Life Course Centre

WORKING PAPER SERIES

No. 2025-20

September 2025

The declining wellbeing of sole parents in Australia in the 21st century

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Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Sole parent families, which are primarily households headed by women, experience considerable social and economic disadvantage. Despite this, there is limited research that shows the specifics of this disadvantage, identifies variations across indicators, how these have changed over time and how sole parents respond, adapt and overcome disadvantage over their life courses. This research fills these gaps through a detailed examination of several indicators measuring social and economic wellbeing for sole parents for the last 25 -30 years.

What were the key findings?

We find that sole parent families are one of Australian society's most disadvantaged groups and that the last 25 – 30 years has seen a worsening of their wellbeing. The poorest sole parents have much higher caring demands and more health issues than sole parents who have higher levels of economic resources, making it much harder for this group to be employed. When parents transition to sole parenthood, their wellbeing worsens a great deal before improving in the years after. The recovery time has become longer in the last decade.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

We suggest that policy reforms to income support payments and conditions introduced in the 2000s, namely the welfare to work reforms, may have worsened the wellbeing of sole parent families. The 2023 government amendments, which increased sole parents' eligibility for financial assistance, may ease some of the disadvantage sole parent families experience.

Citation

Wilkins, R., Buchler, S., & Baxter, J. (2025). 'The declining wellbeing of sole parents in Australia in the 21st century', Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2025-20. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

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Acknowledgements/Funding Sources

The authors do not have a conflict of interest. This research was funded by the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Project ID CE200100025) and a Kathleen Fitzpatrick Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship (FL230100104).

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their continued connections to land, sea and community.

Abstract

Sole parent families, which primarily comprise households headed by women, are one of the most disadvantaged groups within Australia today. Despite this, there has been remarkably little systematic description of the extent and nature of this disadvantage and how it has changed over time. In this paper we present an analysis of the socio-economic characteristics and wellbeing of sole parents along multiple dimensions, drawing on ABS data since 1994 and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey data from 2001. Our findings confirm that sole parents are considerably more disadvantaged than two-parent families and their wellbeing has deteriorated in both absolute terms and relative to partnered parents. Our findings corroborate previous research suggesting that changes in income support policies just after the turn of the century have played an important role in the declining wellbeing of sole parents and, by extension, their children (Cook, 2012; Harding & Szukalska, 2000).

Keywords: Sole parents, single parents, wellbeing, welfare reform, Australia.

JEL classifications: J12, J16, I31, I32, I38

Introduction

Social research consistently identifies sole parent families as one of the most disadvantaged groups in advanced industrial societies (Harkness, 2022). Australia is no exception, with studies consistently showing high levels of poverty and low wellbeing among sole parent families (Baxter, 2025; Vera-Toscano & Wilkins, 2025). Despite this, there is no study providing a comprehensive assessment of the extent of sole parent disadvantage across multiple indicators. Understanding how sole parent families compare to other families, and how their circumstances have changed over time is important for reducing social disadvantage now and into the future. Poor social and economic circumstances of sole parents also potentially leads to adverse outcomes for their children. Improving the wellbeing of sole parents thus also helps to reduce the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage (Cobb-Clark, 2025; Perales et al., 2014).

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive and detailed description of the socio-economic characteristics and wellbeing of sole parents over the last 30 years. This time frame includes the introduction of the Welfare to Work Reforms, which from 2003 restricted sole parent's access to government income support unless they participated in approved work activities after their youngest child reached school age (Brady & Cook, 2015; Daniels, 2009). These types of reforms have been found to reduce the wellbeing of sole parent families (Campbell et al., 2016; de Gendre et al., 2021; Summerfield et al., 2010). An examination of current literature reveals limited information on their socio-economic characteristics and broad measures of wellbeing. Our objective is to fill these gaps in knowledge and provide essential baseline information on sole parent families. Our research will also inform directions for future research.

Our research questions are:

1. What are the demographic, socio-economic and wellbeing characteristics of sole parents and how have these changed over time?
2. How do sole parents in higher income brackets differ to those who are less well off and how has this changed over time?

3. How do the socio-economic characteristics and wellbeing of sole parents change over the transition to sole parenthood, and how has this changed over time?

We use the term 'sole parent' or 'sole parent family' rather than single parent, as individuals parenting children in a household without the child's other biological or adoptive parent are not necessarily single and may well be in an intimate partnered relationship.

Background

Sole parent households with dependent children made up 10.0 percent of all families at the most recent census in 2021, a number which increased from 8.6 percent in 1981, and has remained stable at 10 percent since 2001 (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). Sole parent households are overwhelmingly headed by women (80.39%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a), who are typically between 40 and 54 years of age (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). Children aged between 10 and 19 are the most likely group to live in sole parent households (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). In 2018, 21.6 percent of children under the age of 18 spent two or more nights a week with the other parent in a shared care arrangement, an increase from 10.4 in 2001 (Wilkins et al., 2020). Pathways into sole parenthood are diverse including separation, divorce, widowhood, unplanned pregnancy or intentional sole-parenting/pregnancy (Bernardi et al., 2018).

Sole parents are required to meet the demands of two roles: primary caregiver and sole income earner (Klein, 2021a, 2021b; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). However, the same level of economic participation is not possible in sole parent households compared to two-parent households Nevertheless, seventy percent of sole parents are employed with employment rates higher when children are aged between 10 and 14 years compared to when children are younger(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Employment patterns tend to be precarious for sole parents (Baxter & Renda, 2011; Kalucza et al., 2022) due to their care-responsibilities, inflexible work environments, higher levels of stress than couple parents and limited access to affordable childcare (Baxter & Renda, 2011; Duncan et al., 2013). Securing and retaining paid employment after separation is especially difficult for sole mothers who were not previously employed

(Baxter & Renda, 2011; Bowman & Wickramasinghe, 2020; Cook, 2012). Sole parent households are far more likely than their two-parent counterparts to experience economic insecurity (Bowman & Wickramasinghe, 2020). Further, sole parents are overrepresented in the lowest income quintiles, face elevated housing difficulties and are more reliant on governmental income support than couple parents (Brady et al., 2017; Nieuwenhuis, 2022).

The economic pressures that sole parents face often flow through to other domains of wellbeing. National and longitudinal data has shown that sole parents report lower levels of subjective wellbeing and higher levels of psychological distress compared to partnered parents (Cook et al., 2009; Cook, 2012; Dey & Cebulla, 2023). Sole mothers are more likely to have experienced separation trauma, prior domestic violence and financial and housing stress, factors which are also associated with higher levels of poor mental health (Dey & Cebulla, 2023). Research finds that sole mother's mental health outcomes are strongly mediated by social support (Crosier et al., 2007; Dey & Cebulla, 2023). However, much of this research has focussed on specific outcomes at one point in time rather than providing a fuller picture of how sole parents have fared over time on a wide range of factors.

Institutional Support

Australia, like many other advanced industrial societies, has a social, economic and institutional framework that assumes a two-parent household and a male breadwinner/female homemaker division of labour (Broomhill & Sharp, 2005; Steinbring et al., 2023). While this model is by no means universal or uniform, it does represent the broad pattern of household and employment arrangements since the Second World War (Broomhill & Sharp, 2005). Despite a dramatic increase in women's labour force participation in Australia since the 1980's (Gustafsson, 2021; Hérault & Kalb, 2022), the trend towards equal earning households is slow. Women are primarily employed part time, have interrupted employment patterns and the Australian labour market is highly segregated by gender (Dockery & Buchler, 2023). Over fifty percent of Australian households in 2019 were still primarily male-breadwinner households and only 29 percent were equal earnings households, where women earn between 40 and 60 percent of the household income (Steinbring et al., 2023). Parents, typically mothers, raising

children on their own are expected to function in a society based on a social, economic and political model where two adults providing breadwinning and care work is the norm. Social, welfare and institutional support for sole parents in Australia has varied substantially over time, with a long history of stigma and policy changes that reflect social values and political agendas. Table A1 provides a summary of the policy changes influencing sole parent's access to government income support.

Before the 1970s there was almost no Commonwealth government income support for sole parents, with the exception of select widows (Daniels, 2009). Prior to this, state and federal government policies encouraged, some would argue, coerced, single mothers into giving up their children for adoption (Commonwealth, 2012; Kenny et al., 2012). Policy changes across the late 20th century in Australia helped improve the circumstances of sole parents and their children. This began with the implementation of the Supporting Mother's Benefit in 1973, continuing as the scheme transformed into the Supporting Parent's Benefit in 1977 (McDonald & Spindler, 1988), Sole Parent Pension (1989) and finally to the Parenting Payment in 1998 (Daniels, 2009). The Child Support Scheme was established in 1988, setting out the registration, collection and enforcement of child support agreements (Australian Government, 2024; Qu & Weston, 2021). The introduction of these benefits and payments marked a shift in how Australia perceived and supported sole parents and implicitly recognised the value of parenting, as no additional activity requirements were attached to the receipt of these payments until the youngest child turned 16 (Grahame & and Marston, 2012). Specifically, the government income support reforms allowed for more income into the home, increasing household income for sole parent families with one child under 16 in 1998 by a base rate of approximately $360 per fortnight (Barrett, 2002). The reforms also enabled greater access to education pathways as lone parents were able to participate in education and training without being financially penalised (Saunders & Matheson, 1991). Overall, the reforms made to welfare support throughout the 20th century combined multiple streams of aid and secured financial support for sole parents based on family specific eligibility criteria (Daniels, 2009: 7).

Policy changes since the turn of the century have been less conducive to improving the wellbeing of sole-parent families, potentially reversing these trends. The years 2003 to

2006 saw the introduction of Welfare to Work Reforms, where eligibility for the Parenting Payment was subject to participation requirements, compelling sole parents to engage in 'work activities' (e.g. job search, training, employment) when their youngest child turned 12 (in 2003) and then turned 8 (in 2006) (Brady & Cook, 2015; Daniels, 2009). This was followed in 2013 by eligibility tightening again, restricting further the number of sole parents who had access to the Parenting Payment (Department of Social Services, 2023). Through these reforms, sole parents were implicitly (and explicitly) framed as unemployed if they were not in paid when work their youngest child started school (Grahame & and Marston, 2012). In this context, sole parent's wellbeing was seen by the Australian federal government to be achievable only through paid employment (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005).

Several studies have supported the idea that the Welfare To Work Reforms 2003 – 2013 worsened the financial circumstances and wellbeing of a substantial number of sole-parents and their children across Australia (de Gendre et al., 2021; McKenzie et al., 2019). Arguments have been made that the implementation of these welfare reforms ignored the structural barriers that resulted in heightened levels of socio-economic disadvantage of sole parents, as well as perpetuated the stigma that many sole parents face as welfare recipients (Grahame & and Marston, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2024; Parsell et al., 2020). The introduction of the Welfare to Work Reforms and subsequent difficulty of juggling employment with care work, has been linked to decreases in subjective wellbeing and quality of life for sole parents (Campbell et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2009; Cook, 2012). A systematic review of qualitative studies of welfare-to-work programs in the US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand found adverse health effects associated with programs requiring sole mothers to engage in employment, employment which was commonly poorly paid, precarious and conflicted with child care responsibilities (Campbell et al., 2016). While parts of these welfare-to-work reforms have been backpedalled in Australia, and specifically the participation requirement has been raised back to when the youngest child turns 14 in 2023 (Arthur et al., 2023), sole parents are often still stigmatised for being lazy and un-motivated. Moreover policies are still primarily aimed at encouraging workforce participation as the key pathway to wellbeing rather than other forms of support that acknowledge the importance of parents time for caregiving (Grahame & and Marston, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2024).

What remains missing in the current literature is a broad account of sole parents' demographic, social and economic characteristics, transitions, and wellbeing outcomes across time. Little is known about how the circumstances of sole parents have changed over time in relation to policy changes and whether their position relative to partnered parents has improved or worsened. This is especially the case across the two decades after the introduction of the Welfare to Work Reforms, starting in 2003 and ending in 2023, where policy increasingly prioritised paid employment as the pathway to independence and wellbeing for sole parents (Brady & Cook, 2015; Summerfield et al., 2010). While some reforms can reduce financial hardship, others can further entrench disadvantage, make seeking support more complex and increase the stress and instability felt by sole parents (Cook, 2022; Summerfield et al., 2010). There is limited research that brings together multiple indicators to build a comprehensive understanding of this group or provide a deeper understanding of the impact that policy may have on wellbeing.

Method

Data

We use two nationally representative data sources, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Survey of Income and Housing (SIH), and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The SIH provides consistent nationally representative data back to the 1994-95 financial year at a two-yearly or greater frequency, with the more recent surveys typically having larger sample sizes than earlier surveys (e.g. a sample size of 6,819 in 1994-1995, and 14,060 in 2017-2018) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The data focuses on measures of household income and net worth, housing and household characteristics, with less information on non-financial aspects of wellbeing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b).

The HILDA Survey (Summerfield et al., 2023) is a household panel study conducted annually since 2001 and contains richer information on the characteristics and wellbeing of respondents than the SIH. This includes measures of mental and physical health, disability, subjective wellbeing, social support, relationship satisfaction and time stress. However, the HILDA Survey sample tends to become slightly less representative of the

Australian population due to under-representation of new immigrants, notwithstanding a 2011 general sample top-up which addressed the underrepresentation of immigrants arriving between 2001 and 2011 (Summerfield et al., 2023). The HILDA Survey had approximately 13,000 respondents (aged 15 years and over) between 2001 and 2010 and since 2011 has had approximately 17,000 respondents (Summerfield et al., 2023). Thus, while each data source has its limitations, together they provide a comprehensive picture of sole parents and how they have been faring over recent decades.

The last year of HILDA data that we draw on for this research was collected in August 2020 to January 2021 (Summerfield et al., 2023), well into the pandemic and the associated departure from normal social and economic functioning. The lockdowns and additional government income supports are likely to have been experienced uniquely by sole parent families. While the pre-pandemic patterns largely hold up in the 2020 data, we have taken this into consideration in our analysis with the wellbeing outcomes for 2020 and 2021considered separately from those for 2018-2019. However, we do not focus on the impacts of the pandemic for sole parent families (see Sebastian (2023) for a summary of sole mothers' and their children's experiences of COVID-19).

Sample

We focus on sole parents with coresident children aged under 18, omitting families where the youngest resident child is over 18. Children aged under 18 are, with limited exceptions, necessarily dependent on their parent. Dependence becomes less clear-cut with children aged 18 to 24, leading to possible issues of endogeneity. If children in more disadvantaged households are more likely to become economically independent when aged 18 to 24, rather than go on to further education, the population examined will be biased towards more advantaged sole parents. Further, at ages 18-24 the direction of dependency is no longer clear, as older resident children may contribute to household finances rather than draw on them.

Analysis and Measures

To provide a comprehensive assessment of the socio-economic characteristics and wellbeing of sole parents over the last three decades we focus on descriptive analyses presented in four sections. The first section presents information on the number,

demographic characteristics and economic outcomes of sole parents. After examining how the proportion of sole parent families has changed over time we compare the characteristics and outcomes of sole and partnered parents on a wide range of demographic and socio-economic factors. These include gender, mean age[1], mean number of dependent children, mean age of youngest child, living in a capital city, educational attainment, labour force status, income quintile, relative income poverty (before and after housing)[2], housing stress[3], income support receipt and housing tenure type. As some important demographic characteristics are not collected by SIH, HILDA data examining region of residence[4] (a more fine-grained measure), parent disability (including distinguishing psychological conditions from other conditions) and child disability[5] are presented in a separate analysis. A further analysis summarises the characteristics of people who have newly become sole parents, with a focus on family circumstances the previous year, mean number of dependent children, child disability, mean age of the parent and income quintile. Concluding this section, we present a survival function that shows the proportion of people who become sole parents who are still sole parents at each duration.

[1] Age is reported in 5-year categories (the exceptions being the 2017-8 survey year, and persons aged 15-24 and 55-64 in other survey years, where single year of age is reported). The midpoint of each age category is used to estimate mean ages.

[2] A person is defined to be in relative income poverty if household disposable income is below 50% of the median for all households, where income is adjusted for household size using the 'modified OECD' equivalence scale (Hagenaars et al. 1994). The 'after housing' measure examines income after deducting mortgage and rent payments (whereas the 'before housing' measure does not deduct these payments from income).

[3] Housing stress is defined as a situation where expenditure on mortgage repayments and/or rent exceed 30% of disposable income and the household is located in the bottom two income quintiles.

[4] Regional classification is based on the 2001 Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) for 2001 to 2006 and the 2011 ASGC for 2007 onwards. See ABS (2011) for details.

[5] Disability is defined as any long-term health condition, impairment or disability that restricts the individual in everyday activities and that has lasted, or is likely to last, for six months or more. For parent disability (but not child disability) we further restrict to those with a moderate or severe disability, defined as a disability that restricts the amount of work the individual can do. Disability type, available from 2003 onwards, is examined for those with a moderate or severe disability. A psychological disability is defined to be 'Any mental illness which requires help or supervision' or 'A nervous or emotional condition which requires treatment'. Note that individuals can (and often do) have both a psychological disability and another disability.

The second section examines the wellbeing of sole parents compared to partnered parents. Here we draw on a range of measures including financial stress[6], difficulty raising emergency funds[7], general and mental health[8], psychological distress[9], housing tenure type, shared care arrangement (at least one night per week with the other parent), child support (including, mean child support received and mean child support received by recipients), time stress[10], social support, satisfaction with relationship with children and life satisfaction[11].

The third section presents the characteristics of sole parents by income group, dividing sole parents up by their location in either the bottom two quintiles or the top three quintiles of the income distribution. We examine differences in gender, age, mean

[6] HILDA Survey collects information facilitating construction of a measure of financial stress, every year asking respondents whether, because of a shortage of money, they: could not pay electricity, gas or telephone bills on time, could not pay the mortgage or rent on time, pawned or sold something, went without meals, were unable to heat home, asked for financial help from friends or family, or asked for help from welfare/community organisations. We define people as experiencing financial stress if two or more of these things happened to them.

[7] Difficulty raising emergency funds is defined as inability, or having to do something drastic, to raise $2,000 (up to 2009) or $3,000 (since 2010) for an emergency.

[8] The SF–36 Health Survey is a 36-item questionnaire that is intended to measure health outcomes (functioning and wellbeing) from a patient point of view. It was specifically developed as an instrument to be completed by patients or the general public rather than by medical practitioners and is widely regarded as one of the most valid instruments of its type. See <http://www.sf–36.org/> for further details. The SF–36 measures of general health and mental health are examined here. The scores for both measures potentially range from 0 to 100. Indicator variables are created for poor general health and poor mental health. There are no universally accepted threshold scores for defining poor general and mental health, but for the purposes of this analysis, poor general health is defined as a score less than or equal to 37, on the basis that approximately 10% of the population is at or below this threshold. Similarly, poor mental health is defined as a score less than or equal to 52, on the basis that approximately 10% of the population is at or below this threshold.

[9] The psychological distress measure is based on the Kessler-10 (K10) scale, developed by Kessler et al. (2002). We define a person to be in psychological distress if their K10 score is 'high' or 'very high' (corresponding to a score of 22 or higher on the 0-50 K10 scale).

[10] A measure of time stress is included annually in the HILDA Survey self-completion questionnaire, where respondents are asked: 'How often do you feel rushed or pressed for time?' The response options are 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often' and 'almost always'. A scale is constructed ranging from 1 ('never') to 5 ('almost always'), which indicates the level of time stress. We define a person to be time stressed if the person 'often' or 'almost always' feels rushed or pressed for time.

[11] Life satisfaction is measured on a 0-10 scale by asking respondents "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life overall?".

number of dependent children, labour force status, parent and child disability, shared care arrangements, child support and mean amount of child support received.

The longitudinal design of the HILDA Survey allows a deeper examination of how the socio-economic and wellbeing of sole parents evolves in the years leading up to becoming a sole parent and in the subsequent years. The fourth section presents measures of outcomes of people who became sole parents in each of the two years prior to becoming a sole parent and in each of the following five years. To enable analysis of long time series (7 years), while also enabling examination of a possible period effect, estimates are presented separately for people who became sole parents between 2003 and 2009 and people who became sole parents between 2010 and 2015.

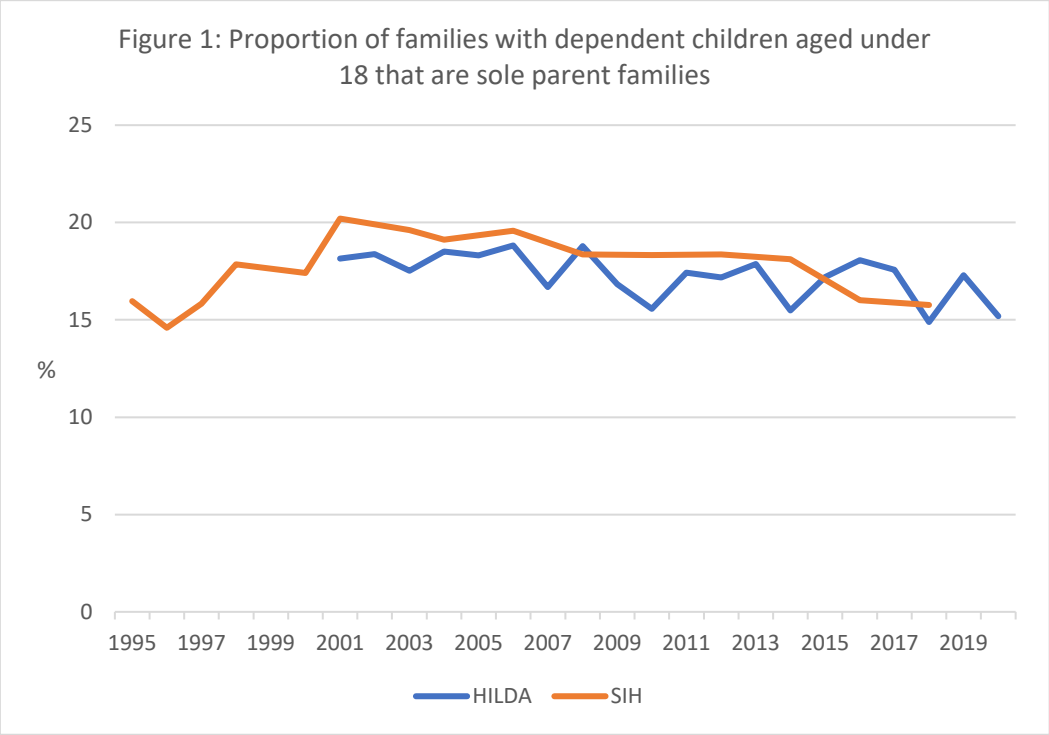
To aid interpretation of the estimates, means for partnered parents are also presented for most of the outcomes. It is important to note that the comparisons of sole parents to partnered parents presented here is comparing a group that is roughly 87% female to a group that is 50% female, respectively (see Tables 1A and 1B below). This needs to be acknowledged when considering the findings. As we aim to provide a broad summary of sole parents in Australia, we have not restricted our analyses by gender. Our findings reflect both the gender composition and the social and economic circumstances of sole and partnered families in Australia.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics and Economic Outcomes of Sole Parents

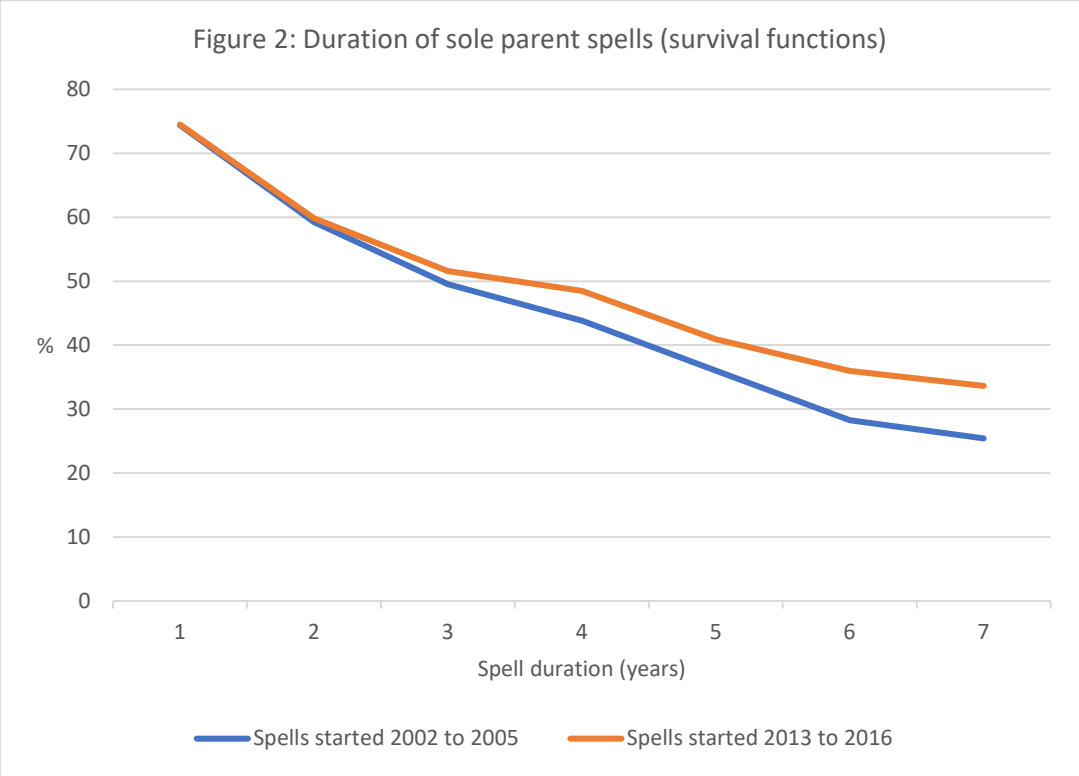
Sole Parents Over Time

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the proportion of families with children aged under 18 that are sole parent families according to the SIH and HILDA Survey data. Both data sources tell a similar story. Overall, SIH shows an increasing proportion of sole parent families from 1995 to a peak in 2001, with both HILDA and SIH showing a subsequent decline in the following two decades.



Duration of Sole Parent Spells

The duration of sole-parent spells is shown in Figure 2. It presents a survival function that shows the proportion of sole parents who are still sole parents at each duration. This enables an examination of how long individuals remain in this status, before re-partnering, the child becoming an adult or moving into another household. It shows that over 70% of people who become sole parents in one year are still sole parents a year later, the corollary of which is that under 30% are no longer sole parents one year later, either because they have re-partnered or because they no longer have dependent children. Three years after becoming a sole parent, approximately one-half are still sole parents. Overall, our analysis shows that spells of sole parenthood are becoming longer. In 2002 to 2005 roughly 25% were still sole parents 7 after years, while the comparable figure in 2013 to 2016 was 33%.



Changing Demographic Characteristics

Tables 1A and 1B show the changing demographic characteristics and economic outcomes of sole parents, in comparison to partnered parents, using the SIH data (Table 1A, 1994 - 2018) and the HILDA data (Table 1B, 2001 - 2020). Despite both data sources providing comparable measures, we focus on the SIH data as this data provide a longer timeframe for comparison, only drawing on the HILDA data when the SIH data does not have information on this measure. Basic demographic characteristics are presented to validate the comparability of both data sets (see the first four rows of each table). These show striking consistency. For example, the percentage of male sole parents is 12.3% in the 2009 – 2012 period according to SIH data (Table 1A), while for HILDA 2009 – 2011 it is 12.9% (Table 1B). Similarly, the mean age of sole parents increases from 37.2 years in the 2001 – 2004 period to 39.6 years in 2017-2018 in SIH, and from 37.3 years to 39.7 years, in comparable time periods, in HILDA. A comparison of a wide range of other indicators provides a broadly equivalent result, with no notable exceptions (data not shown). As SIH is representative of the Australian population at each wave, this suggests that for these measures HILDA (a panel study where representativeness declines over time) retains a high level of validity for sole parents after 2001.

Table 1A: SIH demographic characteristics and economic outcomes of sole and partnered parents with dependent children aged under 18, 1994/95 to 2017/18

	Sole parents				Partnered parents			
	1994/95-1996/97	2000/01-2003/04	2009/10-2011/12	2017/18	1994/95-1996/97	2000/01-2003/04	2009/10-2011/12	2017/18
Male (%)	14.0	14.3	12.3	13.7	50.0	50.0	49.9	49.8
Mean age (years)	35.9	37.2	38.7	39.6	38.1	39.2	40.1	40.2
Mean # of dep. children	1.72	1.68	1.77	1.81	2.04	1.97	1.95	1.94
Mean age youngest child	7.5	8.2	8.2	8.2	6.9	7.2	7.0	6.6
Live in a capital city (%)	61.0	57.2	56.1	60.1	60.1	60.9	62.1	67.4
Educational attainment (%)								
Bachelor's degree or higher	8.1	11.8	15.5	23.2	14.8	20.0	28.5	39.2
Other post-school qual.	19.4	32.1	33.7	37.8	29.9	36.3	35.3	36.0
No post-school qual.	72.4	55.9	50.9	39.0	55.4	43.7	36.2	24.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Labour force status (%)								
Employed full-time	24.3	26.4	25.7	32.3	53.6	54.9	55.3	57.4
Employed part-time	19.0	24.4	29.8	29.3	19.4	21.7	23.8	25.4
Unemployed	8.1	9.5	6.1	5.2	4.9	2.8	2.7	2.5
Not in the labour force	48.6	39.8	38.4	33.1	22.0	20.6	18.2	14.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Income quintile (%)								
Bottom	37.0	35.7	35.3	35.3	16.6	14.6	14.3	14.4
2nd	27.5	27.8	31.1	31.5	21.6	21.8	21.6	20.2
Middle	19.3	21.0	20.6	18.2	24.5	24.6	23.9	24.8
4th	12.2	11.4	9.4	11.0	22.5	23.2	22.5	21.8
Top	4.0	4.1	3.5	4.1	14.9	15.8	17.7	18.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
In relative income poverty (%)	16.2	17.7	20.2	22.7	8.0	8.2	8.2	7.8
In relative income poverty after housing (%)	31.1	29.6	31.4	30.1	12.3	12.7	13.5	13.5
In housing stress (%)	33.3	32.3	35.0	37.2	22.0	22.3	26.3	26.4
Income support recipient (%)	71.4	70.3	69.9	67.3	9.5	14.2	15.5	12.8
Housing tenure type (%)								
Home owner	38.0	39.1	40.2	39.5	78.4	78.9	73.9	70.5
Private renter	39.0	44.5	48.2	50.4	18.3	19.1	24.6	28.3
Social housing	23.1	16.4	11.6	10.1	3.3	2.1	1.5	1.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	1,426	2,259	2,452	904	12,004	14,156	14,486	6,466

The proportion of *male sole parents* has remained low over the two decades, sitting at roughly 13% of sole parent headed households. The mean *number of dependent* children has increased for sole parents, while it has decreased by the same magnitude for partnered parents (roughly 0.1). The mean *age of the youngest child* has increased for sole parents (by 0.7 years) and decreased for partnered parents (0.3 years).

The mean *age* of sole parents has risen from 35.9 years in the 1994/95-1996/97 period to 39.6 years in the 2017/18 period, which is a substantially greater increase than for partnered parents (which rose from 38.1 to 40.2 years during time same period). Despite the proportion of partnered parents *living in a capital city* increasing from 60.1 to 67.4

over the period of the SIH survey, for sole parents it decreased from 61% to 60.1%. Table 1B shows that this this has been made up by an increase in the proportion of sole parents living in non-urban 'other' regions (increasing from 9% in the 2001 to 2003 period to 12.4% in 2018 to 2020).

The *educational attainment* of sole parents has increased, but to a far lesser extent than it has for partnered parents. The *labour force status* of sole parents has seen substantial change in the 1994 – 2018 period, with the number of sole parents not in the labour force decreasing 15.4 percentage points from 48.6 percent to 33.2 percent, and full-time employment increasing by 7.9 percentage points and part-time employment by 10.3 percentage points. Compared to partnered parents, sole parents are roughly twice as likely to be out of the labour market, and roughly half as likely to be employed full time.

The SIH collects a wide range of measures on economic wellbeing. The most notable change in the distribution of the *income quintiles* in the1994 – 2017 periods is that the proportion of sole parents in the 2nd quintile has increased by 4 percentage points while the bottom, middle and 4th quintiles have all decreased by 1.1 to 1.7 percentage points respectively. The pattern for partnered parents is nearly the opposite, with a 4 percentage point increase in the top quintile, drawing from a 2.2 percentage point decrease in the bottom, a 1.4 percentage point decrease in the 2nd and a 0.7 percentage point decrease in the 4th quintile. This dynamic is reflected in the findings for *relative income poverty*. Here, sole parents have increased from 16.2 percent to 22.7 percent, a substantial increase (despite there being no notable change in *relative income poverty after housing*). In comparison, partnered parents have seen essentially no change in relative income poverty and only a moderate increase from 12.3 percent to 13.5 percent in *relative income poverty after housing*. Overall, these analyses show substantially lower economic wellbeing amongst sole parents than partnered parents. For example, in the 2017/2018 period, the likelihood of a sole parent being in the bottom quintile was 2.45 times higher than for partnered parents (35.3% compared to 14.4%), the comparable figure was 2.22 times higher in the earlier 1994/95-1996/97 period (37% compared to 16.6%). Together, our findings show that the economic wellbeing of sole parents has declined in the 1994 – 2017 period, both as a whole and in comparison to partnered parents.

Housing tenure type shows several important changes. The proportion of sole parents in social housing has decreased substantially from 23.1 percent to 10.1 percent, with this reflected in the inverse finding that renting privately has gone from 39 percent to 50.4 percent. It is notable that during this period *housing stress* amongst sole parents has gone up from 33.3 percent to 37.2 percent, an increase that is comparable to partnered parents (who have seen home ownership decrease and private renting increase). The proportion of *income support recipients* has gone down amongst sole parents (from 71.4 percent to 67.3 percent) and up amongst partnered parents (from 9.5 percent to 12.8 percent). Note, Table 1B shows somewhat different figures using the HILDA data, with the proportion of income support recipients amongst sole parents going from 69.9 percent in 2001-2003 to 56.6 percent in 2018-2019.

Table 1B: HILDA Survey demographic characteristics and economic outcomes of sole parents and partnered parents with dependent children aged under 18, 2001 to 2020

	Sole parents			Partnered parents		
	2001–2003	2009–2011	2018–2020	2001–2003	2009–2011	2018–2020
Male (%)	12.6	12.9	10.4	50.0	49.8	49.9
Mean age (years)	37.3	38.5	39.7	39.3	40.0	40.7
Mean number of dependent children	1.7	1.7	1.7	2.0	2.0	2.0
Mean age of youngest child (years)	7.8	8.1	8.3	6.7	6.6	6.6
Region of residence (%)						
Cities of 100,000 or more	65.4	64.3	61.7	64.8	70.3	70.9
Towns of 1,000 to 99,999	25.6	27.5	25.9	20.7	18.9	16.2
Other regions	9.0	8.2	12.4	14.6	10.9	12.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Moderate or severe disability (%)	14.9	17.7	23.8	9.8	9.6	8.8
Psychological disability (%)	3.1	5.1	9.1	1.6	1.8	2.3
Other disability (%)	14.9	16.1	21.1	10.5	9.1	8.3
Child with a disability (%)	15.8	13.4	16.1	9.6	8.0	7.6
Income support recipient (%)[a]	69.9	57.8	56.6	17.0	10.9	8.3
Shared care arrangement (%)[a]	26.8	27.5	29.9	–	–	–
Receive regular child support (%)[a]	39.6	41.8	37.1	–	–	–
Mean child support received by recipients ($, December 2020 prices)[a]	7,866	7,297	7,451	–	–	–
Sample size	1,681	1,688	1,791	11,960	11,930	13,844

Note: [a] The time-frame for this measure is 2018 – 2019 (not 2018 – 2020) as above, to take into account the different regulations for income support, child support and care arrangements due to the COVID pandemic.

The findings for *disability* are particularly striking (see Table 1B). The proportion of sole parents with moderate or severe disability (defined as any long-term health condition, impairment or disability that restricts the individual in everyday activities and the amount of work they can do, and that has lasted, or is likely to last, for six months or more), has increased from 14.9 to 23.8 percent. This contrasts with a decrease amongst partnered parents from 9.8 to 8.8 percent. Psychological disability has seen a threefold increase in

sole parents (less than for partnered parents), while other disability has increased from 14.9 to 21.1 percent (contrasting with a decrease amongst coupled parents). The proportion of sole parents who have a child with a disability has increased from 15.8 to 16.1 percent. This represents a rate that is more than double that of partnered parents at 7.6 percent in 2018 to 2020.

We examine several *shared care* and *child support* measures. The proportion of sole parents whose youngest child spends at least one night per week with their other parent has increased from 26.8 percent to 30.1 percent. The proportion of sole parents that receive child support has decreased slightly, from 39.6 percent in 2001/2002 to 37.1 percent in 2018/2019. Taking sole parents who receive child support, the mean amount of money received has also declined from $7,866 to $7,451.

New Sole Parents

Table 2 focuses on the characteristics of people who have newly become sole parents (defined as being a sole parent in the current year but not in the previous year). This enables an examination of new entrants to the group of sole parents, and in particular how new entrants have changed over time. As was shown in Figure 2, roughly 40% of sole parents remain in this status for over 5 years, a group who is likely to be different in characteristics to new entrants. The mean *age* of new sole parents has increased by 1.3 years to 38.1 years old between the 2002-2004 and the 2018-2020 period, while the *mean number of children* has changed very little, remaining at roughly 1.68. The proportion of new sole parents whose *youngest child is under 5* has increased by 4.5 percentage points from 42.5 percent between the first and last period, while the proportion of those with a youngest child aged 5-9 has decreased 6 percentage points from 22.6 to 16.6 percent.

Table 2: Circumstances of new sole parents, 2002 to 2020

	2002–2004	2009–2011	2018–2020
Mean age (years)	36.8	36.4	38.1
Mean number of dependent children	1.68	1.72	1.64
Age of youngest child (%)			
Under 5	42.4	47.1	46.9
5–9	22.6	22.4	16.6
10–14	22.1	20.5	25.3
15–17	13.0	10.0	11.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Family circumstances in previous year (%)			
Partnered, with or without children	77.6	73.0	67.5
Single, no children aged under 18	10.1	12.6	15.8
Single, children aged under 18 but not dependent [a]	12.3	14.3	16.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Income quintile in the distribution of income among partnered parents with dependent children in the previous year—those who were partnered with dependent children (%)			
Bottom	29.1	30.4	39.8
2nd	27.4	23.7	21.4
Middle	25.2	19.9	16.5
4th	8.5	12.7	13.8
Top	9.8	13.2	8.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Child with a disability (%)	10.7	13.5	14.3
Sample size	260	227	299

Notes: [a] Children aged under 18 may be non-dependent because they do not reside with the parent (most cases) or because they are aged 15 to 17 and have a child of their own or are not engaged in full-time study. Cells may not add up to column totals due to rounding.

The next panel of Table 2 examines the family circumstances the year prior to becoming a sole parent. In the 2002 to 2004 period, 77.6 percent of new sole parents were *partnered in the previous year*. This fell by 10.1 percentage points by the 2018-2020 period. Inversely, the number of sole parents who were *single with no dependent children* under the age of 18 increased from 10.1 percent in 2002 to 2004 period to 15.8 percent in the 2018-2020 period. This group were single and became sole parents by experiencing the birth of a (predominantly first) child. The last group *single, children aged under 18 but not dependent* mostly became sole parents by virtue of an existing co-resident child aged 15 to 18 changing from non-dependent to dependent or an existing non-resident child aged under 18 becoming co-resident (and becoming dependent if aged 15 to 18). For example, this might be an older teenager moving to co-reside primarily with the other biological parent. In the 2018 – 2020 period this group of new single parents represented 16.5 percent of new sole parents (an increase of 4.2% percentage points since 2002-2004). Overall, there has been a rise in the proportion of new sole parents who were not partnered in the year prior to becoming sole parents. This includes a rise in the proportion who are new parents—that is, became parents for the first time when not partnered.

The bottom section of Table 2 provides information about new sole parents who were partnered with dependent children in the previous year, examining their location in the distribution of household disposable income among all partnered parents (where income is adjusted for household size (equivalised) using the modified OECD scale (Hagenaars et al. 1994). Specifically, among new sole parents who were partnered immediately prior to becoming a sole parent, nearly 40 percent in the 2018-2020 period come from the most economically disadvantaged partnered families in our community. Our analysis shows there has been substantial growth in the proportion of sole parents coming from the *bottom income quintile*, as this measure has increased by 10.7 percentage points from 29.1 percent in 2002-2004. The shift for the *middle quintile* is nearly as striking, with a decrease of 8.7 percentage points, indicating that new sole parents are less likely to come from middle-income families in 2018-2020 than they were in 2002-2004. The proportion of new sole parents who have a *child with a disability* has increased 3.3 percentage points from 10.7 to 14.3 percent over the three time periods. This analysis presents a striking picture: those becoming sole parents are an increasingly disadvantaged group to begin with, especially when combined with the evidence of a rise in the proportion of new sole parents who were single when they first gave birth (or adopted a child).

The Wellbeing of Sole Parents

Table 3 displays a range of wellbeing measures using HILDA from 2001 to 2020 for sole and partnered parents with dependent children aged under 18.

Table 3: HILDA Survey measures of the wellbeing of sole parents and partnered parents with dependent children aged under 18, 2001 to 2020

	Sole parents				Partnered parents			
	2001–2003	2009–2011	2018–2019	2020	2001–2003	2009–2011	2017–2019	2020
Experienced financial stress (%)	45.4	37.6	37.5	33.3	15.6	14.3	12.4	12.3
Difficulty raising emergency funds (%)[a]	61.5	52.8	49.3	50.7	21.0	19.2	17.1	15.8
In poor general health (%)	13.7	14.7	18.0	17.0	8.3	7.4	7.2	6.7
In poor mental health (%)	24.3	24.9	29.6	30.2	12.9	11.3	13.7	15.8
In high or very high psychological distress (%)	-	29.3	33.1	-	-	12.0	18.1	-
Time stressed (%)	51.1	53.8	60.1	48.0	50.2	50.0	50.5	41.6
Level of social support (10–70 scale)	51.0	50.8	48.4	48.2	53.6	54.3	53.9	53.8
Satisfaction with relationship with children (0–10 scale)	8.3	8.3	8.2	8.3	8.7	8.6	8.7	8.6
Mean life satisfaction (0–10 scale)	7.0	7.1	7.2	7.2	7.9	7.9	8.0	8.0
Minimum sample size [b]	1,520	1,335	1,027	523	10,466	10,036	8,012	3,960

Notes: [a] The amounts used to assess difficulty raising emergency funds were raised from $2,000 to $3,000 in 2010. [b] Sample sizes vary across variables considered in this table because of item non-response. The most common source of item non-response is failure to return the self-completion questionnaire (noting that information is collected by both personal interview and a self-completion questionnaire). Cells may not add up to column totals due to rounding.

The time trend findings for having *experienced financial stress* and *difficulty raising emergency funds show* that financial strain decreased to a similar extent for both sole and partnered parents between 2001-2003 and 2020. Despite this, rates of financial strain are significantly higher for sole parents. Over this period, roughly 50 to 60 percent of sole parents would have had difficulty raising emergency funds, while the comparable figure for partnered parents is 15 to 20 percent. The same is the case for having experienced financial stress, this lies between 33% and 45% for sole parents and between 12% and 15% for partnered parents. This indicates far higher levels of financial strain amongst sole parents than partnered parents.

Our indicators for *general health* and *mental health* are constructed so they capture those who lie roughly in the bottom 10% of the health distribution, indicating very high levels of poor health. Our analyses show that sole parents have poor general and mental health in comparison to partnered parents and have had a substantial decline in health in the two decades up to 2020. While general health has improved for partnered parents by 1.7 percentage points, sole parents have seen a decline of 3.5 percentage points. The starkest finding, however, is that sole parents are 2.5 times more likely to be experiencing poor general health in 2020 compared to partnered parents. The findings for mental health show the same trends. Looking to the findings for 2018-2019 (to exclude any possible COVID effects), sole parents are 2.1 times more likely to be experiencing poor

mental health. The findings for high or very high *psychological distress* corroborate this, whereby 33 percent of sole parents are in psychological distress, a figure that is 1.8 times higher than for partnered parents.

The proportion of sole parents who were *time stressed* increased steadily from 51.1 percent in 2001-2003 to 53.8 and 60.1 percent in the following two time periods respectively, then dropped to 48 percent in 2020. This, no doubt, reflects pandemic related lockdowns, where a large proportion of Australian residents were required to isolate at home. The pattern for partnered parents was different, with no increase between the 2001 and 2019 time periods, but then a steep drop from 50.5 percent to 41.6 percent in 2020. *Social support* remains high and stable for partnered parents over the time periods, while sole parents start at a lower point and support levels drop by 2.8 percentage points over time.

Both sole and partnered parents showed very high levels of consistency in both their *satisfaction with the relationship with their children* and their *life satisfaction*. Although, sole parents have a slight (0.2 percentage point) increase in their life satisfaction over the observed period. Despite consistency over time, the substantially lower rates of both types of satisfaction for sole parents when compared to partnered parents is striking. The 0.3 percentage point difference for satisfaction with the relationship with their children and 0.8 percentage point difference in life satisfaction represents a considerable gap for a satisfaction measure, as these typically have low variance (Fujita & Diener, 2005; Hinz et al., 2025).

Characteristics by Income Group

Tables 4A and 4B compare sole parents in the top 60% of the income distribution to those in the bottom 40% of the income distribution. This enables a comparison of the characteristics of sole parents who are faring relatively well based on their location in the income distribution with the characteristics of those not faring so well. Table 4A does this with the SIH data from 1994 to 2018, while Table 4B uses HILDA and covers 2001 to 2020. The top panel of each table shows the same measures, so a comparison can be made between the SIH and HILDA data. Comparing the last two time periods in Table 4A and Table 4B for the top three quintiles for 2017/18 (SIH) and 2018-2020 (HILDA), shows a high level of consistency between the SIH and HILDA data. Between the two data

sources, there is a 0.2 percentage point difference in the proportion of men in the top three quintiles, a 1.2-year difference in mean age, a 0.22 difference in the number of dependent children. Larger differences between HILDA and SIH become apparent when comparing the age of youngest child by quintile, with a difference of 2.8 percentage points and 9.2 percentage points for the age categories 'Under 5' and '5–9', respectively. *Labour force status* also shows larger differences between the two data sources, with some discrepancy notable for each category. While 64 percent of the SIH respondents in the 2017/2018 are employed full-time, the comparable figure for HILDA is 58.2 percent. Further, the comparable figures for not employed are 7.9 percent and 15 percent, also a large discrepancy. This indicates quite some inconsistencies between the two data sources. Due to higher representativeness and the longer time series of the SIH of this data, we will focus on Table 4A for our substantive discussion, only turning to Table 4B for the measures only available in HILDA.

Table 4A: SIH characteristics of sole parents by location in the income distribution

	1994/95-1996/97		2000/01-2003/04		2017/18	
	In the bottom two quintiles	In the top three quintiles	In the bottom two quintiles	In the top three quintiles	In the bottom two quintiles	In the top three quintiles
Male (%)	10.3	14.8	12.5	15.5	10.1	14.7
Mean age (years)	35.3	36.1	36.6	37.4	39.3	40.0
Mean number of dependent children	1.84	1.63	1.80	1.57	2.01	1.62
Age of youngest child (%)						
Under 5	38.8	31.1	32.7	25.9	29.7	21.5
5–9	29.8	28.6	29.8	29.2	33.9	34.5
10–14	22.2	32.7	27.5	33.2	25.6	33.8
15–17	9.2	13.5	10.0	16.3	10.8	15.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Labour force status (%)						
Employed full-time	7.4	55.1	9.3	56.2	16.6	64.0
Employed part-time	16.1	24.3	21.2	29.9	29.9	28.1
Not employed	76.5	20.7	69.5	13.9	53.5	7.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	921	505	1,447	812	623	281

Table 4A shows that in 2017/2018, compared to those in the bottom two quintiles, sole parents in the top three quintiles are 4.6 percentage points more likely to be male (14.7 percent versus 10.1 percent) and on average just under a year older than those in the bottom two quintiles. On average, those in the top three quintiles have 0.39 fewer dependent children and are 8.2 percentage points less likely to have a child under 5 years

old (21.5 percent versus 29.7 percent). Overall, the data show they typically have much older children. The findings for *labour force status* show those in the top three quintiles are much more likely to be employed then those in the bottom two quintiles. Strikingly, 64.0 percent of those in the top three quintiles are in full time employment while the comparable figures for those in the bottom two quintiles is 16.6 percent, representing a difference of 47.7 percentage points. The difference for not employed is the opposite but comparable, where those in the bottom two quintiles are 45.6 percentage points more likely to be not employed. The divergence in caring demands, associated with vastly different aged children between these two groups, may influence these employment trends.

Table 4B: HILDA Survey characteristics of sole parents by location in the income distribution

	2001-2003		2018-2020	
	In the bottom two quintiles	In the top three quintiles	In the bottom two quintiles	In the top three quintiles
Male (%)	11.1	17.2	9.0	14.5
Mean age (years)	36.6	38.8	39.1	41.2
Mean number of dependent children	1.88	1.50	1.88	1.40
Age of youngest child (%)				
Under 5	37.4	25.2	33.9	24.3
5–9	29.9	26.7	25.7	25.3
10–14	22.0	32.3	23.7	34.0
15–17	10.7	15.8	16.8	16.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Labour force status (%)				
Employed full-time	9.4	52.9	19.9	58.2
Employed part-time	23.5	27.1	26.8	26.8
Not employed	67.1	20.0	53.3	15.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Moderate or severe disability (%)	18.3	9.6	28.1	15.0
Psychological disability (%)	4.2	1.1	10.3	6.5
Other disability (%)	18.6	8.7	24.8	13.7
Child with disability (%)	18.4	11.5	17.5	13.1
Shared care arrangement	25.5	33.6	26.9	40.5
Receive regular child support	38.7	41.0	36.9	36.0
Mean child support received ($, December 2020 prices)	2,422	5,171	2,421	3,797
Sample size	1,007	630	1,175	579

Notes: 60.9% of sole parents were in the bottom two quintiles in the 2001 to 2003 period and 67.2% were in the bottom two quintiles in the 2018 to 2020 period.

Turning to Table4B using the HILDA data, the findings for *disability* show stark differences by quintile group. While 9.6 percent of sole parents in the top three quintiles have a moderate or severe disability, the figure is 18.3 percent for those in the bottom two quintiles, nearly double the rate. The rate of *psychological disability* is 3.8 times higher and *other disability* is 2.1 times higher in the bottom two quintiles. The proportion who

have a *child with a disability* is also substantially lower for the top three quintiles, at 11.5 percent compared to 18.4 percent for the bottom two quintiles. These high rates of disability, for both the adult and the children in these families, are likely to contribute to the high rates of non-employment for this group, pointing to a considerable level of social and institutional disadvantage.

The bottom panel of Table 4B shows that *shared care arrangements* are substantially more likely in the higher income groups. Looking at the earlier time period, while 25.5 percent of children in the bottom two quintiles spend at least one night with their other parent per week, the figure for those in the higher income categories is 33.6 percent. By the latter time period (2018-2019), those in the higher income categories have seen a vast increase to 40.5 percent, while those in the bottom two quintiles have only seen a 1.4 percentage point increase. This presents strong evidence that shared care has increased substantially, but only for economically advantaged groups. Both groups were less likely to receive regular child support over time, with the difference being larger for these in the higher income categories. The mean amount of child support received stayed the same for the lower income categories but decreased substantially for the top three income quintiles. The differential change in shared care may explain this disparity (less child support paid, but more shared care).

The Transition to Sole Parenthood Over Time

Table 5 shows the wellbeing of sole parents two years before until 4 years after the transition to sole parenthood. To examine period effects, the top panel shows those who became sole parents between 2003 and 2006, while the second panel covers 2013 to 2016. The column on the right shows each measure for partnered parents in each time period.

The top two rows of each panel in Table 5 show how sole parent and partnered status changes over time. For those becoming sole parents between 2003 and 2006, 77.1 percent were still sole parents one year after becoming a sole parent, while 49.6 percent were sole parents four years after becoming a sole parent. For those who became sole parents between 2013 and 2016, a substantially higher proportion (65.9 percent) were still sole parents four years later.

Table 5: Wellbeing of sole parents by time to and from becoming a sole parent, 2001 to 2020

	Years to/from becoming a sole parent							
	–2	–1	0	1	2	3	4	
Became sole parent between 2003 and 2006								Partnered parents
Sole parent (%)	9.0	0.0	100.0	77.1	69.0	57.3	49.6	–
Mean household equivalised income ($, December 2019 prices)	38875	39057	31369	36710	40543	41860	46731	48640
In relative income poverty (%)	13.4	13.6	26.3	15.8	9.0	14.7	12.4	6.4
In relative income poverty after housing (%)	19.2	17.8	31.7	21.7	16.8	19.6	15.6	9.9
Income support recipient (%)	38.6	37.0	51.3	65.6	55.2	52.2	44.7	13.8
Two or more indicators of financial stress (%)	31.0	28.6	43.8	33.1	28.1	27.5	20.2	14.0
Home owner (%)	57.3	56.1	43.5	42.8	46.6	49.5	54.3	78.1
Employed part-time (%)	26.1	26.1	22.9	27.1	27.1	30.9	32.2	22.3
Employed full-time (%)	34.5	33.1	25.5	27.8	30.3	35.3	42.9	55.6
Social support	51.6	52.0	51.9	52.1	52.1	53.0	53.7	53.9
In poor general health (%)	11.0	9.4	7.7	13.3	15.7	10.1	8.7	8.0
In poor mental health (%)	19.4	20.0	29.1	20.6	24.8	19.1	24.9	12.6
Relationship with children	8.2	8.3	8.3	8.5	8.2	8.0	8.0	8.6
Mean life satisfaction (0–10 scale)	7.4	7.6	6.8	7.2	7.5	7.4	7.4	7.9
Sample size	230	237	240	233	224	215	211	31450
Became a sole parent between 2013 and 2016								
Sole parent (%)	3.6	0.0	100.0	79.3	72.4	66.8	65.9	–
Mean household equivalised income ($, December 2019 prices)	52402	50473	41434	43194	43377	43427	45694	58470
In relative income poverty (%)	9.1	8.8	19.6	13.9	16.4	16.9	13.5	4.9
In relative income poverty after housing (%)	13.6	12.7	27.2	23.7	24.1	23.6	20.6	8.3
Income support recipient (%)	24.5	27.4	43.8	50.5	49.6	50.8	44.4	9.6
Two or more indicators of financial stress (%)	30.7	26.1	37.6	37.4	31.6	30.3	26.5	13.0
Home owner (%)	50.3	48.4	37.2	35.9	36.0	36.7	38.3	72.3
Employed part-time (%)	28.9	27.2	29.5	30.1	25.4	27.8	28.9	23.4
Employed full-time (%)	38.9	37.6	35.4	34.5	36.6	36.7	38.1	57.3
Social support	51.0	51.8	50.7	49.9	50.0	49.9	48.9	54.1
In poor general health (%)	14.6	10.1	13.3	13.8	14.3	13.5	13.6	7.2
In poor mental health (%)	23.3	23.1	36.5	31.5	25.7	27.6	29.3	12.8
Relationship with children	8.4	8.3	8.2	8.2	8.4	8.1	8.2	8.7
Mean life satisfaction (0–10 scale)	7.4	7.3	7.1	7.2	7.3	7.3	7.3	7.9
Sample size	297	311	325	325	327	326	315	47944

In both periods examined in Table 5, we see that *mean equivalised income* drops considerably in the year a person becomes a sole parent. However, there is a relatively strong subsequent rebound in income for those who became sole parents between 2003 and 2009, with mean equivalised income four years after becoming a sole parent over $15,000 higher than in the year of becoming a sole parent. For those becoming sole parents between 2010 and 2015, the recovery in income is much weaker and indeed mean equivalised income is broadly constant from one year to four years after becoming a sole parent. Mean (equivalised) income is also much lower than mean income of

partnered parents in the more recent period, both before or after the transition to sole parenthood.

Reflecting the income changes, *poverty rates* and *financial stress* peak in the year of becoming a sole parent. In the earlier period, poverty rates and financial stress decline significantly in subsequent years, but in the more recent period there is much less decline. *Home ownership* also declines on becoming a sole parent. In the earlier period, home ownership partially recovers over subsequent years, but in the more recent years the rate of home ownership deteriorates even further. Employment, particularly *full-time employment*, tends to increase in the years subsequent to becoming a sole parent but, again, the growth is weaker for those who became sole parents between 2013 and 2016.

The findings for *social support* suggest a substantial deterioration between the two periods. Social support increases over time in the 2003 to 2006 period, reaching a peak 4 years after becoming a sole parent. The 2013 to 2016 period sees a drop over time, up until a low at 4 years. While levels of social support are equivalent one and two years prior to becoming sole parent, social support is 4.8 points lower 4 years after becoming a sole parent in the 2013 to 2016 period. This represents a substantial worsening of the social support that sole parents experience between the two periods.

The proportion in poor *general health* does not appear to be correlated with sole parenthood, with substantial fluctuations across the 7 years within both time periods. *Mental health*, however, demonstrates distinct trends. The proportion in poor mental health rises in the year of becoming a sole parent in both the periods and, while decreasing from year to year, on average remains at a higher level by the fourth year, compared to when not a sole parent. Finally, mean *life satisfaction* drops considerably in the year of becoming a sole parent, more so for those who became sole parents between 2003 and 2009. In both periods, mean life satisfaction recovers to pre-sole parenthood levels two to four years after becoming a sole parent, but this is a much lower level than mean satisfaction of partnered parents. Overall, these analyses show that sole parents' wellbeing in the latter period is far slower to recover after entry into sole parenthood compared to sole parents in the earlier period.

Summary and Discussion

In this paper, we provide a comprehensive summary of the socio-economic characteristics and wellbeing of sole parents in Australia over nearly 3 decades, employing the SIH and HILDA data. Our analyses include the time period in which the Welfare to Work Reforms were introduced in the 2000s. (Brady & Cook, 2015; Daniels, 2009). Despite much research on the financial situation of sole parenthood, a review of current literature reveals limited evidence about other aspects of sole parent circumstances and wellbeing. Our paper fills this gap. Furthermore, we examine changes in sole parent wellbeing between 1994 and 2020, as well as considering how sole parent wellbeing changes over the transition to parenthood.

Our results show that, over time, sole parents have become older, are more likely to have a disability, have more and older children and are more likely to live in non-urban regions. Their educational attainment and income have decreased compared to partnered parents, but they are more likely to be employed. The number of sole parent families receiving government income support has declined as have the child support payments they receive, although they are more likely have a shared care arrangement. Income poverty has increased substantially amongst sole parent families, despite going down for couple families. Noteworthy is the substantial decrease in the number of sole parent families living in social housing, from roughly 1 in 4 families to only 1 in 10, indicating a stark reduction in access to secure and affordable housing (Prentice & Scutella, 2020).

New sole parents have increasingly younger children and are less likely to have been partnered the year before becoming sole parents suggesting that sole parenthood is increasingly the results of non-partnered women experiencing the birth of a child. Our analysis also shows there has been substantial growth in the proportion of new sole parents originating from the bottom income quintiles. Further, the proportion of new sole parents who have a child with a disability has increased substantially between 2002 and 2020. Sole parents as a whole, and those newly becoming sole parents, experienced lower levels of socio-economic disadvantage in the 1990s and first few years of the 2000s, with a steady increase in most measures of disadvantage after 2003. The change in levels of disadvantage coincides with the introduction of the Welfare to Work reforms in 2003, with eligibility tightening in 2006 and 2013 (Brady & Cook, 2015; Daniels, 2009).

Our analyses show that in comparison to partnered parents, sole parents have very high levels of financial strain, very poor general and mental health and have had a substantial decline in health in the two decades up to 2020. Sole parents reported a stark increase in feelings of time stress and a drop in social support (prior to the COVID pandemic). Sole parents have substantially lower levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of satisfaction with children compared to partnered parents. Our analyses comparing sole parents who are not doing so well (in the bottom 40% of the income distribution) to those who are better-off (in the top 60%) show those in the bottom of the distribution are more likely to be female, have young children, are less likely to be employed, more likely to have a disability, or have a child who has a disability, and are less likely to have a shared care arrangement. All of these factors point to sole parents in the bottom two quintiles having far higher caring demands, making it much harder for this group to be in employment, let alone in full-time employment, which is likely necessary to secure sufficient financial resources. Prior to the introduction of the Welfare to Work reforms in 2003, sole parents could rely on government income support until their youngest child was 14, eliminating the need for paid employment to stay out of poverty.

Turning to our analyses of the transition to sole parenthood, we find that income, poverty rates, general health and life satisfaction, worsen considerably in the year that individuals become a sole parent before improving in subsequent years. We find a strong period effect. Compared to the earlier period of 2003 – 2006, for those becoming sole parents between 2013 and 2016, the recovery in income, poverty rates, financial stress, home ownership, employment and feelings of social support is much weaker in the latter period. This is consistent with our previous findings and may indicate that the Welfare to Work reforms had an impact on how quickly sole parents recover their socio-economic status after the transition to sole parenthood.

Limitations

Our paper has a number of limitations. First, we examine baseline differences between groups over time and have not conducted multivariate analyses that takes account of changing compositions of groups over time. Second, when comparing sole parents to partnered parents, we are comparing one group that is 50/50 male/female (partnered parents) to another group that is nearly 90 percent female (sole parents). Our

comparisons are thus biased by gender differences in the two groups. Our goal here is to consider sole parents as a whole, but future analyses should take account of gender differences across these groups. Further, while we have taken care to choose time periods correlating with major policy reforms for comparison, our findings may be influenced by period effects specific to our chosen time periods.

Conclusion

Our findings make it difficult to escape the conclusion that sole parents are one of Australian societies most disadvantaged groups and that the last 20 – 25 years has seen a deterioration of their wellbeing. Changes in the labour market are unlikely to have led to these changes as sole parents are more likely to be in the labour market than in the past. Our findings thus suggest that other factors, including policy changes in income support payments and conditions, underlie the declining wellbeing of sole parents over time. Furthermore, limited affordable childcare and inflexible workplace conditions, make it particularly difficult for sole parents, especially those who were not previously employed, to secure and retain paid employment.

Our research finds that the most disadvantaged sole parents have high levels of caring demands due to having substantially more and younger child, and a higher likelihood that their children have a disability. Furthermore, these sole parents are substantially more likely to have a disability themselves. Previous research has identified the Welfare to Work Reforms as playing an important role in the deterioration of the wellbeing of sole parents and, by extension, their children (Campbell et al., 2016; K. Cook et al., 2009; K. E. Cook, 2012; Harding & Szukalska, 2000). Our findings provide support for these conclusions. The 2023 government amendments which expanded eligibility for the Parenting Payment Single by allowing single parents to remain eligible for support until their youngest child turns 14 years, may help to help to eliminate some of the disadvantage of sole parents going forward.

Appendix

Table A1: Summary of policy changes influencing sole parent's access to Government income support.

Year	Policy Change	Details
1942	Introduction of the Widow Pension	Pensions were introduced for widows with dependent children. Some single mothers were included based on assessments of 'moral standards.'(Daniels, 2009; McDonald & Spindler, 1988)
1968	Introduction of the States Grants (Deserted Wives) Act	Support was extended to single mothers beyond widows. Eligibility criteria determined the level of state government assistance received. (Daniels, 2009; McDonald & Spindler, 1988)
1973	Supporting Mother's Benefit Introduced	The first income support for single mothers was established, formally acknowledging the state's responsibility in supporting single-parent families. (Daniels, 2009; McDonald & Spindler, 1988)
1977	Replaced by the Supporting Parent's Benefit	Eligibility for the scheme extended to include sole fathers. Scheme renamed the Supporting Parent's Benefit. (Daniels, 2009)
1989	Amalgamation into the Sole Parent Pension	The existing Widow Pension and Supporting Parent's Benefit merged into the Sole Parent Pension, removing all 'character-based' eligibility criteria. (Daniels, 2009)
1998	Renamed to Parenting Payment	Payments consolidated for both single and partnered parents, aligning broader support mechanisms. Eligibility criteria differed based on family make-up. (Daniels, 2009)
2003/ 2006	Welfare to Work Reforms	In 2003, recipients with a youngest child of high school age were required to seek employment. In 2006, eligibility was limited to those with a youngest child under 8 (single) or 6 (partnered). Formerly eligible individuals not already receiving the payment were automatically transitioned to 'Newstart' payments, which included part-time work requirements. Existing recipients remained eligible until their youngest child turned 16. (Daniels, 2009)
2013	Eligibility Tightened	The 2006 rules were applied to all recipients; all single Parenting Payment recipients were transitioned to Newstart when their youngest child turned 8. (Department of Social Services, 2023)
2020	JobSeeker Replaces Newstart	Parenting Payment recipients transferred to JobSeeker remained subject to mutual obligations. Temporary financial relief was provided through payment increases and COVID-19 supplements.(Services Australia, 2022)
2023	Eligibility Reforms to the Parenting Payment	Eligibility for single parents was extended to those with a youngest child aged up to 14. Payments were income-tested and eligible JobSeeker recipients were automatically transferred back to the Parenting Payment.(Rishworth, 2023; Social Security Act 1991, Cth; Social Security Rights Victoria, n.d.)

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