Family Configurations and Leaving the Parental Home in Finland

Introduction and motivation

The timing of first leaving the parental home is a fundamental demographic marker and a critical point in the life course. A consistent finding in family demography is the profound influence of early-life family configurations —denoting the diverse structural arrangements in which a child and adolescent is raised—on this transition. Young adults who grew up in non-intact families—specifically those from single-parent and step-families—tend to leave home significantly earlier than their peers from intact, two-parent households (Raab, 2017; Berg *et al.*, 2018; Gillespie, 2020; Gillespie and Lei, 2021). Understanding the specific forces driving this accelerated exit is crucial because early home leaving is strongly associated with several poor outcomes in adulthood, such as economic vulnerability, relational instability, and weakened intergenerational ties later in life (Aassve *et al.*, 2007; Leopold, 2012; Oksanen *et al.*, 2016; Tosi and Gähler, 2016).

Current literature proposes two primary, yet often debated, mechanisms underlying this association. The first is reduced social resources (where the 'push' from the parental home occurs via relationship strain). This mechanism posits that family configurations resulting from union dissolution (single-parent or reconstituted families) may experience reduced relational quality and family bonds (Kalmijn and Dronkers, 2015). The inherent difficulties in maintaining close relationships, or the tension arising from integrating new family members, can lead to less cohesive family environments (Sweeney, 2007). This relational strain effectively creates a social 'push' factor, motivating the young adult to seek independence sooner. The second is reduced economic resources (where the 'push' from the parental home occurs via material discomfort). This mechanism emphasizes the financial fragility often associated with non-intact families. Union dissolution or single parenthood frequently leads to a loss of economies of scale, increased poverty risk, or poor housing conditions (Uunk, 2004). This reduced material comfort provides young adults with relatively lower incentive to stay at home, acting as a powerful economic 'push' factor. While reconstituted families may partially mitigate these financial constraints, they often do not fully overcome them (Sweeney, 2010).

Crucially, no clear consensus has emerged regarding the relative strength or independent role of these two mediating factors across different contexts. Van den Berg et al. (2018), using GSOEP data for Germany, found that mediating factors explained only 16-22% of the stepfamily effect and 37-50% of the single-mother family effect on early home leaving, with economic resources serving as the primary mediator for single-mother families. Herzig (2020), using German Family Panel (pairfam) data, noted however that extending analyses to include stepfather-child relationship quality and parental monitoring did not substantially improve explanatory power, indicating significant gaps remain in understanding these mechanisms. Another limitation of prior research is that family configurations are often measured crudely as time-constant characteristics (e.g., dummies of parental divorce before age 15). This is because surveys often lack detailed life history records of co-residence structures during childhood.

Against this backdrop, this paper will examine the dynamic changes in family configurations during childhood and adolescence and their link with the timing of leaving the parental home. We address the existing gaps in the literature by employing high-quality, comprehensive Finnish register data. The longitudinal nature and full coverage of the register data enable us to move beyond static, single-point measurements and track multiple family transitions as well as a multitude of diverse family configurations. Focusing on Finland contributes essential evidence from a Nordic welfare state, a context that has been under-represented in previous international research on early home leaving and family structure effects. Finland is also a particularly common and relevant social dynamic for studying family disruption, as it has one of the highest crude divorce rates in the EU, often placing it among the top countries for this measure (Eurostat, 2025).

Data, method, and preliminary results

I utilize comprehensive Finnish register data, offering a rich, longitudinal perspective on family structures and life course transitions. The base population consists of the 1992 birth cohort (N=62,189 individuals), which was fully observed in Finland from birth (age 0) up to age 15. For computational tractability in the sequence analysis, our study sample is (for now) comprised of 20,000 randomly selected individuals from this cohort.

As a first step in the preliminary analyses, I employed sequence analysis to visualize the dynamic trajectories of family constellations from birth until the young adult left the parental home for the first time. . A key methodological choice was the application of the Sequences of Distinct Successive States (DSS) approach. This method simplifies highly redundant sequences by recording only the succession of states, effectively focusing on the order of family changes rather than the duration of each state. I applied Optimal Matching (OM) to these DSS sequences. Since the previous family-configuration history up to time t is strongly linked to the order of subsequent life stages, I selected a distance metric sensitive to differences in sequencing. The analysis employed a constant substitution cost of 2 and an indel (insertion/deletion) cost of 1. This cost structure ensures that discrepancies in the order of family configurations are penalized more heavily than discrepancies related to the presence or absence of a specific state. I subsequently used the Partitioning Around Medoids (PAM) algorithm to cluster the resulting optimal matching distances. Based on standard statistical criteria, specifically the best average silhouette width, the analysis identified and retained six robust groups (or clusters) of family-configuration trajectories.

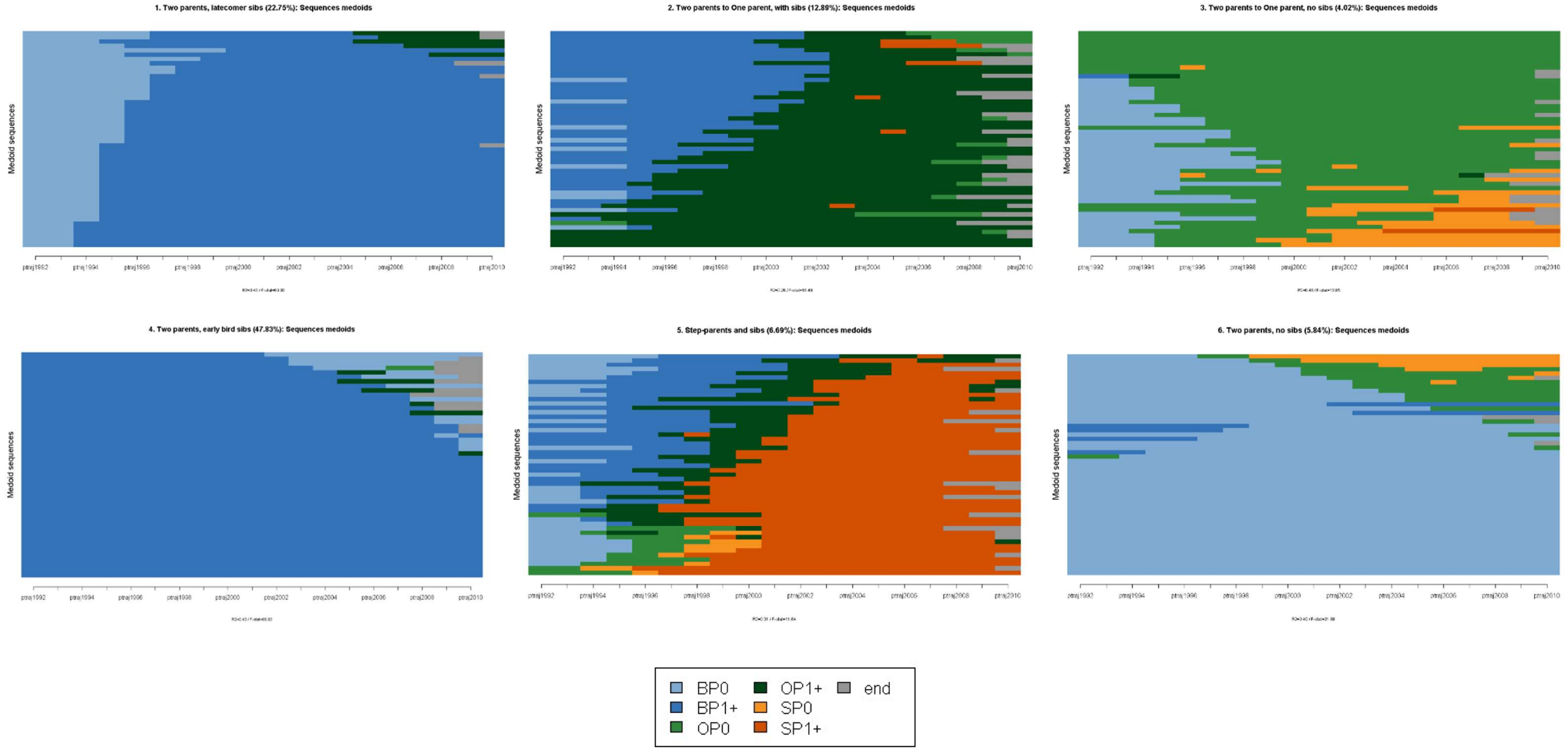
Figure 1 visualizes the medoids, which represent the most frequent co-residence sequences within each cluster. It clearly illustrates the substantial variation in family configurations experienced by children and adolescents while growing up. Nonetheless, living with two biological parents remains the most common family configuration for the 1992 birth cohort in Finland (approximately three-quarters of the sample).

As a second step in the preliminary analyses, I assess the effect of the identified family-configuration trajectories on the timing of first leaving the parental home. I employ discrete-time logistic regression to model the instantaneous risk of leaving. Respondents are considered at risk from age 15 until the event (leaving home) or censoring due to migration or death, whichever comes first. The logistic regression was run on a person-period file, using the cluster membership (the past family-configuration trajectories) as a key explanatory variable. The analysis employs a sequential modeling approach: Model 1 estimates the baseline effect of the past family-configuration trajectories, adjusting for sex, region of origin, student status, having personal income, living in a major city, and the time-varying risk factors. Model 2 builds upon Model 1 by additionally adjusting for the key mediating factor of family socio-economic background, represented by the household income decile. Table 1 shows the abbreviated results from the discrete-time logistic regressions. The effect of being in Cluster 5 accelerates home-leaving consistently across both models, while membership in Cluster 1 or 6 delays this transition.

While comparing the odds ratios of the trajectory clusters between Model 1 and Model 2 provides a preliminary assessment, this method does not robustly allow us to quantify the extent to which economic resources account for (mediate) the effect between family configuration and the risk of early departure in non-linear probability models. Therefore, an additional KHB decomposition (Karlson *et al.*, 2012) was performed, comparing the estimated coefficients between the two nested non-linear probability models. Table 2 shows the results of the KHB decomposition, which indicate that the negative effect of being in clusters 2 and 3 on the risk of leaving home is attenuated when household income is included. Income confounding is strongest when being in cluster 5 (42.6%), but substantially lower in clusters 1 (15.4%) and 6 (17.9%).

Family Configurations and Leaving the Parental Home in Finland

Figure 1 Relative frequency plots by cluster (k=50)



Note: The state ABC shown in the legend are defined as: BP0= - both parents and no siblings; BP1+= both parents and sibling(s); OP0= one parent and no siblings; OP1+= one parent and sibling(s); SP0= step-parent(s) and no siblings; SP1+= step-parent(s) and sibling(s); end= respondents have left the parental home.

Table 1 Logistic Regression Results Predicting Risk of Leaving Home (Discrete-Time Model)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	se	OR	se
Cluster (ref. 4)				
1 Two parents, late sibs	0.72***	0.06	0.72***	0.06
2 From Two to One parent(s), sibs	1.82***	0.14	0.85	0.08
3 From Two to One parent(s), no sibs	1.54***	0.20	0.79	0.12
5 Step-parent(s), sibs	2.06***	0.20	1.42**	0.16
6 Two parents, no sibs	0.72***	0.10	0.73*	0.11
N person-years	98360		98360	

Note: Model 1 adjusts for sex (0=male; 1=female), origin (0=Finnish; 1=non-Finnish), R is student (0=no;1=yes); R has income (0=no;1=yes), R lives in one of the 6 major cities in Finland (0=no;1=yes), t and ln(t). Model 2 additionally adjusts for household income decile.

Table 2 KHB Decomposition of Logistic Regression Coefficients

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 5	Cluster 6
	b	b	b	b	b
Reduced	-0.39	0.48	0.24	0.61	-0.39
Full	-0.33	-0.16	-0.23	0.35	-0.32
Diff	-0.06	0.64	0.47	0.26	-0.07

Note: Reference category: Being in Cluster 4. 'Reduced' refers to the model without the mediator (household income decile). 'Full' refers to the model with the mediator. 'Diff'(erence) refers to the difference between the reduced and full models.

A preliminary conclusion is that living in a step-parent household with siblings increased the likelihood of leaving home. This effect remained statistically significant even after controlling for family socio-economic background, KHB decomposition indicates that the accelerated effect is not solely due to parental household income.

Next steps

Due to computational constraints, preliminary sequence analysis (SA) was conducted on a subsample of 20,000 individuals from the full dataset (N = 62,189). I plan to extend this analysis to the full sample to strengthen the empirical foundation for the 1992 birth cohort.

With this broader base, I will explore potential refinements of the family constellation typology—focusing on dimensions such as parental structure, number of siblings, and birth order—and pay particular attention to sibling diversity.

To better capture the dynamic nature of family configurations from birth to leaving home, I will consider alternative modeling techniques. Multi-State Modeling offers a statistically rigorous alternative to Sequence History Analysis (SHA), as it simultaneously models family transitions and the exit event within a unified framework. This approach naturally integrates the risk of transitioning to a new family state constellation with the risk of leaving home. State-Event Transitions (SEVs) allow for estimating the likelihood of leaving home while in a specific family state.

References

Aassve A, Davia MA, Iacovou M, Mazzuco S. 2007. Does Leaving Home Make You Poor? Evidence from 13 European Countries. *European Journal of Population / Revue européenne de Démographie* **23**: 315–338 DOI: 10.1007/s10680-007-9135-5

Berg L van den, Kalmijn M, Leopold T. 2018. Family Structure and Early Home Leaving: A Mediation Analysis. *European Journal of Population*: 1–28 DOI: 10.1007/s10680-017-9461-1

Eurostat. 2025. Divorce indicators DOI: https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO_NDIVIND

Gillespie BJ. 2020. Adolescent Intergenerational Relationship Dynamics and Leaving and Returning to the Parental Home. *Journal of Marriage and Family* **82**: 997–1014 DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12630

Gillespie BJ, Lei L. 2021. Intergenerational solidarity, proximity to parents when moving to independence, and returns to the parental home. *Population, Space and Place* **27**: e2395 DOI: 10.1002/psp.2395

Herzig M. 2020. Mediating Factors of Family Structure and Early Home-leaving: A Replication and Extension of van den Berg, Kalmijn, and Leopold (2018). *European Journal of Population* **36**: 643–674 DOI: 10.1007/s10680-019-09544-x

Kalmijn M, Dronkers J. 2015. Lean on me? The influence of parental separation and divorce on children's support networks in four European countries. *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung* **27**: 21–42

Karlson KB, Holm A, Breen R. 2012. Comparing Regression Coefficients Between Same-sample Nested Models Using Logit and Probit: A New Method. *Sociological Methodology* **42**: 286–313 DOI: 10.1177/0081175012444861

Leopold T. 2012. The Legacy of Leaving Home: Long-Term Effects of Coresidence on Parent – Child Relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family* **74**: 399–412 DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00964.x

Oksanen A, Aaltonen M, Rantala K. 2016. Debt problems and life transitions: a register-based panel study of Finnish young people. *Journal of Youth Studies* **19**: 1184–1203 DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2016.1145638

Raab M. 2017. Childhood Family Structure and Early Family Formation in East and West Germany. *Journal of Marriage and Family* **79**: 110–130 DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12333

Sweeney MM. 2007. Stepfather Families and the Emotional Well-Being of Adolescents. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* **48**: 33–49 DOI: 10.1177/002214650704800103

Sweeney MM. 2010. Remarriage and Stepfamilies: Strategic Sites for Family Scholarship in the 21st Century. *Journal of Marriage and Family* **72**: 667–684 DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00724.x

Tosi M, Gähler M. 2016. Nest-leaving, childhood family climate and later parent–child contact in Sweden. *Acta Sociologica* **59**: 249–268 DOI: 10.1177/0001699316641996

Uunk W. 2004. The Economic Consequences of Divorce for Women in the European Union: The Impact of Welfare State Arrangements. *European Journal of Population / Revue européenne de Démographie* **20**: 251–285 DOI: 10.1007/s10680-004-1694-0