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Single Parenthood in the Lives of Québec Children: A common but often transitory reality

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I ncreasing instability among couples in Québec in recent decades has had a profound impact on the environment in which children are growing up. An indication of this is the increase, since the early 1980s, in the proportion of children living in a single-parent household. For example, in 1981, 10.9% of Québec children 5 to 9 years of age lived with a single parent. By 1991, this proportion had increased to 14.9%, and in 2006, to 20.6%.¹ Although these data clearly reveal a trend in family structure, they present only a snapshot of single-parenthood and do not provide details on the proportion of children who lived with a single parent at one time or another during their childhood.

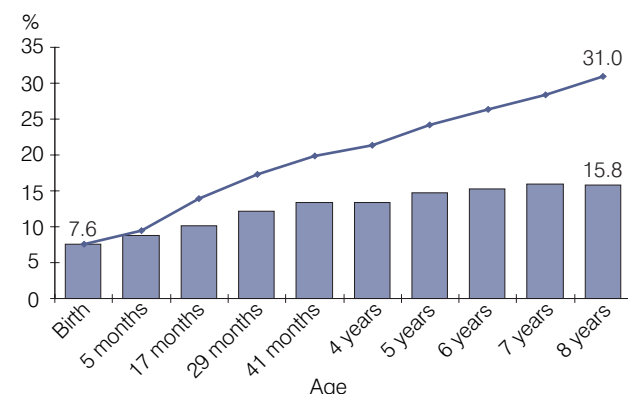
This is why, in order to gain a better understanding of single-parenthood in the lives of Québec children, an analysis was conducted on data from the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD 1998-2010). Detailed data on the spouse/partner history of parents collected over the years in this study have provided a means of indicating the proportion of children who have been in a single-parent household, the event that precipitated it, and the age at which they experienced it. The analysis here covers the first episode of single-parenthood experienced in the first eight years of life of children born in Québec at the end of the 1990s² (see definitions in the box).

At 8 years of age, approximately 30% of children had already experienced being in a single-parent household

According to QLSCD data, at birth nearly 8% of children were living with a single parent, namely their mother (Figure 1). This proportion increased to 12% at the age of 2½ years (29 months) and to 16% at the age of 8 years. However, a significantly higher proportion of children had experienced living in a single-parent household at one time or another in their lives. Indeed, among children born in Québec at the end of the 1990s, approximately 17% had lived with a single parent before the age of 2½ years and 31% before the age of 8 years. The median³ age of children at the first episode of single parenthood was one year and 11 months.

The differences in proportions at given ages and the cumulative proportions are in large part related to the transitory nature of episodes of single parenthood. For example, among children born to a single parent, approximately half experienced having a new spouse/partner or biological father in the household before attaining the age of 2½ years.

Figure 1
Proportion of children living in a single-parent household at a given age¹ and cumulative proportions having experienced this situation at least once, Québec, 1998 to 2006



1. The ages on the horizontal axis represent the median age of children at each of the QLSCD survey rounds, from 1998 when they were 5 months old, to 2006, when they were approximately 8 years old. The bars provide a snapshot of the proportion of children living in a single-parent household at each data collection (in the household surveyed). The curve illustrates the cumulative proportions of children at a given age who had already experienced a first episode of single parenthood.

Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, QLSCD 1998-2010.

Definitions

Single-parent household: Household composed of one or more children living with a single parent (no spouse/partner present in the household), most frequently the mother. Single parenthood is defined here from the point of view of the household surveyed, without regard to the modalities of custody or the type of contact the child has with the non-residing parent. Therefore, it is possible the child lives only in the household surveyed (because, for example, he/she has no contact with the other parent or does not reside with him/her). It is also possible that he/she resides in two single-parent households, sharing his/her time between them, or resides partly in a single-parent household and partly in one with his/her other parent and this person's new spouse/partner.

Episode of single-parenthood: Period during which the child lives with only one parent (with no spouse/partner present in the household), irrespective of the duration. The episode of single parenthood can follow being born to a single parent, a voluntary break-up of the parents (married or common-law), or the death of one of the parents.

1. Source: Statistics Canada census data. These data represent the proportions of children 5 to 9 years of age living with a single parent among all children in this age group in census families. However, this should be interpreted with caution, because in 2001 many changes were made to the concept of "census family." For further details, see: STATISTICS CANADA (2003). *Changes to Family Concepts for the 2001 Census*, Ottawa, Statistics Canada (online version).
 2. Therefore, children who arrived in Québec after their birth who were part of the same age cohort of the initial sample (comprising approximately 9% of children 8 years of age in 2006), were excluded from the analysis (Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, [data processed from the Medicare registration file of insured persons], *Fichier d'inscription des personnes assurées*, Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec, 2006).
 3. Value separating a population into two equal parts.

Nearly half of the first episodes of single parenthood occurred after the break-up of the parents' common-law union

Among children who had lived in a single-parent household before the age of 8 years, nearly half (15% of all children) had experienced this because of a break-up of the common-law union of their parents (Figure 2). In comparison, 26% (8% of all children) had experienced this situation because of the break-up of their parents' marriage, and an equivalent proportion had been born to a single parent. A very small percentage of children experienced single parenthood because of the death of one of the parents.

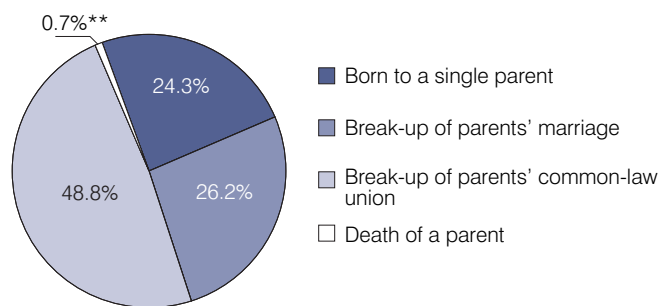
It can be construed that the high proportion of episodes of single parenthood attributed to the break-up of a common-law relationship is related to the spread of this type of union as means of family formation in Québec. However, among children born in Québec in 1997-1998 (all proportions taken into account), almost as many children were born to married parents as to common-law parents (44% vs. 48%). Nevertheless, 35% of children born to parents in a common law union saw their parents separate before the age of 8, compared to 15% of those born to married parents (Figure 3).

Furthermore, the first episodes of single parenthood following the break-up of a common-law union occurred earlier in the lives of children. Indeed, children in a common-law union experienced single parenthood at the median age of 2 years and 7 months, compared to 4 years and 4 months for children born to a married couple. Previous analyses of QLSCD data have revealed that children whose parents were in a common-law union when they were born were more likely than children whose parents were married to see their parents separate in the years right after their birth, even when taking into account a set of characteristics related to the couple's lives, such as family income, mother's age, duration of the union or the existence of children from a previous union.⁴ Therefore, the reasons which can explain the greater fragility of common-law unions compared to married ones remain to be determined.

Conclusion

Numerous Québec children have experienced at least one episode of single parenthood. Among children born in Québec at the end of the 1990s, approximately 30% were born to a single parent or experienced the separation of their parents before the age of 8. For some children, the first episode of single parenthood is only the first step in a family trajectory marked by numerous changes. An in-depth analysis of the QLSCD data will likely provide a more detailed description of the family pathways of children, notably the duration and number of episodes of single parenthood, as well as the modalities of co-parenting following the

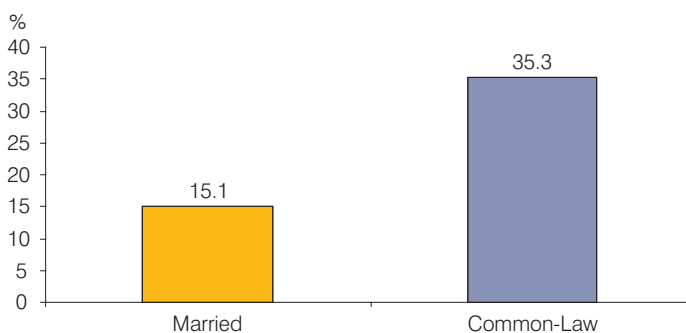
Figure 2
Event at the origin of the first episode of single parenthood experienced by 8-year-old children, Québec, 1998 to 2006



** Coefficient of variation higher than 25%; imprecise estimate provided for information purposes only.

Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, QLSCD 1998-2010.

Figure 3
Proportion of 8-year-old children having experienced at least one episode of single parenthood, by type of union of the parents at the birth of the child, Québec, 1998 to 2006



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, QLSCD 1998-2010.

break-up of the parents' union. Combined with the wealth of data on the health and well-being of children, such data should help us gain a better understanding of the impact of changes in family dynamics and structure on child development in Québec.

4. N. MARCIL-GRATTON, C. LE BOURDAIS and É. LAPIERRE-ADAMCYK (2002). "The Couple – Part II. Parental Separation in Early Childhood: A Preliminary Investigation," in: *Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD 1998-2002) – From Birth to 29 Months*, Québec, Institut de la statistique du Québec, Vol. 2, No. 11.

About the survey

The Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD 1998-2010) is conducted by the Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ) in collaboration with various partners. It is funded by the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, the Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés, the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon, and the ISQ. The main objective of this study is to understand pathways and to identify the factors which, during early childhood, contribute to the social adjustment and the educational achievement of Québec children once they are in the school system.

For more information on the QLSCD, also known as "I am, I'll be", please visit our website at: www.jesuisjserai.stat.gouv.qc.ca.

To access the microdata files of the study, contact the Research Data Access Centre of the ISQ (Centre d'accès aux données de recherche de l'ISQ – CADRISQ) at www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/cadrisq, or call 1 514 343-2299.

This fact sheet, translated by James Lawler, is also available in French under the title « La monoparentalité dans la vie des jeunes enfants québécois : une réalité fréquente mais souvent transitoire ».

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