gabi Price

Product leads: Cam Lugton, Julia Verne

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

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