



Official Statistics

Statistical commentary: children living with parents in emotional distress, 2020 update

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New in this update

Parental emotional distress 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 commentary presents data on the proportion of children living with parents reporting symptoms of emotional distress in England for the period 2017 to 2018 and compares figures to the previous year.

This update includes new data on the proportion of children:

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

This commentary is accompanied by:

- data tables for all indicators
- 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 2017 to 2018 in England:

- around 1 in 3 children lived with at least one parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- around 1 in 4 children lived with a mother reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- 1 in 8 children lived with a father reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- 1 in 28 children lived with both mother and father reporting symptoms of emotional distress
- compared to data reported between 2016 and 2017, there was an increase in the proportion of children living with at least one parent, mother or father in emotional distress
- compared to data reported between 2016 and 2017, there was no change in the proportion of children where both mother and father reported symptoms of emotional distress
- children were more likely to live with a parent reporting symptoms of 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 different.

Parental emotional distress: change over time

Since 2014 to 2015 the proportion of children living with at least one parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress increased year on year. Between the period 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018 the figure increased from 29% to 30.4%, a change of 1.4%.

An increase of 1.3% was recorded for the proportion of children living with a mother reporting symptoms of emotional distress. The proportion increased from 22.3% between 2016 to 2017 to 23.6% between 2017 to 2018.

The increase for the proportions of children living with a father reporting symptoms of emotional distress between the period 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018 was less than 1%, increasing from 12.1% to 12.5%.

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 2017 to 2018, the proportion of children living with a parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress was highest for 'workless families'.

Nearly half of all children (48.4%) living in 'couple-parent' and 'workless' families had at least one parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress. This is compared to less than one third of all children (28.2%) living in 'couple-parent' families where at least one parent was in work.

For 'lone-parent' and 'workless' families, 46.3% of children were living with at least one parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress. For 'lone-parent' families where the parent was in work, 31.1% of children were living with the parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress.

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](#).

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