

The well-being of single parents in Scotland

September 2018

**Do single parents enjoy an adequate quality of life?
Are some single parents more likely to experience well-being?
How do single parents compare to other groups?**

Why this matters

In 2010 the Office for National Statistics established the Measuring National Well-being programme. The thinking behind this development was that traditional economic measures of a nation's development are too limited to truly understand what life is like. Among the 43 indicators are four that measure personal well-being. These data allow us to profile and monitor changes in quality of life in the UK. They also provide data for Scotland as a whole.

What do we already know?

Quality of life is affected by many different factors, but we know that certain groups are at risk of having a lower quality of life than others. For example research conducted by [Age Scotland and the University of Stirling](#) established that factors such as personal independence, health and wellbeing, care, mobility and transport, relationships, technology, communities and services, and societal roles impact on the quality of life of older people in Scotland. In reviewing the literature concerning the wellbeing of single parents, [Campbell et al](#) (2016) found that single parents in countries with compulsory welfare to work schemes were more likely to suffer from depression and additional stress as the ability to work was often dependent on strong social networks and affordable childcare (which was not always available). This was also evident in the Poverty Alliance's report [Surviving Poverty: The impact of lone parenthood](#) and more recently, NHS Scotland's report: [Lone parents in Scotland: work, income and child health; in-work progression; and the geography of lone parenthood](#) which found that quality of life and wellbeing in non/low income households were much lower than in high income single parent households. This paper adds to the current evidence-based literature on the quality of life and wellbeing of single parents in Scotland.

Our research

This is the second of seven research briefings arising from the Single Parent Community Connections project. With the support of the European Union and the Scottish Government, this [Social Innovation Fund](#) project has two aims. First, it aims to better understand isolation and loneliness among single parents in Scotland. Second, it aims to use this knowledge to design and deliver practical service delivery options to tackle these problems.

An online survey was designed by the [Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit](#) and approved by One Parent Families Scotland. Almost 900 single parents completed the survey in the Spring of 2018. The survey was introduced as aiming to find out more about the nature of the challenges that single parents face in Scotland and to explore what could be done to address them. Well-being was one of the broader issues that were explored to better understand its relation to social isolation and loneliness. The numbers that are reported in this briefing have been quality assured, including weighting some results to ensure that they are representative of single parents in Scotland, as a whole. Twelve in-depth interviews were also undertaken across Scotland to explore the key issues in greater depth. The anonymity of participating parents is protected in this briefing. More details about the research can be provided on request.

Findings - What's the big picture?

We asked single parents to self-assess their overall general health. Although we cannot ignore the importance of the minority of single parents who responded negatively, the key finding was that the majority of single parents reported good health.



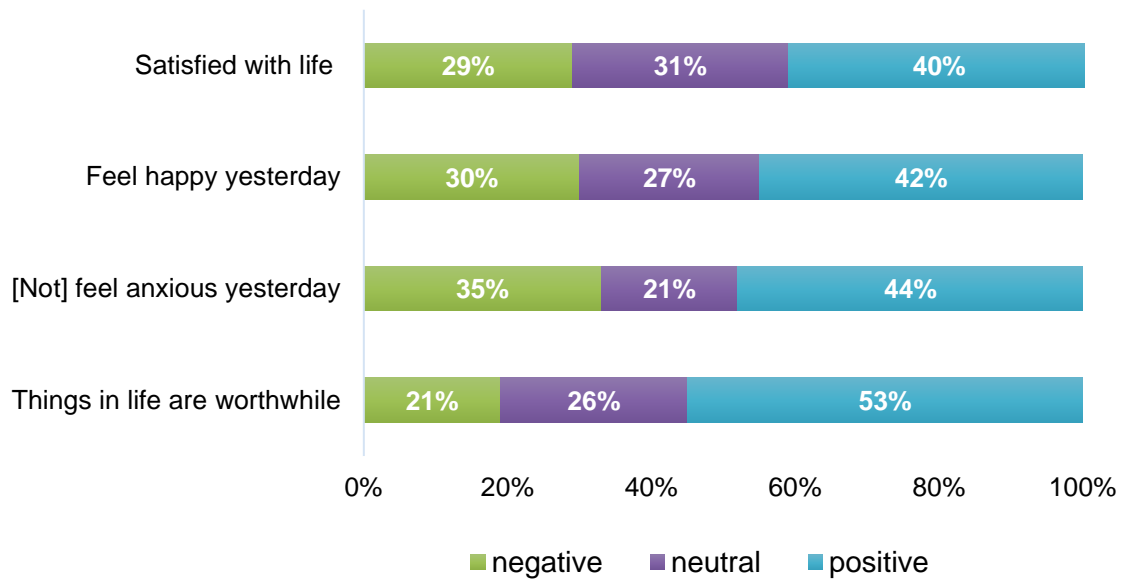
Positive overall general health does not mean that single parents' lives are without challenges to well-being. A very different picture is painted when single parents are asked if they ever "feel down". In sharp contrast to the positivity over general health, it was reported that very few single parents never "feel down" (3%) and that one in ten "feel down" all or almost all of the time (11%).



To better understand the nature of personal well-being among single parents in Scotland, we asked the same four questions that are used by the Office of National Statistics to estimate well-being for the UK as a whole. Respondents are asked to rate themselves on an eleven-point scale with five positive rankings, five negative rankings and a neutral midpoint. Although results tend to be expressed as a number ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely) it makes more sense to report these as positive, neutral or negative.

Personal well-being is not exclusively positive or negative for single parents, with a range of experiences being reported. On one hand, it is more common for single parents to paint a positive picture of their personal well-being, with the proportion who rate their life positively, far more than the proportion who rate negatively for each dimension. There is a particularly strong belief that "things in their life are worthwhile". On the other hand, this still leaves a significant minority of single parents with negative experiences. Notably, one third of single parents reported that they had experienced some anxiety the day before the survey was administered.

Single parents' rating of their life on the ONS personal well-being scales



Findings - Are there key differences among single parents?

In this briefing, we explore the differences among groups of single parents that were expressed for “feeling down”. Independent differences were identified for three groupings, as is shown in the figure below, which reports the proportion of each sub-group who felt down “most of the time” or “all of the time”.

	Percentage of single parents who felt down “most” or “all” of the time
Relationship Status	
In a relationship	17%
Not in a relationship	37%
Disability in the household	
Neither self or children has a disability	20%
Disability in the household	46%
Work Status	
In full-time work	21%
In part-time work	29%
Not in work	49%

Findings - Are single parents different?

There is robust national data that allows us to compare single parents in Scotland to the wider population of people in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Unfortunately, these comparisons do not make for good news. The apparently positive finding that 56% of single parents in Scotland self-rated their general health as either good or very good, looks less positive when set against the average for Scotland, as reported in the Scottish Health Survey (in which 73% of people in Scotland self-rated their general health as good or very good).

Similarly, the four measures of well-being used by the Office of National Statistics to describe personal well-being in the UK also casts single parents in Scotland in a negative light. Against the UK averages, our data demonstrate that well-being is lower among single parents in Scotland. Thus, on the 10 point scale, the UK average for life satisfaction was 7.68 (compared to 5.23 for single parents in Scotland), 7.82 for life being worthwhile (compared to 6.02), 7.43 for happiness (compared to 5.34) and 2.85 for anxiety (compared to 4.61 for single parents).

Thus, although there is much positivity to report in terms of single parents actual levels of well-being, this 'good news' must be tempered against the knowledge that well-being is less prevalent among single parents than the UK population as a whole.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to identify if single parents enjoy an adequate quality of life. Although most single parents reported good general health, there are some concerns about mental health. Our findings were consistent with the literature in that single parents not in work were most likely to experience a negative impact on wellbeing when compared to those in work. Other key groups that shared more negative experiences included single parents with disability in the household or those without a partner. Highlighting the differences in wellbeing among single parents in Scotland ensures that support services are aware of the specific areas where help is needed and can channel assistance to those who need it the most.

Referencing this paper

McKendrick, JH, Campbell, L-A. and Hesketh, W. (2018) The well-being of single parents in Scotland. *OPFS/SPIRU Briefing 2018/2*. Edinburgh: OPFS.



13 Gayfield Square, Edinburgh EH1 3NX
t: 0131 556 3899 | e: info@opfs.org.uk | w: opfs.org.uk

One Parent Families Scotland is a charitable company limited by guarantee
Registered at Edinburgh under number 094860. Scottish Charity Number: SC006403