

Parents in dual-earner households report fewer depressive symptoms

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Raising children requires a reorganization of both professional and private lives, with potential consequences for mental health. In a new study published in *Acta Sociologica*, Anna Baranowska-Rataj, associate

professor in sociology at Umeå University, Sweden, used data from the European Social Survey. The survey includes a validated version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale, constructed to identify populations at risk of developing depressive disorders. The analyses focused on 7,779 partnered men and women in 25 European countries, aged 20–50 and with preschool children. With this data, Anna Baranowska-Rataj investigated how parents' mental well-being were affected by their division of paid and unpaid labor.

"Some couples adopt role specialization, with one of the partners focusing on paid work and the other on unpaid labor. Such role specialization facilitates the management of [family](#)-related demands, but it also deprives one of the parents from financial as well as non-monetary benefits related to employment."

The results show that single-earner families tend to experience more depressive symptoms than parents in dual-earner families. This contradicts the idea that role specialization provides favorable conditions for parents with young children. It also highlights the advantages of a dual-earner family model, which gives both partners sources of income and non-monetary benefits such as time structure and social contacts.

Public policies may reduce the work-life conflict

The gap in the levels of depressive symptoms between parents in dual-earner and male breadwinner families varied across countries. In countries with higher availability of childcare services, the difference in mental health was larger than in countries with low availability. In other words, the benefits of a dual-earner family as compared to a male breadwinner family are larger when the availability of childcare services is higher.

"There may be several explanations for this pattern," says Anna

Baranowska-Rataj. "Childcare policies reduce the work-life conflict among dual-earner couples and create better possibilities to engage in jobs involving more hours of work, which also means [higher incomes](#) for working parents. Better earning opportunities may in turn reduce the risk of financial hardship and consequently limit depressive symptoms in dual-earner families. Strengthening the pressure on stay-at-home parents to get involved in paid work may be an alternative explanation."

Perhaps not surprisingly, the study also showed that parents in jobless households have the highest levels of [depressive symptoms](#).

"This finding adds to the understanding of the long-term consequences of parental division of paid labor," Anna Baranowska-Rataj continues. "Given that families are most likely to become jobless when the male breadwinner loses his job, in addition to impeding parental well-being in the short run, role specialization involves a long-run risk of transitioning into dual joblessness, which is associated with even more severe [mental health](#) problems."

More information: Anna Baranowska-Rataj, The impact of the parental division of paid labour on depressive symptoms: The moderating role of social policies, *Acta Sociologica* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00016993211066261](#)

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