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Descriptive Finding

**Stability in children’s residential arrangements
and distance to nonresident parents in the 10
years after parental separation**

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Stability in children's residential arrangements and distance to nonresident parents in the 10 years after parental separation

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Existing studies investigating children's living arrangements after parental separation and geographic distance to the nonresident parent focus primarily on the situation shortly after separation. Little is known about how children's residence with and distance to parents evolve with time elapsed since separation.

OBJECTIVE

We investigate for the first 10 years following parental separation with which parent the child lives and how far the child lives from the nonresident parent for Belgian children whose parents separated in their early childhood (0 to 6 years).

METHODS

Data from Demobel (Belgian register-based data; 2010–2020) was analyzed by means of descriptive analysis, sequence index plots, and Kaplan–Meier survival functions.

RESULTS

For every 10 children who initially registered with their mother (85%), 9.2 stayed registered with their mother in the long term. Geographical distance to the father increased with time elapsed since separation. Children who were initially registered with their father (15%) were more likely to change residency to their mother. On average, the distance between nonresident mothers and their children did not increase.

CONCLUSIONS

Residential arrangements following separation were mostly stable, even though a switch in the resident parent was not uncommon, especially if the child was initially registered with the father. Compared to residential arrangements, distance to the nonresident parent was more often subject to change.

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CONTRIBUTION

By adopting a longitudinal perspective on the residential arrangements of children following parental separation in early childhood, we were able to assess how the initial arrangements – the typical focus of previous studies – change with time elapsed since separation.

1. Introduction and background

In Belgium around one-fifth of minor children experience parental separation (Dujeu et al. 2018). When parents separate, they have to decide on their new living arrangements, including physical distance between family members. Postseparation living and care arrangements have changed considerably in recent decades. Until the 1990s postseparation arrangements in Belgium, as in many western countries, were strongly gendered, and mothers usually became the sole caretakers of their children following the separation (Vanassche et al. 2017). Since then, fathers have become more involved in postseparation childrearing (Kalmijn 2015; Theunis, Eeckhaut, and Van Bavel 2018; Viry 2014; Westphal, Poortman, and van der Lippe 2014; Zartler 2021) and have more often enacted the role of residential parent. Nonresident parents, whether mothers or fathers, live close to their children shortly after separation (Dommermuth 2016; Turunen, Brandén, and Lundström 2023). The nonresident parent's distance to the child is crucial for their involvement in day-to-day care, such as dropping off or picking up the child from school or preparing meals. However, little is known about how the residential arrangements of postseparation families change with time elapsed since separation. In this paper, we investigate how the residential arrangements and distance to nonresident parents change within the first 10 years after the separation for Belgian children whose parents separated in their early childhood (0 to 6 years).

The evidence on residential arrangements of children with separated parents as well as on geographic distance to the nonresident parent is growing. Yet existing studies investigating the residential arrangements of children focus primarily on the situation shortly after separation (Berger et al. 2008; Dommermuth 2016; Ferrari, Bonnet, and Solaz 2019; Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2008; Sodermans, Matthijs, and Swicegood 2013; Thomas, Mulder, and Cooke 2017, 2018; Turunen, Brandén, and Lundström 2023) or on the situation of parents who have been separated (Mulder and Wagner 2010; Stjernström and Strömngren 2012; Vanassche 2013; Vanassche et al. 2017; Viry 2014; van der Wiel and Kooiman 2019). In Belgium, according to the Divorce in Flanders survey focusing on divorced parents, children most commonly resided with their mother immediately after separation (Vanassche 2013). However, whereas 80% of

children lived mostly with their mother in the 1990–1995 divorce cohorts, this decreased to 53% in the 2006–2011 cohorts. At the same time the prevalence of joint custody increased from 8.5% to 37% (Vanassche 2013). Furthermore, children of divorced parents in Flanders spent most of their time with their mothers: in 31% of cases 100% of the time, and in 39% of cases 70% to 100% of the time. In 21% of cases, the children spent about equal time (30% to 70%) with both parents, and only in 9% of cases 70% to 100% of their time with their father (Sodermans et al. 2014). Recent research using Belgian register data (where the child can be registered with only one parent) shows that the share of mothers who do not live with their children following marital or nonmarital union dissolution increased from 13% in 1996 to 23% in 2018 (Zilincikova and Schnor 2023).

The distance between a child and their nonresident parent tends to be short. In Belgium, around 45% of minor children whose parents separated in 2018 lived in the same municipality as their nonresident parent in the year after separation (Zilincikova and Schnor 2023). Similar results have been found in Norway, where 70% of nonresident mothers and 62% of nonresident fathers live less than 10 km from their children in 2012, regardless of the timing of the separation (Dommermuth 2016), and in Sweden, where about half of nonresident parents separated in 2011 lived less than 2 km from their children in the year after the separation (Turunen, Brandén, and Lundström 2023). The move at separation is, however, often temporary and followed by one or several other moves in subsequent years (Feijten and Ham 2013). Separated parents are more likely to move in the years following separation than parents who did not experience separation (van der Wiel, Kooiman, and Mulder 2021), and the living arrangements and distance between family members tend to change over time (Thomas, Mulder, and Cooke 2018). The subsequent moves among those separated may be connected to repartnering, career and employment opportunities, or simply a decline of financial resources (Stjernström and Strömgen 2012; Thomas, Mulder, and Cooke 2017, 2018).

Focusing on children who experience parental separation at a very young age is especially relevant because they spend most of their childhood in postseparation families. At the same time, young children are more likely to live farther away from their nonresident parent than older children (Dommermuth 2016) and are at a higher risk of losing contact with that parent (Kalmijn 2015). As a consequence, the nonresident parent's side of the family may be less available, with consequences for the children's kin support network throughout their life course. In addition, the quality and quantity of contact with the nonresident parent contributes to better postdivorce adjustment and the child's well-being (Dunn et al. 2004).

To the best of our knowledge, only one study has adopted a longitudinal perspective to follow the distance between ex-partners with a joint child over a longer period. Thomas, Mulder, and Cooke (2018), using a small sample (N = 354) of British families,

follow the families for on average about four years after separation and find that distance between partners tends to increase with time elapsed since separation (Thomas, Mulder, and Cooke 2018). However, given the small sample size, this study provides only limited insight into the transformation of postseparation families in the years following separation. A longitudinal perspective on the residential arrangements of children and distance to their nonresident parent using more exhaustive data is needed to understand the dynamics of the children's postseparation family life. Assessing postseparation family arrangements based only on the situation shortly after separation provides a partial and perhaps misleading picture of the realities of postseparation families.

2. Data and methods

The analysis is based on Demobel data provided by Statistics Belgium gathering residential information from National Population Registers for the years 2010 to 2020. The data contain the entire Belgian resident population and include information on household members, municipality of residence, and the link between parents and their children. A child can be registered with only one parent even though they may be living in shared physical custody. Findings from the Netherlands show that the vast majority of children of separated parents spend most of their time at the address where they are registered (van der Wiel and Kooiman 2019). We selected children aged 0 to 6 (in the year after separation) whose parents separated in 2010. We defined separation as follows. First, we took all couples with a joint child who shared a household on January 1, 2010. If the couple did not reside in the same household on January 1, 2011, we considered the couple to be separated. We excluded families when one of the parents dropped out from the register in 2011 because information on such parents is lost. Additionally, we excluded couples who again lived together on January 1, 2012. We also only included children who lived with one of their parents in 2011. We assessed the residential arrangements immediately following parental separation and created two subpopulations: (1) children with a resident mother and nonresident father ($N = 14,975$) and (2) children with a resident father and nonresident mother ($N = 2,660$). We followed the children from separation over the next 10 years and assessed their residential arrangements (whether they registered with the parent or not) as well as distance to the nonresident parent each year. We categorized the residential situation as follows: (1) both parents resident, (2) one parent resident, (3) the nonresident parent lives in the same municipality, (4) the nonresident parent lives in a different municipality 1 to 9.99 km away, (5) the nonresident parent lives in a different municipality more than 10 km away, (6) the nonresident parent has dropped from the register, and (7) the parent died. If the child and nonresident parent did not live in the same municipality, the distance between the two households was

approximated by the distance between the city halls of the two municipalities.⁴ Please note that the information about the exact distance between the two households is not available in our data. We used descriptive analysis to display the situation for each year after the separation, sequence index plots to describe the most common trajectories, and Kaplan–Meier survival functions to assess the timing of the change of the resident parent.

3. Findings

In 2011, children are much more likely to be registered with their mothers (85%) than their fathers (15%) a year after the separation. In 39% of cases, both parents stayed living in the same municipality, in 27% it was the mother who moved to a different municipality, and in 26% it was the father. In 8% of cases, both the mother and father moved from the municipality where they lived prior to separation.⁵

The statistics in Table 1 show how the average residential arrangements and distance to the nonresident parent changed in the 10 years following parental separation for children who initially registered with mothers (visualized in Figure 1a) and for children who initially registered with fathers (visualized in Figure 1b). The vast majority of the children initially registered with their mothers continued being registered with their mother. Only about 8% no longer registered with their mother 10 years after separation. Children who registered initially with their father experienced a change in residency in the years following parental separation more often. About 32.5% of the children who initially registered with their father switched residency to their mother.

About 8.7% of children initially registered with their mothers and 5.3% of children initially registered with their fathers were coresiding with both parents by the end of the observed period. This suggests either that parents reconciled or that we captured cases in which parents never separated even though they were formally registered in two different households for at least two consecutive years.

About the same percentage of nonresident mothers (29.5%) and fathers (31%) lived 10 km or more away from their child at separation. However, nonresident fathers lived farther away from their children than nonresident mothers 10 years after separation. Whereas the percentage of nonresident fathers living more than 10 km away 10 years after separation is 31%, for nonresident mothers it is 22%. In addition, about 10% of nonresident fathers dropped out of the register before the end of observation (most likely due to moving abroad); for nonresident mothers the figure is 6%.

⁴ As of 2020, there are 581 municipalities in Belgium with the number of inhabitants ranging from 79 to 529,247 with a mean of 19,781 and a mean area of 52.8 km².

⁵ If the mother was the resident parent, the father was more likely to move (father: 29%, mother: 23%), whereas if the father was the resident parent, the mother was more likely to move (father: 6%, mother 49%).

Figure 1a: Children with a resident mother and nonresident father at separation (N = 14,975). Residential arrangements and distance to mother (left) and to father (right)

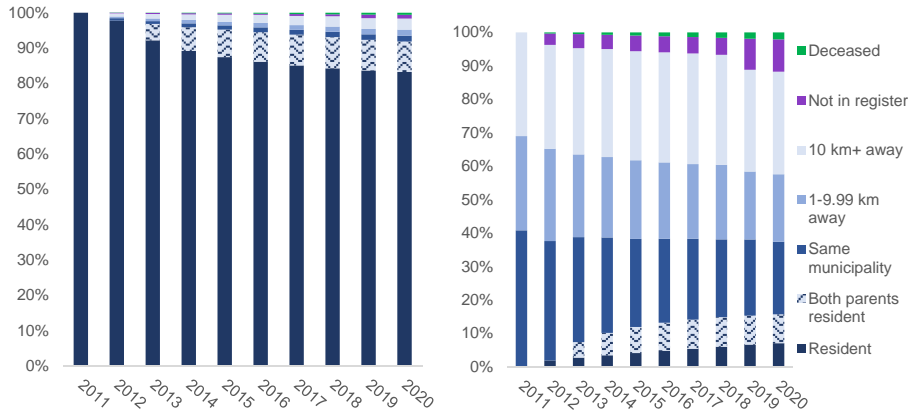


Figure 1b: Children with resident father and nonresident mother at separation (N = 2,660). Residential arrangements and distance to mother (left) and to father (right)

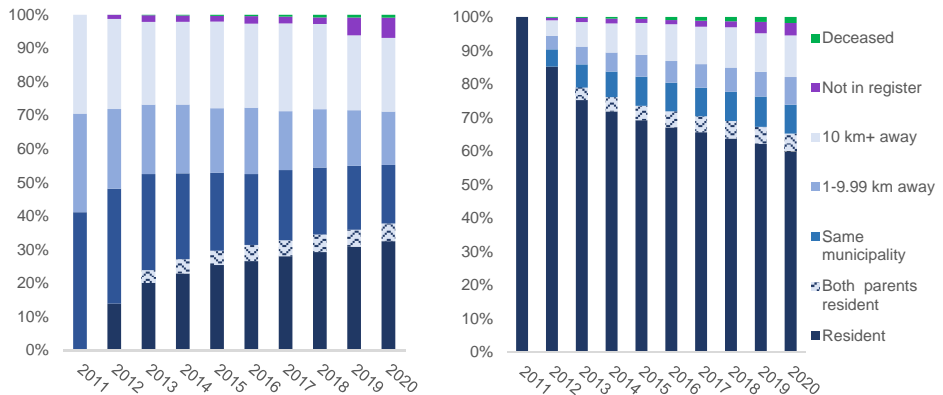


Table 1: Distribution of types of residential arrangements by first postdissolution arrangement and year

Categories	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Resident mother											
Both parents resident	0.00	0.00	4.63	6.71	7.80	8.36	8.72	8.85	8.67	8.65	6.24
Resident	100.00	97.73	92.17	89.16	87.41	86.08	85.05	84.24	83.64	83.18	88.87
Same municipality	0.00	0.70	0.81	1.08	1.18	1.38	1.38	1.50	1.57	1.64	1.12
1–9.99 km away	0.00	0.47	0.74	0.97	0.95	1.24	1.33	1.48	1.51	1.73	1.04
10+ km away	0.00	0.89	1.26	1.57	2.07	2.32	2.61	2.91	3.05	3.13	1.98
Not in register	0.00	0.17	0.30	0.34	0.38	0.31	0.51	0.55	1.01	1.06	0.46
Deceased	0.00	0.03	0.09	0.16	0.21	0.30	0.41	0.47	0.56	0.61	0.28
Nonresident father											
Both parents resident	0.00	0.00	4.63	6.71	7.80	8.36	8.72	8.85	8.67	8.65	6.24
Resident	0.00	1.89	2.75	3.44	4.11	4.81	5.40	6.01	6.65	7.05	4.21
Same municipality	40.80	35.71	31.38	28.53	26.34	25.10	24.17	23.25	22.76	21.70	27.97
1–9.99 km away	28.20	27.62	24.75	24.04	23.52	22.84	22.34	22.28	20.32	20.19	23.61
10+ km away	31.00	31.04	31.76	32.31	32.59	32.91	33.09	32.91	30.42	30.67	31.87
Not in register	0.00	3.41	4.21	4.25	4.69	4.81	4.90	5.08	9.29	9.66	5.03
Deceased	0.00	0.33	0.51	0.72	0.94	1.16	1.39	1.63	1.90	2.08	1.07
Resident father											
Both parents resident	0.00	0.00	3.72	4.25	4.29	4.81	4.74	5.23	5.08	5.26	3.74
Resident	100.00	85.15	75.19	71.80	69.17	67.03	65.60	63.72	62.11	59.92	71.97
Same municipality	0.00	5.15	6.92	7.63	8.68	8.53	8.53	8.72	9.06	8.61	7.18
1–9.99 km away	0.00	4.06	5.30	5.68	6.54	6.47	7.03	7.22	7.37	8.27	5.79
10+ km away	0.00	4.62	7.33	8.68	9.51	10.98	11.17	12.03	11.50	12.41	8.82
Not in register	0.00	0.75	1.24	1.43	1.20	1.24	1.80	1.77	3.38	3.68	1.65
Deceased	0.00	0.26	0.30	0.53	0.60	0.94	1.13	1.32	1.50	1.84	0.84
Nonresident mother											
Both parents resident	0.00	0.00	3.76	4.25	4.28	4.81	4.74	5.22	5.07	5.26	3.74
Resident	0.00	13.90	20.11	22.89	25.40	26.57	28.03	29.27	30.85	32.51	22.95
Same municipality	41.15	34.24	28.64	25.59	23.19	21.12	20.93	19.95	19.05	17.47	25.13
1–9.99 km away	29.39	23.75	20.71	20.52	19.28	19.80	17.55	17.40	16.57	15.90	20.09
10+ km away	29.46	26.87	24.65	24.65	25.82	25.03	26.16	25.40	22.32	21.95	25.23
Not in register	0.00	1.20	1.99	1.88	1.69	2.25	2.03	1.95	5.30	6.05	2.44
Deceased	0.00	0.04	0.15	0.23	0.34	0.41	0.56	0.79	0.83	0.86	0.42

Figures 1a and 1b display the average residential situation for each year, but they do not reveal anything about the trajectories of individual children. Using sequence index plots, Figure 2 shows the ten most common trajectories of children who initially registered with their mothers (left) and with their fathers (right).⁶ The y-axis displays the number of children, and the x-axis shows the number of distinct residential arrangements for each child. The most common trajectories of children registered initially with their mothers are the stable ones – registered continuously with the mother and the father living close (less than 10 km away) or far (10+ km away). This accounts for about 38% of the children. The other most common trajectories are continuous residence with the mother with the father initially living close but living farther away at a later point (11%) or the father initially living far but living closer at a later point (5%). More rarely, the parents moved back together, the father dropped from the register or died, or children experienced more than two residential arrangements. As for the children who registered initially with their father, they also most commonly had a stable trajectory – registered continuously with the father while the mother lives close (23%), while 8% experienced the nonresident mother initially living close and then farther away and 7% had a nonresident mother that continuously lived farther away. Nevertheless, a common trajectory is also the change from residency with the father and the mother living close to being registered with the mother and the father living close (10%). Trajectories including more than two distinct residential arrangements within 10 years are quite rare.

Our results suggest that a change of resident parent following separation is relatively common, especially if the resident parent after the dissolution is the father. To explore when the change of the resident parent occurred, we estimated Kaplan–Meier survival curves (Figure 3), where an event refers to the first switch in the resident parent. The curve referring to initially resident mothers shows that the timing of the change is quite equally distributed throughout the years following separation, while that referring to initially resident fathers shows that the change is most likely to occur relatively quickly after separation. Within the first three years, 25% of initially resident fathers become nonresident. After the first three years, the risk of becoming a nonresident parent considerably decreases.

⁶ Note that sequence index plots use simplified categorization of the dependent variable. Categories 3 (the parent lives in the same municipality) and 4 (the parent lives 1 to 9 km away) were recategorized as “living close”; categories 6 (parent has dropped from the register) and 7 (parent has died) were recategorized as “else.”

Figure 2: Most common trajectories of children’s residential arrangements and distance to nonresident parent in the 10 years following separation for children initially registered with their mother (left) and initially registered with their father (right)

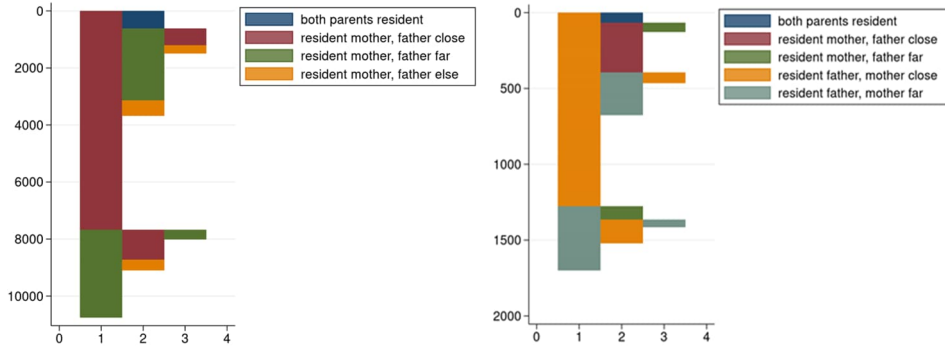
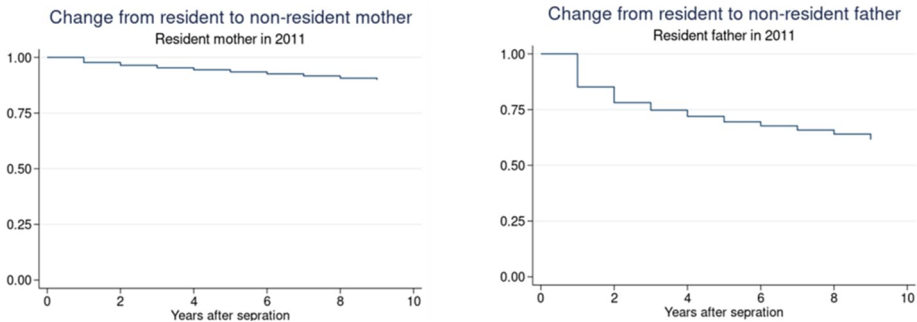


Figure 3: Kaplan–Meier survival function to estimate the transition from resident mother to nonresident mother (left) and from resident father to nonresident father (right)



4. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the stability of children’s residential arrangements whose parents separate early in their life course. By doing so, this study contributes to the study of children’s postseparation well-being. We used Belgian register data to follow these children from 2010 to 2020 (i.e., in the 10 years following the

separation). The most widely adopted arrangement – children registered initially with the mother (85%) – is also the most stable one. For every 10 children in such arrangements, 9.2 stayed registered with their mother in the long term. Children registered with their mother often saw their father moving farther away with the years elapsed since separation. We estimated that 10 years after the separation about 10% of initially nonresident fathers moved away from Belgium. Increasing geographical distance to the nonresident parent may lead to a decline in contact and support from the child's father and paternal support network.

Immediately after separation 15% of children were registered with their father. These children were more likely to change residency to their other parent – one-third of the children initially registered with the father change their residency to their mother, most often in the first years after separation. Unlike for fathers, the proportion of nonresident mothers living farther away from their children did not increase with time elapsed since separation.

In this paper, we refer to registered reality – that is, we consider the child to be living at the registered address. This approach has its limitations. We are not able to distinguish situations in which the child lives in shared physical custody (double registration is not allowed) or other situations that do not reflect reality. A previous Dutch study shows that this may especially be the case when the child is registered with the father (van der Wiel and Kooiman 2019), and hence this might be one of the reasons why we observe more changes for those children who initially registered with the father. Nevertheless, register-based data are increasingly used for the study of separation and child arrangements as they constitute an invaluable source of information for the study of postseparation families. The huge advantage is that they contain longitudinal information on the whole population and that information on postseparation families is not lost, except where parents move abroad.

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