Community, Work & Family

ISSN: 1366-8803 (Print) 1469-3615 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccwf20

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To cite this article: Milla Salin, Mia Hakovirta, Eija Lindroos & Daniel R. Meyer (28 Aug 2025): Children's physical custody arrangements and mothers' employment in 11 European countries, Community, Work & Family, DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2025.2549036

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2025.2549036

Published online: 28 Aug 2025.

COMMUNITY, WORK & FAMILY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2025.2549036

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Children's physical custody arrangements and mothers' employment in 11 European countries

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ABSTRACT

As joint physical custody (JPC) of children after parental separation has become more prevalent across countries, we need to know more about its impacts. This study examines whether JPC is associated with mother's paid employment given that childcare responsibilities are redistributed more equally between parents compared to mothers with sole physical custody (SPC). We provide the first comparative analysis on the relationship between a child's physical custody arrangement type and mother's employment across 11 European countries. Data are from the 2021 European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions Survey (EU-SILC). Our sample includes 3,846 mothers. We employ descriptive statistics, binary logistic regression analysis and decomposition analysis. Results reveal an employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC: mothers with JPC are more likely to be employed than mothers with SPC, even when controlling for individual-level confounding factors and country context. Moreover, results show that only around half the employment gap between JPC mothers and SPC mothers can be explained by differences in characteristics and country context. Thus, we argue that JPC is likely to have an independent role on mothers' employment, and JPC eases the constraints of mother's paid work opportunities.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 December 2024
Accepted 11 August 2025

KEYWORDS
Single mothers; employment; physical custody arrangements; joint physical custody; sole physical custody; EU-SILC

Introduction

Because children have historically typically lived primarily with their mothers if their parents separated, this created demands on their time not experienced by separated fathers. Many studies (e.g. Daly & Kelly, 2015; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; van Lancker, 2018) have shown that single mothers struggle with combining paid work and family responsibilities, and they have more difficulties in balancing paid work and other life spheres than mothers in two-parent families. Having resident children has been seen as a constraint to women's opportunities to engage in paid work, whether full-time or part-time (e.g. Brady & Perales, 2016; Härkönen et al., 2023; see also Bonnet et al., 2022).

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However, recent decades have witnessed a change in children's post-separation living arrangements, as in many countries children of separated parents are no longer living primarily with their mothers (sole physical custody, SPC) but increasingly spending substantial or equal time living with both parents (joint physical custody, or JPC)[1] (e.g. Cancian et al., 2014; Hakovirta et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2022; Steinbach et al., 2021; Zilincikova, 2021). The most recent data shows that in 2021, around 20% of children of separated parents in 21 European countries have JPC, although there are significant cross-national differences in the prevalence of JPC arrangements (Claessens & Mortelmans, 2025).

The increase in JPC makes it important to understand the impacts it has for parents and children. Given that single motherhood has been seen as a potential constraint to employment opportunities, one interesting question is whether JPC can ease the constraints faced by mothers because their child is spending a significant amount of time living with both parents instead of living solely with his or her mother. Understanding how JPC is related to mothers' employment opportunities may help to address the potential economic inequalities between single mothers and their associated ex-partners or even among mothers with different post-separation arrangements. Thus, our focus in this article is on the relationship between child physical custody arrangements and any type of mothers' employment: is JPC associated with mother's paid work (either full-time or part-time) compared to mothers with sole physical custody (SPC)?

Earlier research on child's physical custody arrangements and mothers' employment is very scarce. To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have examined the relationship between child physical custody arrangements and the employment of divorced or separated mothers in a multivariate context. Notably, Bonnet et al. (2022) focused on France, while Chanda (2024) studied the United States. Both Bonnet et al. (2022) and Chanda (2024) find that JPC increases the likelihood of mothers' employment. However, both earlier studies are single-country analyses, and there is no research examining a child's physical custody arrangement and mothers' employment from a cross-national perspective. Cross-national research designs enable the examination of research questions in a broader context and an evaluation of whether the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment varies across countries. Moreover, comparing mothers' employment across countries can offer insights into social policies, family laws, and cultural norms around parenting as well as gender roles and how they are related to the employment of mothers with different living arrangements for their children. Our study opens new avenues for understanding current family dynamics from a comparative perspective.

This study makes three main contributions. First, we provide pioneering evidence on the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment across 11 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland). Second, we examine whether a relationship between JPC and employment continues if socio-demographic factors and country contexts are controlled. Finally, we analyze how much of the (possible) employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC can be explained by compositional factors.

Single mothers' employment

Previous studies on single mothers' employment have shown that there are cross-national differences in the extent to which single mothers are employed (e.g. Biegert et al., 2022;

Nieuwenhuis, 2020; Zagel, 2014). In most countries, employment rates for single mothers differ from that of partnered mothers, with single mothers' employment rate often lower (e.g. Härkönen et al., 2023; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). Table 1 shows the employment rates of single and partnered mothers in the 11 European countries included in this study. There are quite large cross-national differences in single mothers' employment rates. The lowest employment rates for single mothers – between 64% and 69% – are found in Belgium, France, Spain, and Finland, whereas the highest rates, above 80%, are found in Sweden, Estonia, and Slovenia. In seven of the 11 countries, the employment rate of single mothers is lower than that of partnered mothers. In these seven countries, the employment gap varies between two percentage points in Spain and 14 percentage points in Belgium. In four countries (Switzerland, Estonia, Czech Republic, and Slovenia), single mothers' employment rate is higher than the employment rate of partnered mothers.

A substantial literature has proposed how single mothers (or women in general) make decisions about whether they will seek employment, and factors associated with this decision (for classic summaries, see Killingsworth & Heckman, 1986 or Blundell & MaCurdy, 1999; for recent summaries that include many European countries, see Dahl & Loken, 2024 or Turon, 2023). A simplified standard microeconomic theory posits that individuals make employment decisions based on the wages available to them in the market (net of the costs of working), the economic resources available to them if they are not working, and their preferences for work versus other ways to spend time (including care work). In this framework, children affect the employment decision by lowering the income available from working, as if the mother is not caring for the child, someone else needs to, and this may have costs in either time or currency. Children may also change the amount of other resources available to a mother if she is not working, as some benefits are available to families with children, and the general assumption is that those with more outside income will be less likely to work. Finally, children may also change mother's preferences for work versus being at home, and this may differ depending on the child's age.

The simplified framework has been extended along a number of dimensions to incorporate multiple periods, multiple decision-makers, and changes in household membership. For example, household composition may influence the time mothers can commit

Table 1. Employment rates of single and partnered mothers in countries included in this study, 2021 (%).

	Single mothers	Partnered mothers	Difference in percentage points
Austria	73,3	75,8	−2,5
Belgium	64,0	78,0	−14
Switzerland	77,7	76,4	1,3
Czech Republic	72,5	64,6	7,9
Denmark	75,0	83,4	−8,4
Estonia	81,1	73,3	7,8
Spain	67,7	69,8	−2,1
Finland	69,1	78,1	−9
France	65,8	75,8	−10
Sweden	80,5	83,4	−2,9
Slovenia	83,4	75,2	8,2

Source: OECD Family Database (2024).

to employment. Studies on mothers' employment in general (e.g. Lewis, 2009; OECD, 2024) have shown that mothers with older and fewer children are more often employed than mothers with younger and more children. This may stem partly from the fact that younger and more children require more care resources (and more costs) than older and fewer children and that some mothers prefer time at home with young children. In addition, the existence of other adults in the household, for example a new co-residential partner or living in a multigenerational household, can provide additional care resources and therefore support mothers' possibilities to employment. Nevertheless, additional adults can also be an extra burden in terms of care needs, if they need caretaking (see Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020).

The relationship between JPC and mothers' employment

Re-entering or staying at the labor market post-separation can be challenging for mothers due to the presence of children, and there are several mechanisms that may explain the impact of children's living arrangements on post-separation employment outcomes. In this section we discuss four mechanisms that may affect the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment, based on previous research: (1) time constraints related to childcare, (2) economic incentives, (3) compositional differences between JPC and SPC mothers, and (4) the role of country context (i.e. institutional and cultural factors).

Time constraints related to childcare

Earlier research has shown that single mothers struggle more with reconciling paid work and family responsibilities, and they have more difficulties in balancing paid work and other life spheres than other parents (e.g. Bakker & Karsten, 2013; van Lancker, 2018). Single mothers have less flexibility to combine work and family responsibilities, and they face a sharper trade-off between employment and family than partnered mothers (e.g. Daly & Kelly, 2015).

Mothers with JPC may have more employment opportunities than mothers with SPC. While mothers with SPC often face difficulties balancing (especially full-time) employment with caregiving duties, parents with JPC can be assumed to have more time and more flexibility to work (full-time) and to invest in their careers without being as restricted by childcare demands. However, the intersection of JPC and mothers' employment is a complex and multidimensional issue. On the one hand, sharing childcare with the other parent can give mothers the time and freedom to become more involved in the workforce (e.g. Chanda, 2024) and thus alleviate some of the strains of single parenthood. On the other hand, the coordination and child's transitions between two households needed for JPC can also limit the opportunities to engage in paid work (e.g. Steinbach & Augustijn, 2021). JPC can raise difficulties in terms of the time needed to organize a child's life in two households or through restrictions on how far from each other (or from the child's school) it is possible to live and go to work (see Thomas et al., 2018).

We are aware of only few previous studies on a child's physical custody arrangements and mother's employment, and these find that JPC may assist with childcare time constraints. First, Bonnet et al. (2022), focusing on France, studied whether JPC helps divorced mothers return to employment or stay employed. According to their results, on average

French mothers with JPC had as much as 22 percentage points higher probability to be employed one year after their divorce than those with SPC. Moreover, the difference in employment was even larger for mothers in a more disadvantaged employment situation such as previously non-employed mothers, mothers in lower income quintiles before divorce, and mothers with younger and more children. Bonnet et al. (2022) interpreted their results to stem from reduced work-family conflict among mothers with JPC, for example in terms of more flexible time constraints which enabled them to engage in paid work more.

Second, Chanda (2024) examined how long-run (6-10 years after divorce) employment differed by children's post-divorce living arrangements for divorced mothers with school-aged children in Wisconsin (in the US). She finds that mothers with JPC were five percent more likely to be employed than mothers with SPC and concluded that mothers with JPC are in a more advantaged position (i.e. have fewer time constraints) than mothers with SPC, in terms of paid work.

Third, Recksiedler and colleagues (2024) examine mothers in Germany and report that 88% of JPC mothers were employed, compared to around 70% of mothers whose children live primarily with them. However, these results do not control for other confounding factors. Finally, a qualitative study conducted in the Netherlands by Bakker and Karsten (2013) revealed that some parents with JPC tend to use the time when their children stayed with the other parent to focus more on employment; mothers with SPC have less flexibility.

Financial incentives

As outlined above, microeconomic theories (e.g. Becker, 1991) assume that financial incentives play a role in an individual's engagement in employment. Traditionally, separation or divorce decreases mothers' economic situation (Brüggmann & Kreyenfeld, 2023; Mortelmans, 2020) in part because women and mothers have more often been financially dependent on their partner's income (e.g. Gupta, 2007). Thus, a post-separation decrease in the financial situation can be seen as a financial incentive for mothers to engage in paid work and/or to increase their working hours in order to make up for their lost financial resources (Brüggmann & Kreyenfeld, 2023).

JPC brings in new aspects. On one hand, JPC might mean mothers have fewer child-related expenses than in SPC in that expenses are more likely to be shared with the other parent (Haapanen, Chanda et al., 2024), so the need for additional earnings may not be as great. On the other hand, JPC is often considered to be a more expensive living arrangement than SPC in that both homes must accommodate children (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023). Moreover, in JPC arrangements child support is paid less often, and if it is paid, the amount can be substantially lower than in SPC arrangements (Haapanen, Chanda et al., 2024; Hakovirta et al., 2022). Thus, mothers with JPC can still have more need for earnings than mothers with SPC, and this may increase employment (see Bonnet et al., 2022; Melli & Brown, 2008). JPC has also been found to be associated with improved economic well-being for mothers, partly due to increased opportunities to participate in paid employment, as care is more equally shared (Augustijn, 2023; Haapanen, Riser et al., 2024; Köppen et al., 2020).

Compositional differences of JPC and SPC mothers

If mothers with JPC are more likely to be employed than SPC mothers, this might be because it allows mothers to devote more time to employment or because they need earnings more, but, alternatively, it might merely reflect compositional differences. Mothers with higher socioeconomic status (e.g. earnings, education) have been found in past research to be more likely to have JPC (e.g. Augustijn, 2022; Salin et al., 2024; Zilincikova, 2021), so a finding that mothers with JPC are more likely to be employed after separation may only reflect this pre-separation difference. Compositional differences between JPC and SPC mothers may be diminishing as JPC becomes more prevalent (Garriga et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2017). However, it is unclear whether this has occurred yet in Europe where the prevalence of JPC varies between a few percentages in many Eastern European countries to about 50 percent in Sweden (see Hakovirta et al., 2023).

In addition to socioeconomic characteristics, there are differences between JPC and SPC mothers in terms of well-being that may influence their likelihood to participate in the labor market. For example, Steinbach et al. (2021) found that compared to parents with SPC arrangements, parents who practiced asymmetric JPC (that is, substantial but not equal time) felt less alone, had more time for friends, and were less depressed. van der Heijden et al. (2016) found that parents with JPC had higher life satisfaction than parents with SPC because they had better parent–child relationships and were more engaged in leisure activities. On the other hand, Recksiedler and Bernardi (2021) found that physical custody arrangements were associated neither to self-rated health nor with emotional well-being.

A final area of compositional differences to be considered stems from differences in household composition and size. JPC is somewhat more prevalent for school-aged children than for preschoolers or teenagers (Hakovirta et al., 2023;; Steinbach et al., 2021 though see Melli & Brown, 2008). Augustijn (2022) has shown that mothers' with JPC have higher chances of re-partnering than mothers with SPC whereas other studies (Melli & Brown, 2008) have suggested there are no differences between partnership status by children's living arrangement.

Compositional differences between JPC and SPC do not as such affect the dynamics between JPC and mothers' employment unless they have their own 'effect' on mothers' employment. In terms of socioeconomic characteristics, it has been shown that mothers with higher education are employed more often than other mothers as are mothers with older children (e.g. OECD, 2024; Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020). When it comes to the relationship between JPC and parental well-being, it is presumable that a higher level of well-being and a lower level of stress are factors that potentially support mothers' possibilities to engage in employment.

All in all, it seems that compositional differences between JPC and SPC mothers need to be considered when examining the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment: there are compositional differences between mothers with JPC and SPC, and these compositional differences are such that they potentially confound the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment. Another important issue is the question of reverse causality: it might also be that employed mothers end up having JPC more often than non-employed mothers do (see e.g. Bakker & Karsten, 2013). Unfortunately, this is a question that is left unanswered in our study because with cross-sectional data we are not able to examine the direction of causality.

Institutional and cultural context

The country context may be related to both JPC and single mothers' employment. The role of country context on mothers' employment is often approached from one of two related perspectives: earner-carer models or gender arrangements. Earner-carer models illustrate the ways that countries organize their family policies (e.g. Lewis, 2009; Thévenon, 2011). In practice, this refers to policies that can either enhance or restrict mothers' possibilities to engage in paid work. Gender arrangement instead argues that women's (and men's) employment patterns are shaped by interrelations between culture and institutions (e.g. Pfau-Effinger, 2023). An important question then is what kind of gender roles in terms of care and paid work are thought to be suitable for mothers and how 'good motherhood' is perceived: to what extent mothers are expected to engage in paid work and to what extent to devote their time to taking care of children (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2023).

Despite some differences in these perspectives, both of them argue that there are different institutional and cultural factors that are related to mothers' employment opportunities. These arguments are supported by earlier studies: in countries where social and family policies support mothers' possibilities to paid work, mothers' employment is more prevalent (e.g. Ferragina, 2020; Thévenon, 2011). For example, van Damme et al. (2009) have argued that availability of public childcare has a positive effect on post-separation employment, particularly for women not working at separation. In terms of gender arrangements, prior research has shown that prevailing gender role expectations are related to the prevalence of mothers' employment: if there is a strong emphasis for mother's role as a carer, mothers' employment is less common than if mother's role as earner is also emphasized (e.g. Pfau-Effinger, 2023).

The 11 European countries included in our study present different earner-carer models and gender arrangements. Table 1 showed cross-national differences in both single mothers' and partnered mothers' employment rates. Different studies have used different terms and also classified countries somewhat differently. Employing the terminology of Lewis (2009) the Northern European countries (in our study Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) represent countries where full-time working is the prevalent form of paid work for both parents. For Southern and Eastern European countries (in our study Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia, and Spain) there are signs of a polarized pattern between dual full-time earning families and single-earning families where the father works full-time and the mother does not work at all. The other European countries in our study (Austria, Belgium, France, and Switzerland) represent different kinds of one-and-half-earner families where mothers work part-time and fathers full-time. Thus, our selected countries have substantial variation.

Both the earner-carer model and the gender arrangement perspectives are focused on mothers' employment in general, not specifically on mothers' post-separation employment (see Merla et al., 2024). Neither perspective is focused on JPC, but both these perspectives suggest that the country context may be important in shaping mothers' post-separation employment, and whether mothers with JPC differ from mothers with SPC.

Hypotheses

Our framework and the previous research suggest that time constraints related to childcare, economic incentives, compositional differences, and country differences might all affect mother's employment and thus should be considered in a study of the relationship of JPC and employment. JPC mothers are expected to be more likely to work because they have fewer time constraints related to childcare. Because JPC mothers tend to have more human capital, the economic incentive argument suggests they may have less need for employment; this suggests that differing characteristics of mothers with JPC and SPC (compositional differences) need to be controlled to understand the relationship between JPC and employment. Finally, some countries may do more than others to support mothers' employment in general or to support JPC, or there may be cultural differences across countries.[2] Ignoring country differences could confound estimates of the relationship between JPC and employment. Hence our hypotheses are:

(1) Mothers with JPC will be more likely to be employed than mothers with SPC.
(2) Several individual-level confounding factors (socioeconomic, child and family related characteristics) will diminish, but not eliminate, the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC.
(3) The country context (i.e. various institutional and cultural factors) will further diminish, but not eliminate, the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC.

Data and methods

Data and sample

We used microdata from the subject module '*Living arrangements and conditions of children in separated and blended families*', which was collected in 2021 as a part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Condition Survey (EU-SILC) provided by Eurostat. EU-SILC is a large-scale survey that collects data on income, poverty, and social exclusion. The use of commonly accepted questionnaires, primary target variables and concepts promote data comparability across European countries. The subject module includes information on family structure and arrangements for children in separated families. Hence, it provides a unique opportunity to examine cross-nationally whether children's physical custody arrangement is related to mothers' employment (Eurostat, 2022).

We used data from the second release of this subject module, which contained information from 28 countries.[3] We excluded several countries. We excluded eight countries due to large amounts of missing or discrepant information.[4] We then excluded nine countries where the prevalence of JPC is less than 10 percent and/or the number of cases for mothers with JPC is very low (15 or fewer).[5] This leaves us with 11 European countries: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE), and Switzerland (CH) with sufficient sample size to conduct analyses.

The analysis sample began with the 3,887 mothers in 11 European countries for whom we had information on a child's overnights and their mother's employment situation. Only mothers whose child lives primarily with her (SPC) or with both

parents (JPC) were included in the sample, that is, mothers of children who are living primarily living elsewhere (9 overnights or fewer in a month with her), (presumably with the father) were excluded. In cases where the mother has more than one child, the physical custody arrangement of the youngest of these children is used. We then exclude 41 mothers missing on confounding variables, leaving a final sample of 3,846. The number of cases per country is shown in Table 2 along with distribution of all variables used.

Table 2. Distribution of variables used in this study (unweighted).

	N	%
Employment situation		
Employed	2,869	74.60
Not employed	977	25.40
Physical custody arrangement		
JPC	895	23.27
SPC	2,951	76.73
Age		
18–35 years old	950	24.70
36–45 years old	1,793	46.62
46–63 years old	1,103	28.68
Education		
Low	666	17.32
Medium	1,624	42.23
High	1,556	40.46
Health status		
Health problems	848	22.05
Good	2,658	69.11
Health missing	340	8.84
Number of children in the household		
1 child	1,944	50.55
2 children	1,308	34.01
3 or more children	594	15.44
Age of the youngest child in the household		
5 years or younger	1,157	30.08
6–12 years old	1,587	41.26
13–17 years old	1,102	28.65
Re-partnering		
has a partner	989	25.72
does not have a partner	2,857	74.28
Other adults in the household		
Are other adults in the HH	1,073	27.90
No other adults in the HH	2,773	72.10
Other household income (excluding mother's earnings)		
1st quintile	774	20.12
2nd quintile	770	20.02
3rd quintile	768	19.97
4th quintile	770	20.02
5th quintile	764	19.86
Country		
Austria	201	5.23
Belgium	403	10.48
Switzerland	190	4.94
Czech Republic	353	9.18
Denmark	253	6.58
Estonia	224	5.82
Spain	812	21.11
Finland	308	8.01
France	628	16.33
Sweden	317	8.24
Slovenia	157	4.08

Dependent variable

Mothers' employment situation is measured with a dichotomous variable separating those who are employed from those not employed.[6] Around five in six of those who reported employment stated that they work full-time (82%). The category not employed includes all who are outside paid work (i.e. unemployed, retired, those unable to work due health problems, students, homemakers, and those who chose answer option 'other'). About three-quarters of mothers in our sample are employed.

Independent variable

Our independent variable measures the physical custody arrangement of the mother's youngest child. In the data this variable indicated how many nights the child spends in the same household with their parent during a typical month. In our main analyses we recode this to be a dichotomous variable separating mothers who have SPC of their child (i.e. the child spends 21–31 nights in mother's household) from mothers who have JPC of their child (i.e. the child spends 10–20 nights in mother's household). Mothers of children reported to spend 0–9 nights in their household are excluded, as we treat them as living with the other parent (presumably the father). A threshold of 33% to differentiate JPC from SPC has been used in the previous literature (e.g. Hakovirta et al., 2023). In our sample, 23% of mothers have JPC.

Confounding variables

As confounding factors, we include variables both at the individual- and country-levels. As mother's own characteristics at the individual-level we consider age (whether mother is 18-35, 36–45 or 46–63 years old), education (differentiating mothers with low, medium and high education)[7], and health status (whether mother has good health, health problems or health information is missing).[8] As child and household characteristics at the individual-level we take into account the number of children in the household (separating households with 1, 2, and 3 or more children), the age of the youngest child in the household (separating those aged 0-5, 6–12 or 13–17 years old)[9], the existence of a new partner (spouse or cohabiting partner), extended families (any additional adults other than new partners), and equivalent other income (household income excluding mother's earnings, separated into quintiles). While potential wages are presumed to influence working, no estimate of potential wages is available for those not working. We use the mother's unearned income (combining her own unearned income with all income of others in the household) to incorporate her need for financial resources. A weakness of our operationalization is that for mothers who work, other household income is an imperfect approximation of what household income would be if she were to quit (for example, she might receive more government benefits). At the country-level we consider country fixed effects (country dummies) to account for the general country context. Country dummies were chosen because the number of countries (11) is too small to include country-level characteristics in analyses.

Description of sample

Table 2 shows that relatively few mothers are young (25% are under age 36), have low levels of education (17%), or have health problems (22%). Relatively few have 3 or more children (15%), have partners (26%), or are living with other adults (28%). Children under age 6 may be especially likely to need childcare in that they may not be in full-day education, and this comprises 30% of the sample.

Research methods

To study the possible employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC across 11 European countries, we employ simple descriptive analysis. To assess whether JPC mothers are differently likely to be employed than SPC mothers after considering confounding factors, we use binary logistic regression analysis. For the binary regression analysis (employed vs. not employed), we present average marginal effects, their statistical significance, and standard errors. To examine how much of the possible employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC can be explained by compositional factors, we employ a decomposition analysis appropriate for nonlinear response models (Powers et al., 2011), using the Stata command mvdcmp.

Robustness checks

In addition to our main analyses, we conducted five robustness checks to evaluate the extent to which our key findings were sensitive to different approaches. Our first test was to use seemingly unrelated probit analysis (SUR) to evaluate whether JPC is endogenous; this test first predicts JPC and then examines whether the errors in the equation predicting JPC and the equation predicting employment are correlated. Second, in our base results we included mothers who were not in the labor force (that is retired, those unable to work due to health problems, or students) as not employed. We tested whether our results would hold if they were excluded from the analysis (final $n = 3649$). Third, we examined whether JPC was only related to full-time employment by changing our dependent variable to be only full-time work (compared to a combination of mothers working part-time and those not employed).[10] Fourth, we conducted exploratory interaction models to consider whether the relationships between physical custody and employment differed across countries. This result is exploratory because of the small number of JPC families in some countries. Finally, we tested an alternative definition for JPC where the criterion for JPC was set to 15 nights, referring then only to equal JPC.[11] We intended to also conduct a decomposition analysis for each country separately, but this was not possible because of the small number of cases per country in general and especially for mothers with JPC.

Results

JPC and mother's employment

Table 3 presents the share of employed mothers according to child's physical custody arrangement as the total of 11 European countries and within each country. When

Table 3. Share of employed mothers in 11 European countries according to child's physical custody arrangement, % (weighted).

	Mothers with SPC child	Mothers with JPC child	Difference in percentage points
Total	64.9	82.46	−17.56
Austria	69.51	84.42	−14.91
Belgium	67.06	92.32	−25.26
Switzerland	79.55	83.19	−3.64
Czech Republic	70.04	78.88	−8.84
Denmark	63.01	77.42	−14.41
Estonia	75.41	86.02	−10.61
Spain	64.75	82.48	−17.73
Finland	70.43	84.39	−13.96
France	59.65	79.19	−19.54
Sweden	77.33	87.18	−9.85
Slovenia	83.89	87.41	−3.52

examining all 11 countries together, mothers with JPC are more likely to be employed (82% employment), compared to 65% for mothers with SPC. Such a clear employment gap – 17 percentage points – suggests that JPC might ease the constraints of mother's paid work opportunities, and heightens the need to control for potential confounding factors.

Table 3 reveals three interesting results. First, in every country, mothers with JPC are employed more often than mothers with SPC. Second, there is cross-national variation regarding the size of the employment gap. The largest gap, around 25 percentage points, is found in Belgium, followed by France and Spain with about 19 and 18 percentage-point differences. The smallest gap – around three to four percentage points – is in Slovenia and Switzerland. The largest employment gaps seem to be in Western European countries (except for Switzerland) and Southern European countries (where the shares of employed mothers with SPC are among the lowest in the 11 countries under examination). The smallest employment gaps are found in Eastern European countries, where the shares of employed mothers with SPC are among the highest in the countries included in this study. The Northern European countries seem to split in two as the employment gap in Sweden is similar to Eastern European countries whereas in Denmark and Finland the employment gap resembles the employment gaps of Western European countries. Third, cross-national differences in the prevalence of employment are clearly larger among mothers with SPC than with JPC. The share of employed in all countries is very high for mothers with JPC as it varies between 92% in Belgium and 77% in Denmark. For mothers with SPC, the share of employed varies more: between 84% in Slovenia and just below 60% in France. These data suggest that controlling for country may be important in examining the difference in employment between JPC and SPC mothers.

The role of confounding factors on JPC and mothers' employment

Next, we analyze whether the relationship between JPC and mother's employment continues when we consider the role of various confounding factors. Results are shown in Table 4. We present average marginal effects (positive values indicate higher, and negative value lower, probabilities of being employed, compared to each reference category). Model 1 shows the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment without the

Table 4. The role of confounding factors on JPC and mothers' employment (average marginal effects, their statistical significance and standard errors in parentheses).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Physical custody arrangement (ref = SPC)			
JPC	0.18*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)
Age (ref = 18-35 years old)			
36–45 years old		0.08*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
46–63 years old		0.05* (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)
Education (ref = low)			
Medium		0.16*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.02)
High		0.24*** (0.02)	0.22*** (0.02)
Health status (ref = health problems)			
Good		0.12*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)
Health missing		0.09*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)
Number of children in the household (ref = 3 or more children)			
1 child		0.05* (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)
2 children		0.05** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)
Age of the youngest child in the household (ref = 5 years or younger)			
6–12 years old		0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)
13–17 years old		0.13*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)
Re-partnering (ref = does not have a partner)			
has a partner		0.13*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)
Other adults in the household (ref = no other adults in the HH)			
Are other adults in the HH		0.05*** (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)
Household income excluding mother's earnings (ref = 5th quintile)			
1st quintile		0.25*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.02)
2nd quintile		0.16*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.02)
3rd quintile		−0.03 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)
4th quintile		−0.04 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.02)
Country (ref = Sweden)			
Austria			−0.08* (0.04)
Belgium			−0.10** (0.03)
Switzerland			−0.03 (0.04)
Czech Republic			−0.09** (0.03)
Denmark			−0.13*** (0.03)
Estonia			−0.02 (0.04)
Spain			−0.11*** (0.03)
Finland			−0.11** (0.03)
France			−0.11*** (0.03)
Slovenia			−0.05 (0.04)
Pseudo R^2	0.02	0.22	0.23
BIC	4280.0	3554.3	3604.6

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

confounding factors. Mothers with JPC have 18 percentage-points higher probability of being employed than mothers with SPC.

In Model 2 individual-level confounding factors are added to the model. The inclusion of individual-level confounding factors decreases the employment gap, but it does not eliminate it: mothers with JPC have eight percentage-points higher probability to be employed than mothers with SPC. Model 2 also reveals that mothers who are older, have higher education, and better health are more likely to be employed, as are mothers with fewer and older children, consistent with expectations.

In terms of other income in the household, our results support the economic incentive approach that the amount of other household income (all income except mother's own earnings) is negatively related to mother's employment. Mothers in the higher income quintiles are less likely to be employed, perhaps because they do not need their own earnings to have moderate incomes. Another interesting finding is that mothers who have

co-residential partners or additional adults living in the same household have a five to thirteen percentage-points higher probability of being employed than mothers who are not partnered or do not have additional adults living in the same household. Thus, these adults might ease mothers' constraints to paid work by providing additional care resources.

In Model 3, we consider the general country context by including country fixed effects. Inclusion decreases the employment gap between JPC and SPC mothers slightly, to seven percentage points, but it remains statistically significant. This result further supports the argument that JPC might have its own independent effect on easing mothers' employment opportunities even after controlling for the role of individual-level confounding factors and the country context. Moreover, the inclusion of country fixed effects is associated with only a small (one percentage point) decline in the relationship between JPC and employment, compared to Model 2. Furthermore, Model 3 shows that mothers in Sweden have a higher probability of employment than mothers in a vast majority of other countries. The countries similar to Sweden (Switzerland, Estonia and Slovenia) are, like Sweden, countries with high levels of employment for mothers with SPC, leaving little room for JPC to be associated with an increase.

Compositional factors and the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC

As a final step in our analysis, we examine how much of the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC can be explained by compositional factors. The results of a decomposition analysis in Table 5 reveal that only around 50 percent of the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC can be explained by differences in characteristics in these two groups of mothers. For Model 2 (including individual-level confounding factors) the share is just below 50 percent whereas inclusion of country fixed effects in Model 3 increases the share to about 52 percent. Thus, results of decomposition analysis strengthen the argument that mothers with JPC are more likely to be employed than those with SPC, and this cannot be explained solely by differences in characteristics or the country context.

Decomposition analysis also shows (results not shown in Table 5) that differences in income and education matter the most for the employment gap between JPC and SPC mothers. If SPC mothers would have the same distribution of other household income (excluding mother's own earnings) as JPC mothers have, the employment gap would be reduced by around 27 percent. And if SPC mothers had high education as often as JPC mothers do, the employment gap would be reduced by around 14 percent.

Table 5. Decomposition analysis on child's physical custody arrangement on mother's employment.

		Model 2		Model 3	
	Mean	Coef. (St. Err.)	Percentage	Coef. (St. Err.)	Percentage
Reference group: JPC	0.86				
Comparison group: SPC	0.71				
Due to differences in characteristics		0.08*** (0.01)	49.3	0.08*** (0.01)	52.2
Due to differences in coefficients		0.08*** (0.02)	50.7	0.07*** (0.02)	47.8

Robustness checks

Our main model accounts for differences in characteristics between those with JPC and SPC through controlling for these characteristics and showing a decomposition analysis. But there may be unmeasured differences between those with JPC and SPC. We ran a seemingly unrelated probit analysis (SUR), which in this case has two equations, one predicting JPC and one predicting employment, and explicitly tests for whether the error terms in the equations are correlated. Wald's tests of the correlation were not different from zero in either Model 2 or Model 3, suggesting that the separate equations shown above are appropriate.

Our next three checks consider alternative definitions of key variables. In the text we present the results for the marginal effect of JPC (equivalent to Table 4) and in Table 6 we present the results of decomposition analyses (equivalent to Table 5). Our first test excludes mothers who are not potentially employed (i.e. retired, those unable to work due to health problems, and students), leaving a sample of 3,649. The employment gap between JPC mothers and SPC mothers is statistically significant in these models, estimated to be 10 percentage points in Model 2 and eight percentage points in Model 3. The first panel of Table 6 shows the decomposition results. When only individual-level confounding factors are taken into account (Model 2), compositional factors explain only about 39 percent of the employment gap between JPC and SPC mothers, compared to around 50 percent in main model in Table 5. For the model including country fixed effects (Model 3), the results are quite similar to the main model.

Our fourth robustness check is an exploratory interaction model, a challenging task because of the relatively small number of JPC cases in several countries. None of the interaction terms were statistically significant and negative. In nine of our countries there was no statistically significant interaction between the country and JPC, although the marginal effects for the interaction term were typically positive. In two countries, Belgium and Spain, there was a statistically significant and positive interaction term. We caution against placing too much weight on these models because of low power to detect effects; still, the results are broadly consistent with our main finding that mothers with

Table 6. Decomposition analyses with different dependent and independent variables.

		Model 2		Model 3	
	Mean	Coef. (St. Err.)	Percentage	Coef. (St. Err.)	Percentage
Excluding those potentially not working (*n* = 3,649)					
Reference group: JPC	0.91				
Comparison group: SPC	0.75				
Due to differences in characteristics		0.06*** (0.01)	38.3	0.08*** (0.01)	50.3
Due to differences in coefficients		0.10*** (0.02)	61.7	0.08*** (0.02)	49.7
Full-time working mothers compared to others (*n* = 3,836)					
Reference group: JPC	0.75				
Comparison group: SPC	0.60				
Due to differences in characteristics		0.09*** (0.01)	58.9	0.11*** (0.01)	71.5
Due to differences in coefficients		0.06** (0.02)	41.1	0.04* (0.02)	28.5
Criterion for JPC set to 15 nights (*n* = 3,737)					
Reference group: JPC	0.90				
Comparison group: SPC	0.72				
Due to differences in characteristics		0.10*** (0.01)	57.7	na	na
Due to differences in coefficients		0.07** (0.02)	42.3	na	na

JPC are more likely to be employed. Further research on whether this holds in some countries but not others, and why, would be useful.

Our next test separates full-time working mothers from all other mothers (that is part-time working mothers were combined with non-employed mothers). If JPC only enables part-time work, there would be no statistically significant relationship between JPC and full-time employment. However, the difference between JPC and SPC mothers in the logistic analysis remains statistically significant across both models (seven percentage points in Model 2 and five in Model 3), so we cannot conclude that JPC is only associated with part-time work. Decomposition results of Models 2 and 3, shown in the second panel of Table 6, show that the full-time employment gap between JPC and SPC mothers that is explained by compositional factors is higher than the main models in Table 5. Thus, differences in characteristics between full-time working mothers and other mothers explain a larger share of the full-time employment gap between JPC and SPC mothers than of the general employment gap.

Finally, we consider an alternative independent variable where the criterion for JPC is set to 15 nights, i.e. referring only to equal JPC. This analysis excludes mothers whose child spends between 10–14 nights in mothers' household which decreases the number of cases to 3,737.[12] Results of the logistic analysis continue to show statistically significant differences between (equal) JPC and SPC (11 percentage points in Model 2 and nine in Model 3). The decomposition (the third panel in Table 6) shows a larger share of the employment gap between (equal) JPC and SPC mothers is explained by compositional differences: around 58 percent compared to around 50 percent in the main model in Table 5. This is probably due to fact that mothers with equal JPC are a more select group than mothers with unequal JPC. The small number of cases in general and especially for mothers with JPC meant that we could not run a decomposition analysis for Model 3 (including country fixed effects).

These tests show that the main results are robust to alternative specifications. The first test confirms our approach of a separate equation for examining the relationship between JPC and employment. The other tests with different operationalizations for our key variables all show various alternatives all lead to the same conclusion, that JPC mothers are more likely to be employed than SPC mothers.

Discussion

This article examines whether mothers whose children spend significant time with both parents after separation (JPC) are more likely to be employed in 11 European countries. This could occur if JPC eases the constraints on mother's paid work opportunities by lessening the time demands of full-time caring SPC mothers experience. A challenge in this research is that JPC mothers have been shown to have different characteristics than SPC mothers, so any differences in employment may be due to other characteristics. Because of this concern, we analyzed the extent to which socio-demographic factors and country context confound the relationship between JPC and mother's employment and empirically estimated how much of the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC can be explained by compositional factors. Our study contributes to the very scant tradition of previous single-country studies by providing the first cross-national analysis on the relationship between

JPC and mothers' employment, covering 11 European countries and controlling for a wide set of possible confounding factors.

Our main hypothesis was that JPC mothers would be more likely to be employed than mothers with SPC. We further hypothesized that various individual-level confounding factors and country context would diminish, but not eliminate, the employment gap between these two groups of mothers. Our hypotheses were supported: mothers with JPC are more often employed than mothers with SPC, and this holds even when individual-level confounding factors and general country context are taken into account. Furthermore, results of decomposition analyses showed that the employment gap between mothers with JPC and SPC cannot be explained solely by differences in characteristics and country context in these two groups of mothers.

With cross-sectional data, we are not able to fully test causality. But based on our results we argue that JPC is likely to have an independent role on mothers' employment, and that JPC eases the constraints of mother's paid work opportunities. Our results, combined with the very limited results from earlier single-country studies (Bonnet et al., 2022; Chanda, 2024) and more general studies on single mothers' employment (e.g. Daly & Kelly, 2015; van Lancker, 2018), suggest that the mechanism behind this result is time constraints related to childcare. As Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018) have argued, the absence of a partner limits single mother's time and care resources. Mothers with SPC are in an even more difficult situation than mothers with JPC because they have more time demands and have less help with caregiving resources from their ex-partner (see also Brady & Perales, 2016; Härkönen et al., 2023).

In addition, our descriptive results revealed that there are cross-national differences in the employment of mothers with JPC and SPC as well as differences in the gap between them. This result suggests that countries differ from each other in the extent that SPC poses a constraint to mothers' employment opportunities and/or in the extent that JPC eases these constraints. Because of the limited number of countries in our examination, we were only able to include country fixed effects in our analyses and not to identify specific country-level characteristics behind cross-national differences. However, in the light of earlier literature (e.g. Pfau-Effinger, 2023; Thévenon, 2011), a possible explanation is found in various institutional and cultural factors.

The smallest employment gaps between JPC and SPC mothers were found in Eastern European countries where there is a long tradition of mothers' employment in general. Moreover, it has been suggested that economic necessity plays a significant role in mothers' employment in Eastern European countries (e.g. Lewis, 2009). It might be that these factors push mothers into employment regardless of child's physical custody arrangement. For other countries, cross-national differences are somewhat harder to explain. Nevertheless, the largest employment gaps between JPC and SPC mothers are found in most Southern and Western European countries where the prevalence of JPC is lower than in Northern European countries. Hence, one plausible explanation could be that in countries where JPC is less common, mothers with JPC are a more select group than in countries with more prevalent JPC, which in turn could lead to larger employment gaps in these countries. Another possibility is that JPC is more strongly related to employment in countries that whose social policies support the sharing of care (Hakovirta et al., 2024). Further research would be useful.

As with any study, ours also comes with some limitations. The most critical one deals with causality. With cross-sectional data we are not able to say anything about the direction of causality between JPC and mothers' employment. It might be that when parents do not reach a negotiated agreement on physical custody, employed mothers are awarded JPC more often than non-employed mothers. Based on evidence from some single-country studies (e.g. Bonnet et al., 2022), this is probably the case for some mothers. However, looking more deeply at the causality between JPC and mothers' employment is an important issue for future studies – with longitudinal data – to investigate. Another data-related weakness in our study is that we were not able to separately analyze mothers who work part-time from mothers who work full-time because relatively few mothers report working part-time in our countries in these data. To shed some light on whether JPC eases mothers' full-time employment, we conducted a robustness check with an alternative dependent variable that separated full-time working mothers from all other mothers. Results of this analysis suggested that child's living arrangement is related to full-time work, and it might play a smaller role in the full-time employment gap between JPC and SPC mothers than in employment in general (that is, characteristics other than JPC vs. SPC, especially the country of residence, matter more in explaining the full-time gap than the general employment gap). Nevertheless, the questions of whether JPC eases constraints on mothers' part-time employment and whether, how and why it is related to part-time versus full-time employment are important avenues for forthcoming studies. A final weakness is related to evaluating the role of country context on the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment. Having only 11 countries in our analysis prevented us from using multi-level analysis and exploring more detailed factors at the country-level that might confound the relationship between JPC and mothers' employment. For example, factors related to family policies, to cultural factors such as gender roles, may be quite important. This kind of analysis would be important for future studies.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the current knowledge base on potential effects of physical custody arrangements, suggesting that JPC is related to increased mother's employment. Our work is the first to study this topic cross-nationally and provides deeper understanding on how changes in family dynamics and mothers' employment are interrelated. Our results revealed that mothers with SPC are vulnerable in terms of employment. As has been known, supporting the employment of single mothers requires a comprehensive set of policies and services that address childcare policies and flexible work options. We show that physical custody policy may also be important in addressing the employment needs of single mothers. Physical custody can be part of a broad approach that supports all families with children and contributes to wider social and economic objectives, helping to reduce poverty and create a more equitable workforce for mothers (see also Merla et al., 2024).

Notes

1. Other terms include shared placement (compared to sole placement) or shared care (compared to sole care).
2. We note that the time constraints and economic incentives arguments could lead to JPC mothers having more part-time employment than SPC mothers, rather than necessarily

leading to more full-time employment. As we discuss below, most of these countries have relatively few mothers who report working part-time, so we are unable to do a full analysis of this distinction.

3. The second release did not contain data from Iceland, Norway or Slovakia.
4. Data on the number of overnight children spend in the respondent's home is needed to differentiate JPC and SPC. In the released data, Germany, Luxembourg, and Latvia do not have information on overnights, and in Bulgaria, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, and Portugal there are substantial inconsistencies on the information on overnights.
5. Excluded countries are Cyprus, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Serbia.
6. This variable was labeled as measuring 'self-defined current economic status' and answering options were: employed, unemployed, retired, unable to work due to long-standing health problems, student, fulfilling domestic tasks, compulsory military or civilian service, and other. There were no persons in compulsory military or civilian service in our sample.
7. In EU-SILC education is measured with ISCED-levels. We have counted as low education ISCED-levels no formal education and ISCED-levels 1–2 (primary and lower secondary education), as medium education ISCED-levels 3–4 (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education), and as high education ISCED-levels 5–8 (from short-cycle tertiary education to doctoral or equivalent education).
8. To maintain a large sample without biasing the results by using complete-case analysis, we included those with missing health status (9% of our analysis sample). No other variable has missingness of more than 0.7%
9. Age of the youngest child in the household was chosen because it can be assumed to be best measure of child care needs.
10. Conceptually, there are four groups (working full-time, working part-time, unemployed, and not in the labor force); our base analysis contrasts those with any employment (the first two groups) with those not employed (the third and fourth groups). Our robustness checks combine the groups differently. We view the most important limitation of this approach is that we do not directly analyze whether JPC is associated with part-time work versus full-time work. We cannot analyze these separately because part-time work is not common in nine of our eleven countries, being more than 15% of our sample only in Austria and Switzerland. Even in these countries, we have fewer than 20 JPC mothers with part-time employment. As a result, we focus on the relationship between JPC and any employment.
11. This test includes fewer cases (3,737 compared to 3,846) because mothers whose children are with her for 10–14 nights/month are treated as mothers without resident children and not in the analysis.
12. Moreover, the number of cases for mothers with JPC becomes very small in some countries, for example in Austria ($n = 7$), Slovenia ($n = 11$), Czech Republic ($n = 12$), Switzerland ($n = 15$), and Estonia ($n = 17$).

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by INVEST Research Flagship Funding [grant number 345546]; Research Council of Finland [grant number 338282].

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