

06 June 2007 Single parents have poorer health

Single mothers and fathers have poorer health than married or cohabitating couples, according to a new dissertation at Uppsala University. Marcus Westin's study also shows that the social capital that parents have affects both their own and their children's health, and that society should therefore make it easier for single parents to take part in social activities. The dissertation will be defended on June 7.

Marcus Westin has studied health and the utilization of health care among single parents and their children to see if they differ from families with married or cohabitating parents. He has also studied whether parents' social capital, that is, to what extent they participate in civic and social activities and feel they can trust other people, can affect these differences. The data the study is based on were gathered from two national mail-in questionnaires from 2001 and 2003.

The study shows that both single mothers and fathers evince poorer health than parents who are married or cohabitate. Moreover, single mothers refrain from seeking the help of physicians to a much greater extent than married or cohabitating mothers, even when the individuals personally experience a need for care. Both health and use of health care are strongly associated with sociodemographic and socioeconomic factors such as background, level of education, and private economy.

"Here single mothers have a considerably weaker point of departure than married and cohabitating mothers. In terms of social support and social capital, single mothers are also clearly disadvantaged," says Marcus Westin.

Generally speaking, single fathers have a better socioeconomic situation than single mothers, and they seek medical help more readily than single mothers do. But they also have poorer health than married and cohabitating fathers. One explanation may be, according to Marcus Westin, that what impacts health is not an absolute, but rather a relative, lack of socioeconomic resources.

In children as well there was a connection between poor mental health and single parents. Children are also affected by their parent's social capital; on the other hand, the parent's economy, educational level, background, or possible unemployment plays no role in the mental health of children.

"My study studies show a strong association between low social capital and poor health. Society should therefore take measures to enable single parents to increase their participation in civic and social activities, thereby enhancing their social capital," says Marcus Westin.