

# **Becoming a single parent in Scotland: what difference does it make?**

September 2018

**Is the transition to single parenthood a positive experience?  
In what ways do single parents lives change?  
Are some single parents more likely to experience change?**

## **Why this matters**

By definition, becoming a single parent involves a significant change in circumstance. It may involve the loss of a partner, the addition of a child, or both. Change can be for the better, or it may be for the worse. It is important to understand how single parents make sense of this important life transition.

## **What do we already know?**

We know that transitions into single parenting are complex. In their book chapter: [Variety of Transitions into Lone Parenthood](#), Bernardi and Larenza (2018) note that there are two main types of transition; through loss of a partner (through separation or death) or through a lone experience (unplanned pregnancy or single parent by choice). The authors report that complexities can arise depending on the circumstances of transition, which often result in mixed feelings about single parenthood. We also know that there are established links between single parents, depression and poor health. It is reported in [Lone parents in Scotland: work, income and child health; in-work progression; and the geography of lone parenthood](#) that single parents in Scotland commonly face health inequalities as a result of transitions that are namely linked to either lack of employment or in-work poverty. Additionally, there is a strong association between low income and social housing as reported by Berrington (2014) in [The changing demography of lone parenthood](#). It is important that we develop a better understanding of what transitional factors may contribute to negative outcomes.

## **Our research**

This is the last 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. The changes associated with the transition to single parenthood

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?

Becoming a single parent is a significant life change. More than half of all single parents described the transition to single parenthood as being a *complete* change to their lives, while the vast majority of the remainder indicated that *a lot* had changed.

Complete change to life:	57%
Life has changed a lot:	32%
Life has changed a little:	8%
Life has not changed:	3%

How do single parents experience this life transition? We asked single parents to rate whether conditions have improved for the better, got worse, had a mixed impact (both positive and neutral) or had no impact for twelve different things that might change after becoming a single parent.

On the whole, it seems that the overall impact of becoming a single parent is negative. We took away one point for every negative experience, added one point for every positive experience, and record zero for both no impact and mixed impact. We then added up the scores for the twelve things we researched, to find that one in every ten single parents return an overall score of zero (9%), meaning that the overall impact of becoming a single parent was neither positive, nor negative. However, the majority of single parents seemed to have a transition that was more negative (53%) than positive (38%). Negative transitions were further confirmed during the interviews where almost all interviewees had experienced some form of mental or physical abuse, which had resulted in separation. In addition to this, many of the interviewees struggled with the transition to single parenthood, being placed in challenging situations when trying to secure accommodation or when trying to develop new social networks.

“I found the council office and I said I really need help, where do I go for benefits and she just said the nearest job centre was 6 miles away and I said how do I get there... I've not got one penny to my name to get a bus and she says just walk... just walk and do you know it was the most hottest summer.”

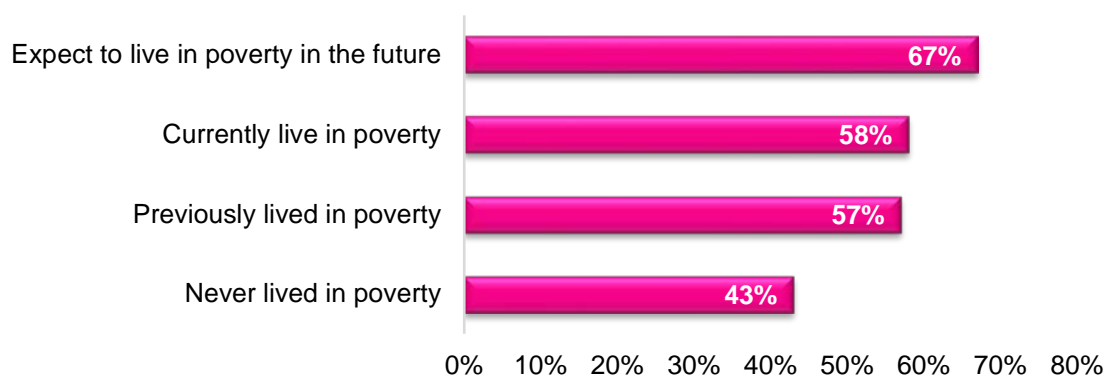
## Findings - Are there devils in the detail?

The summary score hides a much more complicated reality. When we looked at the twelve individual aspects that we researched, we found some strongly positive findings (particularly those that were about relationships), but also some strongly negative findings (notably those relating to money, social life and relations with their ex-partner). On the other hand, it is important not to over-state the extremes. A substantial proportion of single parents reported either no overall impact or a mixed impact of positive and negatives for most aspects of their life after becoming a single parent.

<i>Indicator</i>	Negative Impact	Mixed Impact	No Impact	Positive Impact
Relations with own children	3%	33%	8%	56%
Own parenting	5%	38%	5%	51%
Relations with wider family	11%	37%	17%	36%
Own happiness	20%	45%	3%	33%
Personal safety	17%	28%	24%	32%
Social network	29%	36%	11%	25%
Self-confidence	25%	52%	3%	20%
Employment prospects	47%	22%	13%	19%
Feel about own body	45%	25%	16%	15%
Social life	52%	33%	4%	11%
Financial situation	66%	24%	35	7%
Relations with ex-partner	59%	23%	14%	5%

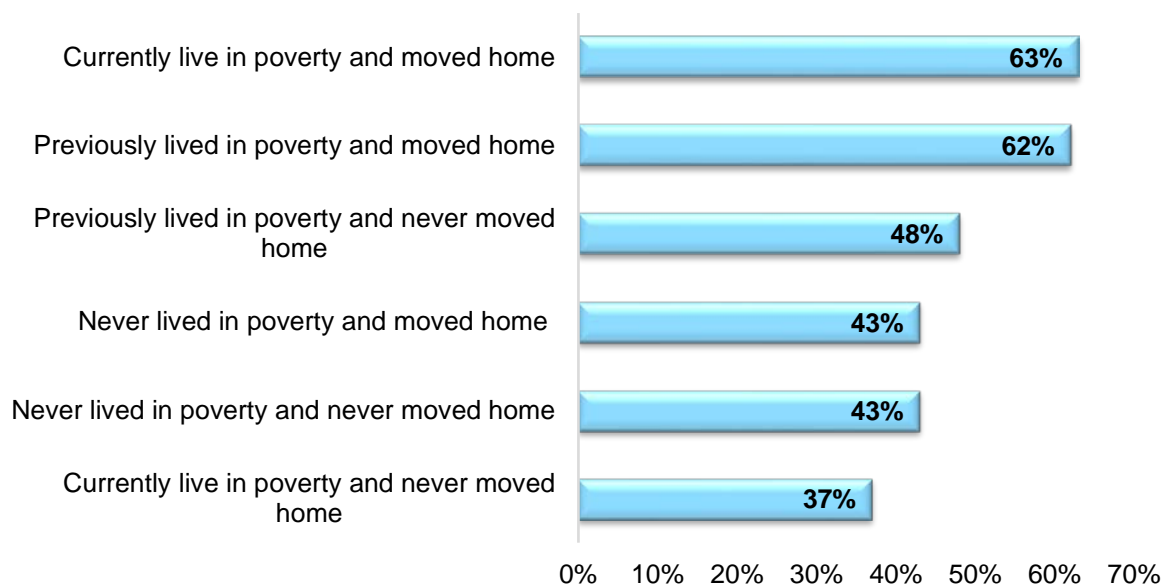
## Findings - Are there key differences among single parents?

Although the majority of single parents report that their life has changed significantly, some groups of single parents are even more likely than others to report significant changes. Poverty is clearly linked to how much single parents think that their life has changed. Those whose experience of poverty is more recent are more likely to think that their life has changed more substantially. The chart below reports the proportion of single parents who think that their life has changed completely, according to their experience of poverty.



Moving home is also associated with how much single parents think that their life has changed. Even when we control for the differences that poverty makes, we still find that those single parents who moved to a new house are more likely than those who did not to think that their life has changed completely.

### Percentage of single parents in Scotland whose life has “changed completely”



## Conclusion

The conclusions that can be drawn around transitions to single parenthood are to some extent to be expected. It is evident that becoming a single parent in Scotland generates major life changes. It is important to note that some of these changes are perceived to be positive, particularly those related to family relationships and parenting skills. That aside, there are several elements that single parents feel are negative, namely, employment prospects, finances, self-esteem and the forming of or maintenance of social relationships including ex-partners. In addition to this, there is a link between transitioning to single parenthood and poverty in Scotland. We also found that moving home is generally associated with change, single parents who live or have lived in poverty are more likely to associate changes in their life as a result of this transition. In brief, the findings illuminate the complexity of the shift to single parenthood and indicate key factors within their lives where transitions tend to be negative.

## Referencing this paper

McKendrick, JH, Campbell, L-A. and Hesketh, W. (2018) Becoming a single parent in Scotland: what difference does it make? *OPFS/SPIRU Briefing 2018/7*. Edinburgh: OPFS.



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