

Chapter Eleven

CHILDREN LIVING IN SOLE FATHER HOMES IN NEW ZEALAND

by
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1. INTRODUCTION

Growth in sole parenthood in the 1980s and 1990s has given rise to a high level of anxiety in New Zealand and elsewhere. Sole parenthood has been depicted as a social problem for several reasons -

- Concern about the style and quality of parenting in sole-parent families.
- Children in sole-parent families lack either male or female role models.
- Sole-parent families are considered unstable.
- Economic deprivation may arise when one parent tries to balance paid work with unpaid care, or cannot take on paid work.
- The cost of support to sole-parent families, if they are welfare-dependent.

Attitudes towards sole parenthood, and the extent to which these influence social policy largely depend on value judgements about the well-being of young children being brought up by sole parents. Attitudes may differ according to whether the parent is male or female. For example, as a general rule, males have higher earning potential. They may more easily be able to remain in the paid workforce and afford day-care for their children. Furthermore, males tend to have a stronger expectation of being in paid work - following the traditional "provider" model. On the other hand, women are, stereotypically, the "carers" and parent support services, such as Playcentre, Plunket, new mothers' groups, tend to be oriented towards the female parent. Fathers may feel less comfortable in such surroundings if they attempt to adopt the role of primary caregiver. In addition to this, traditionally a mother's care has been seen as essential for the nurturing of very young children. Possibly the gender of the parent is less relevant for older children.

There is also the question of parental role models. Boys who have no father-figure in the household are sometimes seen as lacking appropriate socialisation and discipline. They are also unlikely to find such role models in the course of their pre-school or primary education, whereas children from sole father families will come in contact with female teachers and carers. The implications of these different gender influences are not well understood. For example, what about girls who lack male parental influence?

Attitudes may also be influenced by the circumstances through which sole parent families come into being. In the past many were the result of the early death of one parent (Carmichael 1983). Widowed parents of dependent children have traditionally received more sympathy and support than separated or divorced parents, and certainly more than the unmarried. Widowhood is a much less frequent precursor of sole parenthood today, with much lower levels of mortality in the child-rearing age groups, but may be significant in relation to sole father families (among sole parent recipients of the DPB a higher proportion of males are widowed compared to females). There is little information on other processes which create sole father families. As well as the death of a mother, they may arise on separation by agreement between the parties that the father should be the custodial parent, or by order of a court giving custody to the father, for some reason. It is still, however, less common for a father to be given sole custody than for a mother to have this status, and the courts favour some form of joint custody wherever possible (Lee 1990).

In the discussion of marriage breakdown and sole parenthood, much more concern is expressed for "fatherless" families than for those which are "motherless", despite traditional views on female nurturing roles. This may be related to earning potential, but also because "motherless" families are less common. It is also interesting to compare attitudes towards males and females who leave their children. The former are, in some quarters, referred to as "dead-beat fathers" but the latter still tend to be more heavily criticised as "un-natural" mothers.

We know little about the situation of children who live with sole fathers in New Zealand. This is largely because the majority of children in sole-parent families are with sole mothers but, as the paper will show, the number of children living with sole fathers is growing and this trend is not well analysed or understood. The paper therefore aims to describe the characteristics of children living in families with a sole father in New Zealand - by age, gender, ethnicity and the workforce status of their parent - and to examine trends over the period 1981-1996. It also compares these characteristics with those of children living in families with a sole mother, over the same period. The analysis is quantitative and so can answer none of the concerns about well-being, mentioned above. It does, however, throw up significant questions for qualitative exploration and provides a statistical base-line against which future trends can be monitored.

Data for this analysis come from the *From Birth to Death* databases, which were developed for monitoring social trends on a life-cycle basis.¹ These databases contain census information and therefore allow the characteristics of comparatively small

¹ This monitoring framework was developed in the New Zealand Planning Council secretariat in the 1980s. More recently Judith Davey has continued the work at Victoria University of Wellington. Four reports on social trends in New Zealand using this approach have been published. The most recent was Judith Davey's *Tracking Social Change in New Zealand* (Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University, 1998). The databases cover more than 90% of the population at each of four census dates from 1981 to 1996. Technical details and definitions are available in the book cited.

population groups to be explored. However, the census provides only a snapshot view of society. It cannot show the full complexity of people's lives. A group of men are recorded as sole fathers in the census, but many more experience some aspects of sole fatherhood through looking after their children at weekends or during school holidays. The *From Birth to Death* databases record the family circumstances of children in different age groups and also the labour force status of their parent(s). The figures quoted in the following analysis therefore represent numbers of children, not of parents or families.

The information shows the family situation of children rather than household composition. Children living in sole parent families may be part of larger multi-family households. Sole parent families are much less likely to form their own separate households than two parent families. In 1996 almost one in every three one-parent families lived with others (Statistics New Zealand 1998:45). This was more common with very young children and also among Maori and Pacific Islanders (Davey 1998). In situations where sole parent families are living with others there is the possibility of additional support - financial support and help with child-care. This may explain situations where lone parents, especially lone fathers, are in full-time paid work but also, apparently, responsible for very young children. Further research is needed to throw light on such situations.

2. OVERALL TRENDS

Between 1981 and 1996 the number of dependent children living with a sole parent grew by 90 per cent to over 200,000 (around a quarter of all children). The great majority of these children lived with sole mothers, either in separate households or as part of multiple family households. However, between 15 and 17 per cent (nearly 28,000 children according to the 1996 Census) lived with sole fathers, a proportion which remained steady over the period. Table 1 shows the numbers of children living in sole mother and sole father families at four census dates, and the percentage change in numbers from census to census. Rates of increase for children with sole fathers were lower than for the sole mothers group in the periods 1981-1986 and 1991-1996. But between 1986 and 1991 there was a large increase in numbers of children living with sole fathers. The lone mother group has experienced a much steadier rate of growth, but for both groups the rate of increase has slowed considerably over the most recent census period.

Table 1: Children in Sole Parents Families 1981-1996²

Numbers	Sole Father Family	Sole Mother Family	Per cent with sole fathers
1981	16332	96705	17
1986	17598	119064	15
1991	26778	156105	17
1996	27825	183849	15
Per cent change in numbers			
1981-1986	8	23	
1986-1991	52	31	
1991-1996	4	18	

Source: *From Birth to Death* databases.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN LIVING IN SOLE FATHER FAMILIES

3.1. Age

Over half of children living with sole parents are in the age group 5-14. This was the case for 61 per cent of those with sole fathers in 1996 and 56 per cent of those with sole mothers (Figure 1). Only 17 percent of children with sole fathers are under 5 as opposed to 32 per cent of those with sole mothers. As a general rule then, children living with sole fathers tend to be older than those with sole mothers (83 per cent are 5 or over). Figure 1 also shows that the overall patterns are similar between the sole mother and sole father groups and that these patterns have been fairly stable over the 1981-1996 period.

Changes in the numbers of children in sole father and sole mother families by age groups since 1981 follow the overall trends shown in Table 1. However, the changes for the sole father group are more dramatic, partly because numbers are much smaller. The number of children under 5 living with sole fathers more than doubled between 1986 and 1991, from 2208 to 5247 (compared to a 60 per cent increase for the sole mothers group). This was followed by a 9 per cent decrease between 1991 and 1996, while the sole mothers group continued to grow, albeit at a much lower rate than between 1986 and 1991. Among older children there was also a marked increase in the sole fathers group between 1986 and 1991, but this was not as dramatic as for the under-fives.

What factors can be called upon to explain the large increase in children living with sole fathers between 1986 and 1991, especially the increase for very young children? Unemployment was rising rapidly during this period, peaking in 1992, so that fathers without paid work may have taken on child-care roles. The Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) was available in these circumstances. Between 1981 and 1991 the number of male sole parent DPB recipients rose by nearly 500 per cent (from 1556 to 9103). In

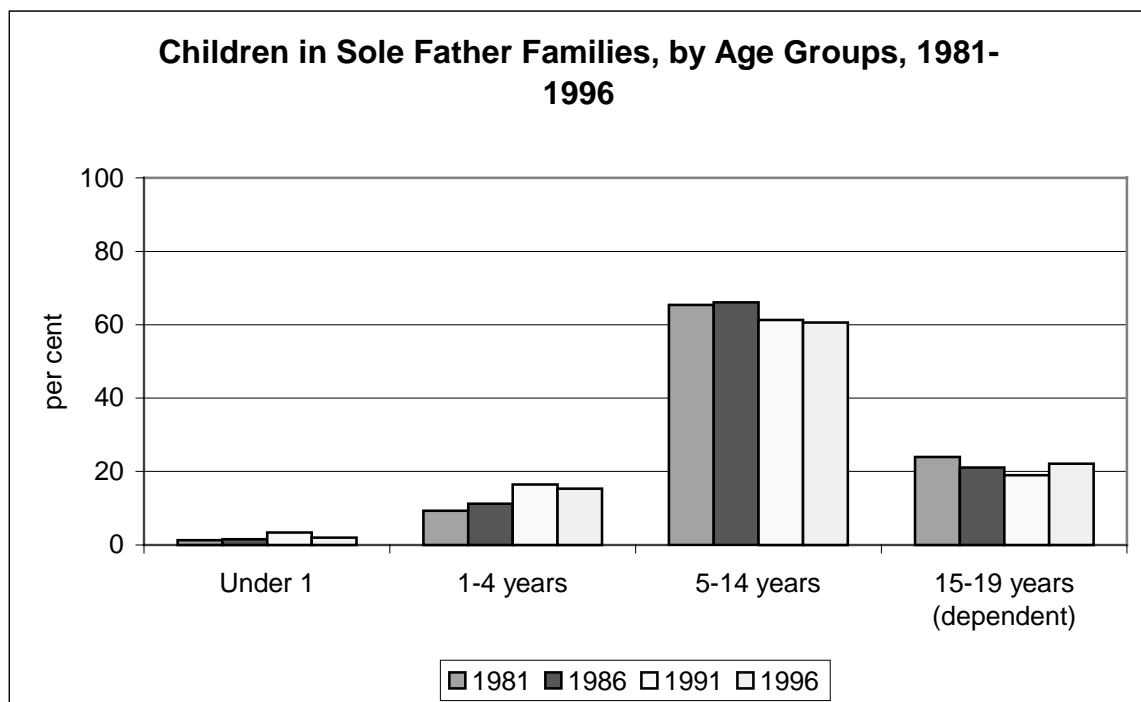
² In this analysis "children" includes all those under 15, and "dependent" teenagers aged from 15 to 19. "Dependent" in this sense means that they are living with their custodial parent(s) and their income is less than the appropriate income support level of the time. Most of these teenagers are school or tertiary students.

1981 only 4.2 per cent of sole parent DPB recipients were male, but this rose to 9.7 per cent in 1991. The cutting of DPB levels in 1991 may have discouraged sole fatherhood. The number of male sole parent DPB recipients grew by only 3 per cent between 1991 and 1996 and the male proportion fell back to just under 9 per cent.

3.2. Gender

Of the total 28,000 children living with sole fathers at the time of the 1996 Census, 57 per cent were male. This compares to 50 per cent of children living with sole mothers. In all ethnic groups and all age groups male children living with sole fathers outnumber female children (55 per cent or more male). The gender balance is more even for all groups among children living with sole mothers. There is no evidence of an increasing proportion of male children living with sole fathers as the age of children increases. This might have been expected following assumptions about the greater need for mothering by very young children and also the increasing need for male role models for pubescent boys. Males have predominated among children in sole fathers families, at about the same level, at each census date since 1981, despite fluctuating rates of change in numerical terms.

Figure 1



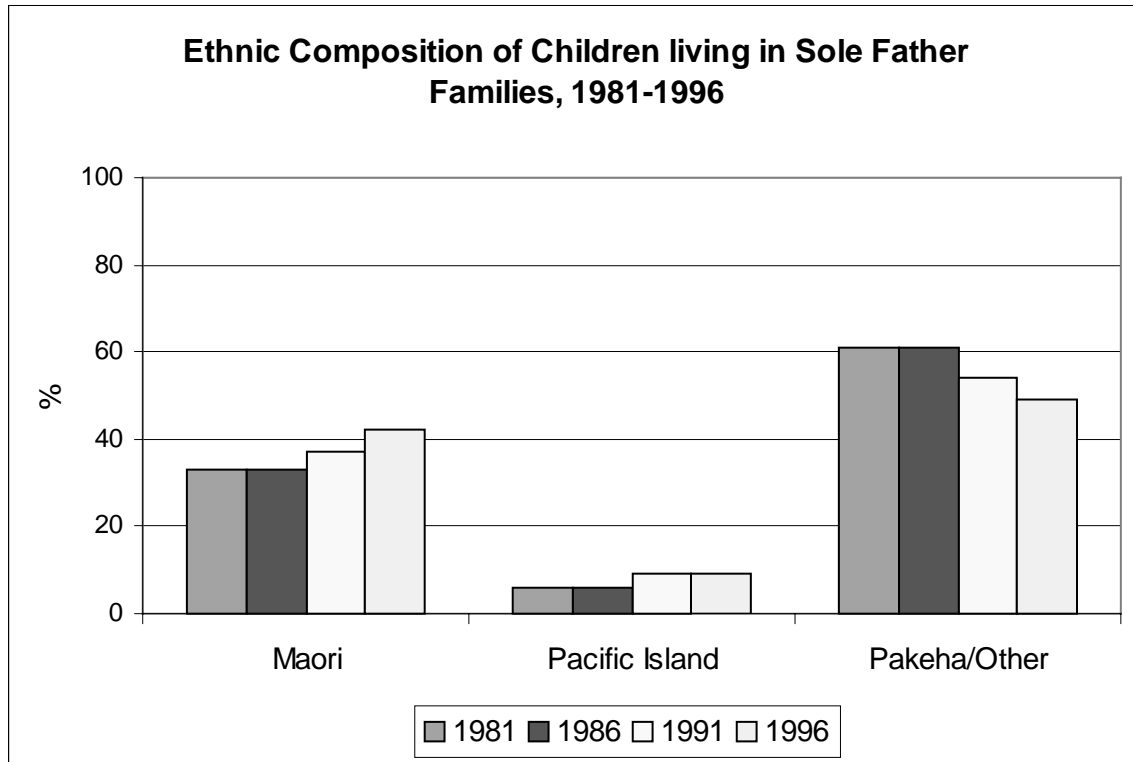
3.3. Ethnicity

The ethnic breakdown of children living in sole father families is very similar to that for children in sole mother families and has been so over the whole period from 1981-1996 (Figure 2). The proportion of the sole father group who are Maori has risen from 33 per cent to 42 per cent and the corresponding figures for the Pacific Island group are 6 per cent to 9 per cent. Consequently Pakeha/Other children represent a decreasing proportion of both the sole father and sole mother groups³.

³ Ethnic groupings in this analysis are derived in a step-wise process. First all those identified as Maori sole ethnicity and Maori plus other ethnicity are grouped as Maori. Secondly, all those

In all three groups, growth in numbers was highest in the 1986-1991 inter-censal period, but whereas numbers declined slightly for Pacific Islanders and Pakeha/Other between 1991 and 1996, they continued to grow for Maori.

Figure 2



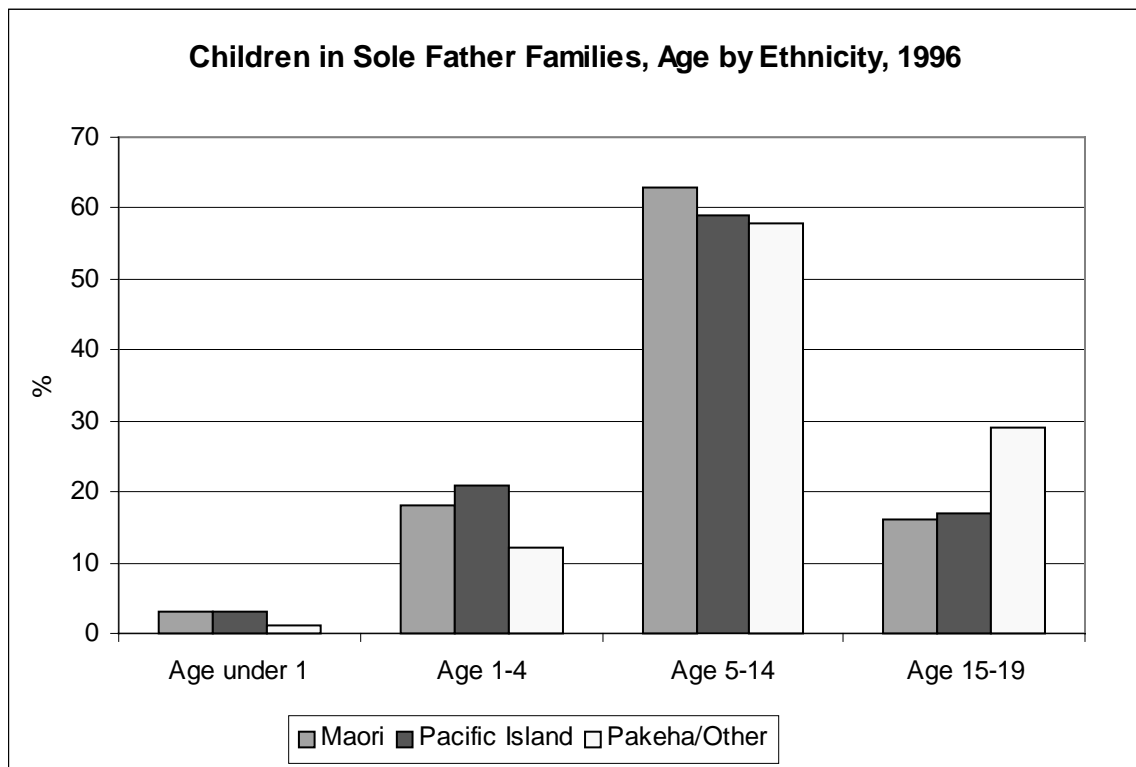
Ethnicity by Age

Figure 3 looks at how children in sole parent families in three ethnic groups are distributed by age. One-fifth of Maori children and a quarter of Pacific Island children living with lone fathers are under five years, compared to only 13 percent of Pakeha/Other children. There is little difference by ethnicity in the 5 to 14 age group. Pakeha/Other, however, predominate among dependent teenagers. In summary, the age differences by ethnicity are found mainly in the pre-school (high Maori and Pacific Island proportions) and dependent teenager (higher Pakeha/Other proportions) groups.

The overall pattern by ethnicity is similar for the sole mother families group, except that a higher proportion of children living with a sole mother come into the pre-school age group (compared to those living with a sole father) and this applies to all three ethnic groups.

identified as Pacific Island sole ethnicity and Pacific Island plus other ethnicity are grouped as Pacific Island (apart from Maori-Pacific Island who are in the Maori group). All others are in the Pakeha/Other grouping. The Asian ethnic group is not separated out in this analysis. There were only around 1000 children in this group living with sole fathers in 1996. The analysis excludes those whose ethnic affiliation was not specified in the census.

Figure 3



4. WORKFORCE STATUS OF PARENTS

Several of the concerns listed at the beginning of this paper are to do with the extent of paid workforce involvement by sole parents. In the rhetoric of current income support policy, if sole parents are employed, then they are more likely to be independent, i.e. not welfare-dependent. Policy initiatives since the late 1980s, such as the Compass and Stepping Out programmes, have aimed to encourage sole parents into paid work. More recently work-testing of DPB recipients, according to the age of their youngest child, is applying stronger sanctions, including the threat of benefit reduction or withdrawal. Fiscal considerations (reduction of the cost of the DPB) are linked to moral judgements about self-reliance. Whether or not these assumptions are accepted, it remains that paid work involvement by their parents is a major factor in the economic well-being of children living in sole-parent families. However, in terms of the quality of parenting, some would argue that paid work, especially full-time work is a threat to the well-being of children, especially those living with a sole parent, as it reduces the time which parents can devote to their children. These issues highlight the significance of patterns of parental workforce participation.

Figure 4 illustrates marked differences, in this respect, between the group of children living with sole fathers and the group with sole mothers. (This contrasts with similar patterns based on age and ethnicity.) Children living with a sole father are much more likely to have a parent in full or part-time work. Children living with a sole mother are more likely to have a parent with no workforce involvement. This applies to all age groups. However, age of children is much more significant for the sole mothers group. Half of the children under one living with a sole father, but only 13 per cent of those

with a sole mother have a parent who is employed. This suggests either that children with a sole father are more likely to be cared for by another household member, or that their father has access to childcare services.

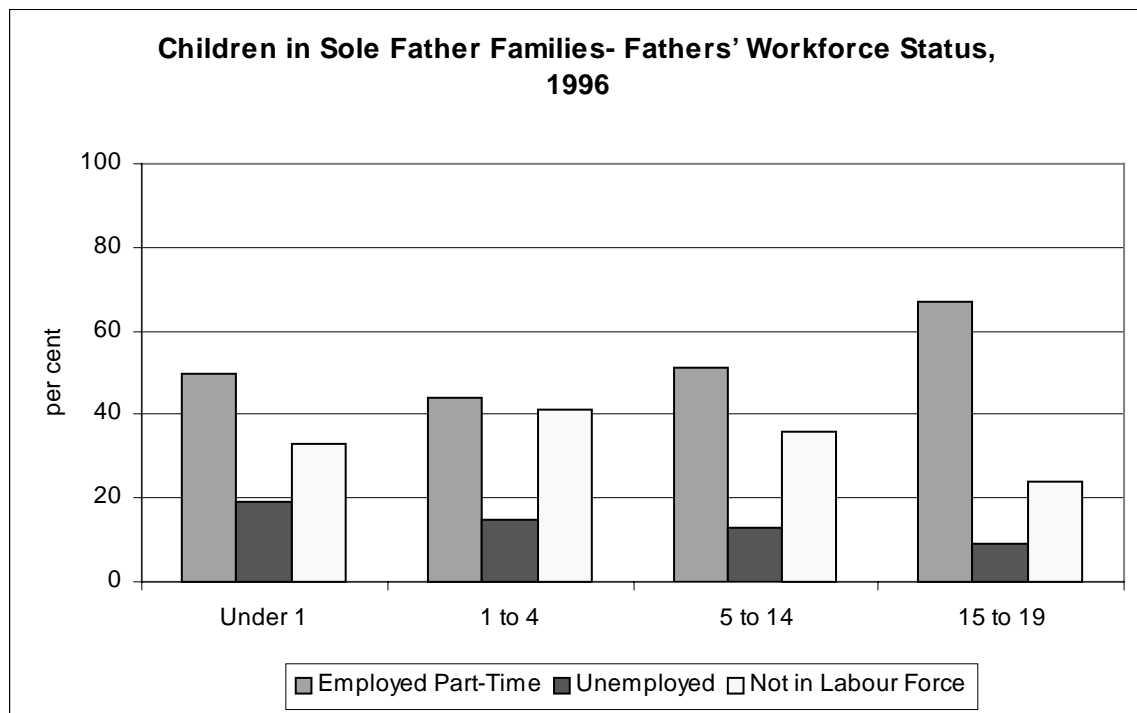
Over the period from 1981 to 1996 the proportion of children with sole fathers in the workforce (full or part-time) fell from 74 per cent to 54 per cent (with a low of 49 per cent in 1991). Figure 5 shows that this applied in all age groups. The pattern is of significant falls between 1981 and 1991, from 71 per cent to 46 per cent for the group under one year and from 63 per cent to 35 per cent for children aged one to four. This corresponds to large increases in the numbers of very young children living with sole fathers and large increases in sole fathers on the DPB, which are noted above. Between 1991 and 1996 there was some turn-around in the downwards trend. However, in 1996 a lower proportion of children had sole fathers in paid work than was the case in either 1986 or 1991.

Table 2: Children in Sole Father Families, Fathers in full or part-time work, 1981-1996, by Ethnicity (per cent)

	1981	1986	1991	1996
Maori	63	50	32	42
Pacific Island	71	58	37	43
Pakeha\Other	81	74	62	66

Source: *From Birth to Death* databases.

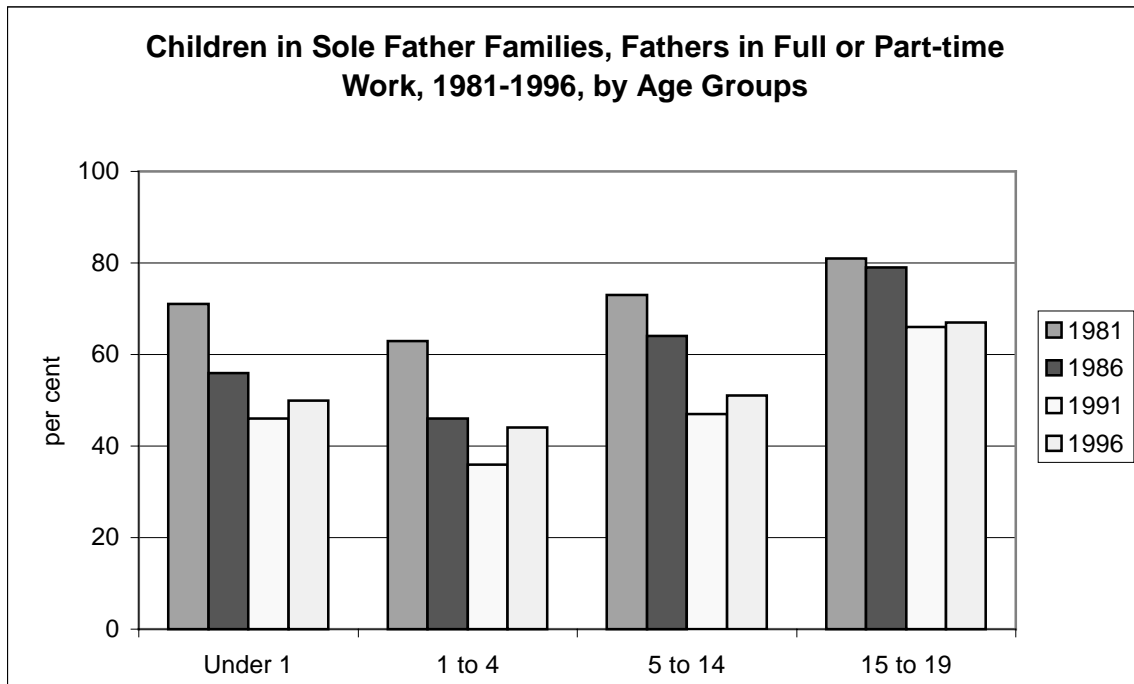
Figure 4



Patterns of workforce involvement by ethnicity show similar overall patterns (Table 2). In all three ethnic groups, over the 1981-1991 period, there was a declining proportion

of children in sole father families who had an employed parent. Between 1991 and 1996, however, this trend was reversed. This follows overall patterns of male employment during this period and also the pattern of employment and unemployment by ethnicity. Nevertheless, in all four years, levels of workforce involvement were highest for the Pakeha/Other group and lowest for Maori, with the Pacific Island group in an intermediate position.

Figure 5



5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The analysis presented here shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of children in New Zealand who live in sole father families. The growth trend has been erratic since 1981. However, as a proportion of all children living with sole parents the sole father group has remained about the same.

Over half of children who live with sole fathers are male - in all age groups - and this pattern has been the same since 1981. Most of them are school-age or older although several thousand children under 5 come into this group.

Maori and Pacific Island children are over-represented among those living with sole fathers and there are more very young children in these groups compared to Pakeha/Other children. The Maori and Pacific Island proportions have been growing since 1981. These patterns are similar for children who live in sole mother families and may relate to different household composition patterns between the ethnic groups. Maori and Pacific Island sole parent families are more likely to form part of a larger household than their Pakeha/Other counterparts.

Workforce participation by parents is an important factor in the social and economic well-being of children. The parents of children in sole father families are much more likely to be in paid work than parents of children living with sole mothers. Parental work force participation in the sole father group has fluctuated over the period since 1981, linked to trends in male employment, but overall fewer children living with sole fathers had a working parent in 1996, compared to the situation in 1986 and 1991.

There is a great deal that we do not know about sole fatherhood in New Zealand, and indeed internationally - about the lives, circumstances and attitudes of the children and the men who live in sole father families. The group, of children or of sole fathers, is not large, but it is growing, representing 28,000 New Zealand children in 1996, and deserves serious study. This paper has thrown up some important questions for research -

- What are the processes whereby sole father families come into existence?
- In what ways are sole father families similar to sole mother families and in what ways are they different?
- In what circumstances do sole father families form their own households and in what circumstances do they live in larger households? How do household circumstances affect income levels, childcare patterns and labour force involvement for sole fathers?
- How many men are part-time sole fathers and how do fathers move between full custodial, part-custodial and non-custodial roles with respect to their children?
- What factors have led to the growth in the number of children living with sole fathers and how do they differ between children of different ages?
- Why are there more Maori and Pacific Island children, especially very young children, living with sole fathers than Pakeha/Other children and why is this disparity increasing?
- What factors affect the work force participation of sole fathers and sole mothers and why are there differences between these groups? What are the links between labour force conditions and DPB availability and trends in sole fatherhood? Are there other policy initiatives which affect trends in sole fatherhood, such as work tests for DPB recipients.

This paper has begun to trace out some of the demographic and social trends relating to sole father families in New Zealand and the people who are part of them. Many of the questions listed above require qualitative research which will put flesh upon the bones of the statistical trends presented here.

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