

Single mothers most at risk of poor mental health

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Single parents tend to have poorer mental health than partnered parents, with single mothers particularly at risk, new research from the University of Otago Wellington (UOW) shows.

The study of nearly 4,860 partnered and 905 single [parents](#) showed single [mothers](#) fared considerably worse than single fathers in [mental health](#) terms – 16% of single mothers and 9% of single fathers reported high or very high levels of psychological distress. This compared with 6% of partnered mothers and 4% of partnered fathers.

Lead researcher and UOW Dean Professor Sunny Collings says the most striking gender difference potentially relevant in explaining the poorer mental health of single mothers were having a pre-school age child, being unemployed, and socio-economic deprivation.

The research team found that having a pre-school age child was twice as common among single mothers than single fathers, and single fathers were more likely than single mothers to be in paid employment, she says.

"Furthermore, while a much higher proportion of single parents experience socio-economic deprivation compared with partnered parents, things tend to be worse for single mothers – our study showed 43% of single mothers experiencing high deprivation compared to 23% for single fathers."

Professor Collings says the significant gender differences in the mental health of single parents is an issue that can no longer be ignored.

A high level public policy approach to address the socio-economic deprivation experienced by female-headed single-parent families, both in and out of work, is needed, she says.

"New Zealand's social welfare system has not prioritised mental health, let alone single mothers living in poor socioeconomic circumstances.

"Policymakers need to include good mental health, alongside paid employment, as a desirable outcome for single parent families.

This is particularly important in light of the evidence of the link between poor parental mental health and that of their children, Professor Collings says.

She notes that while single fathers are at less [risk](#) than [single mothers](#), the research shows they're still at greater risk than partnered parents.

With the proportion of families headed by a single father increasing, it's important to recognise their mental health needs are met too, particularly as men are less likely than women to seek mental health care. Twelve per cent of single parent families in the study were headed by [fathers](#).

The research has just been published in the online journal *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*.

Provided by University of Otago

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