The Socioeconomic Gradient in Joint Physical Custody: A Comparison of 32 Countries

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Objective: This study investigates the association between mothers' socioeconomic status (SES) and joint physical custody among children, focusing on how the SES gradient in joint physical custody relates to its country-specific prevalence.
Background: Joint physical custody has become increasingly common in post-divorce family arrangements. While joint physical custody can have a positive impact on child wellbeing, it is more prevalent in higher-SES families, potentially increasing inequalities in divorce effects. Existing research has overlooked how country-level characteristics, such as the prevalence of joint physical custody, impact the SES gradient in custody.
Method: Using data from the "Health Behaviour in School-aged Children" (HBSC) studies of 2005/2006 and 2009/2010, we analyzed approximately 50,000 children aged 11, 13, and 15 in 32 countries. The analysis employed a multilevel design with children nested within countries, as well as meta-regression analyses.
Results: Findings indicate a positive association between mothers' SES and the likelihood of joint custody. Moreover, the strength of the link between mothers' SES and joint physical custody varies significantly across countries. The country-specific prevalence of joint physical custody moderates the link between the SES gradient and joint physical custody. The more common joint custody is in countries, the stronger the SES gradient in joint physical custody.
Conclusion: Countries with a higher prevalence of joint physical custody show a stronger SES gradient, suggesting that the expansion of joint physical custody may introduce socioeconomic inequalities in the consequences of divorce.
Keywords: Joint physical custody, parental socioeconomic status, country-level variation, multilevel analysis.

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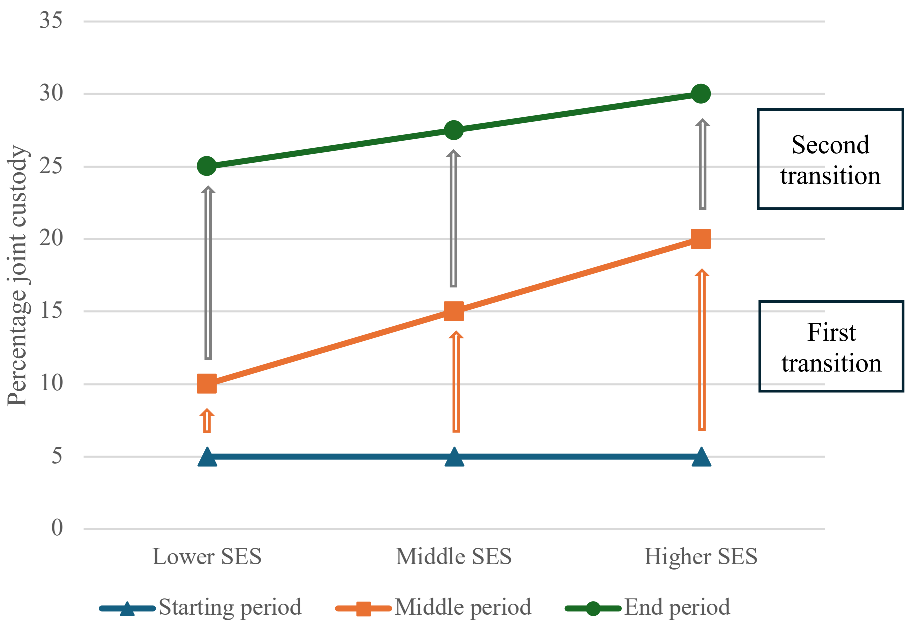
Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a rise in joint physical custody in several countries, driven by the shift toward greater gender equality and legal reforms stimulating postdivorce shared parenting (Hakovirta et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2022; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017). Joint physical custody—or joint custody, for short—is generally defined as children spending an equal amount of time in either parent's household, although specifications of what "equal" means vary across studies. Often, though, living in two households doesn't need to be precisely equally divided, and studies typically distinguish equal joint custody, where children spend (about) 50% of the time with either parent, and unequal joint custody, with thresholds of spending at least 25 to 30% at a parent's home (Hakovirta et al., 2023).

The increase in joint custody may not have occurred evenly across different social strata. Expanding family arrangements, such as joint custody, can be seen as innovations for which there is a demand because they are believed to be advantageous or solve problems (Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003). Theories on the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995) suggest that uncommon and not yet normatively accepted family arrangements are likely to be adopted faster by young people and members of the cultural elite, the so-called "forerunners" of change (Goode, 1962; Härkönen et al., 2021; Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003; Wejnert, 2002). These forerunners typically have the resources to overcome any (normative) barriers associated with the behavior and are often also the ones for whom the behavior is particularly beneficial or acceptable. Several studies have, for instance, shown that when divorce rates just started to increase, divorce was more often an option chosen by better-educated couples and spread to other educational groups when divorce was more common and accepted (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Martin, 2006; Van Poppel, 1992). Similar diffusion patterns have been found for the spread of other "non-standard" family forms, such as unmarried cohabitation (Guetto et al., 2016; Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003), although this pattern is not necessarily observed everywhere or for every new family behavior (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010). Important to note is that diffusion is conceptualized as the expansion of a pre-existing phenomenon; divorce and cohabitation, for example, have existed on a small scale long before the Second Demographic Transition began.

Figure 1. Illustration of hypothetical diffusion of joint physical custody



The diffusion theory can be applied to the expansion of joint custody as well, as illustrated in Figure 1. We distinguish theoretically between a starting period, a middle period, and an end period in the diffusion process. Before joint custody began to increase, depicted as the starting period in Figure 1, only a few families used this arrangement and if they did, it was probably based on idiosyncratic reasons unrelated to SES (Meyer et al., 2017). After the starting period, diffusion proceeds in two steps.

In the first transition, higher-SES families were more likely to adopt joint custody, in part because they may have been more open or secure to experiment with innovations (Glied & Lleras-Muney, 2008) and in part because joint custody is more advantageous, normatively accepted and affordable for them. Equally sharing childcare after divorce is beneficial for higher-SES mothers because it is a way to consolidate the mother's socioeconomic standing in terms of, for instance, her labor supply after divorce (Bonnet et al., 2022; Thomson & Turunen, 2021). In addition, higher-SES families often share childcare responsibilities more equally during marriage (Cano, 2019; Ellingsaeter & Kitterod, 2023; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Yoshida, 2012), making them more likely to continue this practice after divorce (Juby et al., 2005; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017). This continuity in parenting has been shown to benefit children (Poortman, 2018). Irrespective of the actual division of childcare, attitudes toward gender equality are more supportive in higher-SES families than in lower-SES families (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Sani & Quaranta, 2017), which will result in more agreement among divorcing parents to share physical custody. Finally, joint custody requires maintaining two adequately sized homes for the children and higher-SES families more often have the financial means for this (Hakovirta et al., 2023).

These conditions are believed to lead to a positive SES gradient in the middle period (Figure 1). During the second transition, joint custody becomes a more generally accepted arrangement that can serve as a default option for parents. In this transition, lower-SES groups would begin to use joint custody as well, leading to a decline in the SES gradient. Some gradient may still exist in the end period, due to the financial resources needed for joint custody, but the gradient in the end period is smaller than in the middle period. Diffusion theory suggests a certain pattern of change based on the notion of higher status groups as early adaptors combined with the communication of new ideas in homogeneous networks but is not precise enough about the levels of joint custody at which the gradient would become smaller. In other words, where the first transition ends and the second transition begins is not specified in the theory.

The goal of the current study is to examine whether higher-SES families have indeed been the forerunners in the expansion of joint custody and how the SES gradient in joint custody varies across countries. We focus on what we believe is the first transition, using cross-national data from 2005–2010 covering European countries, the United States, and Canada. We compare countries at a single point in time that vary significantly in how common joint custody is. Some countries had a very low level of joint custody and can be considered as being in the starting period, whereas other countries had a moderate level of joint custody, representing the middle period. We note that country differences cannot be equated to changes over time (Thornton, 2001), as countries do not follow a similar historical path in modernization processes. In our data, however, some countries were clearly ahead in the expansion of joint custody, and nearly all countries were increasing. In addition, in most countries, there was no joint custody-related legislation yet. There were recent non-obligatory laws encouraging joint custody, e.g., in the Netherlands in 2009 (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017), or laws making it the default to consider in case of parental disagreement, e.g., in Belgium in 2006 (Vanassche et al., 2013). Joint custody was not the legal norm in most countries (Smyth, 2017), leaving much room for parents' own preferences, norms, and needs.

So far, a few studies have examined the prevalence of joint custody across countries, revealing that Scandinavian countries, particularly Sweden, are the forerunners with regard to the growing trend toward joint custody (Claessens & Mortelmans, 2025; Hakovirta et al., 2023; Palmtag, 2023). Evidence on the association between parents' socioeconomic resources and joint custody has been obtained in a number of single-country studies, such as in Belgium (Sodermans et al., 2013), the Netherlands (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017), the United States (Cancian et al., 2014), Sweden, and Spain (Garriga et al., 2021). Only recently have multiple European countries been analyzed, revealing positive effects of income and education in a pooled sample of 17 countries (Salin et al., 2024).

Variations in the SES gradient across countries or across time have rarely been studied. While recent studies by Salin and colleagues (2024) and Claessens and Mortelmans (2025) highlight the importance of the country's context (e.g., the time joint legal custody has been available in a country, gender equality) for joint custody, no previous studies have examined interactions between country-level and individual-level characteristics, such as parental SES. One study addressed whether the SES gradient has changed over time from 2006 to 2014 in Sweden and Spain (Garriga et al., 2021). Both these countries had already witnessed sharp increases in joint custody, particularly Sweden, and had undergone legal reforms that encouraged joint custody, particularly in Spain from 2010 onwards, implying that both countries were moving beyond the first transition of the diffusion process.

Research on the SES gradient in joint custody is important due to its implications for inequality. An increasing number of studies have found positive—be it small—associations with child outcomes, such as internalizing and externalizing problems, self-esteem and school achievement (see reviews by Berman & Daneback, 2022; Nielsen, 2018; Steinbach, 2019). Moreover, children in joint custody arrangements often maintain stronger relationships with their parents than those in sole physical custody arrangements, even in adulthood (Bastaits & Pasteels, 2019; Palmtag, 2021). Positive associations with parent wellbeing have also been observed (for a review, see Steinbach, 2019). A positive SES gradient in joint custody would thus imply that primarily higher-status groups benefit from this family arrangement. As less-educated couples are increasingly likely to separate vis-à-vis higher-educated couples (Kalmijn & Leopold, 2021; McErlean, 2021), this would mean that parents and children in less-educated families may face a double disadvantage: more dissolution and less advantageous arrangements afterward.

A positive gradient would also inform research on the consequences of joint custody, emphasizing the need to account for selective entry into joint custody. Positive associations with child outcomes are potentially confounded by parental SES. Finally, in case a greater prevalence of joint custody is associated with a more positive SES gradient, this would imply that gender equality and socioeconomic equality can be at odds: an increase in joint custody leads to greater gender equality in postdivorce parenting, but at the same time leads to increased socioeconomic inequality in the extent to which SES groups benefit from joint custody.

We analyze survey data from secondary school children in 32 countries to estimate how mothers' employment and mother's occupational status are associated with the distinction of joint versus sole physical custody. We use a strict definition for joint custody, that is, equal sharing, which we believe is the most appropriate outcome for testing notions of the diffusion of innovations. We also explore a more lenient definition, capturing unequal joint custody arrangement, as both strict and lenient definitions are commonly used in the literature (e.g., Hakovirta et al., 2023). Moreover, countries differ in how joint custody is understood and applied in daily life, for instance in tax systems or legal practice. Using multilevel models with cross-level interactions, we test how the SES gradient in joint custody and the country-specific prevalence of joint custody are associated.

DATA

Data and analytical sample

Data were obtained from the "Health Behaviour in School-aged Children" (HBSC) studies of 2005/2006 and 2009/2010 (Currie et al., 2010). The HBSC focuses on health, wellbeing, social environments, and health behaviors of adolescents aged 11, 13, and 15 across multiple countries. The HBSC studies were done in schools. The school class was the initial sampling unit, and sampling was proportional to the size of the school. The number of cases per country ranged from 4,000 to 6,000 in each year. The data were collected by an international network of researchers funded by the World Health Organization and national funding agencies (https://hbsc.org/). We used the international harmonized data, which are available to external academic researchers.

We pooled the 2005/2006 and 2009/2010 data sets to allow for more statistical power in the analysis. Our selection includes countries from different regions in Europe, including Northern Europe (e.g., Sweden), Western Europe (e.g., Netherlands), Eastern Europe (e.g., Czech Republic), and Southern Europe (e.g., Spain). Moreover, we included data from the United States and Canada. Note that the data from the United States refer to 2001/2002 (instead of 2005/2006) and 2009/2010. We refer to Appendix Table 1 to explain how the analytical sample was constructed from the original sample. The first and most important selection consisted of children who lived with only one parent in the first home, who had two living parents and who responded to a question about whether or not they lived in a second home. The second main selection was based on the countries: we selected countries in which at least 50 children were observed in joint physical custody. The number of countries was 23 for the strict definition (N= 48,174) and 31 for the lenient definition of joint custody (N = 53,916). Since the two sets of countries do not overlap, the total number of countries in the study was 32. Further details are provided in Appendix Table 1.

The exclusion of children with a deceased parent was based on an indirect method since no questions on widowhood were asked. Specifically, we excluded children who responded "never see/don't have a father" to two questions about their father—one concerning their father's occupation and the other about contact with him. We removed children who chose this answer option for both questions (12.0%). For mothers, we used the question on contact, excluding children who responded "never see/don't have a mother" (2.6%). This option did not exist for mother's occupation. By limiting the sample to children who knew and had contact with both their parents, we not only excluded children with a deceased parent but also children who did not have any contact with their parent(s). While this is a disadvantage, we believe the bias it creates is smaller than the bias that would arise from including widowed families in the analyses. Given the gradient in the experience of parental death—children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have experienced the death of a parent (Sasson et al., 2024)—and the impossibility of having two homes in that case, including these cases would bias the socioeconomic gradient in joint custody.

Measures

Children were asked the following question about where they lived: *"All families are different (for example, not everyone lives with both their parents, sometimes people live with just one parent, or they have two homes or live with two families) and we would like to know about yours. Please answer this first question for the home where you live all or most of the time and tick the people who live there."* Next, they were asked if they lived in another home and, if so, with whom and how much time they lived there. Because joint custody is only possible when parents are not living together, all analyses are based on children who had only one parent in the first home, regardless of whether that parent had a new partner living in the same household. We defined the following variable for the living arrangement of the child: (a) children living with only their mother in the first home, (b) children living with only their father in the first home, (c) children with a mother and father in two homes, (d) other arrangements. The main group of interest (c) was defined in two ways, depending on the amount of time spent in the second home. Children could choose from the following options: *"half the time," "regularly but less than half the time," "sometimes," or "hardly ever."* A strict definition considered children living "half of the time" in the second home. A lenient definition considered children who lived *"half of the time"* or *"regularly but not half of the time"* in the second home. Children who lived in a second home but less often than the cutoff point were considered to be living with only one parent. Note that this definition may include regular visitation, which is a limitation of the measure. In some countries (e.g., the Netherlands), the category *"at weekends"* was also presented. These countries were removed from the analysis of the lenient definition because the response option *"at weekends"* could not be clearly classified in the lenient definition.

The 'other arrangements' (listed in (d)), were excluded since these involve more complex patterns (e.g., no parent in any home), or possible coding errors (e.g., a mother in two homes). Our main dependent variables are coded 1 for joint custody (strict or lenient) and 0 for sole custody (be it either mother or father custody). Removing sole father custody from the sample did not change the main findings.

The key independent variable in this study is mothers' socioeconomic status (SES). Children were asked to describe the occupations of their parents. Although one can question the reliability of children's reports of their parents' occupations, studies indicate a good match between parents' and children's reports on parental occupation—and less so in the case of parental education (Engzell & Jonsson, 2015; West et al., 2001). Research teams in each country categorized occupations into five classes ranging from low to high (Currie et al., 2010). While the definition of social classes was suggested by the UK Registrar General Social Class (RGSC) scheme, countries were permitted to use their own classification systems as well. The class position of the mother was used because information on fathers' occupations was more often missing, especially when children lived only with their mother. Mothers who did not work for pay were classified in a separate category.

Mothers' socioeconomic status (SES) had a substantial number of missing values (23.7%), mainly due to occupational data that could not be coded. For working mothers, the missing SES values were imputed using STATA'S *ice* procedure, which is based on chained regression models (Royston, 2005). In the imputation process, all control variables (see below) and country dummies were used as independent variables to impute the missing values for mothers' SES. In addition, we used an elaborate set of auxiliary variables to enhance the imputation. These included fathers' SES, fathers' unemployment, a scale measuring family affluence, student assessments of their family's financial situation (rated on a scale from 1 to 5), a measure of how often students go to bed hungry, and self-reported school achievement. For further discussion on these additional socioeconomic measures, we refer to publications by the HBSC staff (Elgar et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2009). To strengthen the imputations, we included school-level measures of both mother's and father's SES, as well as children's school achievement, as predictors. No imputations were done when there were more than 50% missing values in a country year; in this case, only the valid cases were used. It was believed that imputing a majority of the cases would not be appropriate. Because some of these decisions may be considered arbitrary, regression models without imputations are presented in Appendix Table 2.

The primary country-level characteristic examined in this study is the prevalence of joint custody in a country, which is aggregated from the HBSC data for each country. We made two country-level measures of joint physical custody prevalence, based on the strict and the lenient definition. Additionally, one other country-level characteristic was included, namely a structural measure of gender equality based on the Global Gender Gap Index constructed by the World Economic Forum (2008). This measure combines indicators of gender (in)equality across economic, educational, political, and health domains (Hausmann et al., 2011), with higher values representing greater gender *equality*. This macro-level variable plays a role in aggregate-level analyses as a robustness check.

The control variables included the age and gender of the child, the number of siblings, the presence of a stepparent in the first home and the survey year. These variables have effects on custody arrangements and can be correlated with SES (Steinbach, 2019). Detailed descriptive information on all variables per country can be found in Table 1.

Design of the analysis

After providing descriptive information on the prevalence of joint custody (see Table 1), we present a multilevel analysis for the contrast between joint custody and sole custody. Random slope linear probability models were used, nesting respondents within countries. Nesting within schools was not accounted for, as the analyses focused solely on individual- and country-level factors, and no school-level variables were relevant to the research questions. Both individual and country-level independent variables were analyzed, with random slopes for mothers' socioeconomic status. Mothers' SES was initially treated as a categorical variable (Model 1), but later as a linear variable (Model 2-4) with scores of 1-5 rescaled to a 0-1 range. A linear specification made it easier to estimate interactions with the country-level prevalence of joint custody. Regression models are presented in Table 2 for the strict definition and Table 3 for the lenient definition.

In the linear model, we include a dummy variable indicating whether the mother is non-employed. Non-employed mothers were assigned the country-specific mean SES on the linear measure of SES. The reason for choosing this value is that after doing so, the effect of non-employment compares non-employed mothers to working mothers with an *average* SES in that country. Note that the imputation value does not affect the main effect of SES; it only affects the reference point for comparing employed and non-employed mothers.

To test the diffusion theory, we added cross-level interactions between mothers' SES and employment, and the country-specific prevalence of joint custody while controlling for the main effect of aggregate-level joint custody. Analyses were done with countries as the unit and country years as the unit, resulting in both a country-level and a country-year-level aggregated joint custody measure. The country-year level is conceptually more attractive, but the sample sizes make the prevalence measures at that level more uncertain. Note that the main effect of the aggregate measure of joint custody helps account for country differences, while the interaction effect indicates how the SES gradient varies across countries, assuming a random slope.

Due to the potential unreliability of multilevel models with few macro units, aggregate-level analyses serve as an extra and more intuitive view of the relationships in the data (Brons et al., 2017). Therefore, in a second test, we estimated a meta-regression analysis to examine the linear association between mothers' SES and joint custody, based on individual regressions for each country (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016; Harbord & Higgins, 2008). This association was regressed on macro-level indicators, using the standard errors as weights. The results are displayed in a regression table (Table 3 and 4) and scatterplots (Figures 2 and 3), with each marker representing a country.

The key prediction of the theory is that between the starting and the middle level of joint custody (see Figure 1), the SES gradient increases. After this level, the gradient would not increase further or even decline again. Given the historical period we are focusing on, the first way to test the theory is to examine the linear association between the prevalence of aggregate-level joint custody and the effects of SES. Because there is some uncertainty about the level at which the gradient is supposed to decline again, we also examine a nonlinear association between the prevalence of aggregate-level joint custody and the effects of SES, using linear and quadratic versions of prevalence. If the variation in the prevalence across societies would caputure the full range of values, one would expect an inverted U-pattern in the association and this is tested with the quadratic effect.

In both the multilevel and aggregate-level analyses, we consider gender equality as an alternative explanation. Countries where joint custody is more prevalent tend to be more gender equal, and the level of gender equality may influence the SES gradient in joint custody. In more gender-equal countries, for example, it may be easier for higher-SES parents to act in line with their attitudes and preferences, favoring shared postdivorce parenting. We therefore also analyze interactions between mothers' SES and the country-level indicator of gender equality.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the percentages in joint custody per country for the two years combined. Among the countries for which we were able to construct the strict version of the joint custody measure, the overall prevalence of children spending half of their time in the second home in this period was 8.2%, which can be considered low. In the countries where the lenient definition of joint custody could be constructed—i.e., including children who "regularly" live in a second home—the prevalence of joint custody was 29.0%. At the country level, the strict and lenient joint custody measures were strongly correlated (r = .77).

In Table 1, the countries are ranked by the prevalence under the lenient definition. The prevalence ranged from a high of 37% to 43% in Finland, Sweden, Belgium, and Denmark, to a low of 6% to 10% in Turkey, Ukraine, Latvia, and Bulgaria. Under the strict definition, Sweden clearly had the highest prevalence of joint custody (23%), but substantial variation remained among the other countries, ranging from 14% in Belgium to 3% in Latvia. The correlation of the prevalence of joint custody with our measure of gender equality in a country was substantial (r = .53 for the strict definition, N = 23; r = .67 for the lenient definition, N = 31). This finding is consistent with analyses of data from EU-SILC (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions) by Claessens and Mortelmans (2025).

Table 1. Descriptives of variables by country

Rank (lenient)	Country	Base N for strict	Joint custody rate strict	Base N for lenient	Joint custody rate lenient	Gender equality	Mother employed	Mean SES	Valid N for SES
1	Finland	2636	6.3	2636	43.4	0.820	0.837	3.024	2253
2	Sweden	2103	23.3	2103	38.8	0.814	0.805	2.708	1628
3	Belgium	3579	14.0	3579	37.7	0.716	0.793	2.853	2830
4	Denmark	1694	12.3	1694	36.5	0.754	0.863	2.645	1420
5	France	2487	9.1	2487	34.6	0.734	0.796	2.718	2046
6	Iceland	5001	11.4	5001	34.6	0.790	0.847	2.482	3515
7	Switzerland	1840	4.5	1840	33.0	0.736	0.834	2.220	1534
8	Wales	2529	10.6	2529	30.0	0.737	0.776	3.031	2156
9	Hungary	1575	3.2	1575	28.8	0.687	0.788	3.118	1426
10	Norway	1572	9.0	1572	28.8	0.824	0.832	2.666	1246
11	USA	3394	7.1	3394	28.3	0.718	0.803	3.060	2597
12	England	1803	8.9	1803	27.6	0.737	0.767	2.976	1328
13	Spain	948	7.3	948	27.2	0.728	0.834	1.945	850
14	Scotland	2868	7.5	2868	26.1	0.737	0.779	2.836	2299
15	Israel	[b]		407	25.8	0.690	0.772	2.607	320
16	Canada	1306	9.1	1306	24.9	0.714	0.858	2.926	988
17	Luxembourg	1469	3.7	1469	22.4	0.680	0.725	2.311	937
18	Czech	2094	5.5	2094	22.2	0.677	0.820	2.703	1807
19	Slovenia	1305	5.2	1305	21.2	0.694	0.879	2.765	1062
20	Ireland	1294	8.0	1294	20.8	0.752	0.740	2.636	1057
21	Austria	1825	4.8	1825	20.3	0.715	0.837	2.260	1589
22	Croatia	[b]		741	17.4	0.697	0.753	2.913	669
23	Estonia	2100	3.9	2100	14.4	0.708	0.824	2.480	1860
24	Slovakia	[b]		783	14.2	0.682	0.807	2.515	575
25	Portugal	[b]		993	14.1	0.705	0.829	2.562	870
26	Greece	[b]		866	13.3	0.673	0.809	2.448	728
27	Poland	[b]		1047	12.7	0.695	0.767	2.803	906
28	Bulgaria	[b]		614	9.6	0.708	0.845	2.089	440
29	Latvia	2022	3.0	2022	8.8	0.740	0.850	2.500	1586
30	Ukraine	[b]		1715	7.0	0.686	0.812	2.792	1482
31	Turkey	[b]		1051	5.6	0.585	0.278	2.165	655
.	Netherlands[a]	1349	9.2			0.740	0.789	2.620	1044
	Overall rate		8.2		29.0				

Note: HBSC data 2005/2006 and 2009/2010 merged (2001/2002 and 2009/2010 for the US).
a Netherlands used different categories for less than equal time in the second home and can therefore not be used for the lenient definition.
b Less than 50 cases in joint custody.

Multilevel models

Table 2 presents the multilevel regression models for the strict definition of joint custody, including 23 countries. In Model 1, we observe a clear SES gradient: the prevalence of joint custody increases steadily across higher maternal social classes. The effects appeared linear, and the effect sizes were substantial, with predicted differences in prevalence exceeding five percentage points between the lowest and highest SES groups, while the overall prevalence was only 8.2%. Non-employed mothers had a lower prevalence of joint custody than most social classes and were similar to the lowest social class.

Significant control variables included a year effect, showing an increase across the two surveys. Older children were less likely to have joint custody. A stepparent in the first home was associated with a higher prevalence of joint custody. Neither the child's gender nor the number of siblings affected joint custody prevalence.

Model 2 includes a linear specification of mothers' SES and a dummy variable for non-employed versus employed mothers. As previously explained, non-employed mothers were coded to the country-specific average of SES. This model revealed similar findings, the higher the mothers' SES, the higher the prevalence of joint custody. Non-employed mothers had a lower prevalence of joint custody compared to the average employed mother. The linear model served as a steppingstone to the cross-level interaction models. More importantly, Model 2 allowed us to estimate the slope variance for SES and non-employment. The standard deviation for the SES effect was 0.0294 with a standard error of 0.0065, implying significant heterogeneity in the SES effect across countries. A similar conclusion was reached for the effect of non-employment (SD = 0.021 with a standard error of 0.005).

Model 3 includes cross-level interactions. The model revealed that the effect of mothers' SES was stronger in countries with a higher prevalence of joint custody. Similarly, the effect of mothers' non-employment was more negative in countries with higher joint custody prevalence. No interactions were found between the year of the survey and the effects of mothers' SES and non-employment.

In Model 4, we switch to the level of country years. This yielded more statistical power for estimating cross-level interactions but also had less precision due to smaller sample sizes in each level. Nonetheless, the findings were similar: significant cross-level interactions of SES and non-employment with the prevalence of joint custody.

The cross-level interactions with prevalence are replaced in Model 5 by interactions with gender equality. The interactions of gender equality with mother's SES and non-employment were not significant.

Table 3 presents the results for the multilevel regression models for the lenient definition of joint custody, covering 31 countries. Models 1–4 yielded results largely consistent with those using the strict definition. In Model 1, we observe that the prevalence of joint custody increases with higher SES, with somewhat larger effect sizes than in the strict version—about a nine-percentage point change relative to a 29.0% overall prevalence. Non-employed mothers again show lower joint custody prevalence compared to most social classes (except the lowest social class), similar to the strict model.

Table 2.- Multilevel linear models of joint physical custody (strict definition)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	-.012*	-.012*	-.012*	-.012*	-.012*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Girl vs boy	.003	.003	.003	.003	.003
	(.250)	(.258)	(.245)	(.282)	(.248)
Stepparent first home	.018*	.018*	.018*	.017*	.018*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Number of sibs	-.000	-.000	-.001	-.001	-.000
	(.655)	(.821)	(.555)	(.518)	(.700)
2010 vs 2005/2006	.014*	.014*	.010*	.001	.010
	(.000)	(.000)	(.038)	(.785)	(.051)
Joint custody prevalence	.043*	.034*	.030*	.030*	
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	
Not employed	.000				
	(.)				
Low	.008				
	(.086)				
Lower middle	.020*				
	(.000)				
Middle	.031*				
	(.000)				
Higher middle	.041*				
	(.000)				
High	.053*				
	(.000)				
Linear SES		.044*	.036*	.042*	.036*
		(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.003)
Non-employed		-.027*	-.027*	-.027*	-.025*
		(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
SES x year			.012		.012
			(.212)		(.231)
Non-employed x year			-.001		-.002
			(.885)		(.763)
SES x prevalence			.040*	.042*	
			(.000)	(.000)	
Non-employed x prevalence			-.023*	-.022*	
			(.000)	(.000)	
Macro-level gender equality					.023*
					(.000)
SES x gender equality					.010
					(.433)
Non-employed x gender equality					-.009
					(.157)
Constant	.208*	.217*	.220*	.224*	.213*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Chi-2	1683.1	650.2	1808.6	1870.9	365.1
N	48174	48174	48174	48174	48174
N macro units	23	23	23	44	23

Note: HBSC data 2005/2006 and 2009/2010. P-values in parentheses. Non-employed is in reference to women with an average SES. Prevalence standardized. Prevalence in Model 4 is by country-year.
* $p < 0.05$

Table 3.- Multilevel linear models of joint physical custody (lenient definition)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	-.017*	-.017*	-.017*	-.017*	-.017*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Girl vs boy	.012*	.012*	.012*	.012*	.012*
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Stepparent first home	.073*	.073*	.073*	.071*	.074*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Number of sibs	-.013*	-.013*	-.013*	-.013*	-.014*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
2010 vs 2005/2006	.013*	.013*	.008		.013
	(.001)	(.001)	(.251)		(.081)
Joint custody prevalence lenient	.093*	.088*	.084*	.086*	
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	
Not employed	.000				
	(.)				
Low	.007				
	(.300)				
Lower middle	.042*				
	(.000)				
Middle	.071*				
	(.000)				
Higher middle	.095*				
	(.000)				
High	.099*				
	(.000)				
Linear SES		.105*	.103*	.104*	.104*
		(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Non-employed		-.055*	-.065*	-.061*	-.062*
		(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
SES x year			.007		.004
			(.597)		(.785)
Non-employed x year			.011		.007
			(.294)		(.522)
SES x prevalence			.033*	.036*	
			(.000)	(.000)	
Non-employed x prevalence			-.027*	-.027*	
			(.000)	(.000)	
Macro-level gender equality					.060*
					(.000)
SES x gender equality					.004
					(.764)
Non-employed x gender equality					-.013
					(.064)
Constant	.432*	.444*	.447*	.454*	.435*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Chi-2	1869.2	1342.4	1710.2	3167.7	807.4
N	53916	53916	53916	53916	53916
N macro units	31	31	31	58	31

Note: HBSC data 2005/2006 and 2009/2010. P-values in parentheses. Non-employed is in reference to women with an average SES. Prevalence standardized. Model 3 has country-years.
* $p < 0.05$

Model 2 confirms these patterns using linear SES and a non-employment dummy: higher SES is associated with greater joint custody prevalence, and non-employment with lower prevalence. The effects vary significantly across countries. Model 3 introduced cross-level interactions and again showed comparable patterns: the positive association between mothers' SES and joint custody was stronger in countries with higher joint custody prevalence, while the negative association for non-employed mothers was more pronounced. The results in Model 4, based on country-year data, confirmed these findings, with significant interactions between joint custody prevalence and both SES and non-employment. Overall, the results based on the lenient definition strongly align with those from the strict joint custody models.

Meta-regression approach

In the last part of the analysis, we switch to a more straightforward way for approaching the multilevel structure, using the two-step model. In the first step, the effects of mothers' SES were estimated for each country and these effects and their standard errors were used in a second-order meta-regression model, with the standard errors as weights. The meta-regression approach also allowed us to analyze one other macro-level variable (gender equality) to evaluate how robust the effect of the prevalence of joint custody was. Findings are presented in Table 4 (strict definition) and Table 5 (lenient definition).

Table 4 showed a significant positive effect of the prevalence of joint custody on the magnitude of the SES gradient (Model 1), while no statistically significant effect was found for gender equality (Model 2). The sample size did not allow for the simultaneous inclusion of multiple macro-variables.

Figure 2 illustrates the findings of the meta-regression: countries with higher joint custody levels exhibited a stronger SES gradient. The scatterplot suggests that some specific countries may produce a relatively strong association between the prevalence of joint custody and the SES effect, particularly Sweden and Belgium. For this reason, we estimated the model again, first without Sweden (Model 3, Table 4).

This model revealed the same effect of the prevalence of joint custody. Next, we also excluded Belgium, which yielded a smaller and non-significant effect of the prevalence of joint custody with a p-value of .088 (Model 4). However, the effect was still positive and sizeable. In Figure 2, we added the linear macro-level effects as implied by the model with and without these two countries. The line was flatter without the outliers but still upward.

Finally, we tested a non-linear effect of the prevalence of joint custody. The quadratic specification was not statistically significant (Model 5, Table 4). The predictions of the quadratic model are displayed in Figure 2 and these reveal no inverted U-pattern in the association, in line with the non-significant quadratic effect.

Additionally, we analyzed mothers' non-employment status instead of mothers' SES. The bottom part of Table 4 shows the results of the meta-regression models. The prevalence of joint custody was negatively associated with the magnitude of the non-employment effect. The more prevalent joint custody in a country, the greater the difference between non-employed and employed mothers. This association remained when excluding Sweden and Belgium. There was no significant effect of gender equality on the magnitude of the non-employment effect, nor was there evidence for a quadratic effect of the prevalence of joint physical custody.

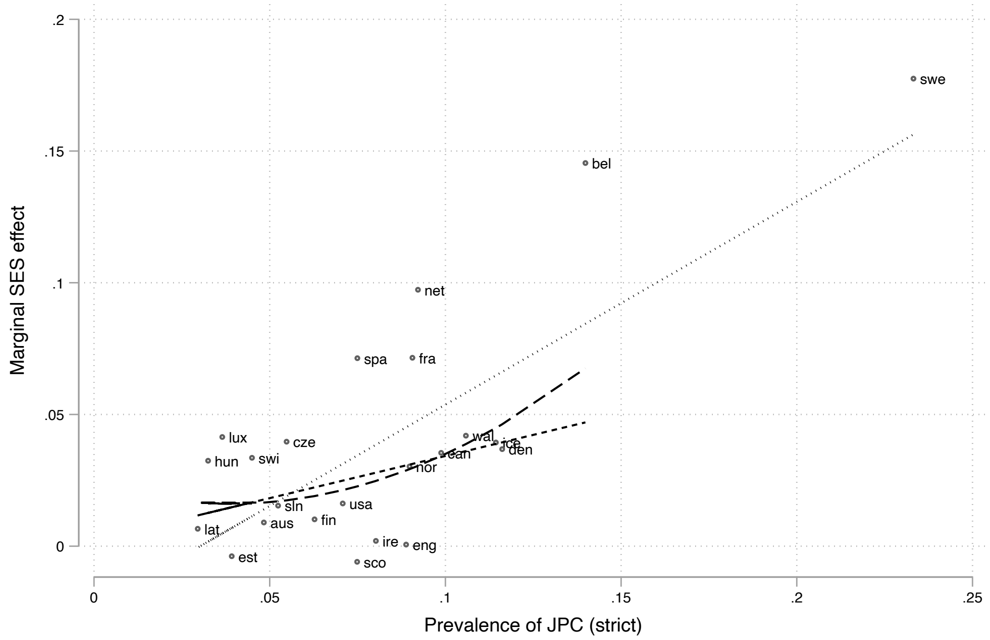
Table 4.- Meta regression of SES- and non-employment effects (strict definition)

SES effects	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3	(4) Model 4	(5) Model 5
Prevalence JPC	.770*		.656*	.320	.329
	(.000)		(.005)	(.088)	(.087)
Prevelence squared					5.013
					(.497)
Gender equality		.174			
		(.464)			
Constant	-.023~	-.089	-.016	.002	.021*
	(.092)	(.609)	(.347)	(.864)	(.008)
F-test	25.9	.6	10.0	3.2	1.8
N countries	23	23	22	21	21
Non-employment effects	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**
Prevalence JPC	-.541*		-.472*	-.422*	-.431*
	(.000)		(.001)	(.009)	(.011)
Prevelence squared					-2.226
					(.726)
Gender equality		-.140			
		(.349)			
Constant	.018*	.079	.014	.011	-.017*
	(.037)	(.471)	(.141)	(.270)	(.010)
F-test	26.2	.9	13.9	8.3	4.0
N countries	23	23	22	21	21

Note: HBSC country level data 2006-2010. P-values in parentheses. Model 3 excludes Sweden, Model 4 and 5 also exclude Belgium. Prevalence is centered around its mean in Model 5.

* $p < 0.05$

Figure 2. The SES gradient in joint custody (strict definition) in 23 countries



Note: Individual gradients obtained from a model including country interactions with mother's SES. Lines based on meta regression models in Table 4. Dotted line includes all countries, dashed lines exclude outliers (see text).

Table 5 shows the meta-regression results for the lenient definition of joint custody, based on 31 countries. The results closely mirror those for the strict definition: the prevalence of joint custody is positively associated with the strength of the SES gradient and negatively associated with the employment gradient. As with the strict definition, no significant effects were found of gender equality at the macro level. No outliers were visible in the figure. These findings further confirm the robustness of the main patterns across both definitions of joint custody. Figure 3 visualizes the SES gradient in joint custody and shows that the positive relationship between joint custody prevalence and the SES gradient also holds under the lenient definition. The quadratic specification in Model 2 was not statistically significant and visual inspection of the effect confirms this. Figure 3 suggests a slight decline in the SES effect with increases in prevalence, but this is still far away from an inverted U-pattern.

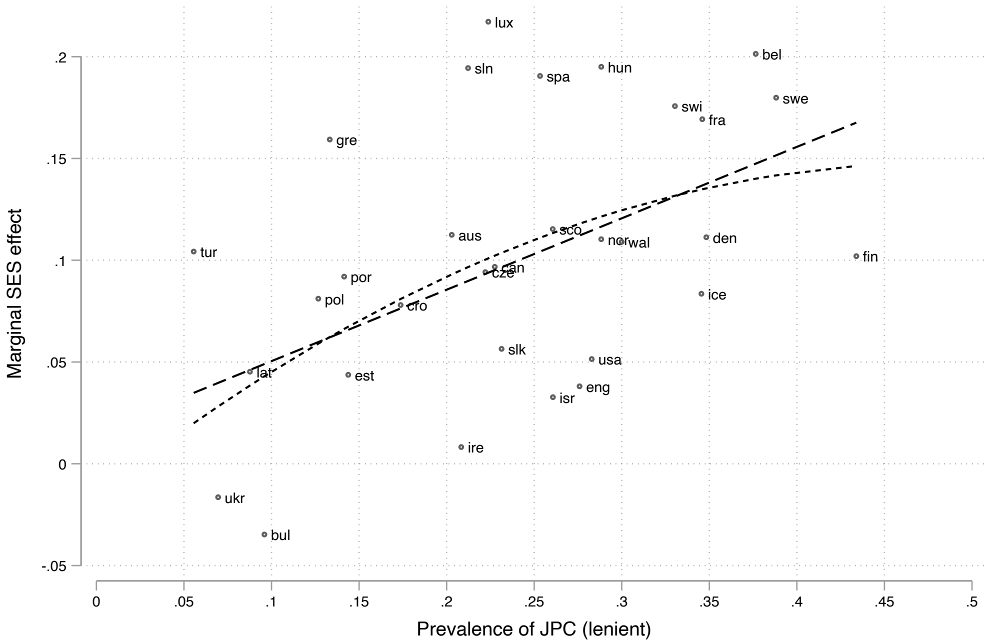
Table 5.- Meta regression of SES- and non-employment effects (lenient definition)

SES effects	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3
Prevalence JPC lenient	.351*	.346*	
	(.002)	(.002)	
Prevelence squared		-.701	
		(.483)	
Gender equality			.090
			(.738)
Constant	.015	.105	.035
	(.561)	(.000)	(.856)
F-test	12.0	6.1	.1
N countries	31	31	31
Non-employment effects	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Prevalence JPC lenient	-.288*	-.288*	
	(.001)	(.002)	
Prevelence squared		.111	
		(.887)	
Gender equality			-.311
			(.135)
Constant	.016	-.054	.171
	(.449)	(.000)	(.250)
F-test	12.8	6.1	2.4
N countries	31	31	31

Note: HBSC country level data 2005/2006 and 2009/2010. P-values in parentheses. Prevalence is centered around its mean in Model 2.

* $p < 0.05$

Figure 3. The SES gradient in joint custody (lenient definition) in 31 countries



Note: Individual gradients obtained from a model including country interactions with mother's SES. Lines based on meta regression model (Table 5).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between mothers' socioeconomic status (SES) and the prevalence of joint (physical) custody across a large number of countries, exploring how SES influences the likelihood of children living in joint custody after divorce or separation. The current study showed that children of higher-SES mothers were more likely to live with both their father and their mother after divorce or separation compared to children of lower-SES mothers. Our findings align with earlier country-specific studies and a few multiple-country studies (cf. Garriga et al., 2021; Salin et al., 2024). In a more general sense, the findings are also consistent with studies showing a socioeconomic gradient in the frequency of contact between children and nonresident fathers after divorce (Juby et al., 2007; Kalmijn, 2015).

The descriptive statistics highlight significant variation in the prevalence of joint custody among countries in 2005/2006 and 2009/2010. This cross-national variation in the prevalence of joint custody suggests that some countries experienced the expansion of joint custody sooner or quicker than others. In line with predictions from diffusion theory, we find that the socioeconomic gradient was more pronounced in countries where joint custody was more common. These findings provide critical insights into how the socioeconomic gradient in joint custody manifests itself differently across various national contexts. It suggests that both the normalization and the expansion of this post-divorce family arrangement may intensify socioeconomic disparities in access to beneficial child residence arrangements after divorce.

Our data come from 2005/2006 and 2009/2010, a period in which countries still had low or moderate levels of joint custody. The countries in this period can be conceptualized as covering the first transition in the process, where some countries were in the starting period while others were in the middle period (Figure 1). We realize that comparing a range of countries at one point in time is not the same as comparing one country at several points in time, but the theoretical mechanisms are general enough to inform comparative research.

An important caveat is that diffusion theory does not specify at what levels of joint custody the first transition ends and the second transition begins. It is reasonable to hypothesize that as joint custody becomes even more widespread, the strength of the SES gradient may diminish. Our findings do not suggest that in the period we examine, there is already an inverted U-pattern in the association between prevalence and the SES gradient. More recent data are needed to examine the full implications of the diffusion theorey.

It is also possible that the strong gradient observed in, for example, Sweden, is already the endpoint of the expansion of joint custody. Classic diffusion theory is often applied to innovations that ultimately become universal (e.g., seat belts), but this is less plausible for joint custody, especially since it requires two homes of adequate size. In an analysis of a more recent period for Sweden and Spain, Garriga and colleagues (2021) found a strong and stable SES gradient in Sweden and a *decreasing* SES gradient in Spain between 2006 and 2014. Although the period is short, this can tentatively be interpreted as evidence for the second stage in the diffusion process where a strong SES gradient in the middle period in Spain changed into a weaker gradient in the later period.

Cross-national analyses over longer time spans are needed to examine such trends in the gradient more conclusively. In particular, future research should investigate whether the SES gradient diminishes as joint custody becomes more widespread, a process that can be conceptualized as the democratization of this post-divorce family arrangement. Examining this question will be crucial to understand whether the strong SES disparities observed in the early stages of diffusion persist, decline, or stabilize as joint custody becomes increasingly normalized.

Despite the significant findings, the study has limitations that must be acknowledged. The reliance on child self-reported data can introduce bias, as children may lack a comprehensive understanding of their mother's employment and occupation. Nonetheless, comparisons of child and parent reports in other school surveys yield positive conclusions, at least for occupation (Engzell & Jonsson, 2015). While multiple imputation techniques helped provide a more accurate estimate of parental SES, the potential for bias remains, particularly in countries where parental occupation data were frequently missing. However, models with and without imputation yielded similar findings. In terms of variables, the HBSC does not provide details on parents' marital status. The information on parent-child relations and living arrangements is elaborate (including clear distinctions between parents and stepparents), but no direct questions are asked on marital status in all countries. To address this concern, we limited our analyses to children who knew and had contact with both their parents, thus excluding widowhood and, possibly, also mothers who were single from birth onward.

We focused on mothers' SES, as this information was more consistently available than fathers' SES, particularly in cases where children lived primarily with their mother. While relying on only one parent's SES may appear to be a limitation, it is in fact well-justified in this context: after separation, most children live with their mother either fully or partly, making maternal SES the most relevant and reliably reported indicator of the family's post-divorce socioeconomic position. Moreover, this focus helped preserve a larger and less selective sample, minimizing bias due to missing data.

Child reports may also have advantages, especially regarding living arrangements. Divorced parents may not always provide consistent information about their children's living arrangements and often overstate their own involvement in children's living arrangements (Lin et al., 2004). In contrast, children might offer more accurate details in this regard. However, as the HBSC sample includes only children aged 11 to 15, our findings may not generalize to younger or older children. Prior studies suggest that the prevalence of joint custody is lower among younger children and among children aged 16 and over (Salin et al., 2024; Steinbach, 2019). Finally, a caveat is needed for the effects of non-employment. While these effects were in line with the general SES gradient – joint custody being less prevalent for non-employed mothers – the causal direction may go both ways. Joint custody may be more desirable when mothers work for pay, but if mothers do not work for pay, joint custody will foster their opportunities to enter or reenter the labor market (Bonnet et al., 2022).

Our findings have important policy implications. The observed socioeconomic gradient raises concerns about equitable access to joint custody arrangements. Children of high-SES parents not only have an advantage in terms of a lower likelihood of experiencing parental divorce but also benefit postdivorce, as they are more likely to live in a joint custody arrangement rather than solely with one parent. Previous research has demonstrated that joint custody is the most favorable living arrangement for children's wellbeing following divorce (e.g., Steinbach, 2019). However, it remains uncertain whether this gradient will persist, diminish, or intensify as joint custody becomes more widespread and normalized. If the gradient does persist, joint custody risks remaining largely accessible to higher-SES families, potentially reinforcing social inequalities in the consequences of divorce. Therefore, policy efforts should aim to reduce barriers for lower-SES families to facilitate broader access to joint custody and promote more equitable outcomes. Simultaneously, ongoing research is crucial to monitor the development of this gradient over time, as understanding its trajectory will be key to evaluating and guiding effective policy interventions.

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Data are publicly available from the website https://www.hbsc.org/data/. The references for the data are as follows:

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ONLINE APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. Selection of cases

	Remaining N	Country-years	Countries
Starting sample	417,660	79	41
One parent in first home	91,083	78	41
Father and mother alive	77,979	78	41
Valid info on living arrangements	72,289	77	41
Exclude when fully missing SES	63,107	72	41
50 joint custody cases for strict definition	48,793	45	23
Excluding ‘other’ living arrangements	48,174	45	23
50 joint custody cases for lenient definition	55,661	58	31
Excluding ‘other living arrangements	53,916	58	31

Source: HBSC 2005/2006 and 2009/2010.

Appendix 2.- Multilevel linear models without using imputations

	Strict	Strict	Lenient	Lenient
main				
Age	-.012*	-.012*	-.018*	-.018*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Girl vs boy	.002	.002	.008	.008*
	(.550)	(.540)	(.051)	(.043)
Stepparent first home	.016*	.015*	.067*	.067*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Number of sibs	.001	.000	-.011*	-.011*
	(.632)	(.850)	(.000)	(.000)
2010 vs 2005/2006	.014*	.010	.014*	.007
	(.000)	(.070)	(.001)	(.386)
joint custody prevalence	.038*	.033*		
	(.000)	(.000)		
joint custody prevalence lenient			.092*	.089*
			(.000)	(.000)
Not employed	.000		.000	
	(.)		(.)	
Low	.010		.011	
	(.203)		(.296)	
Lower middle	.024*		.056*	
	(.001)		(.000)	
Middle	.036*		.087*	
	(.000)		(.000)	
Higher middle	.045*		.114*	
	(.000)		(.000)	
High	.053*		.114*	
	(.000)		(.000)	
Linear SES		.037*		.115*
		(.000)		(.000)
Non-employed		-.031*		-.079*
		(.000)		(.000)
SES x year		.013		.013
		(.223)		(.407)
Non-employed x year		-.002		.009
		(.828)		(.378)
SES x prevalence		.041*		
		(.000)		
Non-employed x prevalence		-.027*		
		(.000)		
SES x prevalence lenient				.029*
				(.006)
Non-employed x prevalence lenient				-.032*
				(.000)
Constant	.206*	.221*	.442*	.466*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Chi-2	573.8	1543.5	1104.3	1459.6
N	38598	38598	43320	43320

Note: HBSC data 2005/2006 and 2009/2010.

* $p < 0.05$