Family Complexity in Children's Lives in Europe: Cohort Change and Inequalities

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Introduction and Background

Families have become increasingly complex across Europe since the 1960s (Thomson, 2014). Due to the dramatic rise in non-marital cohabitation and childbearing, separation, divorce, repartnering, and multi-partner fertility, the share of lone parents and complex families (i.e., those including stepparent(s) and/or step- and/or half-sibling(s)) has increased substantially. These changes have major implications for the settings in which children grow up and socialise (Amato, 2000), as they require them to adjust to a new family situation (Härkönen et al., 2017) potentially several times. Surprisingly, relatively little research has investigated children's experiences of family change across Europe. We know little about children's experiences of family complexity across their lives, whether their experiences have changed over time, and whether their experiences differ by socio-economic background and across countries. This paper takes an innovative child-centred life course approach and focuses on family complexity across children's life courses in 20 European countries. I also examine changes in children's experiences of family transitions leading to family complexity (parental separation, lone parenthood and repartnering) and educational differences in these trends. Taken together, this paper provides significant new insights into the trends and inequalities in family complexity in children's lives across Europe using a novel child-centred life course approach.

A huge body of demographic literature has investigated trends and inequalities in family change across Europe. Many studies have focused on union formation (Billari and Philipov, 2004; Hoem et al., 2010), divorce (Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006), non-marital childbearing (Mikolai et al., 2018; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010), or repartnering (Gałęzewska et al., 2017). Although these changes have major implications for the lives of children who live in these families, the vast majority of demographic studies have analysed adult women (sometimes men) and only a handful of studies have investigated children's experiences of family change (e.g., Andersson et al., 2017; Cancian et al., 2011; Kalmijn and Leopold, 2021; Thomson, 2014). This means that what we know about children's experiences of family change is largely based on studying adults and generalising the results to children. For example, it seems trivial that if more adults experience separation or repartnering, children are also more likely to experience these events. However, this is not necessarily the case as has been shown recently by comparing adults' and children's risk of experiencing separation in eight European countries (Kalmijn and Leopold, 2021). It could be that parents and non-parents follow different life course paths and hence those with children may have different experiences from those without children. If this is the case, adults and children may have vastly different experiences. Finally, conclusions about social inequalities in family transitions can also be different among adults and children. For example, Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) showed that social inequality in the risk of separation grew faster in children than in adults and the differences have become even larger across cohorts. Taken together, this means that we cannot learn about children's experiences of family complexity and potential inequalities in these processes by analysing the

lives of adults and translating the findings to the lives of children. Instead, we need to take a child-centred approach and analyse children's experiences.

The dominant explanation for trends in family change since the 1960s has been the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa, 1986), which argues that ideational and value changes are the main explanation for changes in family behaviours. As a result of better living standards, increased gender equality, and weakened normative regulations, individuals developed a need for self-development and self-fulfilment. New lifestyle choices and self-realisation led to changes in family behaviours (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004). This implies that more liberal, individualistic, and secularised individuals are more likely to experience and be the forerunners of new and emerging demographic behaviours such as non-marital cohabitation and childbearing, divorce, repartnering, and multi-partner fertility (i.e., complex family transitions). The SDT has traditionally been applied to understand family change from adults' perspective. However, family change not only has consequences for the lives of adults who make decisions about family formation and dissolution but also for the lives of children who live in these families. The 'diverging destinies' argument (McLanahan, 2004) postulates that family change leads to widening social inequalities and disparities in children's resources. It argues that the trends in family change have created two distinct trajectories. Delaying childbearing and increasing maternal employment imply gains in parental resources and it is women who have more resources in the first place who tend to follow this trajectory. On the other hand, family transitions such as divorce or childbearing outside marriage lead to losses in parental resources and women with the fewest resources tend to follow this path. Hence, children born to the most educated mothers are gaining resources and have more favourable outcomes whereas those born to the least educated mothers are losing resources and have less favourable outcomes as a result of family change (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; McLanahan, 2004).

Whilst these prominent theories provide explanations for the trends in family change, socio-economic inequalities in these trends, and potential mechanisms behind family complexity, they do not provide a framework to understand how children's lives unfold over time in response to family change and what the role of socio-economic (dis)advantage is for children's experiences across their childhood. The Life Course Theory (Elder, 1985; Giele and Elder, 1998) fills this gap. It is an interdisciplinary framework for studying individuals' lives as they unfold over time and hence it has become the dominant paradigm for studying family change in individuals' lives. Traditionally, this framework has been applied to studying the lives of adults. In this paper, I propose to apply the life course perspective to improve our understanding of family complexity and inequalities in children's lives. The 'life course' refers to a series of events or transitions (e.g., marriage, divorce, repartnering) experienced by individuals over time. These transitions are embedded in trajectories while trajectories are sequences of linked states in several interrelated life domains. Individuals' life courses are embedded in social institutions, historical time, and geographical context. Applying a life course perspective to children's lives allows us to follow whether and how their experiences of family complexity changes across their childhood.

The literature on children's experiences of family complexity primarily comes from the United States, a country with a markedly different profile of family behaviours to most European countries. For example, cohabiting unions with children are less stable, the share of

lone parent families is higher, and there are larger differences in family transitions by socio-economic status than in many European countries (Furstenberg, 2014; Raley and Sweeney, 2020; Thomson, 2014). This means that what we know about family complexity and children's lives from these studies may not be generalisable to the European context. Some emerging evidence is available on family complexity and child outcomes in Europe mainly from individual country case studies and overwhelmingly from the United Kingdom (e.g., Bernardi and Boertien, 2016; Erman and Härkönen, 2017; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000; Fiori, 2020; Havermans et al., 2014; Kalil et al., 2011; Kiernan and Mensah, 2009; Leturcq and Panico, 2019; Mariani et al., 2017; Panico et al., 2019; Pronzato and Aassve, 2019; Robson, 2010). However, there is limited comparative evidence across Europe on these trends across children's lives.

For example, regarding the trends in children's experiences of family complexity, descriptive cross-sectional evidence or summary measures are available. Thomson (2014) showed the percentage of children who experienced parental separation by age 9, and of those who were in a stepfamily six years after parental separation across European countries. Andersson et al. (2017) described children's experiences of family disruption by calculating the share of children whose parents separated by age 15, the share of those who were in a stepfamily within 6 years of parental separation, and the percentage of time spent in different family types. Finally, Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) calculated children's risk to experience parental separation across union cohorts.

We might expect differences across countries in the trends, inequalities, and consequences of family complexity in children's life courses because next to broader historical, cultural, political, and economic differences, European countries have varying welfare provisions as well as family and fertility policies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Frejka and Gietel-Basten, 2016; Mayer, 2001). These differences have resulted in sometimes vastly different family behaviours across countries. For example, after the transition in 1990, post-socialist countries have seen declining marriage rates, delayed family formation, and an increasing share of non-marital births (Koytcheva and Philipov, 2008; Mikolai, 2012; Mureşan et al., 2008; Stankuniene and Jasilioniene, 2008; Zakharov, 2008). The divorce rate has remained relatively low in some countries (e.g., Romania and Bulgaria), while it has increased to western European levels in others (e.g., Lithuania, Estonia) (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008). In southern Europe, non-marital cohabitation is rare (Kiernan, 2004) and childbearing is very closely linked to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004). Additionally, a relatively low share of marriages ends in divorce (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008). In western and northern Europe, marriage and fertility are not as closely related as in other countries (Sigle-Rushton, 2008). Cohabitation is common and divorce rates are higher than in other European regions (except some post-socialist countries) (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008). European countries also differ regarding their levels of income and educational inequalities. Educational and income inequalities are lowest in the Nordic countries, income inequality is the highest in the United Kingdom, whereas educational inequalities are highest in former socialist countries (Kalmijn and Leopold, 2021). Due to the lack of cross-national evidence from children's perspective, we do not know whether children are more or less likely to experience different types of complex families across their life courses in countries with different family regimes, welfare states, policies, and different levels of inequalities.

Although the trends in family complexity are likely to be different for children who come from varying socio-economic backgrounds, only a few studies analysed heterogeneity within the population of children who experience parental separation (Härkönen et al., 2017) and almost no studies analysed this among more complex post-separation families. Additionally, cross-national comparative evidence on socio-economic inequalities in the trends in family complexity in children's lives is also scarce. McLanahan (2004) compared mothers by their level of education in the US, UK, Canada, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands and showed that highly educated mothers have children at later ages, are employed to a larger extent, are much less likely to be single mothers, and less are likely to divorce than mothers with lower levels of education. Fathers with higher levels of education are also more likely to be involved in taking care of their children compared to those with lower levels of education. Taking a child-centred approach and only focusing on the risk of separation, Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) studied the risk of parental separation among children in eight European countries by their parents' level of education. They found that across union cohorts, children of low educated parents were increasingly more likely to experience parental separation than children of highly educated parents. However, there is a lack of evidence on socio-economic differences in the trends in family complexity across Europe from the perspective of children.

To summarise, this paper takes a child-centred life course approach to study trends in family complexity across the life courses of European children. I study changes across birth cohorts and by educational groups to understand whether children's experiences of family complexity has become more common across generations and whether socio-economic differences in children's experiences of family complexity have changed over time.

Data

I take a child-centred perspective to data preparation and analysis and combine several data sources to provide a comprehensive picture of family complexity and inequalities during childhood in Europe. To be able to study change across birth cohorts, I combine data from the Harmonized Histories (HH) and the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS; Round II). The HH primarily relies on data from wave 1 of the GGS (Round I). The GGS is a set of comparable, large-scale, representative, longitudinal national surveys. These data are the most appropriate for studying individual family life courses across Europe because they include detailed reliable retrospective information on the year and month of the start and end of several cohabitations, marriages, union dissolutions, and the birth date(s) of child(ren). Respondents in these datasets are adults but as it includes information on the birthdate of their children, the dataset can be turned into a file where children are the unit of observation. This means that children and the evolution of the structure of their families can be followed from the time they are born until their age at the time of the survey. The GGS also includes information on parent's highest level of education. I analyse 20 European countries for which data are available (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Spain, and the UK). Due to the year of different data collections, not all countries have information on all birth cohorts. The adult respondents in the dataset can be mothers or fathers. I use information on children of both mothers and fathers. Later, I will conduct sensitivity analysis to check whether the results are sensitive to only using information on the children of mothers.

Methods

Using Kaplan-Meier estimates of the survival function, I study children's propensity to experience family transitions leading to complex families; that is first and second parental separation, lone parenthood, and first and second parental repartnering. First, I calculate overall survival curves for these events across countries; then I disaggregate the trends by birth cohort and the parent's highest level of education. Children's life courses are observed from birth to age 15, the time of interview, or the event of interest, whichever occurs earlier. Children are also censored if they pass away. For studying the risk of first parental separation, the baseline is children's age. Then, we study children's propensity to experience a first parental repartnering among children who have experienced parental separation. Here, the baseline is time since first parental separation, and we follow children up to 6 years following parental separation. Next, we study children's risks of experiencing a second parental separation. Here, we focus on children who experienced a first parental separation and the baseline is children's age. Finally, we calculate children's risk of experiencing a second parental repartnering. This is calculated among those who experienced two parental separations and the baseline is time since second parental separation. With each subsequent transition, the number of children at risk of experiencing the next transition and the number of those who experience these transitions gets smaller. This means that I cannot disaggregate second parental repartnering risks by birth cohort and level of education so here I only show the overall trends. The graphs do not present confidence intervals as they make the Figures illegible. It remains part of the next steps to find out how confidence intervals can best be shown.

Variables

I compare the experiences of children born in three birth cohorts that broadly align with different generations: those born between 1960 and 1979 (Generation X), those born between 1980 and 1999 (Millennials), and those born after 2000 (Gen Z). I measure parents' highest level of education using the ISCED 1997 classification. We distinguish between low/medium (ISCED 0 - ISCED 4) educated and highly educated (ISCED 5 and ISCED 6) parents. It is possible that parents' highest level of education at the time of the birth of each of their children was not the same as their highest level of education at the time of the survey. As a sensitivity check, we have created a variable where for those whose highest level of education has changed between childbirth and the survey, we have reduced their level of education by one on the original ISCED variable (e.g., from ISCED2 to ISCED1) and then created a recoded variable. The two variables are almost identical, so we have decided to use parents' highest level of education at the time of the survey. To examine changes across birth cohorts among children with low/medium and highly educated parents, we have cross-classified birth cohort and level of education, resulting in a variable with six categories.

Results

First parental separation

Figure 1 shows the proportion of children over age who have not (yet) experienced a first parental separation among children who were born in a union. Overall, around 20% of children have experienced the separation of their parents by age 15 among children who were born in a

relationship. In some countries, this proportion is somewhat larger (Finland, the UK) and in other countries it is somewhat smaller (Norway, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania). In some countries (Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Italy, Spain), this proportion is around 10% or less.

Figure 2 shows these trends by birth cohort and level of education. Overall, for most countries we find that the risk of first parental separation has increased across birth cohorts. Additionally, among all cohorts, it was children of less educated parents who were more likely to experience a first parental separation compared to children of highly educated parents. Furthermore, these educational differences seem to have increased across birth cohorts. This is the case in Norway, Belgium, France, the UK, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and to a lesser extent (i.e., both cohort and educational differences are smaller) in the Netherlands, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Italy, and Spain. However, in some countries, at least some of these patterns are different. For example, in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Croatia, and Estonia, younger cohorts have lower risks of experiencing a first parental separation. Additionally, in Finland, the gap between children of low and highly educated parents also seem to decrease rather than increase across cohorts.

Living with a lone parent

Figures 1 and 2 only showed parental separation among children who were born in a union. However, children can also be born outside of a relationship either to a never partnered or separated parents (i.e., to a lone parent). Additionally, children who experience at least one parental separation among those who were born in a union are also considered to experience living with a lone parent. Figure 3 shows the proportion of children who have not yet experienced living with a lone parent. First, we see cross-national differences in the proportion of children who were born to a lone parent. This proportion is generally under 10% but it is higher in Germany; and it is the lowest in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Croatia. By age 15, around 20-25% of children have lived with a lone parent for some time in most countries. However, in Germany, the UK, and Estonia, this share is around 30%. Finally, it is much lower (only around 10%) in Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Italy, and Spain.

Figure 4 shows trends in the risk of living with a lone parent by birth cohort and education. (The sudden jump at the start of the figures is because some children were already in a lone parent family when they were born. In order to not have these children excluded from the Kaplan-Meier estimates, I have imputed a duration of one month for these children. I will have to find a more elegant solution to this issue.) The results here largely correspond to those in Figure 2 but when we also consider children who were born outside of a union, cohort and educational differences become larger, especially at younger ages in most countries.

First repartnering

In the entire population of children, the overall risk of repartnering is below 10% in all countries (not shown). Among children, who have experienced a first parental separation, overall, around 40-50% of children will see their parent form a new relationship 6 years after separation (Figure 5). This share is much smaller (only around 20-30%) in Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Italy, and Spain. When disaggregating these trends by birth cohort and parental education (Figure 6), we find that in many countries, a smaller share of children of separated parents experiences a first

parental repartnering across younger than older cohorts. This is the case in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, France, the UK, and Croatia. In these countries, it also seems that children of highly educated parents are less likely to experience parental repartnering that those of lower educated parents, especially among the youngest cohort. In other countries, we see the opposite, whereby children from younger cohorts are more likely to experience parental repartnering compared to older cohorts (Sweden, Czech Republic, Estonia). In these countries, although the differences are often less obvious, it is also the children of more educated parents who are less likely to experience parental repartnering. In the remaining countries, it is harder to detect clear patterns as the experiences of different cohorts are more similar.

Second parental separation

Some children may experience parental separation more than once. Among those children whose parents separated once, a substantial proportion, 10-20% experiences parental separation again (Figure 7). This share is lowest (less than 5%) in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Italy, and Spain. Disaggregating these figures by birth cohort and education (Figure 8), we find fewer differences overall across most countries but such differences are more pronounced in a few countries such as Sweden, the UK, and the Czech Republic where children from younger cohorts are more likely to experience a second parental separation than those from older cohorts and this is especially the case among children of lower educated parents in the UK and Sweden (but not in the Czech Republic).

Second repartnering

Those children whose parents separated twice may experience the entry of a new partner into the family for a second time. Here, we have much fewer events but nonetheless Figure 9 shows that among these children, again around 40-50% will see their parent repartner for a second time within 6 years from second separation (but this share is lower in Croatia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Italy). Due to the small numbers of events, we cannot disaggregate these results by birth cohort and education.

Conclusions, limitations, and next steps

Overall, this study shows that children experience a fair amount of family complexity in Europe. Around 20% of children experience parental separation and around 40-50% of these children will go on the experience the repartnering of their parent with a new stepparent. Additionally, around 10-20% of children experience a second parental separation of whom around 40-50% experience a second parental repartnering. We found only small differences in the timing of transitions leading to family complexity. Additionally, there is a vast amount of cross-national variation in children's experiences of family complexity, but these are not (always) according to the expected geographical groupings. Studying trends in family complexity by birth cohort and parental education reveals that overall family complexity has increased across cohorts and socio-economic inequalities in these trends have widened across cohorts in many countries.

Next steps for this study include adding more data where available, calculating measures related to step-siblings and half-siblings where possible, exploring the impact of studying several children from the same family, exploring the impact of studying children of

both mothers and fathers, and grappling with sample size challenges especially for higher order events (e.g., finding a way to visualise confidence intervals without overwhelming the figures).

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Figure 1. Proportion of children (born in a union) who have not yet experienced a first parental separation by country. Kaplan-Meier estimates.

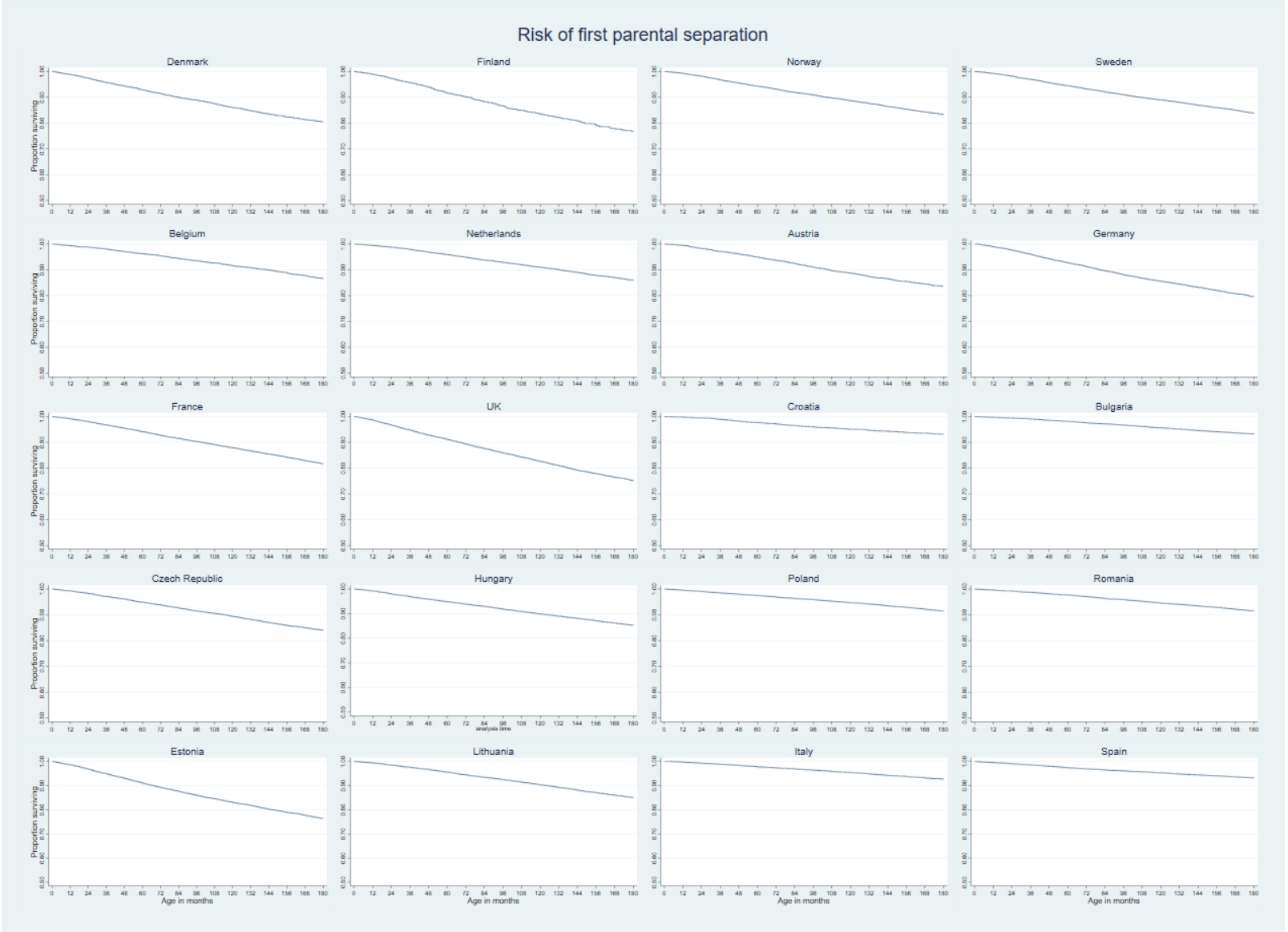


Figure 2. Proportion of children (born in a union) who have not yet experienced a first parental separation by cohort, parental education, and country. Kaplan-Meier estimates.

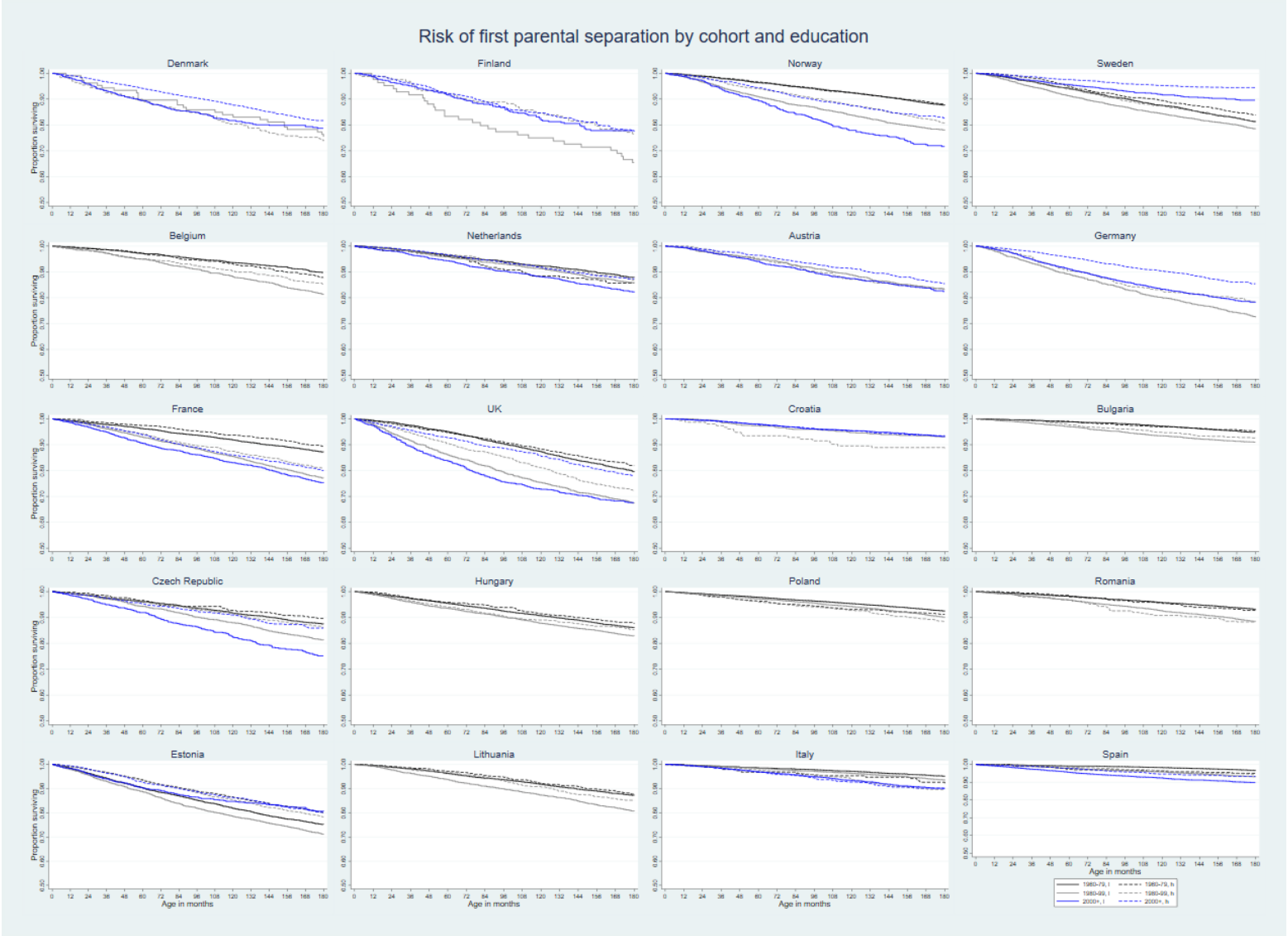


Figure 3. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced living with a lone parent by country. Kaplan-Meier estimates

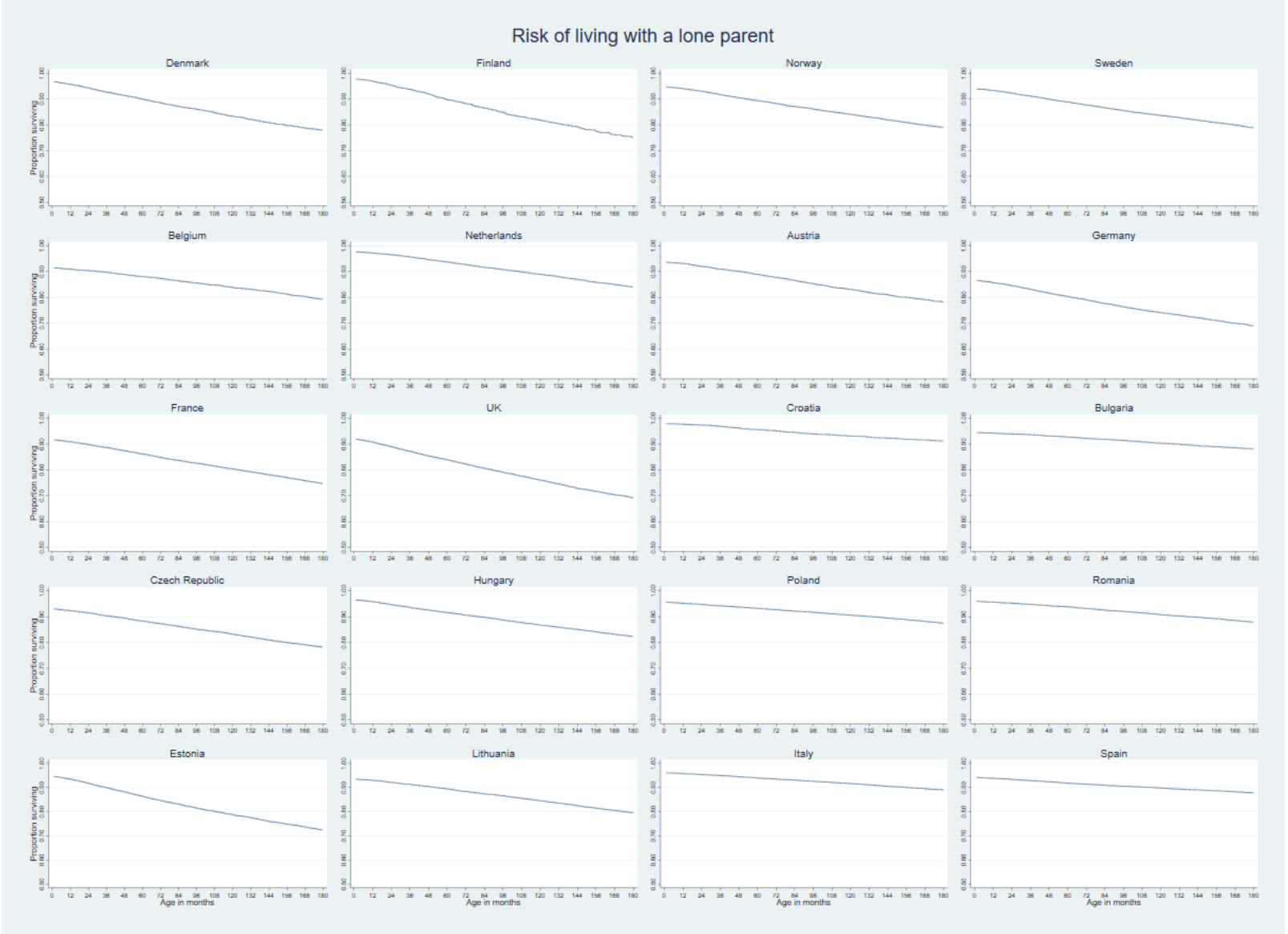


Figure 4. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced living with a lone parent by cohort, parental education, and country. Kaplan-Meier estimates

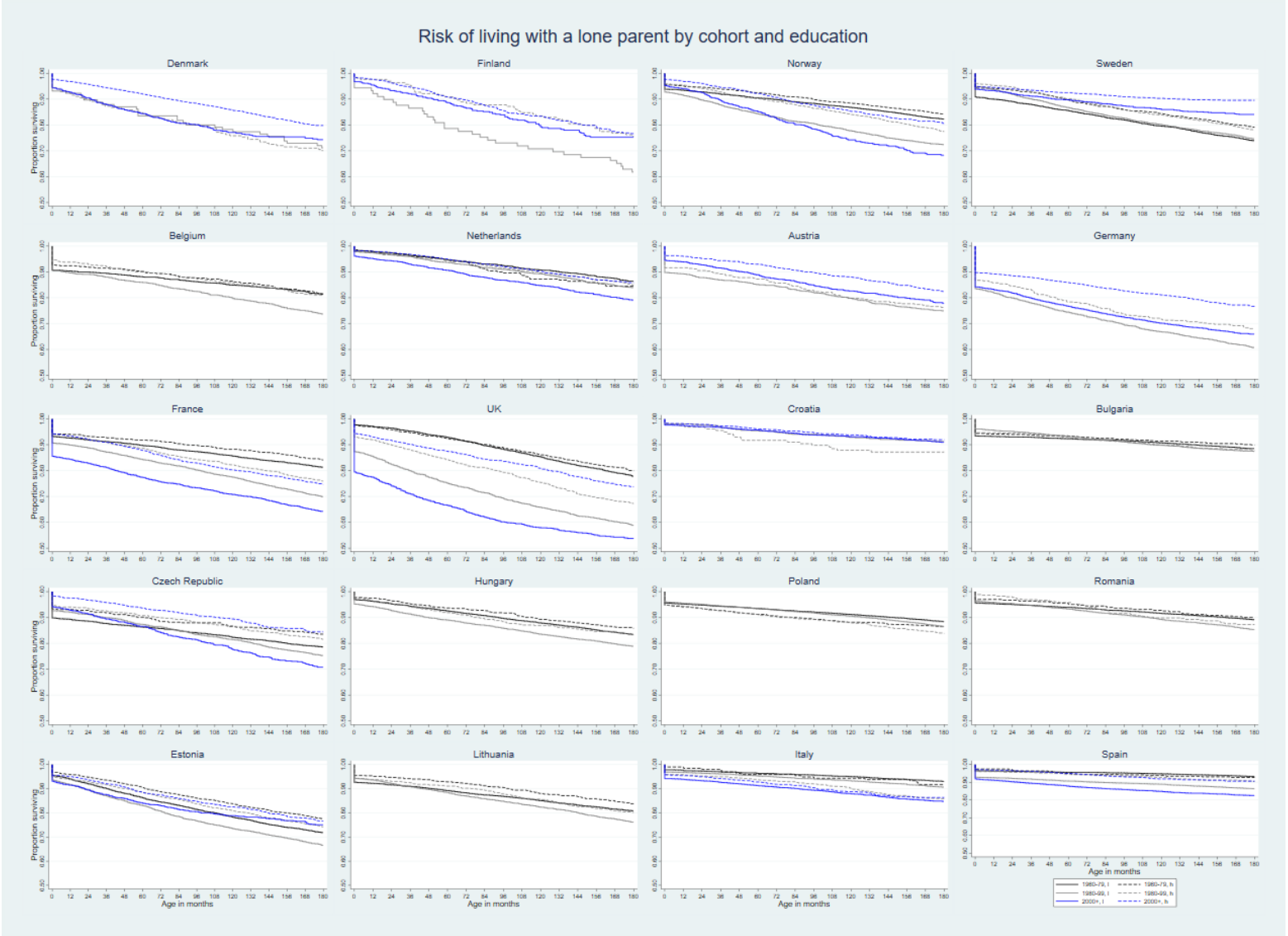


Figure 5. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced a first parental repartnering by country. Kaplan-Meier estimates (among those whose parents have separated; baseline: time since first parental separation)

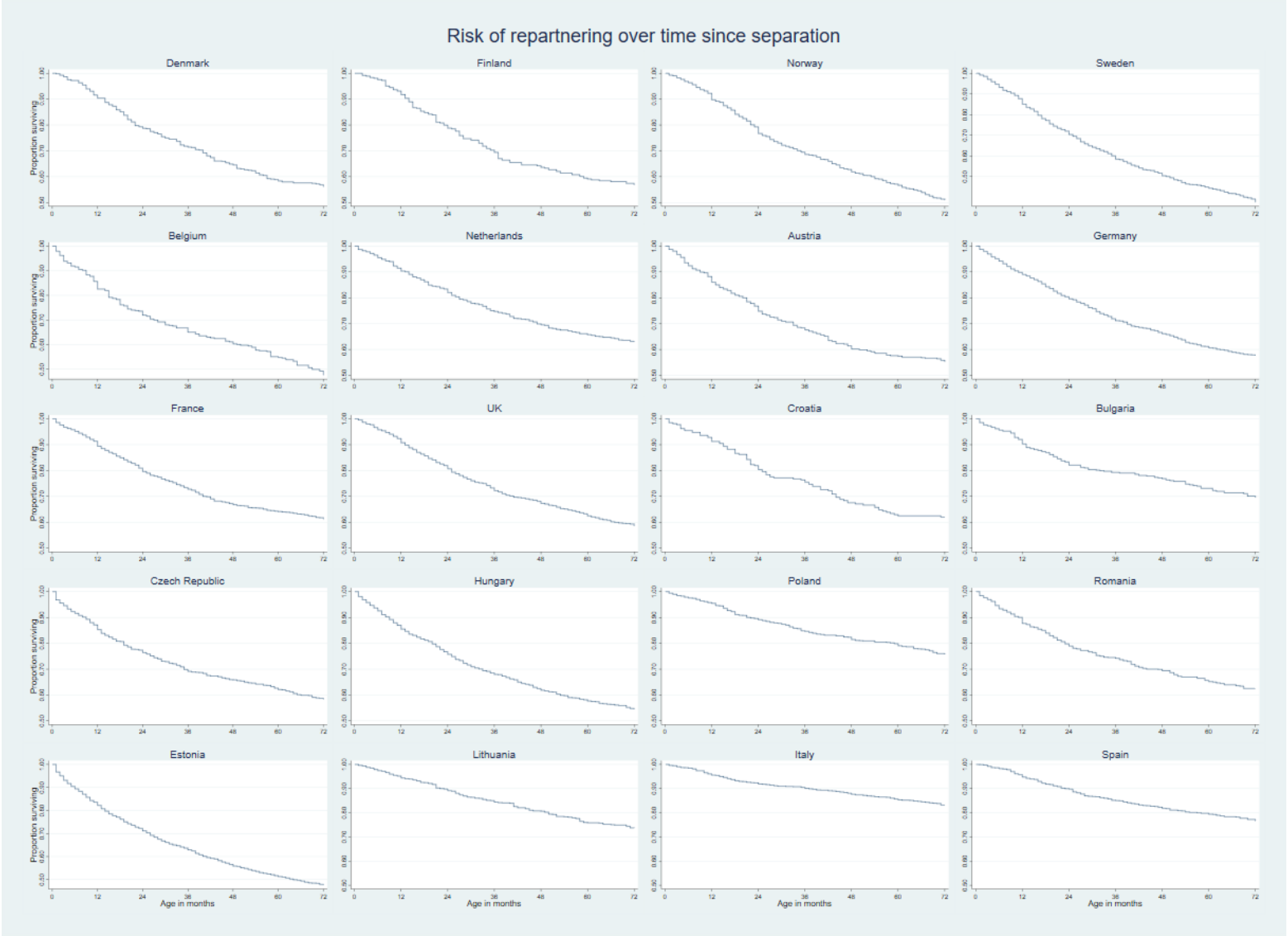


Figure 6. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced a first parental repartnering by cohort, parental education, and country. Kaplan-Meier estimates (among those whose parents have separated; baseline: time since first parental separation)

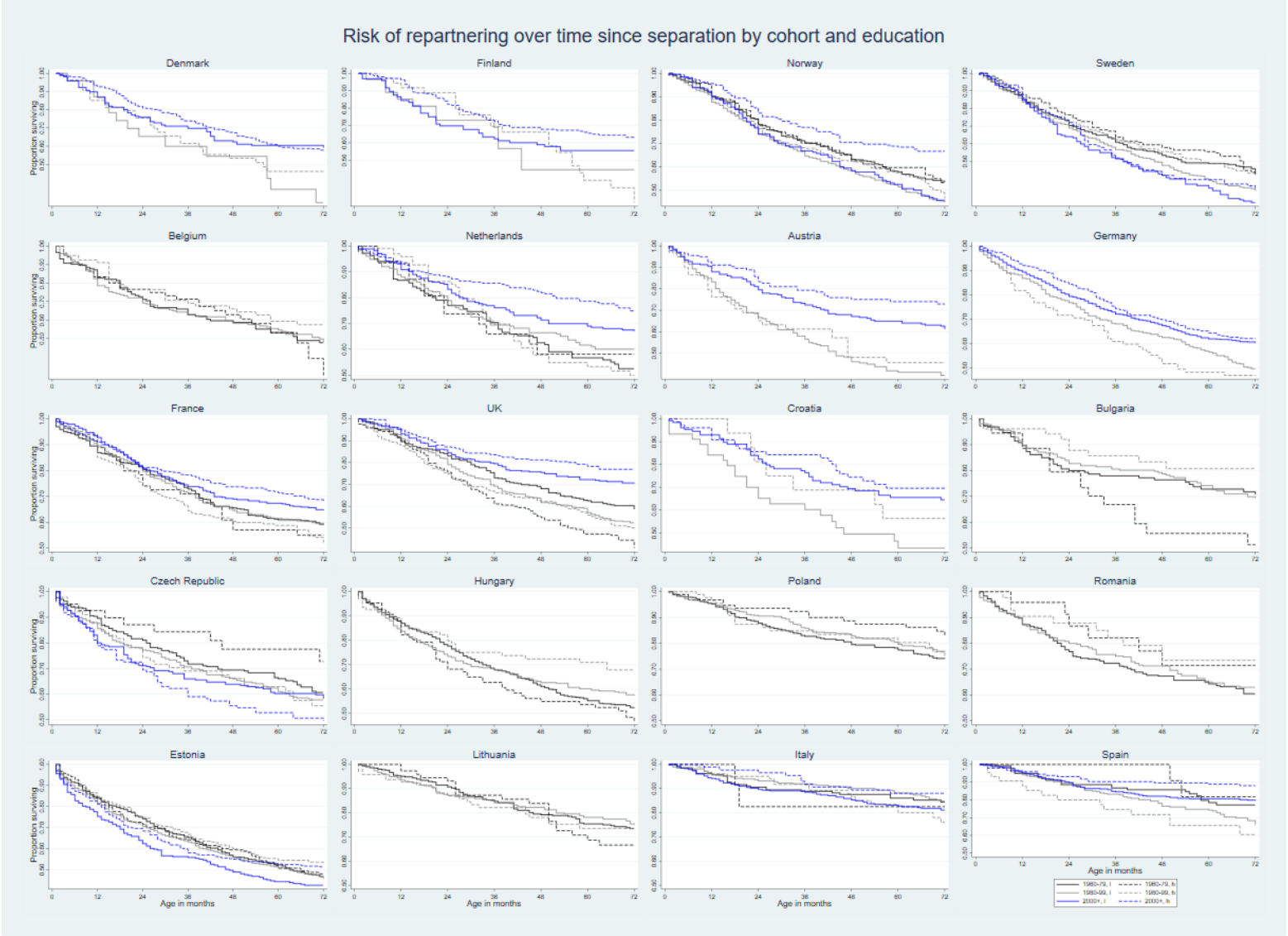


Figure 7. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced a second parental separation by country. Kaplan-Meier estimates

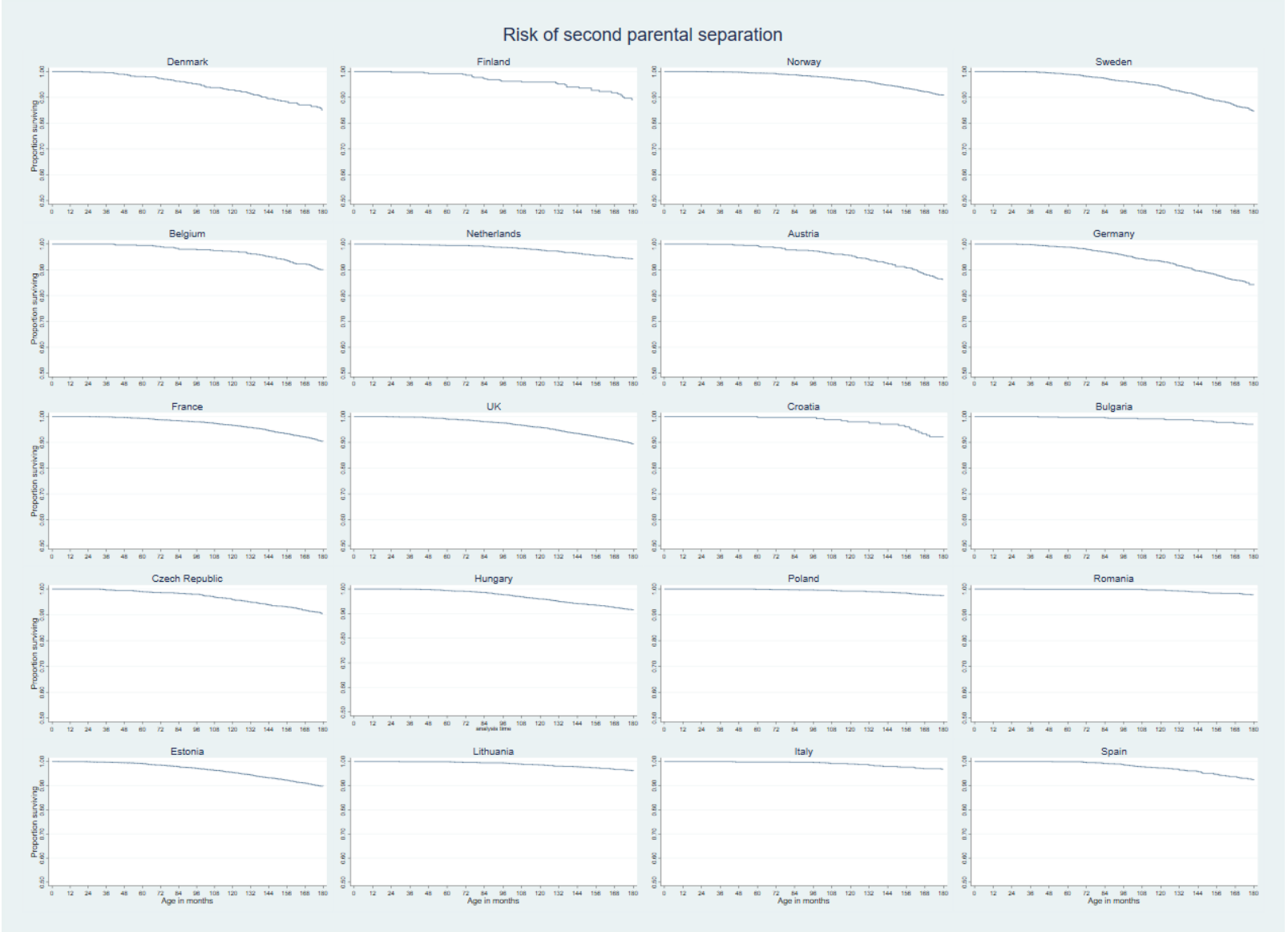


Figure 8. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced a second parental separation by cohort, parental education, and country. Kaplan-Meier estimates

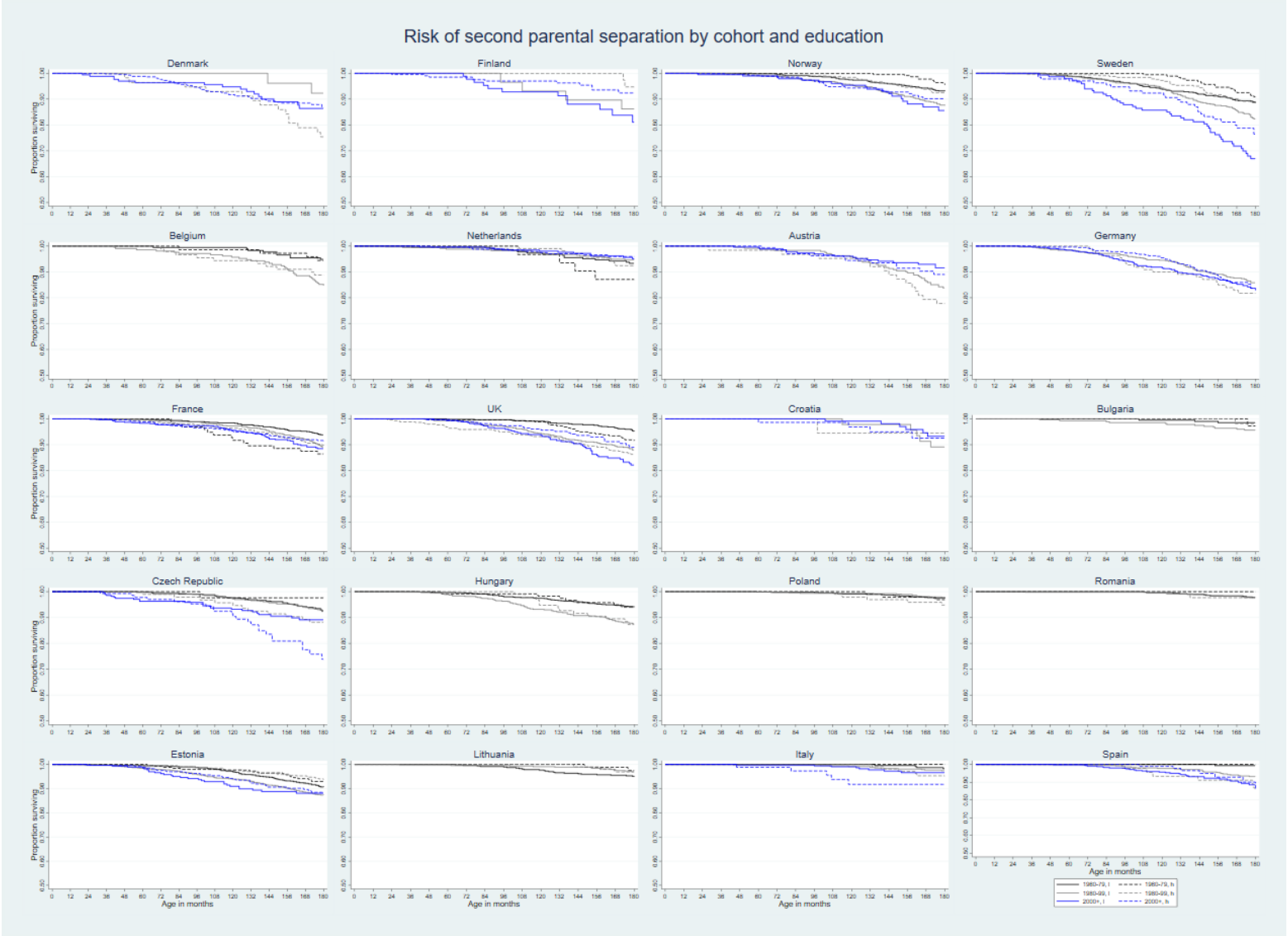
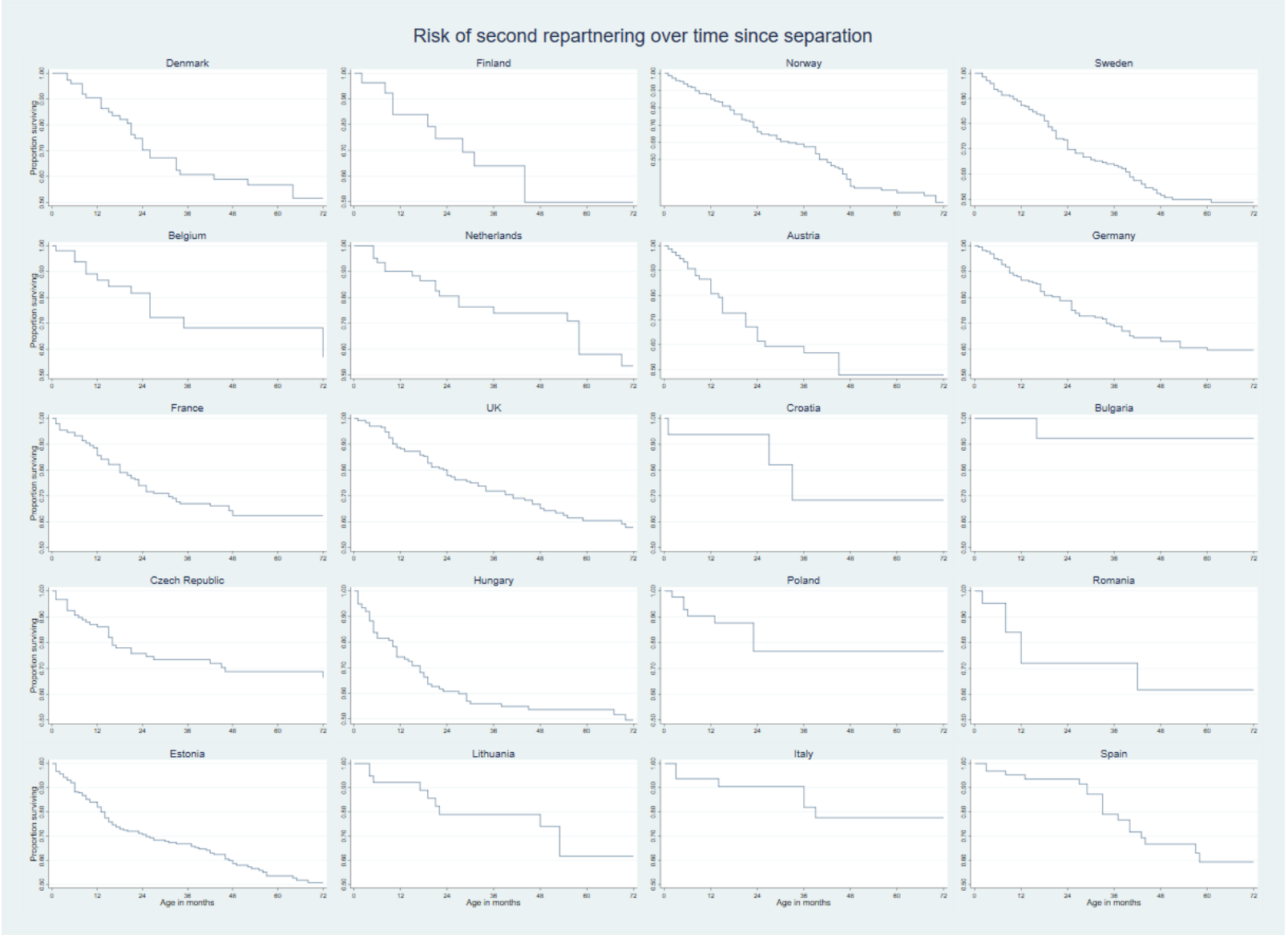


Figure 9. Proportion of children who have not yet experienced a second parental repartnering by country. Kaplan-Meier estimates



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