

Single Parents' Subjective Well-being in Europe: A Multilevel Analysis

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Abstract: This study investigates how single parenthood is associated with subjective well-being across European countries, with a particular focus on financial satisfaction, social connectedness, and welfare policy. Moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between single and coupled parents, we introduce a four-category typology that distinguishes between parents who are single or in a couple, and whether they have experienced a divorce. Using multilevel data from the European Social Survey, we examine both individual-level and macro-level mediators/moderators of the relationship between family structure and life satisfaction. Results confirm that single parents report significantly lower subjective well-being compared to coupled parents. Financial satisfaction emerges as a key mediating mechanism, substantially reducing the well-being gap, although not eliminating it. Social connectedness plays a more consistent moderating role. At the macro level, generous and targeted welfare policies, particularly in childcare and parental leave, help narrow well-being disparities, but gaps persist even in the most supportive contexts. Our findings underscore the complex nature of disadvantage among single parents. They highlight the need for context-sensitive, targeted interventions that go beyond income support to address time poverty, caregiving strain, and structural exclusion.

Keywords: Subjective Well-Being • Single-Parent Families • Family Policy • Multilevel Modeling • Social Inequality

1 Introduction

Single parenthood has become increasingly prevalent in Europe due to social, economic, and demographic shifts associated with the Second Demographic Transition (SDT). Declining marriage rates, increasing divorce rates, and a growing acceptance of non-traditional family structures have reshaped family dynamics (Lesthaeghe 2020; Biegert *et al.* 2022). This study examines how single parenthood is associated with subjective well-being (SWB) in different European contexts.

SWB, encompassing dimensions such as life satisfaction, emotional health, and social connectedness, serves as a comprehensive metric for assessing quality of life

(Cooke *et al.* 2016; DiMaria *et al.* 2020). While single parenthood is often linked to lower levels of SWB, this association is not uniform. Rather, it is shaped by many factors, ranging from individual characteristics and household circumstances to broader societal and policy contexts. Financial strains, social isolation, the dual responsibilities of caregiving, and income generation are frequently cited as critical determinants of single parents' well-being. However, these effects may not be uniform and could differ across countries and over time, depending on contextual factors.

Existing literature has made significant strides in identifying the economic and social burdens of single parenthood (e.g., Avison/Davies 2005; Vignoli *et al.* 2014), but gaps remain in understanding the complex interplay between individual and contextual influences. This research aims to address these gaps by adopting a multidimensional perspective that integrates individual experiences with macro-level policy and societal contexts. The European Social Survey (ESS) provides an ideal dataset for examining these dynamics, offering rich, cross-nationally comparable data spanning many years. Using this data, the present study explores the association between single parenthood and SWB across European countries. It employs a multilevel modeling approach to account for variation at the individual, country, and time levels, enabling a nuanced understanding of how policies and societal norms shape the well-being of single-parent families.

Countries differ significantly in their approaches to supporting single-parent households, with some providing robust welfare systems, while others offer minimal support. These disparities create an opportunity to evaluate how different policy frameworks influence the well-being of single parents and to draw lessons for enhancing social protection.

The diversification of family forms associated with the SDT has led to a growing share of children living outside traditional two-parent households. While this trend is well documented, less is known about how different routes into single parenthood relate to subjective well-being. Moreover, the experience of single parenthood is shaped by both individual and institutional factors, calling for a multi-level perspective. To address these gaps, this study is guided by three key research questions. First, how does the subjective well-being of single parents compare to that of coupled parents across Europe, accounting for differences in partnership and separation histories? Second, to what extent do individual-level factors, such as financial satisfaction and social support, moderate this association, buffering the disadvantages faced by single parents? Third, how do welfare policies influence the SWB gap, and to what extent do national policy interventions mitigate well-being disparities between single and coupled parents? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to clarify the mechanisms underlying single parents' well-being and assess the role of the context, providing insights for policymakers and contributing to a broader understanding of how structural support and financial security can reduce disparities in SWB for single-parent families across Europe.

2 Theoretical framework: A multi-dimensional perspective

Single parenthood has become more common in Europe, growing steadily over the decades. This change is closely tied to what researchers call the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), a period when traditional family structures started to shift. Fewer people were getting married, divorce rates were climbing, and more children were born outside of marriage. These trends reflected a broader acceptance of diverse family arrangements, as well as growing individualism and gender equality (*Lesthaeghe* 2020). Today, single-parent households are a significant part of Europe's social fabric, accounting for an increasing share of families across the continent (*Biegert et al.* 2022; *Nieuwenhuis* 2022).

At the same time, life course theory reminds us that transitions such as separation and the onset of single parenthood cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, their impact on well-being depends on timing, sequence, and institutional context (*Bernardi et al.* 2019). Becoming a single parent at different life stages, or in more or less supportive settings, may lead to very different outcomes. Moreover, life trajectories are shaped by both individual agency and structural constraints, suggesting a need to consider selection processes and long-term consequences jointly (*Kalmijn/Leopold* 2021).

2.1 The many faces of single parenthood and well-being

Subjective well-being is a multifaceted construct measured through various instruments. This study focuses on life satisfaction as assessed by the European Social Survey (ESS), a commonly used measure within the hedonic well-being framework (*Cooke et al.* 2016). SWB is particularly important as it reflects a person's subjective evaluation of the quality of life as a whole and is linked to positive outcomes such as better health and life expectancy (*Diener/Chan* 2011) and increased productivity (*DiMaria et al.* 2020). Beyond personal benefits, strong SWB fosters social cohesion through enhanced relationships and community engagement (*Putnam* 2000). While SWB is influenced by stable factors such as personality traits, genetic predispositions, and long-term socio-economic status, research indicates that approximately one-third of SWB is shaped by demographic events, suggesting potential for policy interventions (*Lucas/Donnellan* 2007, 2012).

Research shows that single parents, on average, report lower life satisfaction than parents in two-parent households do. The extent of this disparity is shaped by various mechanisms, such as economic struggles, social stigma, and emotional stress (*Avison/Davies* 2005; *Vignoli et al.* 2014; *Leopold/Kalmijn* 2024; *Ballerini/Guetto* 2024).

The psychological toll of union dissolution is well documented. *Tavares and Aassve* (2013) show that partnership breakups significantly increase psychological distress, with pronounced effects for individuals with high levels of neuroticism. This underscores that the mental health consequences of family disruption are shaped by pre-dissolution vulnerabilities, rather than representing a uniform shock. *McLanahan's* (2004) concept of "diverging destinies" highlights how disadvantaged

individuals are not only more likely to enter single parenthood, but also more vulnerable to its consequences. Structural inequalities – such as education, income, and precarious employment – both increase the likelihood of separation and amplify its negative effects. This stratification lens underscores the importance of studying both individual and institutional moderators of well-being.

One of the primary explanations for lower SWB among single parents is the heightened emotional burden associated with raising children alone. Single parents often report higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety than parents in two-parent households do (*Biotteau et al. 2019; Avison/Davies 2005; Kühn et al. 2023*). For single mothers, these factors are often compounded by the struggles of balancing work and caregiving (*Van de Velde et al. 2014*). For single fathers, the challenges are slightly different but no less real, especially in societies that are less accepting of fathers taking on caregiving roles (*Avison/Davies 2005*). Additionally, a single parent's stress can shape the emotional atmosphere of the household, in turn impacting children's well-being. Furthermore, children's difficulties can feed back into the parent's stress, reinforcing a cycle of mutual influence that highlights the need to support both (*Fransson et al. 2018; Guetto et al. 2022*).

The absence of a second earner often causes financial stress. Single parents are more likely to work low-paying, unstable jobs, and many live in poverty. This is especially true in countries with weak welfare systems, where the costs of childcare and the demands of precarious jobs create constant pressure (*Horemans/Marx 2018; Nieuwenhuis/Maldonado 2018*). Beyond income, wealth disparities make single parents less able to handle unexpected expenses, leaving them more vulnerable to economic shocks (*Sierminska 2018*). The financial consequences of forming a single-parent household tend to persist over time, leading to prolonged economic strain and limiting long-term financial stability (*Fadel et al. 2025*).

Social life is another area in which single parents face difficulties. They often have smaller support networks and fewer opportunities to share caregiving responsibilities or seek emotional help. In many societies, single parenthood remains stigmatized, making it harder for these parents to feel included or supported. This isolation exacerbates feelings of stress and inadequacy (*Fransson et al. 2018*).

Pathways into single parenthood can also distinctly influence well-being outcomes (*Sierminska 2018; Kühn et al. 2023*). This study acknowledges that household structure alone cannot capture the complexity of family transitions. We therefore propose a classification that includes both current partnership status and divorce history: couples who have never divorced, couples who have, single parents who have never divorced, and single parents who have divorced. This typology reflects different channels into parenthood and allows us to isolate, as far as possible, the effects of divorce. By focusing on divorce, which is institutionally comparable across countries and strongly tied to emotional and financial disruption, we move beyond the existing literature's binary classifications.

These mechanisms are also strongly gendered. Across Europe, single parents are predominantly mothers, and single motherhood is more common among socioeconomically disadvantaged women (*Härkönen 2018*). Single fathers are less common and may follow different pathways into single parenthood. Living with a

lone father can also reflect situations with additional challenges or conflicts with the mother, which may signal more complex family circumstances (Guetto *et al.* 2023). These patterns suggest that economic penalties and time pressure are likely to be stronger for single mothers, while non-economic costs may especially matter for single fathers, who form a small group and have fewer peers and social models to rely on when reorganizing their lives as lone parents.

Policies that provide better social support can make a big difference (Horemans/Marx 2018; Nieuwenhuis/Maldonado 2018). Taken together, these mechanisms show that economic, social, and emotional dimensions should be considered jointly when studying single parents' well-being to better capture their actual needs.

2.2 Context matters: the influence of society and policy on well-being

The well-being of single parents is shaped not only by their individual and household circumstances, but also by cultural attitudes and the broader welfare policies implemented at the national level (Härkönen 2018; Leopold/Kalmijn 2016). Countries with robust welfare systems tend to report smaller disparities in SWB between single and coupled parents. In contrast, countries with weaker welfare systems expose single parents to greater economic insecurity and a higher risk of poverty. Specifically, Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (2015) argue that policies providing targeted support – such as accessible childcare, generous parental leave, and targeted income assistance – are particularly effective in reducing poverty and improving well-being among single-parent families, more so than general welfare expenditures alone.

In fact, universal child benefits can provide a basic safety net, while targeted income support programs help address specific vulnerabilities by reducing income instability. Earned income tax credits and wage subsidies further enable workforce participation and economic stability, ensuring that single parents have both immediate and sustainable economic security (Nieuwenhuis/Maldonado 2018; Bradshaw *et al.* 2018). These policies are particularly vital for single parents who lack financial support from a non-custodial co-parent. Policies to support employment and caregiving should be implemented jointly to improve the well-being of single parents. Access to affordable childcare enables parents to maintain stable employment, reducing financial strain and caregiving stress (Duvander/Korsell 2018; Härkönen 2018), while active labor market programs – which include job training, employment subsidies, and job search assistance – support single parents in securing better employment opportunities. These programs are most effective when implemented together, allowing parents to balance work and caregiving responsibilities (Sawhill 2022; Nieuwenhuis/Maldonado 2018). Cross-national evidence underscores the importance of institutional design in mitigating post-separation disadvantage. Aassve *et al.* (2007) show that marital disruption leads to significant economic penalties across European countries, but the extent of these losses varies widely depending on the structure and generosity of welfare systems.

Housing policies further contribute to financial security, as stable and affordable housing reduces economic pressure. Subsidies and homeownership assistance

programs help single parents avoid housing instability, while inclusive urban planning enhances access to essential services and social networks (*Sierminska 2018; Horemans/Marx 2018*).

Moreover, in more conservative societies, single parents may face stigma, intensifying their difficulties. While the diffusion of single-parent households and subsequent greater acceptance can reduce social isolation, it may also reflect increasing socioeconomic disadvantages, as vulnerable populations are overrepresented among single parents (*Härkönen et al. 2017*). Nonetheless, cross-national differences in post-separation parenting laws and practices can be a major source of heterogeneity. For example, where joint physical custody is common, a non-trivial share of parents classified as “single” in surveys may share time and caregiving with the other parent. Reviews indicate that, in low-conflict settings, shared care is often linked to lower parental time/financial strain and better outcomes relative to sole custody (e.g., *Steinbach 2019*). As a result, the observed single-parent disadvantage may be attenuated in such contexts, contributing to cross-national differences in well-being. Although our data do not include information on custody arrangements, such developments may partially explain differences in well-being outcomes across contexts.

Consistently with the life course perspective (*Bernardi et al. 2019*), policies can shape well-being by affecting how individuals manage critical family transitions and their aftermath. This study examines how welfare policies mediate and moderate the relationship between single parenthood and well-being by reducing the structural disadvantages faced by single parents, particularly in financial and employment stability. In addition to policy indicators, we also draw on a widely used welfare regime typology to capture broader institutional contexts. This classification distinguishes Nordic, Continental, Anglo-Saxon, Southern, and Eastern regimes, each reflecting distinct combinations of labor market regulation, family support, and social security systems. Similar strategies have been used in prior research that stratified health outcomes by welfare regime to investigate cross-country disparities and found that health disparities among lone mothers were significantly smaller in Nordic countries (*Burström et al. 2010*).

Additionally, this research assesses whether income satisfaction serves as a key buffer, neutralizing some of the financial strain that often exacerbates well-being disparities. In summary, this study highlights how different environments shape subjective well-being outcomes and the extent to which targeted interventions can reduce disparities between family structures.

3 Research questions and hypotheses

The relationship between single parenthood and subjective well-being is shaped by a combination of individual characteristics and broader policy contexts. While previous studies have consistently shown that single parents report lower levels of well-being than coupled parents do, the mechanisms driving these disparities remain a subject of debate. This study builds on existing literature by analyzing how

individual and macro-level factors mediate and moderate the relationship between single parenthood and SWB, accounting for cross-national variation in welfare policies. To guide this investigation, the study is structured around the following research questions: How does the subjective well-being of single parents compare to that of coupled parents across Europe, accounting for differences in partnership and separation histories? What individual-level factors, such as financial satisfaction and social support, mediate and moderate this relationship? To what extent do family policies influence the SWB gap between single and coupled parents?

Building on these questions, the study posits several hypotheses. First, single parenthood is expected to be negatively associated with SWB, with variations linked to separation or partnership history (H1). While this relationship has been widely documented, this study aims to confirm its persistence within the current dataset and across different European countries, assessing whether this pattern holds when accounting for individual and macro-level factors. Divorce is hypothesized to play a key role in shaping well-being outcomes. Divorced parents – especially those who are single – are expected to report lower life satisfaction than those who have never divorced, reflecting the combined effects of solo parenting and the trauma of marital dissolution. However, the “single, never-divorced” group includes individuals who have never married or cohabited, those who have cohabited without formal union or legal dissolution, never officially partnered single parents, and widowed individuals. While diverse, this group offers a meaningful contrast to divorced single parents. Pooling them together would merge distinct pathways into single parenthood and likely attenuate any divorce-specific disadvantage. Although the prevalence of single-parent families in a society may contribute to changes in social norms, it is not expected to directly alter the well-being gap once economic and policy variables are accounted for. Instead, it is used as a macro-level control variable rather than a primary hypothesis.

Second, financial satisfaction and social support are expected to significantly mediate and moderate the relationship between single parenthood and SWB (H2). Single parents with higher income satisfaction and stronger social networks are anticipated to report smaller well-being disparities, as access to financial and emotional resources can help mitigate the challenges associated with raising children alone.

Third, welfare policies are hypothesized to influence well-being disparities between single and coupled parents (H3). Single parents in countries with more generous family policies are expected to experience smaller SWB gaps. These policies likely moderate the effects of single parenthood by reducing financial strain and improving work-life balance.

These research questions and hypotheses address critical gaps in the existing literature. Previous studies have often examined either country-level policy differences or individual experiences, but rarely integrated the two. By combining these dimensions, this study offers a more comprehensive view of how single parenthood and different family trajectories impact SWB, highlighting the interplay between societal contexts and personal circumstances.

4 Data and methods

4.1 Data: sources and variables

This study uses data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS), covering Rounds 1 through 11, collected between 2002 and 2023. The ESS is a robust cross-national dataset that captures various aspects of social life in Europe, making it well-suited for analyzing SWB in diverse contexts. The analysis focuses on 16 countries: Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. These countries were selected based on consistent data availability across all rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) and sufficient sample sizes for every group. We rely on pooled repeated cross-sectional data from Rounds 1 to 11 (2002-2023), allowing for the study of how family structures and well-being relate to one another across time and context, though without tracking individuals over time. We retained only respondents for whom family structure could be confidently classified and excluded observations with missing or inconsistent data on key variables. The analytical sample includes 61,706 parents aged 30-55, each living with at least one dependent child under the age of 18. These criteria minimize unobserved heterogeneity by focusing on families with similar caregiving and life circumstances. We also control for the age of the youngest child. While both mothers and fathers are included, mothers form most single-parent households due to prevailing social and legal norms: about 81 percent of single parents are women, and about 19 percent are men.

The use of ESS data is particularly valuable in a comparative study of this kind, as few other sources provide the necessary sample size and harmonized measures to analyze single parents across countries and time. The breadth of the ESS allows us to achieve sufficient statistical power for subgroup analyses that would be impossible with smaller or country-specific surveys.

The dependent variable, subjective well-being (SWB), is operationalized as life satisfaction, measured through a self-reported question where respondents rate their overall life satisfaction on a scale from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). The key independent variable is family structure, using a four-category typology capturing both current partnership status and divorce history. Parents are grouped as follows: (1) coupled and never divorced (reference category), (2) coupled and previously divorced, (3) single and never divorced, and (4) single and previously divorced. Divorce is used as a marker of past marital dissolution, a life event often linked to lasting psychological and economic consequences. The use of divorce allows us to introduce greater objectivity and comparability in identifying major transitions across countries. This makes our typology a conceptual and methodological improvement over traditional classifications. Although the four family structure categories are unevenly distributed, each group remains large in absolute terms. This allows for sufficient statistical power in all comparisons, including among smaller subgroups.

To account for confounding factors, several individual-level control variables were included: we checked whether the respondent was born in the country of

residence and whether they belonged to an ethnic minority; religiosity (on a scale from 0 to 10), household size and number of children, educational level (up to lower secondary, upper-post secondary, tertiary), and domicile (big city, suburbs, small city, country village, farm) were also used; finally, gender and age were included.

Additionally, intervening variables related to income satisfaction and social interactions are analyzed to examine their role in mediating and moderating the relationship between family structure and SWB. For financial security, satisfaction with household income is used instead of absolute income, as it aligns more closely with subjective well-being assessments. The variable was originally coded into four ordered categories: living comfortably on present income, coping on present income, finding it difficult on present income, and finding it very difficult on present income. We then collapsed the last two into one category, labelled finding it difficult or very difficult on present income. Social connectedness is assessed through the frequency of social meetings, recording how often respondents socially meet with friends, colleagues, and relatives. The variable is categorized into three groups: rarely or never (up to once a month), weekly (once a week or almost), and frequently (more than once a week).

At the macro level, data are sourced from the OECD database and measured at the country-round level, focusing on welfare policy indicators that act as moderators in the analysis. The most relevant measure for this study is family benefit expenditures as a percentage of GDP, which captures national investments in early childhood education and care (ECEC), maternity and parental leave, housing assistance, and family allowances. While additional OECD indicators – such as net childcare costs, parental leave duration, and working hours needed to escape poverty – were initially considered, they were later excluded due to concerns about reliability, as discussed later in the paper. Finally, household composition data were used to calculate the percentage of single-parent families out of all households with dependent children, a contextual variable that helps assess cross-country differences in family structures.

4.2 Analytical framework

We employ a three-level linear multilevel model, with individuals nested in country-year groups, and country-years nested within countries. While the second level (country-year) captures variation across time and national contexts, the third level (country) is included to improve model specification and estimate reliability, correcting for residual clustering. Since our hypotheses involve cross-level interactions – specifically, whether macro-level family policies moderate the association between family structure and subjective well-being – it is essential to include random slopes for the lower-level variables involved in those interactions. This approach follows best practices in multilevel modeling and ensures unbiased estimation of moderation effects (*Heisig/Schaeffer 2019*).

Multilevel models are particularly effective for handling clustering effects, capturing both within-country and between-country variation while adjusting for contextual influences (*Schmidt-Catran/Fairbrother 2016*). The estimation procedure relies on restricted maximum likelihood (REML), which improves the accuracy of

variance component estimates, especially in cases where sample sizes at higher levels are limited (McNeish 2017). The inclusion of the country-round as an intermediate level allows for examining how temporal changes, such as policy shifts, are associated with SWB beyond cross-sectional country differences. This structure reflects the continuity of policy adjustments, economic trends, and cultural shifts, which typically evolve incrementally rather than as abrupt changes. By incorporating this temporal dimension, the model improves upon simpler approaches that focus solely on cross-country comparisons or that nest individuals within countries without accounting for within-country variation over time. It enables a distinction between within-country (over-time) effects and between-country (cross-sectional) effects, allowing for a more dynamic understanding of how policy environments shape well-being outcomes that we use to test our hypothesis. For instance, this structure enables an assessment of whether increases in childcare subsidies over time within a given country correspond to smaller SWB gaps between single and coupled parents, independent of cross-country differences in baseline welfare generosity. Given the gendered nature of single parenthood, we estimated additional models separately for men and women and interpret differences cautiously, given the small single-father subgroup.

The analysis begins with an ANOVA, which partitions the variance in subjective well-being across the individual, country-round, and country levels. This preliminary step provides insight into the relative contribution of each level in explaining differences in SWB before introducing explanatory variables. The multilevel regression model is built using a stepwise approach to isolate the net effect of single parenthood on SWB. The first step includes individual controls. Next, we test the mediating role of both macro-level and individual-level variables. Then, income satisfaction and social interactions are added as potential moderators through individual-level interactions, to assess whether financial stability and social networks influence the SWB gap between single and coupled parents. For instance, perceived financial security may buffer the negative impact of single parenthood, while frequent social meetings may reduce feelings of isolation. Finally, macro-level moderators are included to examine whether structural factors further shape well-being disparities. Cross-level interactions test whether welfare policies protect single parents from the disadvantages they face, showing how institutional contexts are associated with SWB outcomes. For example, the model evaluates whether single parents experience smaller SWB gaps in countries with more generous family benefits, highlighting how policy environments may mitigate economic vulnerabilities.

The final model is specified as a three-level multilevel regression equation, incorporating individual-level predictors, macro-level moderators, and cross-level interactions. The model takes the following form:

$$SWB_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot (X_{ijk}) + \sum \beta_p \cdot (C_{pjk}) + \sum \gamma_j \cdot (M_{jk}) + \sum \delta_j \cdot (M_{jk} \cdot X_{ijk}) + \sum \beta_v \cdot (V_{ijk}) + \sum \beta_s \cdot (V_{ijk} \cdot X_{ijk}) + \varepsilon_{ijk} + u_{0j} + \theta_{00k} + u_{1j} \cdot X_{ijk}$$

where:

- X_{ijk} represents family structure
- C_{ijk} captures individual controls
- M_{jk} represents macro-level moderators
- V_{ijk} represents individual intervening variables
- ε_{ijk} , u_{0j} , θ_{00k} , u_{1j} are the random effects

To ensure the robustness of the findings, a sensitivity analysis was conducted. We reran our analysis by restricting category 1 to only legally married couples, and category 3 to only never-married single parents. This tests whether the results are driven by legal marital status. We also included alternative model specifications, conducted subgroup analyses, and ran tests for non-linear relationships. Models were re-estimated with alternative sets of control variables, and the sample was stratified by gender to assess potential heterogeneity. The results showed consistency across all models, reinforcing the reliability of the associations between single parenthood, policy contexts, and subjective well-being, and are available upon request.

5 Results

5.1 Descriptive patterns of single parenthood and well-being

Descriptive statistics provide preliminary evidence justifying the subsequent multivariate analysis, offering initial support for the research hypotheses. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables used in the analysis, while Table 2 shows the distribution of subjective well-being, financial satisfaction, and social connectedness across family structures. These descriptive tables already offer an interesting picture. Contrary to common assumptions, single parents do not appear to suffer from a pronounced “social gap”; in fact, they report the highest levels of interaction with friends, colleagues, and relatives. While this measure cannot fully capture the complexity of social life, it suggests that social isolation may not be the primary channel explaining differences in well-being. Accordingly, we do not expect a strong mediating effect from this variable. However, it may still operate as a moderator, buffering the impact of disadvantage among specific family structures.

In contrast, the pattern for financial perception reveals a clear gap. Single parents are more than twice as likely as coupled parents to report financial difficulty, and less than half as likely to report feeling financially comfortable. These descriptive differences provide preliminary support for the idea that financial hardship may be a key pathway through which family structure affects life satisfaction.

In addition to the individual-level patterns discussed above, demographic trends across countries provide further context. Over the past two decades, the prevalence of single-parent families (SPFs) across Europe has increased from 14.6 percent in 2004 to 17.8 percent in 2022, although notable differences persist between countries. Southern European countries have experienced rapid growth in SPF prevalence, but overall levels remain lower than those observed in Nordic countries.

Tab. 1: Variables used in the analysis

	%	Mean	SD
<i>Dependent Variable</i>			
Subjective Well-being (SWB, 0-10)		7.32	1.99
<i>Independent Variable</i>			
Family structure			
Coupled parents, never divorced	82.21		
Coupled parents, ever divorced	7.88		
Single parents, never divorced	4.59		
Single parents, ever divorced	5.13		
<i>Individual Intervening Variables</i>			
Financial satisfaction			
Living comfortably on present income	33.76		
Coping on present income	47.09		
Difficult on present income	19.15		
Social interactions			
Rarely or never	18.69		
Weekly or almost	42.10		
Frequently	39.21		
<i>Macro Moderators</i>			
<i>Welfare</i>			
Childcare (% of GDP)		0.78	0.40
Leaves		0.42	0.30
Total		2.38	0.77
<i>Household composition</i>			
Single parent families (% on hhs with dependent children)		17.56	4.39
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Migration status			
Born in country, doesn't belong to minority	87.31		
Born elsewhere, doesn't belong to minority	8.47		
Born in country, belong to minority	1.62		
Born elsewhere, belong to minority	2.55		
Missing	0.05		
Other household members		0.96	0.40
Number of children		1.91	0.79
Age of youngest child		7.98	5.07
Educational level			
Up to lower secondary	14.63		
Upper-post secondary	43.93		
Tertiary	41.13		
Missing	0.31		
Domicile			
A big city	16.52		
Suburbs or outskirts of big city	13.62		

Tab. 1: Continuation

	%	Mean	SD
Town or small city	31.17		
Country village	30.31		
Farm or home in countryside	8.24		
Missing	0.15		
Gender			
Male	45.60		
Female	54.40		
Age		40.92	6.26

Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS and OECD data.

Preliminary descriptive analyses suggest that the negative association between single parenthood and subjective well-being has weakened over time. However, this trend varies considerably across countries, underscoring the potential role of contextual factors in moderating the association between family structure and well-being. Selection effects must also be considered, as changes in the socioeconomic profiles of different family types – alongside evolving patterns of family formation and dissolution – may influence these trends (*Kalmijn/Leopold 2021*).

At the macro level, higher state expenditure on family policies – such as childcare, parental leave, and family allowances – is associated with smaller well-being gaps between family structures. Countries with robust family support systems, like those in the Nordic region, tend to show narrower disparities in subjective well-being, while Southern European countries, with less comprehensive support, exhibit greater inequalities. These findings underscore the critical role of public policies in alleviating the structural disadvantages faced by the most vulnerable groups, particularly divorced single parents.

These descriptive patterns motivate a more detailed analysis, aiming to disentangle the relationship between family structure and well-being, while accounting for key mediators and moderators at both the individual and contextual levels.

5.2 Regression results

This section presents the results of the multilevel regression analysis, which examines the association between family structure and subjective well-being and tests the mediating and moderating roles of individual and contextual factors.

To justify the use of a multilevel approach, the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) was first calculated to quantify the proportion of variance in SWB attributable to different levels of analysis. The country-level ICC is 0.105, indicating that approximately 10.5 percent of the variance in SWB can be explained by country-specific factors. The ICC for rounds within countries is 0.03, underscoring substantial temporal variations within countries. These values support the choice of a multilevel analytical framework. After including individual-level and macro-level covariates (Model 5), the ICCs decrease to 0.046 (country level) and 0.018 (country-round

Tab. 2: Distribution of SWB, financial perception, and social connectedness over family structure

	%	Mean	SD
<i>Couple, never divorced</i>			
Life satisfaction		7.432	1.905
Financial perception			
Comfortable on present income	35.86		
Coping on present income	47.56		
Difficult on present income	16.58		
Social connectedness			
Frequently meeting with friends	38.72		
Weekly meeting with friends	42.80		
Rarely meeting with friend	18.48		
<i>Couple, ever divorced</i>			
Life satisfaction		7.228	2.170
Financial perception			
Comfortable on present income	33.83		
Coping on present income	46.45		
Difficult on present income	19.72		
Social connectedness			
Frequently meeting with friends	36.23		
Weekly meeting with friends	42.41		
Rarely meeting with friend	21.37		
<i>Single, never divorced</i>			
Life satisfaction		6.415	2.260
Financial perception			
Comfortable on present income	15.99		
Coping on present income	43.66		
Difficult on present income	40.35		
Social connectedness			
Frequently meeting with friends	46.16		
Weekly meeting with friends	35.39		
Rarely meeting with friend	18.45		
<i>Single, ever divorced</i>			
Life satisfaction		6.448	2.310
Financial perception			
Comfortable on present income	16.36		
Coping on present income	43.33		
Difficult on present income	40.31		
Social connectedness			
Frequently meeting with friends	45.60		
Weekly meeting with friends	36.68		
Rarely meeting with friend	17.71		

Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS and OECD data.

level), suggesting that the observed variables account for a substantial portion of the between-context variance. A likelihood ratio test ($\chi^2(4) = 60.21, p < .001$) further supports the multilevel structure with random intercepts and slopes. Since our hypotheses involve cross-level interactions – specifically, whether macro-level policies moderate the association between family structure and well-being – we follow best practice in including a random slope for the lower-level variable involved in the interaction (Heisig/Schaeffer 2019). This allows for baseline differences across contexts while also capturing variation in the strength of associations across countries and time.

The bivariate analysis (Model 2, Table 3) reveals a strong and statistically significant negative association between family structure and subjective well-being. Compared to the reference category – coupled parents who have never divorced – single parents who have divorced and single parents who have never divorced report substantially lower levels of well-being. In the baseline model, the coefficients for both groups are nearly identical ($\beta = -0.988$ and -0.998 , respectively; $p < .001$), suggesting that each experiences a considerable disadvantage. When individual-level demographic controls are introduced (Model 3), these effects are slightly attenuated but remain strong and significant ($\beta = -0.880$ for divorced single parents and $\beta = -0.892$ for never-divorced single parents; $p < .001$). The introduction of macro-level policy variables in Model 4 produces no further reduction. Finally, Models 5 and 5/b introduce the two individual-level intervening variables – social connectedness and income satisfaction – separately to test their mediating roles. Model 5 includes only social connectedness and shows that, although it is positively associated with subjective well-being, it does not significantly reduce the negative coefficients for single parents. This confirms the earlier descriptive finding that social contact, while beneficial, is not a key mediating pathway. In contrast, Model 5/b adds financial satisfaction and results in a substantial reduction in the well-being gap: the coefficients for single parents drop from $\beta = -0.904$ to $\beta = -0.587$ (never divorced) and from $\beta = -0.886$ to $\beta = -0.559$ (ever divorced), indicating a strong mediating effect of income perception. These results underscore that economic strain remains the most powerful mechanism linking family structure to well-being, whereas social support plays a more limited explanatory role. Despite the substantial reduction in coefficients, the negative associations remain statistically significant even in the fully specified model.

Although single parents who have never divorced show slightly lower average life satisfaction scores than those who have divorced, this difference is not statistically significant. Both groups experience comparably lower levels of well-being relative to couples. This suggests that both groups face persistent disadvantages, even if these likely arise from different sources. The “single, never-divorced” category is highly heterogeneous: it includes parents who never cohabited, those who separated from a cohabiting partner without legally divorcing, and widowed parents. While the disadvantage is most pronounced among single parents, coupled parents who have experienced a divorce also report a modest but statistically significant reduction in life satisfaction compared to stable couples. This suggests that the effects of divorce

Tab. 3: Results, Models 1-5

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 5/b
<i>Coupled, never divorced (ref.)</i>						
Coupled, ever divorced		-0.248*** (0.032)	-0.104*** (0.029)	-0.104*** (0.029)	-0.096*** (0.029)	-0.063** (0.028)
Single, never divorced		-0.998*** (0.051)	-0.892*** (0.053)	-0.893*** (0.053)	-0.904*** (0.053)	-0.587*** (0.052)
Single, ever divorced		-0.988*** (0.050)	-0.880*** (0.052)	-0.880*** (0.052)	-0.886*** (0.051)	-0.559*** (0.051)
<i>Native, no ethnic minority (ref.)</i>						
Not native, no ethnic minority			-0.169*** (0.026)	-0.169*** (0.026)	-0.127*** (0.026)	-0.003 (0.025)
Native, belong to min.			-0.481*** (0.058)	-0.481*** (0.058)	-0.500*** (0.057)	-0.361*** (0.055)
Not native, belong to min.			-0.445*** (0.046)	-0.444*** (0.046)	-0.385*** (0.046)	-0.154*** (0.044)
<i>Male (ref.)</i>						
Female			0.035** (0.015)	0.035** (0.015)	0.035** (0.015)	0.057*** (0.014)
Age of respondent			-0.003* (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.000 (0.002)	-0.004*** (0.001)
Cohabitants (not children)			-0.051** (0.025)	-0.051** (0.025)	-0.041 (0.025)	-0.048** (0.024)
Number of children			-0.028*** (0.010)	-0.028*** (0.010)	-0.028*** (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)
Age of youngest child			-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.002)
<i>Living in a small city (ref.)</i>						
Living in a big city			0.004 (0.022)	0.004 (0.022)	0.005 (0.022)	-0.011 (0.021)
Living in the suburbs			0.007 (0.023)	0.007 (0.023)	0.008 (0.023)	-0.018 (0.023)
Living in a country village			0.074*** (0.018)	0.074*** (0.018)	0.075*** (0.018)	0.067*** (0.018)
Living in the countryside			0.131*** (0.029)	0.131*** (0.029)	0.133*** (0.029)	0.132*** (0.028)
<i>Good general health (ref.)</i>						
Very good general health			0.485*** (0.017)	0.484*** (0.017)	0.463*** (0.017)	0.408*** (0.017)
Fair general health			-0.657*** (0.020)	-0.657*** (0.020)	-0.631*** (0.020)	-0.522*** (0.019)
Bad general health			-1.664*** (0.041)	-1.664*** (0.041)	-1.618*** (0.040)	-1.364*** (0.040)

Tab. 3: Continuation

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 5/b
<i>Moderately religious (ref.)</i>						
Not at all religious			-0.040** (0.020)	-0.040** (0.020)	-0.035* (0.020)	-0.028 (0.019)
Very religious			0.312*** (0.021)	0.312*** (0.021)	0.303*** (0.021)	0.354*** (0.020)
<i>Up to lower secondary education (ref.)</i>						
Upper-post secondary education			0.202*** (0.023)	0.202*** (0.023)	0.189*** (0.023)	0.017 (0.023)
Tertiary education			0.447*** (0.024)	0.447*** (0.024)	0.417*** (0.024)	0.0670*** (0.024)
Welfare expenditures total				0.111 (0.070)	0.123* (0.069)	0.084 (0.057)
Share of Single-Parents Families				-0.004 (0.011)	-0.004 (0.011)	0.002 (0.009)
<i>Weekly meeting friends (ref.)</i>						
Rarely meeting friends					-0.443*** (0.020)	0.350*** (0.020)
Frequently meeting friends					0.204*** (0.016)	0.198*** (0.016)
<i>Coping on present income (ref.)</i>						
Comfortable on present income						0.539*** (0.017)
Difficult on present income						-1.106*** (0.020)
Constant	7.299*** (0.165)	7.414*** (0.157)	7.390*** (0.154)	7.196*** (0.297)	7.070*** (0.286)	7.439*** (0.241)
Observations	61,706	61,706	61,706	61,706	61,706	61,706
Number of country groups	16	16	16	16	16	16
Number of country-round groups	161	161	161	161	161	161
Random slope	–	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Covariance is unstructured. Random effects are both at level 3 (country) and level 2 (country × round).

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), OECD Social Expenditure Aggregates, OECD Family Database

extend beyond the dissolution of the partnership itself, potentially leaving longer-term emotional or economic traces even when a new relationship is formed.

Building on the previous analysis, we now examine interaction effects to assess how the relationship between single parenthood and SWB is moderated by individual-level intervening and macro-level variables. Table 4 reports the results

Tab. 4: Results, Models 6-7

Variables	Model 6/Fin	Model 6/Soc	Model 7/Total	Model 7/Targeted
<i>Coupled, never divorced (ref.)</i>				
Coupled, ever divorced (CED)	-0.001 (0.039)	-0.050 (0.040)	-0.173* (0.099)	-0.154** (0.072)
Single, never divorced (SND)	-0.595*** (0.064)	-0.626*** (0.069)	-0.743*** (0.159)	-0.665*** (0.112)
Single, ever divorced (SED)	-0.484*** (0.061)	-0.533*** (0.065)	-0.691*** (0.150)	-0.735*** (0.115)
Rarely meeting with friends	-0.350*** (0.020)	-0.305*** (0.022)	-0.351*** (0.020)	-0.351*** (0.020)
<i>Weekly meeting with friends (ref.)</i>				
Frequently meeting with friends	0.198*** (0.016)	0.178*** (0.017)	0.198*** (0.016)	0.198*** (0.016)
CED # Rarely meeting with friends		-0.227*** (0.068)		
CED # Frequently meeting with friends		0.091 (0.057)		
SND # Rarely meeting with friends		-0.250*** (0.095)		
SND # Frequently meeting with friends		0.181** (0.074)		
SED # Rarely meeting with friends		-0.296*** (0.091)		
SED # Frequently meeting with friends		0.069 (0.070)		
<i>Coping on present income (ref.)</i>				
Comfortable on present income	0.517*** (0.018)	0.523*** (0.017)	0.522*** (0.017)	0.522*** (0.017)
Difficult on present income	-1.027*** (0.022)	-1.083*** (0.020)	-1.083*** (0.020)	-1.083*** (0.020)
CED # Comfortable on present income	0.032 (0.058)			
CED # Difficult on present income	-0.382*** (0.068)			
SND # Comfortable on present income	0.111 (0.096)			
SND # Difficult on present income	-0.063 (0.074)			
SED # Comfortable on present income	0.017 (0.091)			
SED # Difficult on present income	-0.228*** (0.071)			

Tab. 4: Continuation

Variables	Model 6/Fin	Model 6/Soc	Model 7/Total	Model 7/Targeted
Welfare expenditures, total	0.095*	0.094	0.096*	
	(0.058)	(0.057)	(0.057)	
CED # Total			0.044	
			(0.038)	
SND # Total			0.065	
			(0.062)	
SED # Total			0.055	
			(0.058)	
Welfare, Childcare + Leaves (C+L)				0.408***
				(0.085)
CED # C+L				0.061
				(0.050)
SND # C+L				0.054
				(0.080)
SED # C+L				0.133*
				(0.079)
Share of SPFs	0.001	0.001	-0.002	-0.004
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Constant	7.224***	7.122***	7.438***	7.111***
	(0.239)	(0.234)	(0.241)	(0.224)
Observations	61,706	61,706	61,706	61,706
Number of groups	16	16	16	16
Number of country-round groups	161	161	161	161
Random slope	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Covariance is unstructured. Random effects are both at level 3 (country) and level 2 (country × round).

Controls include migration/ethnic background, religiosity, household size, number of children, education, domicile, gender, age, and share of SPFs.

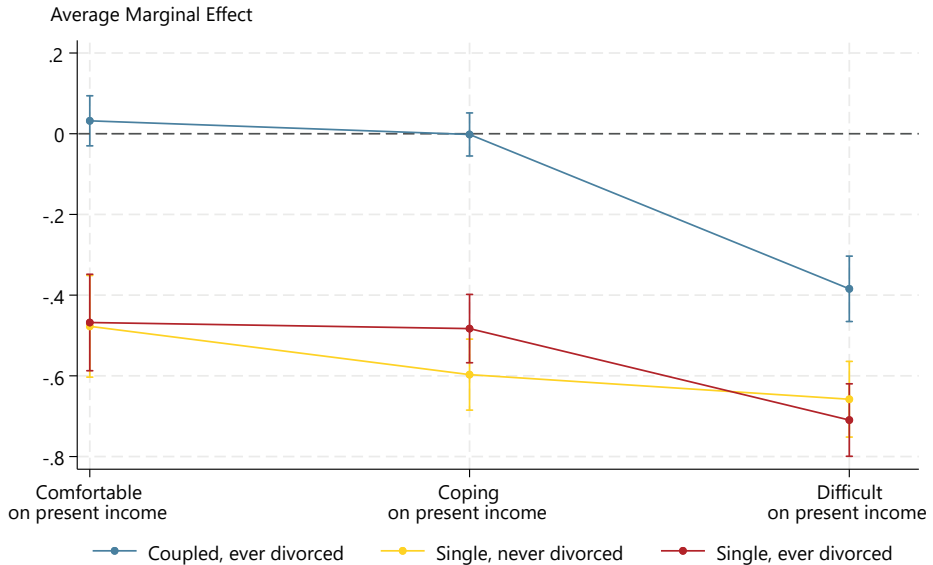
"Total" refers to total public expenditure on family benefits (% of GDP); "Targeted" includes only spending on childcare and parental leave.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), OECD Social Expenditure Aggregates, OECD Family Database

from interaction models (Models 6-7), providing insights into how these moderating factors influence SWB disparities.

Among the individual-level intervening variables, financial satisfaction and social connectedness both appear to buffer the negative association between family structure and subjective well-being, although their effects vary in strength and significance across subgroups.

Fig. 1: AME by family structure for different levels of financial satisfaction

Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS data.

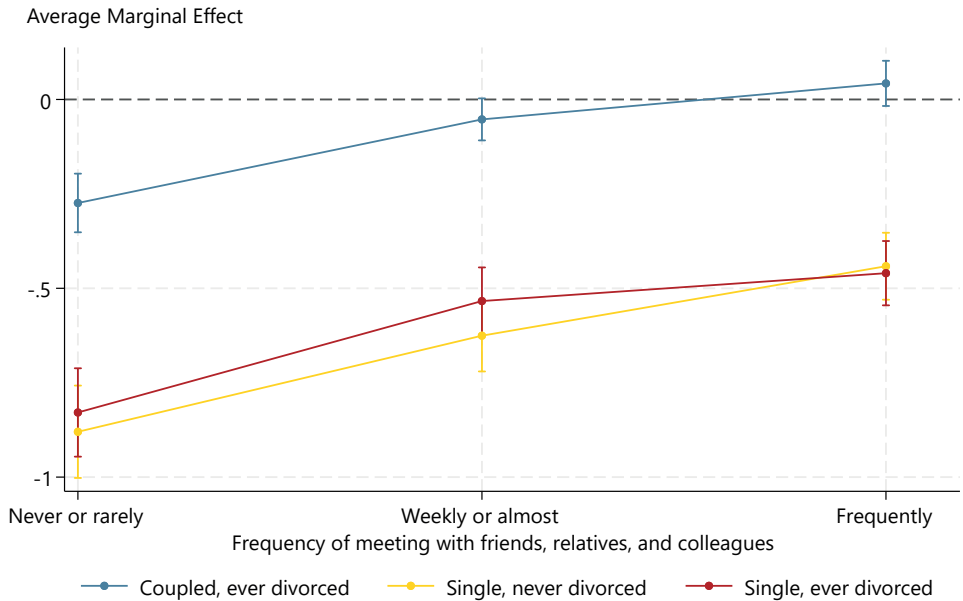
Economic security appears to function as a protective factor: as financial satisfaction increases, the predicted well-being gap between single parents and the reference group tends to narrow. However, as shown in Figure 1, the interaction effect is statistically significant only for parents who have experienced divorce, while it remains non-significant for never-divorced single parents.

In contrast, social connectedness exhibits a more consistent and statistically significant moderating effect. As shown in Figure 2, parents who report frequent or at least weekly social interaction display higher levels of well-being, and the gap between family types is notably reduced. This pattern holds across categories, although the intensity of the effect varies slightly.

For both moderators, the overall picture suggests that the penalty for being disadvantaged financially or socially is more pronounced than the benefit of being advantaged, pointing to an asymmetry in how protective resources function. Furthermore, among coupled parents who have experienced divorce, the observed negative effect is largely driven by disadvantaged subgroups. When financial satisfaction and social connectedness are high, the average marginal effect becomes statistically insignificant.

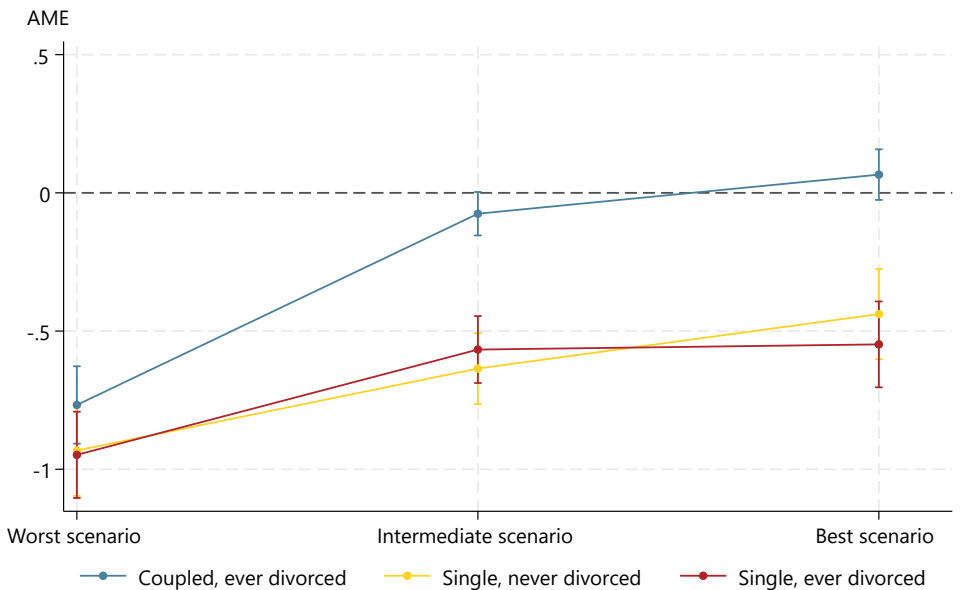
The strongest moderation pattern emerges when financial satisfaction and social connectedness are considered together, as illustrated in Figure 3. We define three scenarios: a "worst case" (financial difficulty and rare social contact), an "intermediate case" (coping financially and weekly contact), and a "best case" (financial comfort and frequent contact).

Fig. 2: AME by family structure for different levels of social connectedness



Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS data.

Fig. 3: AME by family structure for different levels of financial satisfaction × social connectedness



Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS data.

The pattern reflects what is observed in Figures 1 and 2: the “worst case” scenario is significantly more penalized than the intermediate and best cases are. Life satisfaction increases with better resource profiles, but even in the most favorable conditions, the gap between single and coupled parents does not fully disappear. This highlights the complexity of disadvantage associated with single parenthood and suggests that structural barriers remain regardless of individual resources.

From a macro-level perspective, higher state expenditure on family benefits is generally associated with improved SWB across all family types. We begin by testing our original hypothesis (H3) using total family benefit spending as a share of GDP. However, an important distinction emerges when comparing targeted interventions – such as childcare services and parental leave – with total family spending, as shown in Figures 4 and 5.

As shown in Figure 4 and Model 7/Tot, total expenditure fails to significantly moderate the association between family structure and well-being. While the main effect of spending is weakly positive, interaction terms are not statistically significant for any single-parent group. This is a somewhat surprising result, though consistent with a minority of previous findings suggesting that it may mask compositional effects or reflect selection effects at the macro level.

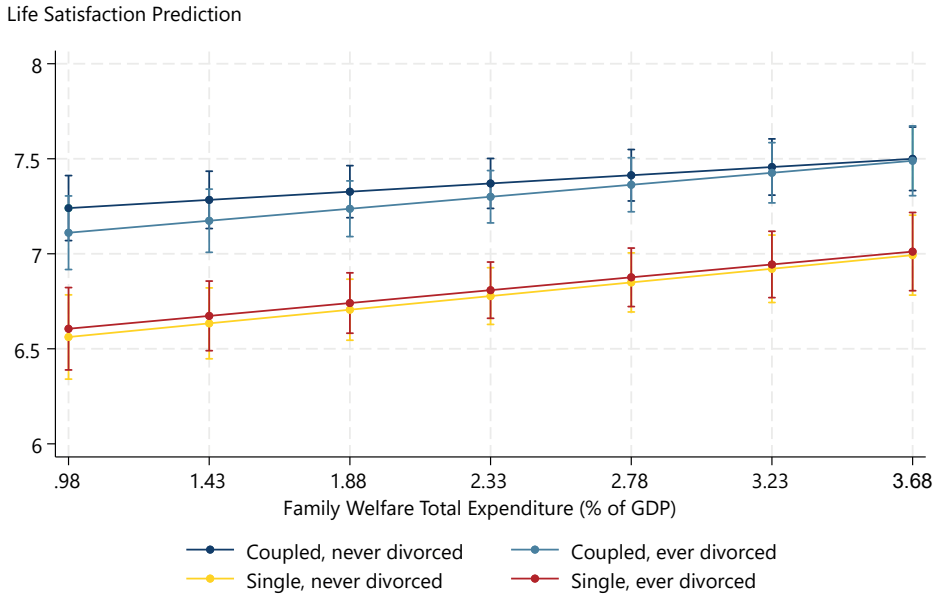
Motivated by this, we conduct two follow-up tests. First, in Model 7/Targeted, we isolate childcare and parental leave spending, focusing on support that directly reduces caregiving strain and facilitates work–family balance. As shown in Figure 5, this targeted indicator performs better: the interaction with divorced single parents becomes statistically significant, suggesting that these policies help alleviate part of the well-being penalty.

While the effect remains moderate in size, the difference between the targeted and total policy indicators is evident. Still, as observed with individual-level moderators, the well-being gap remains significant even under the most favorable policy conditions. This points to the need for additional forms of intervention, possibly including psychological support or measures addressing social stigma, particularly for the most vulnerable groups.

Finally, we stratify the sample descriptively by welfare regime. As shown in Figure 6, countries with more robust and targeted systems – particularly in the Nordic region – consistently display smaller well-being gaps. However, even in supportive contexts such as Denmark and Finland, the SWB disadvantage does not fully disappear, pointing to residual structural burdens associated with single parenthood.

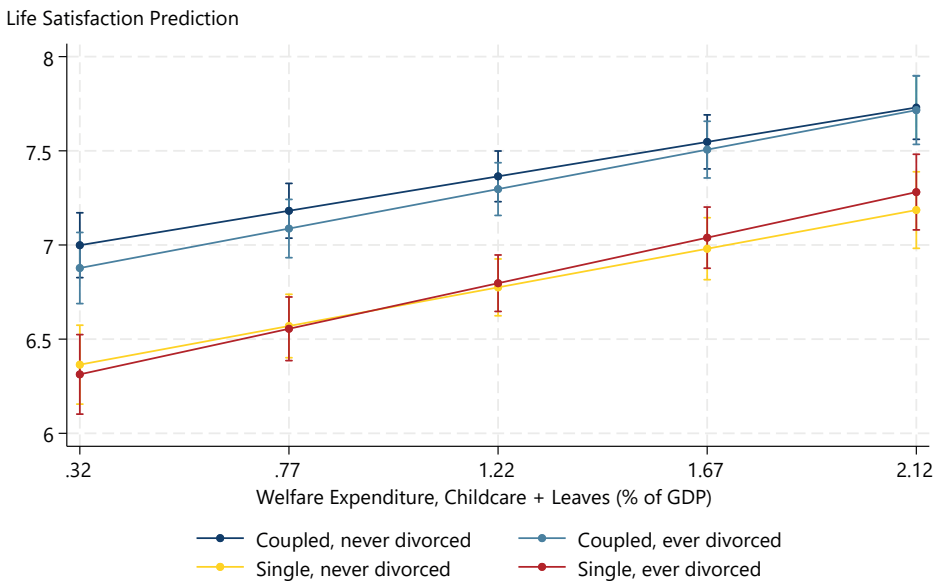
Lastly, we examined whether the prevalence of single-parent families conditions the effectiveness of welfare policies. The analysis shows no mediation effect of the prevalence of single-parent families, suggesting that the role of welfare spending in shaping well-being disparities operates independently of how common single parenthood is within a given society. Nonetheless, this result may be partially influenced by selection effects and should be interpreted with caution.

Fig. 4: Fitted values by category for different levels of state expenditure (total)

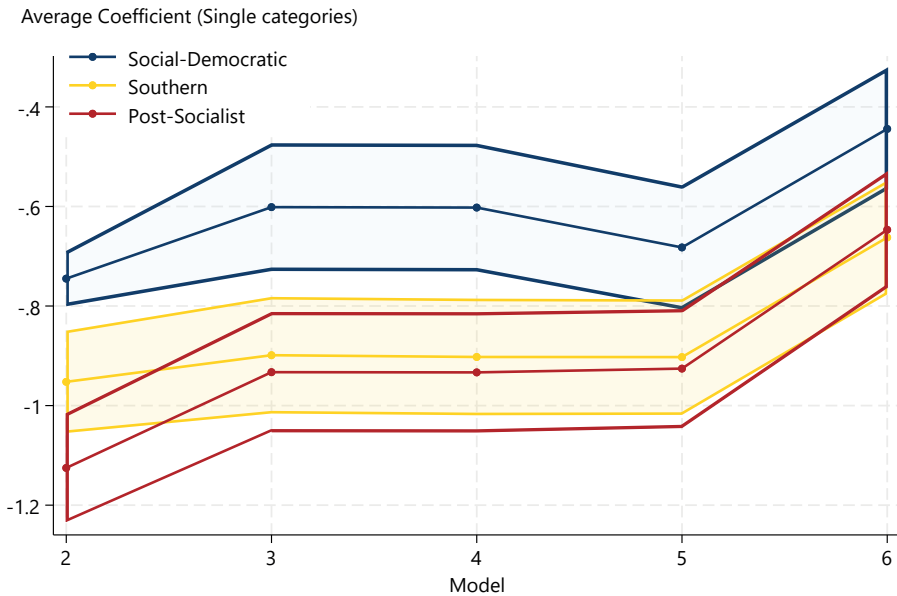


Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS and OECD data.

Fig. 5: Fitted values by category for different levels of state expenditure (childcare and parental leave only)



Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS and OECD data.

Fig. 6: Average coefficient for single parents by welfare regime, with 83.4 percent CIs (Models 2-5/b)

Source: authors' elaboration based on ESS data.

6 Discussion, implications and future directions

This study set out to explore the complex relationship between family structure and subjective well-being (SWB) across European countries, with a particular focus on the effects of divorce and single parenthood. In line with H1, the results confirm that parents who are single – whether they have experienced a divorce or not – report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction compared to those in stable couples. This association remains robust even after accounting for a wide range of individual- and macro-level covariates, suggesting that stressors uniquely tied to single parenthood – such as time constraints, social stigma, and the absence of co-parenting – continue to shape well-being outcomes independently of observable resources.

While the experience of divorce clearly compounds certain challenges, single parents who have never divorced report similarly low levels of well-being. Despite a slightly lower average among the never-divorced group, the difference is not statistically significant. This finding complicates the expectation that the trauma of marital dissolution is the primary source of disadvantage. It suggests that both groups face persistent disadvantages, albeit potentially arising from different sources. In particular, the “single, never-divorced” group is highly heterogeneous. However, it is still meaningful to treat this group separately from divorced single parents. Combining them would merge distinct trajectories into single parenthood and would likely reduce any disadvantage specific to divorce. Never-divorced single

parents may face chronic socioeconomic hardship, limited legal protections, or a lack of access to co-parenting arrangements. At the same time, divorced parents may be more affected by emotional strain or institutional disruptions. Selection processes could also play a role – those who divorce may have relatively higher resources or stronger coping capacities, partially offsetting the stress of marital dissolution. These diverging sources of disadvantage may ultimately result in comparable well-being outcomes.

These findings point to single parenthood itself, rather than the route into it, as the most consistent predictor of lower well-being across contexts.

The findings strongly support H2, though they reveal a more nuanced pattern than originally anticipated. Financial satisfaction emerges as a central mediating mechanism, rather than a moderator. Single parents report significantly greater financial hardship, and once this is considered, the gap in well-being between single and coupled parents decreases substantially. This suggests that economic strain is a major contributor to lower well-being among single parents and that income satisfaction functions as a broad, consistent determinant of life satisfaction across family structures. However, the data show little evidence that financial satisfaction offers a stronger protective effect specifically for single parents, as the moderation effects are generally weak. In practical terms, this means that while income and support improve well-being for all parents, they do not provide a strong disproportionate advantage for those in more vulnerable family forms. If moderation had been significant, targeted financial support would have been not only equitable but also more efficient, yielding greater marginal benefits for disadvantaged groups. In the absence of this pattern, the results imply that redistributive efforts remain essential – but not sufficient – to fully close the well-being gap. These findings underscore the importance of moving beyond income transfers and toward comprehensive, multidimensional strategies that address the structural and emotional burdens of single parenting – such as time poverty, caregiving overload, and the persistent lack of institutional and social recognition.

In contrast, social connectedness – while positively associated with well-being – does not appear to mediate the relationship between family structure and SWB. Rather, its role is primarily moderating, with the effect clearest when comparing parents in the most socially isolated situations to those with regular social contact. The asymmetry is also noteworthy: being socially disadvantaged has a more pronounced negative impact than the positive gains associated with high social integration. This pattern holds when financial satisfaction and social connectedness are interacted: the most disadvantaged profiles show the sharpest penalties, while well-supported single parents still experience a gap relative to stable couples. Even in the most favorable conditions, the disadvantage associated with single parenthood does not fully disappear, reinforcing the structural nature of this inequality.

Total family benefit expenditure, when tested directly, does not significantly moderate the SWB gap across family types. This unexpected finding aligns with research suggesting that aggregate spending may reflect contextual selection effects – countries with greater inequality or need may invest more in welfare yet still exhibit large disparities due to compositional factors or policy inefficiency. In

response, we tested a more targeted welfare indicator, capturing only childcare and parental leave. This refinement yielded clearer results: divorced single parents appear to benefit more in these contexts, suggesting that focused policies can buffer caregiving and financial stress. This finding is consistent with *Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis* (2015), who argue that targeted family policies are more effective than general welfare spending in reducing disadvantage among single-parent families. A final robustness check based on welfare regime type showed that Nordic countries consistently display smaller well-being gaps, but even in these supportive environments, a disadvantage associated with single parenthood persists.

In addressing the research questions, this study offers important insights into how both policy interventions and individual-level characteristics shape the association between single parenthood and SWB. First, national policies related to family benefits – particularly childcare subsidies and paid parental leave – moderate the relationship between family structure and well-being. Countries with more robust and targeted welfare systems exhibit smaller SWB disparities, reflecting the capacity of such systems to reduce both financial and caregiving pressures on single parents. However, even in the most supportive contexts, such as Denmark and Finland, the gap does not fully disappear. This suggests that while strong policy frameworks can alleviate disadvantage, they cannot eliminate the structural and emotional challenges associated with solo parenting. Second, individual-level characteristics – especially income satisfaction – play a central role in mediating well-being disparities. Social connectedness, on the other hand, moderates well-being outcomes more clearly. These findings emphasize the importance of multi-dimensional support strategies that combine income protection, social inclusion, and tailored services.

Importantly, robustness checks confirmed the validity of these findings. When cohabiters were removed from the group of coupled, never-divorced parents – or when formerly cohabiting parents were excluded from the never-divorced single category – the results remained stable.

The implications of these findings for policymakers are substantial. While universal benefits such as childcare and parental leave are essential, they should be viewed as part of a broader, integrated strategy. Additional support is needed to address time poverty, caregiving overload, and the emotional toll of solo parenting. This includes improving access to mental health services, investing in community-based initiatives, supporting housing stability, and offering tailored services for the most disadvantaged groups. Targeted interventions – especially for single parents who have never married or lack co-parenting support – can be especially effective in narrowing well-being gaps.

One of the contributions of this work lies in its advancement over existing literature in how family structure is conceptualized. While previous research has often relied on a simple binary between coupled and single parents, this study introduced a more nuanced four-category typology, distinguishing between divorced and never-divorced parents, both partnered and single. This approach allows us to identify more accurately how the combination of partnership status and relationship history shapes well-being, even within the limitations of available data. ESS nonetheless has

important constraints, but this typology moves beyond oversimplified classifications and captures key distinctions that had previously been overlooked.

Despite its significant findings, this study is not without limitations. The reliance on data from the ESS imposes certain constraints, particularly regarding the availability of variables that could provide deeper insights into personal mechanisms influencing SWB. For instance, variables related to mental health, perceived social stigma, access to community resources, and joint custody were either unavailable or inconsistently measured across survey rounds. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating more comprehensive datasets that capture a broader range of variables and provide balanced representation across different groups. Future research should build on these findings in several ways. Collecting more granular data on family transitions would help unpack the complex pathways into single parenthood. Even if we included a wide range of controls for socio-demographic, economic, and health factors, the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow us to draw causal conclusions. A panel or longitudinal design would be especially valuable to trace how changes in family structure impact well-being over time, and to disentangle causal effects from selection processes. Future research could also examine whether the timing and duration of single parenthood influence well-being outcomes more directly, as suggested by life course frameworks (*Bernardi et al.* 2019).

Another promising direction is the investigation of emerging family forms, such as Living Apart Together (LAT) arrangements. These arrangements may offer alternative pathways to mitigate the stress of solo parenting and deserve attention as family patterns continue to diversify.

We also recognize that single parenthood is a gendered experience, with different pathways into single parenthood and differing consequences for men and women. While our main models pool both sexes, we also estimated sex-stratified models. Across these models, single parenthood is associated with lower life satisfaction for both men and women. After including the full set of controls, point estimates are slightly more negative for men than for women. For example, among single parents who have never divorced, the coefficient is around -0.75 for men versus -0.54 for women, and among divorced single parents it is around -0.72 for men versus -0.50 for women (see Appendix Tables A1-A2). Confidence intervals overlap, so we interpret differences cautiously, but the magnitude gap is notable. These results support comparative evidence of larger income shocks for mothers and relatively greater non-economic costs for fathers (*Aassve et al.* 2007), e.g., psychosocial strain, support deficits, and post-separation logistics. Interaction results reinforce this reading: social connectedness reduces the gap more for men, whereas more generous family benefits reduce the gap more for women. From a life course perspective, this pattern may also reflect the rarity of single fatherhood. As few of these men's peers have likely experienced lone parenting, the lack of social scripts and role models may explain why the non-economic and psychosocial costs can be particularly significant for single fathers, even though income losses tend to be greater for mothers. In addition, cases in which children live with a lone father may

reflect more complex or conflictual situations on the maternal side. Future research could test these theories more directly.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a more detailed and context-sensitive understanding of how single parenthood is associated with life satisfaction across Europe. By moving beyond simplistic binaries and introducing a more refined typology of family structures, it identifies key mechanisms – most notably income satisfaction and targeted social policies – that help explain the well-being gap. At the same time, the persistence of this gap, even under favorable conditions, points to the structural disadvantages still faced by single-parent families. As the prevalence of single-parent families continues to rise across Europe, it is crucial for researchers and policymakers to develop and implement strategies that enhance the well-being of these families. To effectively reduce well-being disparities, policymakers should move beyond broad welfare measures and invest in targeted interventions that address the financial and caregiving needs of different subgroups of single parents.

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Appendix

Tab. A1: Women only, Model 2-5

Variables	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 5/b
Coupled, ever divorced	-0.262*** (0.0465)	-0.0965** (0.0424)	-0.0968** (0.0424)	-0.0853** (0.0418)	-0.0582 (0.0401)
Single, never divorced	-1.021*** (0.0565)	-0.855*** (0.0617)	-0.855*** (0.0617)	-0.857*** (0.0616)	-0.541*** (0.0602)
Single, ever divorced	-1.007*** (0.0550)	-0.819*** (0.0604)	-0.819*** (0.0604)	-0.814*** (0.0593)	-0.495*** (0.0584)
Welfare expenditures, total			0.0917 (0.0724)	0.113 (0.0707)	0.0850 (0.0604)
Comfortable on present income					0.474*** (0.0235)
Difficult on present income					-1.045*** (0.0263)
Never or rarely meeting friends				-0.514*** (0.0280)	-0.421*** (0.0271)
Frequently meeting friends				0.227*** (0.0223)	0.219*** (0.0216)
Constant	7.441*** (0.160)	7.328*** (0.167)	7.125*** (0.309)	6.953*** (0.296)	7.259*** (0.252)
Observations	33,568	33,568	33,568	33,568	33,568
Number of groups	16	16	16	16	16

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), OECD Social Expenditure Aggregates, OECD Family Database.

Tab. A2: Women only, Model 2-5

Variables	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 5/b
Coupled, ever divorced	-0.230*** (0.0451)	-0.111*** (0.0425)	-0.110*** (0.0425)	-0.105** (0.0422)	-0.0665* (0.0402)
Single, never divorced	-0.977*** (0.102)	-0.925*** (0.0992)	-0.924*** (0.0991)	-0.966*** (0.0958)	-0.747*** (0.0934)
Single, ever divorced	-0.939*** (0.0865)	-0.972*** (0.0913)	-0.973*** (0.0913)	-1.003*** (0.0912)	-0.723*** (0.0870)
Welfare expenditures, total			0.135* (0.0739)	0.141* (0.0730)	0.115* (0.0591)
Comfortable on present income					0.579*** (0.0240)
Difficult on present income					-1.157*** (0.0296)
Never or rarely meeting friends				-0.362*** (0.0297)	-0.268*** (0.0285)
Frequently meeting friends				0.177*** (0.0238)	0.178*** (0.0227)
Constant	7.382*** (0.159)	7.470*** (0.171)	7.276*** (0.316)	7.189*** (0.308)	7.401*** (0.251)
Observations	28,138	28,138	28,138	28,138	28,138
Number of groups	16	16	16	16	16

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), OECD Social Expenditure Aggregates, OECD Family Database.

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