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# Enhancing Potentials for Research on Post-Separation Families Using the Growing up in Germany Panel

## **Forschung zu Kindern, Jugendlichen und Familien an der Schnittstelle von Wissenschaft, Politik und Fachpraxis**

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**Abstract:**

Rates of separation and divorce are persistently high in Western societies and post-separation families are increasingly diverse and complex, mainly due to more active fatherhood and increased and faster re-partnering. However, post-separation family constellations are insufficiently captured in official statistics in Germany, as its family definition is household-based (no record of non-resident children or parents) and step-parenthood cannot be identified. Many large-scale panel surveys offer only limited information to classify post-separation family constellations and parental care involvement accurately and often lack crucial information on the non-resident parent, the parent-child relationship, as well as the interparental relationship. Yet these indicators have shown to be essential in understanding post-separation child and family-level outcomes (e.g., emotional and economic well-being). The panel study "Growing Up in Germany" launched in 2019 aims to provide comprehensive information on everyday practices, conflicts, and parental care involvement of a wide range of family constellations, explicitly including single parents, stepfamilies, and information on non-resident biological parents. We present the survey module specifically targeting post-separation families with a non-resident parent (the "Post-Separation Family" module) and discuss its contribution to providing information on the representation and coverage of diverse family constellations in Germany. Research potentials, that arise in connection with the broader spectrum of information collected in the survey (e.g., economic hardship, subjective well-being, health, parental education, and employment), are further outlined.

**Keywords:** divorce, union dissolution, shared physical care, Germany, AID:A panel study

**Key Messages:**

- Post-separation family constellations are diverse yet often insufficiently captured in registers and surveys.
- With the Post-Separation Family (PSF) module, we propose a standard instrument for international research.
- In 2019, 23% of German families with minors are post-separation families (17% single-parents, 6% stepfamilies).
- About 12% of minors in post-separation families practice a Shared Parenting arrangement in 2019.

# 1 Introduction

What constitutes a family changed rapidly over the last decades because family constellations have become more diverse (e.g., Smock/Schwartz 2020). This is largely due to three major trends that occurred in most Western countries. First, rates of divorce and separation have remained high among couples with and without children (Mortelmans 2021; Kreyenfeld/Trappe 2020), which increases the number of children growing up without the presence of both biological parents in one household. Second, changes in cultural norms concerning parenting and especially more active fatherhood transform paternal involvement in the family before, but also after parental union dissolution (Schoppe-Sullivan/Fagan 2020; Amato et al. 2009). This contributes to the rising share of separating parents practicing complex physical custody arrangements, such as shared physical care (SPC) where children alternate with varying extent and frequency between both parental homes rather than residing with one parent only (i.e., usually the mothers; Bernardi/Mortelmans 2021). Lastly, parental re-partnering tends to happen more frequently and faster after a divorce or separation (Raley/Sweeney 2020). The presence of children from prior unions, in addition to the birth of children into these unions, further surges the complexity of post-separation family constellations (e.g., in stepfamilies).

However, the representation and coverage of pluralized family constellations in registry data are often insufficient. Germany, for instance, had a comparable divorce rate to the European average in 2021 (about 1.7 per 1,000 individuals; Eurostat 2023), yet official registry statistics do not allow to identify all post-separation family constellations. More specifically, stepfamilies cannot be distinguished from families with two biological parents, and no information is available on shared physical custody arrangements after parental separation. Even most German research surveys and large-scale panel studies include only limited information to identify post-separation families with non-resident parents. In addition, due to poor theoretical guidance, there is a wide variety of measurements covered in surveys without any standards, lacking reliable and comparable estimates regarding the prevalence of different post-separation family constellations and their parental care involvement. This impedes the development of targeted policies for these populations.

Our study aims to address these research gaps in the German context in three ways. First, we summarize salient debates on post-separation families and their coverage in relevant German surveys. Second, we introduce a more diverse measurement of family constellations implemented in the “Post-Separation Family” (PSF) module of the large-scale panel study “Growing up in Germany” (AUFWACHSEN IN DEUTSCHLAND: ALLTAGSWELTEN – henceforth AID:A; Kuger et al., 2023) and show how the resulting estimates on post-separation families provide superior information compared to registry data. Third, we propose a concise set of indicators, integrated into the PSF module, that characterize the variety of family constellations and parental care involvement in post-separation families (e.g., in terms of contact with and overnight stays at the non-resident parent – henceforth NRP) from the resident parent perspective, and even additional child perspective items. Related, we show how this expanded measurement of family constellations and parental care involvements, can be linked to the larger range of outcome measures available in

AID:A (e.g., parental and child well-being, or parental employment). The PSF module could serve as a standard in future surveys to define the landscape and describe the situation of post-separation families more adequately.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Theoretical Perspectives and Current Debates on Post-Separation Families

Several theories inform issues related to family life and parenting in the context of parental separation. The development of the PSF module in AID:A has been rooted, among other approaches, in family systems theory (Baude et al. 2023; Minuchin 1974) that aims to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics in post-separation family constellations. Its core assumption is that families represent a unit or social system possessing, for instance, unique characteristics, role distributions, rules, or communication patterns. Families further strive to seek equilibrium, which can be thought of as a balance between stability and change, through negotiating and shaping their unique set of characteristics and processes. Among post-separation families, parental separation represents a transformative transition that requires and activates adaptive strategies of the individual actors and the system as a whole in response. Some transitions stem directly from the separation itself (e.g., in terms of increased interparental conflict, distress, or material deprivation; Amato 2010). Ripple effects of parental separation are further mediated by altered opportunity structures, challenged identity construction, and related parental decisions, which, in turn, are moderated by parents' resources and traits (e.g., Amato 2000).

Through this systemic lens, Baude et al. (2023) proposed that daily practices and routines in post-separation families, such as patterns of parent-child contact with a NRP or physical custody arrangements, need to be negotiated over time. They are shaped by individual (e.g., characteristics of the mother, father, and child), relational (e.g., on the parent-child, but also the interparental level), and larger contextual factors (e.g., institutional settings). Family life differs considerably with regard to levels of continued parental involvement of both parents for a substantial share of recently separated families compared to those previous decades (e.g., Amato et al. 2009). Even though children are still more likely to reside with their mother after parental separation (Kreyenfeld/Trappe 2020), the proportion of non-resident parents (i.e., mainly fathers) who remain in contact with their child has increased significantly (van Spijker et al. 2022; Amato et al. 2009). With this increase, the socio-demographic characteristics of the non-resident parent and couple before and after separation gain importance in understanding the development of post-separation family-level and particularly child outcomes (Pailhé et al. 2020; Poortman 2000; Ross 1995). For instance, more affluent and educated parents tend to be more likely to remain in contact and be involved with their children (e.g., Walper et al. 2021; Cancian et al. 2014; Sodermans et al. 2013). This is furthermore likely if parents are less conflict-ridden and have a better co-parenting relationship after the separation, as well as divided care more equally before their separation (e.g., Augustijn 2023; Langmeyer et al. 2022; Nielsen 2018). Regular contact with and involvement of the NRP facilitates children's close relationship with this parent, which is associated with better child outcomes (Adamsons/Johnson 2013). Prior studies documented also direct links between positive child well-being and a cooperative, less conflictual interparental relationship after the separation (e.g., Lux/Walper 2019; Amato 2000).

Parental care involvement of both biological parents can further help mothers to balance employment and childcare, or to regain ground on the labor market to stabilize their household income (Boll/Schüller 2023).

Related to the trend of increased involvement of both separated parents in matters regarding their child and faster re-partnering after separation is the diversification of post-separation family constellations and children's physical custody arrangements. If parental re-partnering forms a new stepfamily, all family members have to deal with novel challenges, such as reorganizing daily routines with a new partner and possibly parental figure and dealing with new role expectations and obligations within the family (Raley/Sweeney 2020). A stepfamily constellation can quickly become complex if the NRP, who may also have entered into a new union, continues to play an active role in children's lives. Moreover, the share of families opting for SPC rather than more traditional sole custody arrangements has risen considerably in many European countries, parts of North America, and Australia (e.g., Meyer et al., 2022; Bernardi/Mortelmans 2021). Its prevalence is particularly high in countries that implemented it early on (e.g., the Nordic countries) or strengthened legislation for SPC considerably (e.g., establishing it as the default). SPC means that children alternate between both parental homes for a substantive amount of time (e.g., operationalized as an equal or at least 70:30% time split; Vowels et al. 2023). Some studies have used residential calendar methods to assess the amount of shared parenting time more precisely (e.g., Sodermans et al. 2014), but these instruments tend to be rather time-consuming. The vast majority of studies on SPC use the count of overnight stays at each parental residence per month (e.g., see Vowels et al. 2023; Steinbach, 2019 for an overview), which do not necessarily assess variations on weekends, vacations, or holidays precisely. Other surveys and official statistics lack basic information on parental care involvement completely, which may lead researchers to underestimate the amount of SPC and instead misclassify them as sole care arrangements. In addition, most of these surveys include the parental perspective, while the perspective of underage children is still rarely surveyed.

## 2.2 The Institutional and Legal Context for Post-Separation Families in Germany

Germany operates under a modernized male breadwinner model (Grunow et al. 2018). That means its welfare state institutions, family policies, and gender beliefs promote rather traditional work-care arrangements among parents. Taxation and social security systems favor a one-and-a-half-earner model with little fiscal benefits for dual-earner couples (Lechevalier 2019). Notable shifts in family policies enhanced maternal labour force participation, such as in 2007 introduced leave months for fathers, a justiciable right to enrolment in daycare from age 1 onward (in 2013), and a legal entitlement to all-day care for children at primary schools (planned for 2026). Despite these shifts, most mothers work part-time and assume the main responsibility for childcare and household chores (Zoch/Schober 2018). Shortages in the provision of childcare—especially under age 3 in West Germany and all-day care for school children—represent a main hurdle to maternal employment (Boll/Lagemann 2019). The share of single parents among families with minors was about 19%



in 2019 and almost nine in ten (about 88%) were mothers (Destatis 2023). Single mothers often depend on basic security benefits, even if they are employed, and they receive these benefits longer than mothers in couple households (Lietzmann 2014). Although basic income support, social assistance, family-related transfers, and tax reliefs somewhat cushion single parents' material hardship, more than one-fourth (27%) of this group was at risk of poverty in 2019 (Eurostat 2024) in Germany.

To date, Germany lacks legal regulations for SPC arrangements (e.g., Walper et al. 2021), unlike joint legal custody regulations (i.e., parents share the right and duty to make important decisions for a child). The latter became the legal default for divorced parents in 1998 (Köppen et al. 2020). Consequently, estimates of families practicing SPC in Germany are relatively small compared to those of other countries that implemented SPC models as a legal default or preferred option (e.g., about 40% in Belgium; Steinbach, 2019). The prevalence of SPC varies across studies from about 4% (Walper et al., 2021 based on AID:A II collected between 2013-2015), 8.5% (Langmeyer et al. 2022 based on AID:A 2019), to about 12% (Köppen et al. 2020 based on the "German Family Panel" pairfam), depending on the used samples and model definitions. The lack of legal regulations for SPC affects financial issues as well. Even though only the resident parent is eligible to collect certain child benefits (Ruetten 2016), alimony and other child supplements can vary depending on how children's time is split between the parental residences (Köppen et al. 2020).

## 2.3 Indicators for Post-Separation Families and Parental Care Involvement in Germany

The representation and coverage of diverse family constellations in research surveys and registry data are often insufficient due to extensive data requirements. It requires a comprehensive exploration of partnership and fertility biographies, encompassing cohabitation status, marital status, and living arrangements with biological and non-biological children. Despite considerable divorce rates, official household statistics in Germany, including the Microcensus, underestimate the true extent of family diversity. The Microcensus fails to distinguish stepfamilies from families with two biological parents, and there is no information available on SPC after parental separation.

Additionally, many German research surveys and large-scale panel studies provide limited information for accurately identifying post-separation families. In a meta-analysis of seven studies based on four survey datasets, Kuhnt/Steinbach (2014) found significant variations in family constellations due to differences in survey sample and measure. For instance, stepfamily households ranged between about 7-17% of all family households in Germany. Understanding diversity in family constellation is further constrained because crucial information about non-resident parents is only available in three current surveys, namely the "Family Models in Germany (FAMOD)" project (Steinbach/Helms 2020) with an oversample of about 79% of post-separation families among a total of 1,554 families in 2019, the "German Family Demography Panel Study (FReDA)" (Bujard et al. 2022), a survey that

merged GGS and pairfam since 2021, and the latest launch of AID:A in 2019 (Kuger et al. 2023).<sup>1</sup> Table 1 provides a concise overview of these three surveys, detailing the indicators for the study of post-separation families and their living arrangements in Germany. Socio-demographic factors, which are highly salient (Poortman 2000; Ross 1995), especially regarding the NRP, are differently represented in these three surveys. AID:A contributes to these studies by further detailing the non-resident parent's resources.

As previously outlined, the relationship between the resident and the NRP plays a crucial role in child well-being (Lux/Walper 2019). Among the three surveys, FReDA lacks information on the parental relationship, while AID:A and FAMOD provide fairly similar questions. Both surveys include data on the frequency of contact between the resident and the NRP, regardless of whether it is in person, by phone, or through other means. Additionally, they cover aspects such as co-parenting, relationship satisfaction, and disagreements from the perspective of the resident parent. AID:A inquires additionally about experiences of physical violence between the ex-partners. The measurement of parent-child contact strongly varies across studies. Overnight stays at the non-residential parent's home in a typical or given month are, for example, included in FReDA and AID:A. In contrast, FAMOD used the residential calendar method to assess parental care involvement and classify SPC more precisely. In addition, FAMOD includes information on the assessment of non-resident parents' involvement in the child's life, their financial contributions, and the division of caregiving responsibilities between both parents (e.g., care during illness, organizing parental meetings, birthdays, meal preparation, and outings). While the previously mentioned information is mostly surveyed from the resident parent, in AID:A also information from the child's perspective is included on digital contact and the relationship quality with the NRP.

<sup>1</sup> The Socio-Economic Panel Study (Giesselmann et al. 2019) includes only a limited number of separated parental couples where both parents separated while being included in the panel and gave information post-separation (e.g., 176 in Boll/Schüller 2023), and it lacks systematic information regarding the non-resident parent.

**Tab. 1: German surveys covering information on non-resident parents (NRP) in post-separation families**

Survey	AID:A 2019	FAMOD 2019	FReDA-GGS 2021
Post-separation target population	Parents with at least one minor child who (1) resides "constantly" or as a primary residence with RP, and (2) has a NRP	Parents of a focus child aged 0-14, who (1) resides at least 70% of the time with the RP and has contact with the NRP or (2) lives with the NRP 30-70% of the time	Parents aged 18-49 with at least one child among the 4 oldest children not "constantly" living in the same household
Perspective	Perspective of the RP (and partly of children aged 9-17)	Perspective of the RP; partly also of the NRP and target children aged 7-14 years	NRP on non-resident child
Socio-demographics	On NRP & RP  (NRPs' vital status, current activity status, educational credentials, occupation, immigration background)  Residential distance between NRP & RP household (in categories; e.g., same neighborhood)  Separation: (1) separation year, (2) marital status before separation	On NRP & RP  (NRPs' vital status, current activity status, educational credentials)  Residential distance between NRP & RP household (in minutes/hours)  Separation: (1) separation year, (2) marital status before separation	On NRP (limited on RP)  (extensive information on NRP including household type, current partnership, activity status, etc.; minimal information on RP: living in a household with a partner)  Residential distance between NRP & RP household (in minutes)  Separation: (1) separation year, (2) marital status before separation
RP & NRP relationship	Current contact & conflict: (1) contact frequency between RP & NRP, (2) co-parenting, (3) relationship satisfaction, (4) disagreements, (5) physical violence	Current contact & conflict: (1) contact frequency between RP and NRP, (2) co-parenting, (3) relationship satisfaction, (4) disagreements	-
Parent-child relationship	(1) contact frequency of child with NRP (incl. by phone or any other means) (2) children aged 9-17 self-report on relationship quality with NRP	Residential calendar of a typical month: Day/Night where is the child physically – with father or mother	Days per week/month/year: (1) taking care of the child, (2) seeing the child in person, (3) having contact with the child (by phone, mail, email, or other electronic means)
Overnight stays	Number of overnight stays per month with the NRP	Residential calendar of a typical month: Day/Night where is the child physically – with father or mother	Number of overnight stays per week with the NRP

Overall assessment of parental care involvement	Legal custody (shared/mother or father only/another person/still in dispute)	RP-assessment of NRPs' (1) involvement in the child's life (2) financial contribution and (3) RPs' division of labor regarding care when the child is sick, organizing parent meetings, birthdays, preparing meals, outings, playing/sports, shopping, etc.	-
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Notes: RP: Resident parent. FReDA: German Family Demography Panel Study. FAMOD: Family Models in Germany. AID:A: Growing up in Germany.

## 3 Data and Measurements

### 3.1 The PSF Module in AID:A

The PSF module is an integral part of the latest launch of AID:A, a large-scale national probability longitudinal study that surveys approximately 6,000 households in Germany on living conditions and everyday life practices of children, youth, young adults, and the parents of minors biennially since 2019 (Kuger et al. 2023). Building on two previous cross-sectional—and partly longitudinal—studies (AID:A I in 2009 [Rauschenbach/DJI 2012], and AID:A II in 2014 [Rauschenbach/DJI 2018])<sup>2</sup>, as well as predecessor surveys merged into AID:A I (Family Survey 1986-2000, Youth Survey 1997-2003, Children Survey 2002-2005 and Childcare Survey 2012-2017), the PSF module consolidates detailed questions on family life after separation.

The design of AID:A differs from other international “Growing up studies” covering similar topics and target populations, which tend to be prospective cohort studies (e.g., Growing up in Québec [Fontaine et al. 2023], or Growing up in Ireland [McNamara et al. 2019]). In contrast, AID:A is based on a probability sample of individuals aged 0-33 years in private households in Germany, including interviews with additional household members. The first major wave took place in 2019 (administered March 13, 2019 – November 17, 2019 via Computer Assisted Personal Interviews [CAPI] and Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews [CATI]; Kuger et al. 2019). A reduced set of questions was re-assessed among panel cases in 2021 (administered October 26, 2021 – January 24, 2022 via Computer Assisted Web Interviews [CAWI]; Kuger et al. 2021). Data is publically available for scientific use (for more information on the sampling and weighting designs see Kuger et al., 2023). The AID:A 2023 wave re-interviewed all panel members and a refreshment sample (administered May 22, 2023 – November 21, 2023 via CAPI, CATI, CAWI or Computer Assisted Self-Administered Interviews).

The target population of the PSF module comprises minor children residing with one resident parent while also having a NRP, including children in single-parent families as well as those in stepfamilies. AID:A surveys children at their primary residence where they constantly live. The module covers various topics, including socio-demographic characteristics of the NRP, separation-specific topics, the relationship between the resident and the NRP, as well as between the child and the NRP. These topics have a longstanding research tradition within AID:A and its predecessor surveys and have proven valuable for research on post-separation families in Germany. Moreover, the PSF module has added new components since 2021 and fills some aforementioned data gaps (see the following subsections for more

<sup>2</sup> Note that the predecessor studies AID:A I and II are only partly comparable to the ongoing AID:A Panel Survey starting in 2019 due to differences in overall survey design (e.g. sampling, age groups etc.). Therefore, we focus in the following on AID:A 2019 onward, although parental separation was a relevant topic in these studies too (see Tables 2-4).

details). We focus on presenting descriptive data from 2019, while providing an overview of the topics covered in the subsequent waves. The 2019 PSF module comprised around 1,200 minors with a NRP nested in about 800 households.<sup>3</sup>

## 3.2 Measurement

The PSF module, besides capturing family diversity, aims to enhance understanding of post-separation family life through three key components: (1) socio-demographic details about the NRP and information on the separation, (2) the relationship between the resident and NRP, and (3) the relationship between the child and NRP. Tables 2-4 outline the specific question items and response categories for each component across the AID:A waves.

### 3.2.1 Socio-demographics of the non-resident parent and information on the separation

Socio-demographic characteristics of the NRP are important contextual factors in disentangling the conditions and mechanisms related to union dissolution (e.g., Raley/Sweeney 2020). The PSF module covers the non-resident parents' vital status, current activity status, occupation, educational credentials, and immigration background (see Table 2).

Current or previous occupation of the NRP are available as ISCO-08 (4-digit) or German KldB 2010 (5-digit) occupational classifications. Surveying the birth country of the non-resident parents and their parents allows for a comprehensive immigration background up to the second generation, i.e. up to the third generation concerning the child. Detailed information on educational credentials of the NRP (the data refers to both the ISCED 2011 and the CASMIN classification) helps define parental education flexibly based on social or biological parenthood. Socio-demographic details are surveyed (or updated for panel cases) exclusively in the major AID:A waves (2019, 2023) and are not addressed in the interim panel waves (2021). Separation-specific questions include the year of separation, pre-separation marital status, and the residential distance between the child and NRP.

Note that both socio-demographics of the NRP, residential distance, and information on the separation are reported by a household informant in AID:A. This informant, typically a parent aged 18 years and over, provides information about the household, including personal relationships, financial circumstances, and background information on all household members, as well as external parents of children living in the household.

<sup>3</sup> Due to panel attrition, the number of post-separation families decreased to about 540 minor children with a non-resident parent in 2021. As the 2023 data is still undergoing cleaning and weighting, the precise number of post-separation families not yet available.

**Tab. 2: PSF Module: Socio-Demographics of Non-Resident Biological Parent (NRP), Residential Distance, and Separation Information**

Item	Response categories	AID:A	AID:A	AID:A Panel			
		I	II	2019	2021	2023	
Socio-demographics							
NRP:							
Vital status	Is [name]'s biological father/mother still alive?	1: yes	√	√	√	-	√
		2: no					
Activity status, occupation	Is the father/mother of [name] currently employed?	1: yes	-	√	√	-	√
		2: no					
	What is his/her current occupation?	Open entry: Occupation (250 characters)					
	Was he/she previously employed?	1: yes					
2: no							
	What was his/her occupation then?	Open entry: Occupation (250 characters)					
Migration background	In which country was [name]'s fa-ther/mother born?	Country list	-	√	√	-	√
	Was he/she born in Germany?	1: yes					
		2: no					
	And in which coun-try was the fa-ther/mother of [name]'s fa-ther/mother born?Was he/she born in Ger-many?	Country list					
		1: yes					
		2: no					

Educational credentials	What is [name]'s father's/mother's highest general school-leaving qualification?	<p>1: Student, attends a full-time general education school</p> <p>2: Left school without a school-leaving certificate</p> <p>3: Secondary school leaving certificate or equivalent qualification</p> <p>4: GDR polytechnic secondary school with completion of 8th or 9th grade</p> <p>5: Secondary school certificate or equivalent qualification</p> <p>6: GDR polytechnic secondary school with completion of the 10th grade</p> <p>7: Advanced technical college entrance qualification</p> <p>8: Abitur</p> <p>9: Another school-leaving qualification in Germany</p> <p>10: Another school-leaving qualification abroad</p> <p>-95: Never attended school</p>	√	√	√	-	√
	How many years did [name]'s father/mother go to school in total?	0-99					
Residential distance	How far away does [name]'s biological father/mother live?	<p>1: in the same house</p> <p>2: in the neighborhood</p> <p>3: in the same town, but more than 15 minutes' walk away</p> <p>4: in another town, but within 1 hour's reach</p> <p>5: further away in Germany</p> <p>6: further away abroad</p>	√	√	√	√	√
Separation information:							



Separation year	Since when have [name]'s parents been separated?;	0-9999	-	√	√	-	√
	Since when have you been separated from [name]'s father/mother?	-4: parents have never lived together					
Pre-separation marital status	Were you married to the biological father/mother of [name] before the separation?	1: yes 2: no	-	-	-	√	√

Notes: Omission options "cannot answer" and "do not wish to answer" are included in all survey response categories.

### 3.2.2 Relationship between resident and non-resident parent

The PSF module recognizes the significance of understanding the relationship between the resident and NRP in researching post-separation families and the resulting impact on children, particularly in terms of conflict between the ex-partners and their ability to deal with each other in terms of parenting (e.g., Amato 2010). The module offers insights into interparental contact frequencies, (ex-)partnership satisfaction, co-parenting, disagreement frequencies, and violent escalations in the post-separation context (see items displayed in Table 3). Specifically, co-parenting practices are extensively surveyed through a 6-item battery, that broadly captures interparental cooperation and triangulation/conflict (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80 in 2019; Langmeyer et al. 2022).

### 3.2.3 Relationship between child and non-resident parent

Surveying contact frequencies, types, and overnight stays at non-resident parents' home is crucial for documenting parental care involvement in post-separation families. Monitoring the spread of SPC models, typically defined by overnight stays per month, versus more traditional arrangements (e.g., children spending every second weekend with the NRP) holds significant relevance for social policy in Germany. The PSF module strikes a balance between the detailed residential calendar method and a more straightforward approach of solely surveying the number of overnights. Table 4 displays these items in detail.

Beyond overnight stays, the module includes questions on overall contact frequencies, digital contact frequencies), and physical contact on weekdays, weekends, and vacations. For schoolchildren, some waves capture time spent with the NRP on a typical weekday in hours. An open-answer response category for physical contact on weekdays allows exploration of potentially misclassified parental care involvements. Additionally, the module also gathers the resident parent's assessment of the care involvement of the NRP over the past 12 months and inquires about child custody status. These items offer flexibility to analyse and document the diversity and distribution of post-separation parental care involvement, which is a clear added value.

Furthermore, the module captures the perspective of children affected by parental separation: Self-reports from children aged 9-17 years on relationship quality with the NRP and digital contact frequencies offer a multi-perspective investigation since also resident parents report on digital contact frequencies between the child and NRP.

**Tab. 3: PSF Module: Relationship Between Resident and Non-Resident Parent**

Item		Response categories	AID:A	AID:A	AID:A Panel		
			I	II	2019	2021	2023
Contact & Conflict:							
Contact, overall	How often do you have contact with the biological father/mother of [name], whether in person, by telephone or other means?	1: daily 2: several times a week 3: 1- 2 times a week 4: 1- 2 times per month 5: less often 6: never	-	√	√	√	√
Relationship satisfaction	How satisfied are you overall with your relationship with the biological father/mother of [name]?	1: very satisfied 2 3 4 5 6: not at all satisfied	-	√	√	√	-
Co-parenting	The following is about how you and the biological father/mother of [name] work together as parents. To what extent do the following statements apply to you? _1: We are a good team as parents. _2: We make important parenting decisions togeth-er. _3: We have fundamentally different ideas about raising children.	1: fully applicable 2 3 4 5	-	√	√	√	√

	_4: We stab each other in the back.	6: does not apply at all				
	_5: He/she drags our child/children into conflicts					
	_6: Discussions about the upbringing of the child/children often end in arguments.					
Disagreements	How often do you and the biological father/mother of [name] have serious disagreements or arguments?	1: always or almost always 2: very often 3: often 4: sometimes 5: rarely 6: never	-	√	√	√
Physical violence	If you have a serious disagreement with the fa-ther/mother of [name], how often ... _1: do you argue and get loud? _2: does it end in violence?	1: always or almost always 2: very often 3: often 4: sometimes 5: rarely 6: never	-	-	√	√

Notes: Omission options "cannot answer" and "do not wish to answer" are included in all survey response categories.

**Tab. 4: PSF module: Relationship between child and non-resident parent**

Item	Response categories	AID:A	AID:A	AID:A Panel		
		I	II	2019	2021	2023
Number of monthly overnights	How often does [name] stay overnight with the biological father/mother? Please enter the average number of overnight stays per month.	1-30	-	√	√	√
Contact, overall	How often does [name] have contact with the biological father/mother, whether in person, by telephone, or by other means?	1: daily 2: several times a week 3: 1- 2 times a week 4: 1- 2 times per month 5: less often 6: never	√	√	√	√
Contact, digital	How often does [name] have contact with the biological father/mother via digital media (e.g., Whatsapp, Facetime, phone calls, etc.)?	1: daily 2: several times a week 3: 1- 2 times a week 4: 1- 2 times per month 5: less often 6: never	-	-	-	√
Contact frequency weekdays	How often does [name] spend time together with the biological father/mother during the week (Monday-Friday)?	1: daily 2: several times a week 3: 1- 2 times a week 4: 1- 2 times per month	-	-	-	√

		5: less often				
		6: never				
		7 other, namely: [open text entry]				
Contact frequency weekends	How often does [name] spend time together with the biological father/mother at the weekend?	1: every weekend	-	-	-	√
		2: every other weekend				√
		3: once a month				
		4: less often				
		5: never				
Contact frequency vacations	When you think about the vacations: How much of the vacations does [name] spend with the biological father/mother when you are not there?	1: all the time	-	-	-	√
		2: more than half				√
		3: about half				
		4: at least a quarter, but less than half				
		5: less				
		6: never				
Overall parental care involvement	Finally, if you take stock of the last 12 months: What proportion of the care or time with [name] did the biological father/mother of [name] take over?	1: more than half	-	(√)**	-	√
		2: about half				√
		3: at least one-third, but less than half				
		4: less than one third				
		5: none				
Weekday childcare time spent (in hours)	How often is [name] regularly supervised by the following persons on school days outside school? _5: By a biological parent who does not live in the household	1: daily	√	√	√	-
		2: several times a week				√
		3: 1- 2 times a week				

		4: 1- 2 times per month				
		5: less often				
		6: never				
	And how many hours is that in a typical week?	1-999				
Weekend childcare (0/1)	Who regularly looks after [name] at the weekend? _5: A biological parent who does not live in the household	1: yes 2: no	-	-	√	-
Vacations childcare (0/1)	Who regularly looks after [name] during closing times and vacations? _5: A biological parent who does not live in the household	1: yes 2: no	-	-	√	-
Child custody	How is the custody of [name] regulated?	1: joint custody 2: with me 3: with the other parent 4: with another person 5: custody has not yet been clarified	√	√	√	-
Children aged 9-17 years self-report on:						
Relationship quality	How well do you get on with your biological father?	1: very well 2 3 4 5 6: very bad	-	-	√	-

Digital contact	How often do you have contact with your biological father/mother via digital media (e.g., WhatsApp, FaceTime, phone calls, etc.)?	1: daily	-	-	-	-	√
		2: several times a week					
		3: 1- 2 times a week					
		4: 1- 2 times per month					
		5: less often					
		6: never					

Notes: Omission options "cannot answer" and "do not wish to answer" are included in all survey response categories. \*2023 version of the survey question (in 2021 the question was limited to school children concerning school holidays). \*\*different item wording and response scale: "How much does the father/mother of [name] participate in the care and upbringing of the child? Please rate from 1-very much to 6-not at all".



## 4 Results

### 4.1 Documentation of Pluralized Family Constellations in Germany

Based on information from the PSF module and employing the full AID:A survey, the prevalence of diverse family constellations in Germany can be documented to inform research and policymakers where official statistics fail. In fact, German Microcensus data and AID:A 2019 report remarkably similar shares of single-parent households (19%<sup>4</sup> in both, among all households with minors). However, as previously discussed, post-separation family constellations other than single parents (i.e. stepfamilies) cannot be identified in the Microcensus and there is no information on the existence of non-resident parents in these data as well. Thus, we must rely on survey data.

Table 5 displays the pluralized family constellations of parents with underage children in Germany utilizing data from the 2019 PSF module. Our findings reveal that approximately 23% of families with minors in Germany fall into the category of post-separation families with a NRP, comprising 17% single-parent families, and approximately 6% stepfamilies. Further differentiation allows us to examine the prevalence of single-parent families and stepfamilies, in which the NRP is deceased or unknown. This share amounts to approximately 3% among all families with minor children.

<sup>4</sup> Own calculations based on Microcensus 2019 (Federal Statistical Office 2020).

**Tab. 5: AID:A 2019. Families with minors: Heterogeneous family constellations in Germany.**

Couple family with own* children only	74% [ $\pm 2$ ]	
Single-parent family		100%
Non-resident parent: present	17% [ $\pm 2$ ]	93%
Non-resident parent: deceased/unknown	1% [ $\pm 1$ ]	7%
Stepfamily		100%
Non-resident parent: present	6% [ $\pm 1$ ]	78%
Non-resident parent: deceased/unknown	2% [ $\pm 0$ ]	22%
%	100%	
N (Families)	4,594	

Notes: Error margins to 95% confidence interval in brackets. \* incl. biological and adopted children. Weighted calculations.

## 4.2 Defining Parental Background in Post-Separation Contexts

Aligned with existing literature, our findings highlight notable socio-demographic differences between couple families and post-separation family constellations. Table 6 illustrates that parents of minors in post-separation families are less likely to have a university degree (16%) and report having a migration background less frequently (27%) compared to parents in couple families (31% and 38%, respectively). This information is crucial for investigating selection into separation and post-separation parental care involvement, re-partnering, as well as the formation of (complex) stepfamily constellations. Second, education and migration background often shape separated parents' economic well-being, which tends to be heavily gendered (e.g., Poortman 2000).

**Tab. 6: AID:A 2019. Parental education and immigration background of under-age children.**

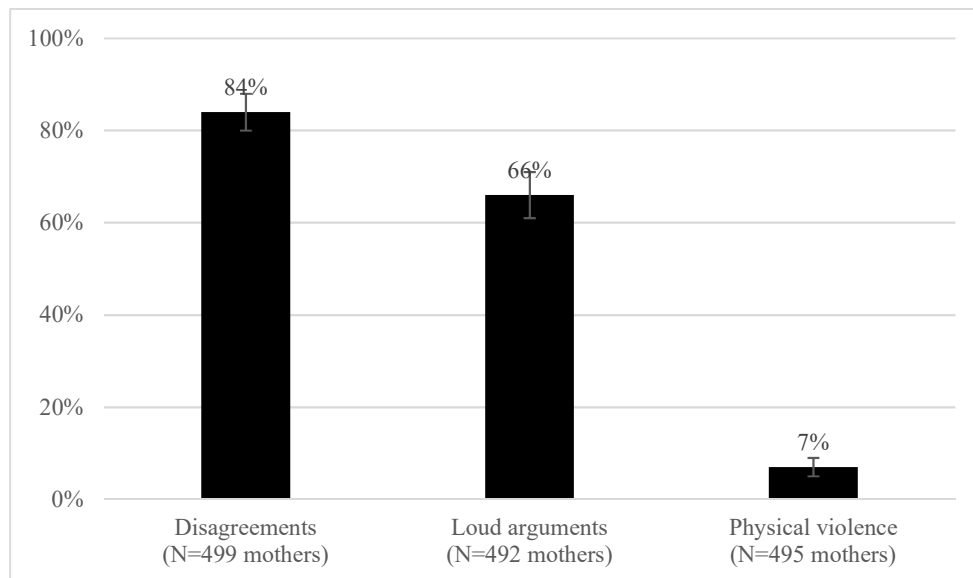
	Children in single-parent or stepfamilies with a NRP		Children in couple families with own* children only
	Total	RP is mother, NRP is father	
Biological parents' education:			
One or both parents hold a university degree	16% [±3]	14% [±3]	31% [±2]
Mother holds a university degree	9% [±3]	9% [±2]	23% [±2]
Father holds a university degree	10% [±3]	9% [±3]	22% [±2]
N (children)	1,109	1,078	6,987
Immigration background:			
Child and/or at least one biological parent immigrated	27% [±4]	28% [±4]	38% [±2]
N (children)	1,185	1,073	7,024

Notes: NRP: Non-resident biological parent. RP: resident biological parent. \* incl. biological and adopted children. Weighted calculations.

### 4.3 Understanding Conflict Among Parents Post-separation

In addition to providing insights on the frequency of disagreements, cooperation, and conflict regarding interparental co-parenting, the PSF module allows to examine the prevalence of violence in the relationship among resident and non-resident parents. For example, Figure 1 shows the prevalence of disagreements, loud arguments, and physical violence in the parental relationship after separation reported by the resident mother in 2019. We opt to show the reports of resident mothers only because the experience of violence is likely highly gendered (Hardesty/Ogolsky 2020), and also because 90% of resident parents in post-separation families are mothers in our sample.

**Fig. 1: AID:A 2019. Prevalence of disagreements, loud arguments, and physical violence experienced by resident mothers in relationships with the other biological parent.**



Notes: 95% confidence interval. See Table 3 for exact wording of survey questions. Prevalence coded as 0 if "never," 1 otherwise. Weighted calculations.

#### 4.4 Flexibly Characterizing Post-Separation Parental Care Involvement

The PSF module allows characterizing post-separation parental care involvement flexibly based on a range of contact measures such as overnight stays, overall contact, digital contact, and contact frequency on weekdays, weekends, and during vacation periods. This versatility enables adjustments to measurements in response to ongoing developments in political discussions concerning SPC regulation reforms in Germany. When characterizing post-separation parental care involvement based on overnight stays and overall contact, our key findings indicate that in 2019, approximately 12% of minors in post-separation families practiced SPC (see Table 7). SPC is here defined as 8-15 overnights at the non-resident parent's home per month, which follows the current political debate in Germany. SPC exhibits a relatively low prevalence in international comparison, highlighting the absence of legal regulations or guidelines for SPC models in Germany to date. Moreover, about 22% of children had no contact with their NRP, while about 29% had contact but never stayed overnight with their NRP. The latter group could be especially interesting for future research concerned with investigating the effects of various forms of post-separation parental care involvements that are not based on overnights.

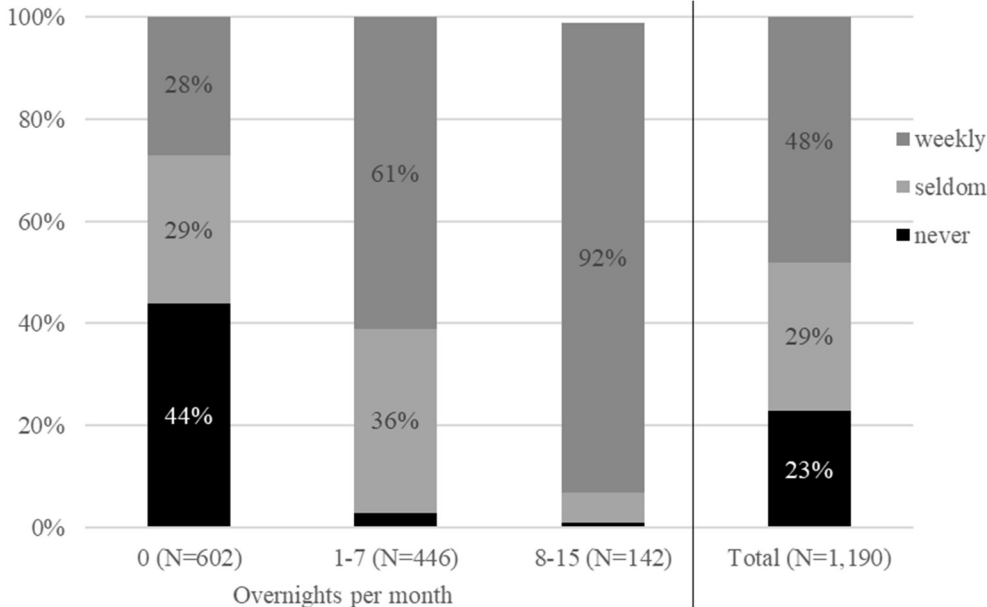
**Tab. 7: AID:A 2019. Overnights and contact for underage children with a non-resident parent.**

Children with a NRP	
No contact	22% [±3]
Contact, 0 overnights per month	29% [±4]
1-7 overnights per month	37% [±4]
8-15 overnights per month	12% [±3]
<hr/>	
%	100%
N (children)	1,191

Notes: 95% confidence interval in brackets. Contact: based on the frequency of overall contact of the child with the NRP reported by the resident parent (no contact: frequency of contact "never"). Overnight stays of 1 night or more per month are counted as contact. Overnight stays: "only during vacations" are recoded as 0 (concerns 43 children). Weighted calculations.

Conversely, contact frequency and overnight stays are strongly correlated, as depicted in Figure 2. The percentage of children with weekly contact varies from 27% (with no overnight stay) to over 61% (with 1-7 overnight stays), reaching 92% for children with 8-15 overnight stays per month at the non-resident parent’s home. Overall, child contact with the NRP in Germany reflects about 48% weekly contact and approximately 24% no contact.

**Fig. 2: AID:A 2019. Child contact with NRP by overnight stays, underage children.**



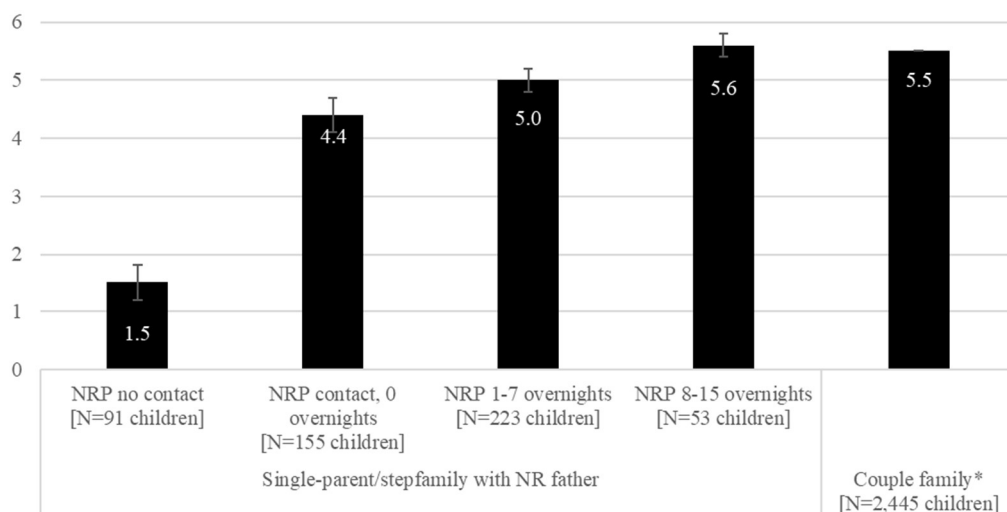
Notes: NRP: Non-resident parent. N=1,199 children in single-parent- or stepfamilies with a non-resident parent. Overall contact frequency between the child and the NRP; reported by the resident parent. "Weekly" includes "daily," "several times a week," and "1-2 times a week;" "seldom" includes "1-2 times a month" and "less often." Weighted calculations.

## 4.5 Interrelating Post-Separation Parental Care Involvement With Parent And Child Outcomes

The combination of information on post-separation parental care involvement with the wide range of other outcomes of parents and children in AID:A (e.g., well-being, health, educational attainment, employment, parenting) opens up a variety of research potentials. Through the utilization of the PSF module, we can exemplify a positive correlation between the relationship quality from a child’s perspective with the non-resident father and the post-separation living arrangement, ranging from 1.5 (for no contact) to 5.6 (for 8-15 overnight stays per month; see Figure 3). Notably, the latter relationship quality is comparable to the relationship quality on average observed with biological fathers in couple families (5.5 vs. 5.6).

Regarding the interrelation of post-separation parental care involvement with parent- and child outcomes, in accordance with international evidence, SPC families fare economically better than those with an absent NRP, but worse than couple families (Table 8). Moreover, Figure 4 shows that SPC is correlated with a higher maternal employment propensity compared to both other groups, underlining the importance of SPC for mothers’ post-separation economic prosperity (Boll & Schüller, 2023), while Table 9 reveals relatively lower levels in mothers’ well-being and health within all post-separation arrangements compared to couple families. One exception are single parents and stepfamilies with highly frequent NRP contact, which fare equally well as couple families in terms of maternal health.

**Fig. 3: AID:A 2019. 9-17-year-old children: Quality of relationship with biological father.**



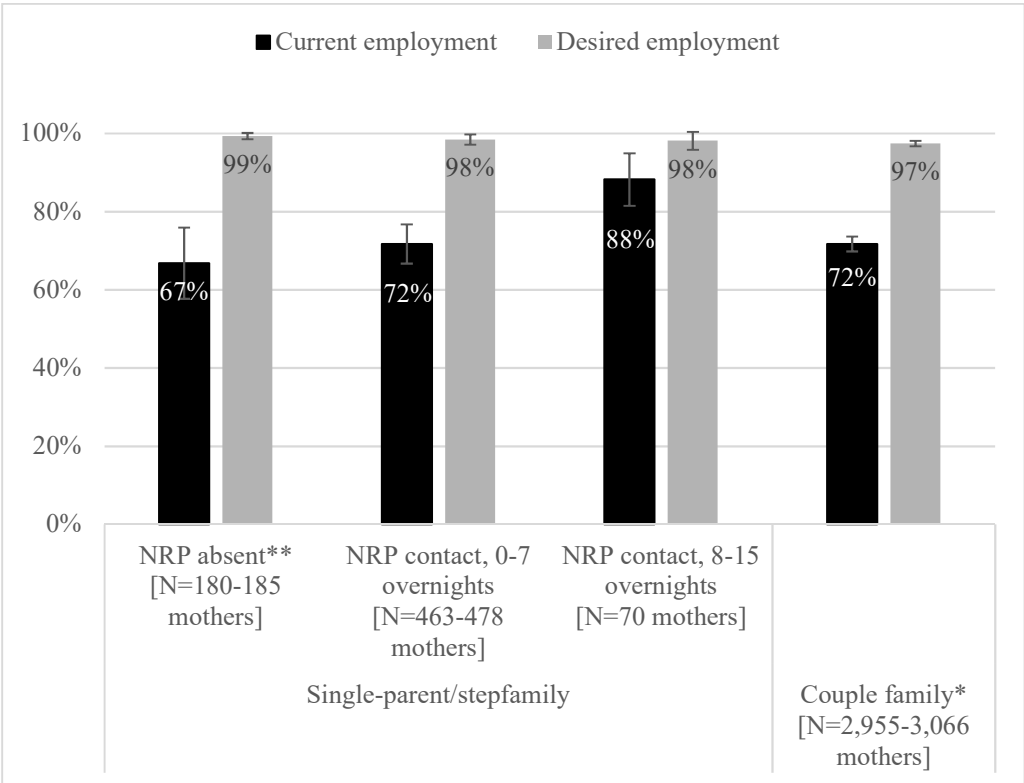
Notes: \*Couple family with only own children (incl. biological and adopted children). 95% confidence interval. Relationship quality: “How well do you get on with your biological father, from 1 very badly to 6 very well?” Weighted calculations.

**Tab. 8: AID:A 2019. Families with minors: Poverty, material deprivation, and welfare receipt.**

	Single-parent & stepfamilies			Couple families*
	NRP deceased, unknown or no contact	NRP contact, 0-7 over-nights	NRP contact, 8-15 over-nights	
Income poverty	47% [±9]	49% [±6]	29% [±13]	22% [±2]
N (families)	199	493	92	3,351
Material deprivation: No. of items parents cannot afford (out of max. 3 Items)	1.1 [±0.2]	0.9 [±0.1]	0.7 [±0.2]	0.4 [±0.0]
N (families)	204	502	93	3,557
Unemployment benefit II receipt by a household member	33% [±8]	28% [±5]	17% [±12]	9% [±1]
N (families)	205	504	93	3,564

Notes: \*Couple family with only own children (incl. biological and adopted children). 95% confidence interval in square brackets. Income poverty: below 60% of the median equivalent net household income in 2019 (=EUR 1,790). Material deprivation: For a total of 3 items, parents were asked whether they were able to afford them: (1) "save a fixed amount per month," (2) "replace worn-out furniture," (3) "pay for unexpected expenses yourself." Weighted calculations.

**Fig. 4: AID:A 2019. Resident mothers of minors in post-separation families compared to couple families: Employment (current and desired).**



Notes: \*Couple family with only own children (incl. biological and adopted children). \*\* NRP absent: NRP deceased, unknown, or no contact. 95% confidence interval. Desired employment: "If you could choose the scope of your working hours yourself, taking into account that your earnings would change according to your working hours: How many hours a week would you then prefer to work?": Coded as "desired employment=1" if the respondent answers with working hours larger than zero, coded as "desired employment=0" if zero working hours are reported. Weighted calculations



**Tab. 9: AID:A 2019. Resident mothers of minors: Self-rated health, life satisfaction, and well-being.**

	Single-parent & stepfamilies			Couple families*
	NRP deceased, unknown or no contact	NRP contact, 0-7 overnights	NRP contact, 8-15 overnights	
Health (1-very bad to 6-very well)	4.4 [±0.2]	4.6 [±0.1]	5.0 [±0.3]	5.0 [±0.0]
N (mothers)	185	479	70	3,066
Life satisfaction (1-very bad to 6-very well)	4.6 [±0.2]	4.6 [±0.1]	4.6 [±0.4]	5.0 [±0.0]
N (mothers)	184	476	70	3,060
WHO-5 well-being index	14.4 [±1.1]	14.3 [±0.5]	13.8 [±1.5]	15.3 [±0.2]
N (mothers)	185	474	70	3,015

Notes: 95% confidence interval in brackets. The WHO-5 consists of five items, with responses reflecting a two-week timeframe. Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from (0) not at all to (5) all the time. The index score is calculated by summing up the values of the five items. Higher values indicate better well-being. An index score below 13 indicates poor well-being and aligns with a potential diagnosis of major depression as per ICD-10 guidelines (Topp et al, 2015). Weighted calculations.

## 5 Discussion

Post-separation families have become an increasingly diverse and relevant subpopulation in many Western nations (e.g., Mortelmans 2021; Kreyenfeld/Trappe 2020; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). This population is diverse in its socio-demographic composition, parental care involvement, as well as the level of cooperation and conflict in the interparental relationship (e.g., Pailhé et al. 2020), which can affect individual- and family-level economic and mental well-being (e.g., Mortelmans, 2021; Amato, 2000; Adamsons/Johnson 2013). However, post-separation families are often not identifiable in official statistics and surveys. This is especially the case in Germany, where only three current large-scale or national surveys, namely FAMOD, FReDA, and AID:A, cover information on non-resident (biological) parents post-separation in more depth. In addition, there is no standardized set of indicators guiding the development of survey questionnaires concerning the definition and identification of post-separation families internationally, which would facilitate comparable research on these important matters.

The presented PSF module, which is embedded in the large-scale AID:A panel study, enhances research potentials on post-separation families in several ways. While we showed that the distribution of family constellations based on the categories of the official statistics was reasonably similar between AID:A and the German Microcensus in 2019, pluralized family constellations (i.e., stepfamilies) could be documented based on survey data only. Employing information on non-resident parents and step-parenthood, we found that about 23% of families with underage children in Germany can be classified as post-separation families with a NRP (consisting of about 17% single-parent families and about 6% stepfamilies). Moreover, the PSF module represents a valuable starting point for developing a standardized module that can be implemented in various national and international survey contexts. From theoretical considerations based on a family systems approach (Baude et al. 2023; Minuchin 1974), we identify key research debates and develop a concise instrument to provide information that is relevant to inform these debates. Distilled topic areas are (1) the socio-demographic characteristics of non-resident parents and contextual information on parental separation, (2) the interparental relationship after separation, and (3) the relationship between the child and the NRP including contact and overnight stays.

In line with the previous literature, we find socio-demographics to vary distinctively between couple families and post-separation family constellations, which points to relevant selection processes (e.g., by educational or migration background; Raley/Sweeney 2020). Concerning post-separation parental care involvement, our key finding is that by 2019, about 12% of minors in post-separation families (and about 2% among all underage children) lived in a SPC arrangement (defined as 8-15 overnight stays at the residence of the non-resident parent's per month, which is in line with the current political debate in Germany, compared to previous definitions; e.g., 10-21 overnight stays in Langmeyer et al. 2022). In international comparison, this is a rather low prevalence of SPC (cf. Steinbach 2019), which reflects the lack of legal regulations or guidelines for SPC models to date in Germany (Walper et al. 2021; Köppen et al. 2020).

The overall contact between children and their NRP, in contrast, is roughly in line with the hypothesis of increasing high-frequency contact and decreasing contactless relationships with a share of about 48% having weekly contact versus 23% having no contact (e.g., van Spijker et al. 2022 for the Netherlands; Amato et al., 2009 for the U.S.). Nevertheless, the fact that almost a quarter of children in post-separation families have no contact with their NRP in Germany is relatively high in comparison to international trends (e.g., about 10% of Dutch children experiencing parental divorce between 1990 and 2000; van Spijker et al. 2022). This might be linked to characteristics of the German welfare state and family law that continue to foster the prevalence of single motherhood (Grunow et al. 2018; Ruetten 2016). In addition, from the perspective of the child, we find that the relationship quality between the non-resident father and the child increases with the number of overnight stays per month, reaching a plateau that is comparable to the relationship quality with the biological father in couple families. When interrelating post-separation parental care involvement with parent outcomes, descriptive results reveal that families practicing SPC arrangements are better off in terms of poverty risk, financial deprivation, maternal employment status, mental well-being, and health. This finding is supported by other research pointing to the potential benefits of sharing parental roles after union dissolution (e.g., Augustijn et al. 2023; Recksiedler et al. 2022; Steinbach, 2019; Nielsen, 2018), even though self-selection processes into SPC have to be taken into account as well (Meyer et al. 2022; Nielsen 2018; Sodermans et al. 2013).

This study has some limitations. First, the sample size of post-separation families is too small to achieve generalizability, particularly for unevenly distributed characteristics. An oversampling of post-separation families (Williamson 2024) would enhance the research potentials of the PSF module even more. Second, relying on proxy information for the external parent may introduce biases, such as over-representing the perspective of resident parents (i.e., usually mothers). However, other surveys tracking and recruiting non-resident parents in addition to the surveyed target household showed only very limited success and, thus, tend to be quite costly.

Given these limitations, it is of utmost importance that official statistics reform their measurement of family constellations, to provide large-scale information on post-separation families, i.e. on the incidence of multi-household families in their diverse constellations. However, this information can only accompany in-depth analyses with survey data such as AID:A on families' well-being and daily routines, as well as multi-perspective measures including the child perspective. With the PSF module of AID:A, we propose a standardized survey instrument on post-separation families. This can be used to evaluate the effects of upcoming German policy reforms, e.g. on legal and physical child custody, and further, it could lay the groundwork for future national and international comparisons, if adopted by other surveys.

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