

Prevalence and characteristics of custody arrangements in Switzerland

Background and aims

In the last decades, increasing separation and divorce rates have generated new forms of post-separation family life across Europe, which has led to an increasing interest in custody arrangements. While shared physical custody (SPC)—defined as the child spending at least 30% of time with each parent—has become widespread in Nordic and some Western European countries, it remains a minority but growing practice in countries with more traditional gender regimes and limited family policy support. Research from high-prevalence SPC countries suggests that SPC is associated with better or similar levels of child well-being compared to lone physical custody (LPC), partly because children maintain strong relationships with both parents and have access to both of their resources. However, SPC is not equally accessible to all: in low-prevalence contexts, SPC families are positively selected in terms of education, income, cooperation, and low conflict, which blurs the conclusions when assessing children's well-being.

Switzerland represents a particularly relevant case. It combines a traditional male-breadwinner labour market regime, limited public childcare and parental leave policies, and a late legal shift towards SPC (joint legal custody introduced in 2014; judicial encouragement of SPC introduced only in 2017). Despite these reforms, empirical data on the prevalence and characteristics of custody arrangements remain scarce and outdated. To address these research gaps, we aim at providing an overview of custody arrangements and focus on three research questions. First, we assess the prevalence of lone physical custody (LPC), equal shared physical custody (equal SPC) and unequal shared physical custody (unequal SPC). Second, we analyze the association between different child, parent, parental ex-couple and family characteristics and custody arrangements. And finally, we examine differences in child well-being across the different custody arrangements.

Data and methods

We draw on the FamyCH data to assess the prevalence of custody arrangements and for the subsequent analyses. The FamyCH survey is a national online survey in Switzerland launched in November 2024 that targeted families with at least one child aged 0-15 (the target child) living in different custody arrangements including lone custody, shared custody and non-separated families.

With a sample size of 4,535 respondents, we classify custody arrangements using a monthly residential calendar counting the number of nights the child spends with each parent. We created three categories: Lone physical custody (LPC) if the child resides in one parent's household more than 70% of the nights, equal shared physical custody (equal SPC) if the child resides at both parents' households 45-55% of the time and

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unequal shared physical custody (unequal SPC) if the child resides at both parent's households 30-45% or 55-70% of the time. Child well-being is measured with the SDQ-25 (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) for children aged 5 to 15 years old while a PCA-based index is constructed for children aged 6 months to 4 years. Additional indicators include health and academic performance.

We employ descriptive analyses and multinomial logistic regressions with a step-wise procedure using the type of custody arrangement as the dependent variable (LPC, equal SPC and unequal SPC) and different child, parental, couple-related and family characteristics as independent variables. We then explore through linear regressions the association of different custody arrangements with children well-being indicators.

Preliminary results

Preliminary findings indicate that there is still a selection effect in Switzerland with SPC parents reporting higher education levels, higher relationship quality with their children, closer distance and more egalitarian division of childcare before separation despite the recent legislative changes aiming to encourage SPC. Some differences between equal and unequal SPC are also highlighted, with equal SPC parents reporting higher selection than unequal SPC parents.

Well-being analyses reveal no differences between non-separated families and SPC families regarding children's total difficulties, internalizing and externalizing scores but lower scores for LPC children. However, children in non-separated families seem to fare better regarding their health and school grades compared to SPC children, which fare better themselves than LPC children.

Contribution and relevance

This study is the among the first to provide a detailed picture of custody arrangements in Switzerland after the 2017 reform. It contributes to research and larger public and societal debates by examining how widespread SPC has become and examining the socio-demographic differences among parents practicing different custody arrangements. It also assesses the well-being differences for children and paves the way for more detailed analyses of child well-being.