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## **SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS**

# **"THE QUALITY OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY LIFE THE ROLE AND PLACE OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE LIFE OF THIS TYPE OF FAMILY"**

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## CONTENTS OF THE THESIS

|   | <b>Page</b> |
|---|-------------|
| <b>LIST OF TABLES</b>   | <b>6</b>    |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURES:</b>   | <b>9</b>    |
| <b>LIST OF CHARTS</b>   | <b>10</b>   |
| <b>LIST OF ACRONYMS</b>   | <b>11</b>   |
| <b>LIST OF ANNEXES</b>  | <b>11</b>   |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>   | <b>12</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 1: SINGLE PARENT FAMILY - VULNERABLE<br/>SOCIAL GROUP</b>  | <b>17</b>   |
| 1.1. Conceptual clarifications on the family  | 17          |
| 1.2. Family functions   | 28          |
| 1.3. Deficiencies in family structure and functions resulting in single<br>parenthood                         | 31          |
| <b>Chapter 2: SINGLE PARENT FAMILY ISSUES</b>   | <b>42</b>   |
| 2.1. The single parent family between functioning and social marginalisation                                  | 42          |
| 2.2. Risk factors specific to single-parent families and their effects<br>on the development of minors        | 47          |
| <b>Chapter 3: SOCIAL PROTECTION AND THE<br/>SINGLE PARENT FAMILY</b>  | <b>52</b>   |
| 3.1. The emergence of social assistance and protection services in Romania                                    | 52          |
| 3.2. Protection of single-parent family at risk   | 54          |
| 3.2.1. <i>The functions of social welfare services and their role<br/>in relation to single parent issues</i> | 54          |
| <b>Chapter 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b>  | <b>60</b>   |
| 4.1. Research objectives  | 60          |
| 4.2. Research hypotheses  | 60          |
| 4.3. Operationalisation of concepts   | 62          |
| 4.4. Research Universe  | 65          |
| 4.4.1. <i>Single parent family receiving social support from specialist services</i>                          | 65          |
| 4.5. Research methods and techniques  | 66          |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Chapter 5: DATA PRESENTATION</b>  | <b>74</b>  |
| 5.1. Quantitative analysis. Presentation, distribution and analysis of<br>the research databases. Statistical processing of the database | 74         |
| 5.1.1. <i>Univariate analysis for the study population in 2017</i>   | 76         |
| 5.1.2. <i>Univariate analysis for the study population in year2021</i>   | 91         |
| 5.1.3. <i>Bivariate analysis for the study population in 2017</i>  | 103        |
| 5.1.4. <i>Bivariate analysis for the study population in 2021</i>  | 113        |
| 5.1.5. <i>Conclusions from the statistical processing of data collected for<br/>single parent families</i>                               | 122        |
| 5.2. Qualitative analysis  | 131        |
| <b>CONCLUSIONS</b>   | <b>140</b> |
| <b>STUDY LIMITS</b>  | <b>153</b> |
| <b>ANNEXES</b>   | <b>154</b> |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>  | <b>160</b> |

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

|   |    |
|---|----|
| SUMMARY .....                                 | 5  |
| GENERAL PURPOSE of the research .....         | 8  |
| THE MAIN OBJECTIVE of the research.....       | 9  |
| METHODS USED in the research .....            | 10 |
| RESEARCH TOOLS used .....                     | 11 |
| INDICATORS analyzed .....                     | 12 |
| Measured VARIABLES .....                      | 14 |
| REASONS behind the research (2017-2021) ..... | 21 |
| NOVELTY of research .....                     | 22 |
| RESEARCH LIMITS .....                         | 23 |
| REFERENCES .....                              | 24 |

**Keywords:** family, single-parent family, poverty, needs, welfare services, counseling, labor market integration.

## SUMMARY

The family has been a fundamental institution of society since ancient times.

At the family level, sets of social statuses and roles can be identified, i.e. members' positions and expectations of them. From this point of view, both the structure and the specific functions of the family are important.

There is a correspondence between the structure and functions of the family (biological function, economic function, pedagogical-educational and moral function, function of cohesion and conjugal solidarity), in the sense that optimal functioning is determined by the presence and involvement of both spouses (partners). A deficit-free structure cannot warrant optimal functioning in all situations, but it offers a better chance of achieving the family's functions in the best possible way.

The relationships that form and develop in the family further lead to the stability of the family type. "Relationships between spouses are not static: they are constantly evolving under the influence of internal and external family factors. Their dynamics can lead either to increasing or maintaining satisfaction, or to decreasing it and to the emergence of family tensions and conflicts, which, under certain conditions, can lead to family disintegration, socially sanctioned by divorce" (I. Mihăilescu, 1999, p. 99). This is the case of the single-parent family, representing the social group consisting of a single parent who has one or more minor children to raise and educate.

"The increase in divorce is only one of the dimensions of the transformation of the nuclear family and can only be understood in the context of the transformations that have taken place. It is worth noting that in the countries where the family has undergone the most profound changes (in attitudes to marriage, in marital behaviour, in fertility, in the situation of women in the family and in society), divorce rates are the highest." (Mihăilescu, 1999, 104).

If in the past it was considered that families with unsuccessful marriages should stay together for the sake of the children, nowadays many believe that it is better for the children if the parents separate, instead of subjecting them to a permanent conflict in the family (I. Mitrofan, C. Ciupercă, 1998, p.60).

"It is important to stress the alternative nature of this type of family, not being a deviant or abnormal type. Single parenthood is becoming normal, in a sociological sense, as it is increasing in frequency and becoming common in today's societies. The increase in divorce rates, illegitimate fertility, changes in values and mentality in recent decades have made this type of family particularly widespread" (M. Voinea, 2005)

The temporary or permanent single-parent family, seen as a positive alternative to a failed marriage (for various reasons), can help to rebalance its members from a psychosocial and behavioural point of view, constituting an alternative to the traditional model and aiming at eliminating misunderstandings and tensions present within it.

This type of family can occur through:

- family dissolution,
- the death of a parent,
- the appearance of a child out of wedlock
- the adoption of a child.

The structural deficit, i.e. the absence of one parent, can have a negative impact on the accomplishment of family functions, requiring the redistribution of family social roles and the assumption of additional responsibilities by the single parent.

The assumption of all family functions by a single parent and the exercise by that parent of both maternal and paternal roles often puts the parent in question in great difficulty, while at the same time exposing the family to a number of risks that may arise.

E. Stănculescu (1997, p. 144) considers that "the risk factors stem mainly from the single parent's professional situation, which determines not only the level of his income, but also his vulnerability on the labour market in terms of fragility, dependence, psychological wear and tear, etc."

Research results on this subject (Richards and Schmiede, 1993) show that the educational, professional and life success of the child from a single-parent family is directly conditioned by the cultural level of the family, by the direct involvement of the present parent in the upbringing, education and training of the child's future.

At the same time, Vladimir Pasti notes that for single mothers there is a heightened perception of the discrimination they face on a daily basis (2003, p. 92). He notes that there is a double reality: a ... "declarative, normative one, and this is referred to in official reports

analysing the situation of women in Romania (or elsewhere), assessing formal achievements (laws, institutions, political commitments, quantitative presence of women in various sectors, etc.), and a 'reality behind reality', in which differences turn into shortcomings and factors of disadvantage for one sex in relation to the other, regardless of the laws, norms and political declarations officially adopted. Many of the problems faced by single parents are caused by gender discrimination, resulting not from laws but from the way they are applied." (C. Ștefan, 2006, p. 246).

Lately, the number of single-parent families has been on the rise. Thus, in the period 2013-2018, according to information provided by the Statistical Yearbook (2020), the situation of family dissolution has seen a considerable increase. In just six years, the number of divorces has increased by 8%, with families with one child in first place, two children in second, three children in third, four children in fourth and five or more children in last place.

Source: <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/tags/anuarul-statistic-al-Romaniei>

"Demographic events" shows that, in territorial profile, in 2020, most divorces were registered in the Municipality of Bucharest (in 2021 divorce cases representing 8.9% of the total number of divorces registered).

Iași county had the most divorces registered after Bucharest (1028 divorce cases), being the only county where more than 1000 divorce cases were registered.

The lowest number of divorces was recorded in Vâlcea county (144 divorces).

The highest divorce rate was recorded in Brașov county (1.37 divorces per 1000 inhabitants) and the lowest divorce rate was recorded in Vâlcea county (0.37 divorces per 1000 inhabitants).

Compared to other EU countries, in 2019 (the latest year for which data are available at European level), Romania, with a divorce rate of 1.6%, recorded an average level.

The lowest divorce rates in Europe were in Malta (0.7%) and Slovenia (1.2%).

The highest divorce rates of 3.1‰ were recorded in Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg.

Source: [https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/evenimente\\_demografice\\_in\\_anul\\_2020.pdf.p.25](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/evenimente_demografice_in_anul_2020.pdf.p.25)

Against the backdrop of this alarming increase in family dissolution, combined with the risks to which it may be exposed, a survey was conducted among single-parent families receiving social support in order to determine the place and role of social services and to determine the profile of the social support recipient.

Defined as a "set of institutions, programmes, measures, professional activities to protect *individuals*, groups, communities *with social problems*, temporarily in difficulty, in crisis and therefore vulnerable" (Zamfir, 1993, 46), social assistance services are the only ones that can provide support to these social categories in difficulty. The programmes run within these services aim to promote change in the lives of people in difficult situations, mobilise them to solve their own problems and re-adapt them to social life, which is undergoing constant transformation.

This activity aims to increase social welfare, reduce poverty, develop resources and prevent the emergence of deprivation (Miley, 2006, 26). Thus, *social assistance services* (which are part of the social protection system) aim to maintain, restore and develop individual capacities to overcome a situation of need, chronic or emergency, if the person or family is unable to solve it alone" (Buzducea, 2005, 61). When I use the term "need" I think of physiological needs, security and protection needs, social needs, the need for esteem and the need for self-accomplishment, all of which are normal minimum conditions of life, according to the pyramid of A. Maslow (*apud* Zamfir, 2006, p. 161).

In order to study the *role and place of social services in the life of the single parent family*, a concrete research was undertaken at the level of the Municipality of Bucharest, respectively at the six General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) corresponding to each sector.

### **GENERAL PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

Through a series of social indicators, aspects of the functioning of social assistance services and the profiling of social service beneficiaries were highlighted. In this regard, **explanatory research** has been carried out which demonstrates the existence of a relationship between effects and specific causes (Black and Champion, 1976, p. 15, *apud* S. Chelcea). Finding causality is in fact the purpose of explanatory research.



This type of research aims to test hypotheses. The confirmation of the hypotheses represents progress in terms of scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and the substantiation of suggestions, measures, proposals aimed at addressing the social problem studied, on the other. This makes it possible to develop models, explanatory schemes, which give insight into the situation of single-parent families benefiting from the social protection system. In this respect, it is of interest how these families come to benefit from social support, the effectiveness of the benefits on their quality of life, and the main effects of the forms of support: on the one hand, a positive effect, where those social benefits actually help those families to overcome the difficulties they face, and on the other hand, a negative effect, which is related to dependency on those benefits.

Explanation makes prediction possible. The identification of causal relationships between the different variables allows the configuration of the probable evolution of the studied phenomena, as well as the elaboration of suggestions to formulate solutions to the studied social problems.

The study aims to analyse the category of single parents who receive support from specialised services. In this regard, and especially out of the desire to create a profile of the beneficiaries of formal and informal social support offered by the specialized social services, we initiated a research in March 2017, which we repeated in 2021 (March), with the main objective of knowing the particularities of single-parent families receiving support from the General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) existing at the level of the six town halls of the Municipality of Bucharest.

Given the small number of existing beneficiaries in payment in 2017 (237 single-parent families) and 2021 (156 single-parent families) in the municipality of Bucharest and, knowing that this is where the highest number of divorces are located (p. 140 of the thesis, para. 3 and 4), we opted to study all single-parent families receiving social support, in order to obtain complete information on their profile, based on the quality of life indicators that formed the basis of the quantitative and qualitative research.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH** were:

a) **Establishing the profile of the beneficiary of specialized social services** within the DGASPC in Bucharest. By determining the characteristics of this profile, it is possible to identify the coverage of these services. In other words, the question can be answered as to the factors that lead to the situation where some families do not receive social assistance even though they are facing serious difficulties.

b) **Identify the factors that seriously limit the number of single-parent families that can benefit from specialised support**, at a time when the divorce rate is increasing at an alarming rate, according to statistical data provided by the INS.

**THE HYPOTHESES** from which this research was initiated were:

- **The** smaller the number of single-parent families benefiting from specialist support, **the** more likely it is that certain socio-cultural characteristics of these families will shape a certain profile of the beneficiary, in terms of education, family structures and functions, occupation, housing.
- **If** the single-parent family manages to receive expert support in good time, **then** the chances of economic and social rebalancing increase, thus avoiding the risk of isolation, marginalisation and social exclusion.
- **If** the single-parent family behaves as an open family system (receptive to outside sources of information), **then** the chances of rebalancing increase.
- The **more the** single-parent family system manifests itself as a closed system, rejecting the penetration of formal and informal information within the family, **the** more the risk of depletion of the remaining energy in the family increases, delaying and decreasing its chances of adaptation, rebalancing and development. In this situation it is possible that other undesirable side-effects, such as isolation, marginalisation or social exclusion, may occur.
- **The** greater the assumption of responsibilities by both parents (both the one who stays with the child and the one who leaves the family), **the** greater the chances of rebalancing and adaptation of the child to the new type of family.
- **If** extended families - both the parent who has stayed with the child and the parent who has left the family - provide formal and informal support to the single parent,

**then** the difficulties faced by the single parent are reduced, giving both the parent and the children security, support and confidence that they can get through the difficult time they are in.

**THE METHODS USED IN THE TWO STAGES OF THE RESEARCH** (March 2017 - March 2021) were the sociological survey, carried out by means of the sociological questionnaire and the interview guide, and the documentary analysis, given the fact that this social category subject to research - the single-parent family receiving social support - is extremely vulnerable, and the discreet conduct of the research helps to obtain information in full without any restraint on the part of the subjects.

*The sociological survey* is the most complex research method, its complexity being provided by the set of research instruments (the sociological questionnaire and the interview guide) and the set of coding, scaling, analysis and data processing techniques. The sociological survey is a basic method in scientific research and can be defined as a method of informing about social facts (attitudes, characteristics) at the level of the social group, of quantifiable analysis of data in order to describe and explain them.

*Documentary analysis* is the study of information held in certain documents, which may be statistical or content-related. As S. Chelcea points out, "...the progress of sociological research methodology implies - concomitantly with the widening of information sources - the verification of the quality of social information and its integration into explanatory models with prognostic value". (S. Chelcea, p. 11).

**RESEARCH TOOLS used** were the **sociological questionnaire** and the **interview guide**. The sociological questionnaire was administered to social assistance recipients within the D.G.A.S.P.C. in all sectors of the capital, and the interview guide was administered to the heads of social services who coordinate the entire activity.

**The sociological questionnaire** was constructed from a series of quality of life indicators in order to profile the social service recipient in single-parent families.

As C. Zamfir apud I. Mărginean, "...social indicators reflect certain features of social phenomena and processes, being at the same time elements of practical action. They express both the objective state of social systems - their structure (composition, relationships), functionality and performance - and their subjective state (satisfaction, dissatisfaction). In order

for an item to become a social indicator, it must be systematically researched to determine the extent to which it can successfully accomplish different functionalities (attributes), such as:

1. means of information,
  2. means of research;
  3. means of analysis, evaluation and interpretation of various phenomena, relationships, social processes or actions;
  4. a means of realising objectives in an area;
  5. means of tracking (measuring) changes in the evolution of phenomena."
- (I. Mărginean, p. 34).

The following **INDICATORS** were analysed in the research:

- Marital status of subjects;
- School situation;
- Occupation;
- Family structure;
- Housing (type);
- Total family income;
- Net monthly income per family member.

The **interview guide** applied to the specialists includes a series of questions in addition to those in the **sociological questionnaire**, with the aim of providing the study with complementary information and consistency at the same time.

Through its exploratory role (Fred N. Kerlinger (1973), apud S. Chelcea, p. 297, 2007), the interview conducted with specialists in the field aims to determine the causes and conditions that led to the request for welfare support, to identify the existence of risk situations to which the single-parent family may be exposed and, at the same time, the willingness of beneficiaries to use the opportunities offered by the welfare system to overcome the difficult moment they are in.

A. Rădulescu (coord. Buzducea, 2010, p. 67) considers that a correct assessment of the needs and resources necessary to overcome the moments of difficulty in which a family may find itself can only be carried out by specialists. They can analyse the type of family requesting support, the existing relationships within the family, the degree of integration of the members

of the requesting family in the community, the educational level of each member, employment and health issues, as well as the willingness of the assisted persons to use the support offered by the social assistance services to improve their living conditions.

The research aimed to aggregate information in order to get a more accurate profile of the beneficiary of specialized services in the Municipality of Bucharest and, at the same time, to find out the share of families benefiting from this opportunity out of the total number of single-parent families existing in the Statistical Yearbook.

The number of single-parent families present in the Statistical Yearbook is very high (2,740 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2017), and is constantly increasing, according to data issued by the NSI, **but it represents only a part of the total number of existing single-parent families**, i.e. those who have acquired this social status through family dissolution. Evidence of single-parent families resulting from the death of a parent, the adoption of a child or the emergence of a child out of wedlock is not recorded to date.

According to the same source, we note that, starting from the number of 28,507 single-parent families existing in 2013 (resulting from family dissolution), it increased considerably, reaching a total of 31,527 single-parent families (resulting from family dissolution) in 2015. There was a slight decrease in 2016 (30,497), followed by an increase in 2017, bringing the total to 31,147 single-parent families (resulting from family dissolution).

All the information obtained from the two field surveys (2017-2021) was recorded in two databases, one for the survey conducted in March 2017 and the second for the survey conducted in March 2021. The databases were processed and analysed using SPSS software. The two databases produced contain information with variables that have been measured and coded nominally.

For **variables measured** on a nominal scale, two-dimensional association tables (contingency or incidence or cross-tabulations) were obtained. Each cell in the table shows the number, the absolute frequency for a particular combination of the characteristics in question. The association is established by comparing frequency distributions (absolute or relative) between rows or columns.

For dependence testing, the Hi-square (Pearson) test was used to measure the existence of a link.

In the Hi-square test, the hypothesis to test (null hypothesis) is that there is no relationship between the two variables. The alternative hypothesis in the case of rejecting the null hypothesis is that there is a link. If the probability of the Hi-squared test is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis.

The statistical analysis of the database consists of univariate analysis (for main characteristics) and bivariate analysis (double entry tables) to ascertain the existence and magnitude of the degree of association between the paired variables.

The analysis of the results obtained from the field research was carried out separately for the population surveyed in 2017 and the population surveyed in 2021, and finally a comparative analysis was carried out between the results obtained from the two databases.

A brief overview of the results obtained from the two surveys (2017-2021) provides the following insights:

- The highest share of the population in 2019 is in sector 3 (22.5%), followed by sector 6 (18.5), sector 2 (17.4%), sector 4 (15.5%), sector 5 (14.2%) and sector 1 (12.0%).
- The highest share of single-parent families in 2017 was in sector 6 (25.3%), followed by sectors 2 (20.7%), 5 (15.6%), 1 (14.8%), 3 (13.5%) and 4 (10.1%).

The rank correlation coefficient (Spearman) is statistically significant at a level of 0.01 and indicates a negative correlation of -0.600 between the population and the studied population in 2017, and a positive correlation of 0.600 between the population and the population in 2021.

The correlation between the population surveyed in 2017 and 2021 is strongly negative at -1,000. This shows that **there is no correlation between the size of the sector as a population and the number of single parent families living in that sector, but on the contrary, there is a negative correlation for the 2017 sample and a positive average correlation in 2021.**

## VARIABLES MEASURED IN THE RESEARCH

**MARITAL STATUS** of the single-parent families studied, both in 2017 and 2021, is characterized by **illegitimacy to a very large extent**, accounting for 70% in 2017 and 70.5% in 2021. The results show a decrease in respect for the value of the family among this social category, and for parental functions and roles, a trend similar to that shown at European and world level (taken from p. 37 of the thesis) of an increase in the number of children born out of wedlock. At the same time, this result also illustrates a new model of 'family' offered to children, which, according to learning theory, they can take up and practice in the future. Next come **lone-parent families resulting from family dissolution**, accounting for 22.8% in 2017 and 17.9% in 2021, single-parent families resulting **from the death of a parent**, 5.9 in 2017 and 5.8 in 2021, and single-parent families resulting **from de facto separations**, accounting for 1.3% in 2017 and 5.8% in 2021.

Regarding the **PROFILE** (degree of relatedness) of **single-parent families** in 2017 and 2021, it can be observed that: for both samples, **the highest share is for families composed of mother + 1 child (47.3% and 38.5% respectively) and mother + 2 children (32.5% and 35.9% respectively)**. For families with 3 children (11.8% and 12.8% respectively) and 4 or more children (4.6% and 10.3% respectively), the situation is reversed for the two populations studied. A small share is accounted for by families composed of father + one or more children (3.8% and 2.6% respectively). This indicates the task in predominantly maternal care, even if she has support for one or more children.

An important characteristic of the single-parent family is the **SCHOOL EDUCATION OF THE PARENT of the family**, in both samples (2017 and 2021): the majority of breadwinners are uneducated (16.5% and 32.7% respectively) or with general education (44.3% and 37.8% respectively) and secondary education (33.3% and 24.4% respectively); university graduates: only 5.9 and 5.1 respectively.

**In terms of OCCUPATION**, for the population surveyed in 2021, the majority of the breadwinners/parents are unemployed (85%), almost double the share of 2017 (46.4%); the employed represent only 7.7%, three times less than in 2017 (25.3%), retired and casual workers 2.6%, four times less than in 2017 (11.8), and unemployed 1.3%, the same share as in 2017. Agricultural workers or self-employed parents no longer appeared in DGASPC records.

This difference between the two surveys (for 2017 and 2021) may be due to the emergence of the pandemic and, with it, the restrictions imposed.

**THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES** is strongly correlated with their profile (degree of relatedness) in the two samples, 2017 and 2021 respectively. Thus, families with 2 persons (mother + 1 child) represent 48.90% and 39.7% respectively, those with 3 persons (mother + 2 children) represent 34.2% and 37.2% respectively, and those with 4 persons represent 12.2% and 12.8% respectively.

**HOUSING TYPE** shows similar results in both surveys (2017 and 2021), with the highest share in the situation *tolerated by parents or other extended family members/friends*, 42.6 in 2017 and 66% in 2021, *ownership* (block or house) 38.4% and 19.9% respectively, followed by *renting* (block or house) 15.2%, and 12.2%, respectively.

In terms of the **SCHOOL STATUS OF CHILDREN** in the studied families (2017 and 2021), among families with one dependent child, most are in *secondary school* (60.3% and 48.1% respectively), followed by *pre-school* (23.6% and 35.9% respectively). The situation is similar for families with two dependent children. Most are in secondary school (61.0% and 55.3% respectively), followed by pre-school (34.7% and 39.4% respectively). The situation is also the same for families with three dependent children, most of them in secondary school (52.5% and 60.0% respectively), followed by pre-school children (45.0% and 37.1% respectively).

Regarding the **AGE OF CHILDREN**, in both surveys, the highest percentage of single-parent families *with only one* parent raising and educating a *child* is found in the age group 6-10 years (30.4% and 30.1% respectively), followed by the age group 11-14 years (30.0% and 26.9% respectively), the age group 15-18 years (20.7% and 17.3% respectively) and 1-5 years (19.0% and 25.6%, respectively). Among families with *two* dependent *children*, in both samples, the highest percentage is in the age group 6-10 years (35.3% and 51.1% respectively), followed by the age group 1-5 years (35.3% and 22.3%, respectively), the age group 11-14 years (21.8 and 18.1, respectively) and 15-18 years (5.0% and 8.5%, respectively). The same ranking is found for both samples and for families with *three* dependent *children*, with the highest percentage in the 6-10 age group (50.0% and 40.0%, respectively), followed by the 1-5 age group (35.0% and 28.6%, respectively), the 11-14 age group (12.5% and 28.6%, respectively) and the 15-18 age group (2.5% and 2.9%, respectively).



**TOTAL NET INCOME OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES:** the results obtained for the 2017 sample show the highest share of total monthly net income belonging to the income group between 251 and 500 lei (25%), followed by the income group below 250 lei (22%), then the groups 1001-1250 lei (17.3%), 501-750 lei and 751-1000 lei (14.3%), with equal percentages and, finally, the income group above 1250 lei 6.5%.

The population surveyed in 2021 shows the highest share of total monthly net income per household in the group with income between 501-750 lei (20.3%), followed by the group with income above 1250 lei (19.5%), then the group 1001-1250 lei (18.8%), the group 751-1000 lei (14.8%) and the groups with equal shares below 250 lei and 251-500 lei (13.3%).

Total net income of the single parent family is strongly correlated with **TOTAL NET INCOME PER FAMILY MEMBER**. Thus, most single-parent families 26.9% (2017) have a net income per person member between 101-200 lei, while in 2021 the first place is occupied by 26.6% families with an income between 301-400 lei, the second place in 2017 is occupied by single-parent families with a net income per person member below 100 lei (21.10%), and in 2021 by those with an income between 401-500 lei (20.3%).

In 2017, families with incomes between 301-400 lei and 401-500 lei are in third and fourth place, and in 2021 families with incomes between 101-200 lei are in third place, while families with net incomes per person of more than 600 lei are in fourth place.

For the year 2017, the results show that only 5.3% of families receiving social support had a net income per person of more than 600 lei, and for the year 2021, the results show that net income per family member below 100 lei was found in only 10.20% of the studied families, and income between 501 and 600 lei was found in 10.9% of the subjects.

It should be noted, however, that all income declared by families receiving social assistance (2017-2021) also includes "state child allowances and school grants", which are not taken into account when determining financial assistance, but are mandatory for obtaining the single-parent family support allowance. The state child allowance is used as a tool to stimulate children's participation in education; more specifically, children aged 6 to 18 must be enrolled in an educational establishment in order for their families to have access to family support allowance and other social benefits. Without these allowances and merit scholarships the total and net incomes of the families studied would be much lower.

Bivariate analysis based on two-dimensional cross-tabulations (contingency tables) mathematically shows the existence of the association of the two characteristics in the contingency table, provided by the Hi-square test.

In this sense, the analysis based on the population surveyed in 2017 and 2021 highlights the existence of a strong link (association) between *Education* and *Social Status*, between *Education* and *Housing Type*. There is also an association between *Education* and *Occupation*, but without a high intensity. There is no association between *Education* and *Number of children*, so in single parent families *the parent's education* does not decisively influence the *Number of children* in the family. There is an association between the *parent's education* and the *school situation* of the (first) two children.

The answers given by the specialists in the **qualitative research confirm the results obtained from the quantitative research and** provide a number of additional details known to them from the social surveys.

Thus, with regard to the **social status** of the parent who has the children for upbringing and education, we find that "mothers are the ones who apply for social aid to a very large extent and most of them are unmarried. They are very poor, they don't receive child support, their only source of income is the state child allowance and family benefits."

The emergence of a child out of wedlock reflects the trend of diminishing value of the legally recognised family (through the presence of the marriage certificate) found in most studies on the contemporary family and, at the same time, can be seen to be in line with new international trends of children appearing more out of wedlock.

**The failure of both parents to take responsibility for the** upbringing and education of children resulting from even an informal relationship is a poor description of the type of relationship (resulting in children). They may be short-term, transient relationships where the partners do not know each other well enough to decide together whether it is the right time to have a child, or they may be relationships of interest, aimed at achieving certain material goals (housing, partner's material situation) that are not achieved.

**Lack of information about the importance of the family** in a child's life, a minimum education, the parental role and functions to be performed, when the partners decided by mutual consent to become parents, or the inherited parental model may explain this research

result. "There are few single-parent families resulting from the death of a parent (widows) or arising from family dissolution (divorced), and they stay in the system quite a bit," experts say.

As regards the **education of parents** receiving social assistance, the answers received from the interviewees confirm the data obtained through the quantitative research. In this regard, it has been shown that the vast majority of single parents in families receiving social support have a low level of education or are even illiterate "When they come to fill out the application for social support, some come accompanied by someone who knows how to write, and after filling out the form that person, the applicant puts his finger... or others, in the same category, ask to be helped by a specialist from the directorate... If there happen to be more applicants present at registration than we have employees present at that time (because employees are away doing social surveys in the field), applicants don't have the patience to wait until someone is released and leave..."

**The poor educational status** of applicants is a major determinant of their lack of income or low income and they have to seek support from social services. But even for obtaining this help, it is observed that the applicants lack patience, understanding that for any need to be met, social rules must be observed, rules that can sometimes take a little time.

Closely related to education are **employment** issues: "...the vast majority have not had jobs, do not have or carry out occasional activities, which cannot provide them with a constant income sufficient to their needs and necessities" (specialist, sector 4).

Even attempts to help them find jobs through the specialised employment agency proved fruitless: "...those sent to different jobs usually present themselves in certain manners (unkempt, with dirty clothes) and do their best to be refused, to receive a denial (from the applicant), stating that they are not suitable for those jobs. Thus, they remain recipients of social support". "The same happens when they are offered qualification or retraining courses, which are ineffective because they do their best to prove that they cannot adapt. In addition, most of them are mothers, who say they have no one to leave their children with during the time they would miss to attend a job or a qualification course. Whether the children are young or school-age, this excuse is constantly present."

Another relevant aspect that emerged from the interviewees' responses concerns **housing** issues, in the sense that the status of most social support recipients is to be *tolerated* in the home of parents, extended family members or friends. "Their housing conditions are poor

and associated with a low quality of life. Spaces are small, crowded with many members in one room, without adequate facilities and often offered for a limited time. In Sector 3, for example, the majority of social support recipients live in the Tei-Toboc area, which is recognised as dangerous in terms of physical safety. The dwellings lack utilities, the spaces are very small, and most of the inhabitants have no education. They live in poverty, they are used to it and do nothing to overcome it. In this area, social workers go with the police when they carry out social investigations, so that their physical protection is assured." This *tolerable* status is also validated by the results obtained from the quantitative research to a very high extent, i.e. 42.6% in 2017 and 66.0% in 2021.

The social services chiefs also appreciated that **social support recipients seem to be attached or even dependent on these services**. One can even speak of a *survival strategy*, whereby they try to ensure their continued access to support in the long term. For example, in "some of the beneficiaries, when the youngest child in their care is approaching the age of majority, the mother prefers to become pregnant again, to bring another child into the world, which again ensures their access to social support for quite a long time, until the child turns 18. Thus, they remain on the social services' records, sometimes until the upper limit of working age, and then become beneficiaries of other categories of social support."

Regarding the **small number of social benefit recipients**, another aspect highlighted by the specialists interviewed was the increasingly **bureaucratic nature of access** to this type of benefit. For example, "...in the early period of the application of the legal provisions, the number of applications was quite high and the number of approved files was around 1500 in one sector (e.g. in sector 4). Subsequently, both the number of applications and the number of approved files showed a significant downward trend, so that in 2021 the total number of beneficiaries in the entire Municipality of Bucharest reached 156 files".

One factor that seems to discourage people from applying for social support is the **rather low level of social assistance granted**, which makes it unattractive when access is so complicated. Moreover, all these applications for registration in the system are checked by the ITM through the database held, known as PatrimVen ANAF. "Thus, the regulations in force require an institutional collaboration between the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, the National Tax Administration Agency and the Payment and Social Inspection Agency of the Municipality of Bucharest, which collaborate in the procedures of

means-testing, i.e. verification of the information declared by applicants on their income and sources. If there are discrepancies between what is declared and the information in the databases of the relevant institutions, the beneficiary is suspended from receiving aid and the amounts granted on the basis of the incorrect declarations must be reimbursed" (specialist, sector 4). If there are discrepancies between what the applicants declare and the reality, the files are rejected. If, after enrolment in the scheme and receipt of these benefits, it is found that, during the time they have been in receipt of aid, material changes have occurred or assets obtained that have not been declared, then the money received/collected is recovered.

The inter-institutional relationship between the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC), the Labour Force Office (OFM) and the Territorial Labour Inspectorate (ITM) reduces the risk of errors in beneficiaries' declarations and discourages possible malicious intentions, so that the number of beneficiaries has greatly decreased.

To the question (interview guide) "whether it is possible to speak of creating a dependency of single-parent families receiving systemic social assistance", the answer was unanimously positive: " ...any social service that is provided without the obligation to identify a job leads to the creation of a dependency on the social protection system. Thus, it can be said that there is no motivation for a particular social group to overcome this stage of poverty. There are very few single-parent families who manage to get out of the system. We've had single-parent families on welfare for many years."

The analysis of the information resulting from the interviews confirms **the characteristics of the profile of the single parent family receiving social support:**

- structurally, most cases are represented by single mothers and their minor children;
- the illegitimacy status of most cases (children born out of wedlock);
- the precariousness of education, even the lack of it (illiteracy);
- absence of a job;
- low-level motivation to work;
- inadequate or absent living space, with families being *tolerated* with relatives or friends, for short periods and in conditions lacking utilities;
- the tendency to become dependent on social benefits and services for the rest of their lives.

**THE REASONS WHY THE TWO RESEARCHES PRESENTED IN THE PhD THESIS (2017-2021) were:**

- the desire to find out why, although the number of single-parent families is increasing alarmingly, the number of people receiving social support is extremely low
- and to establish a profile of these single-parent families receiving social support, the role and place of social services in their lives.

It is well known from the literature that the single-parent family is the type of family that faces a number of difficulties that can easily destabilise it. If the difficulties are not material (there are very few cases), in terms of accomplishing all the family functions, they are very difficult for a single parent to achieve. Without a little help from the extended family or specialist services it is hard to overcome such an ordeal for the whole family.

The **NOVELTY** of this research is to profile single parent families receiving social support in terms of quality of life indicators (marital status, education, occupation, family structure, housing, income), the place and role of social services in the lives of beneficiaries, and to determine the reasons why the majority of existing single parent families who would need help from specialists are "penalised" by "suppressed participation" in these services.

On the basis of **the analysis of the main characteristics of the profile** of single-parent families receiving social support, **several proposals can be formulated to improve the functioning of social support services, increase the quality of life of single-parent families and prevent their social marginalisation** by:

1. Single parent **support** for a **limited period of time**, for example six months, during which time the level of support should increase in conjunction with a range of active measures such as:
  - completing education,
  - obtaining a qualification,
  - vocational guidance and labour market placement,
  - ensuring adequate living conditions, through which beneficiaries can increase their degree of autonomy, of independent functioning.
2. **Making access** to social welfare services and benefits **conditional** on participation in education, skills and employment programmes, with refusal to participate triggering suspension of services.

3. **Providing free childcare support** (crèches, day nurseries, day centres, after school), so that parents can participate in interventions that help them to develop their autonomy and eventually be able to take up employment.
4. **Careful monitoring** of the impact of the measures set out in the intervention plan, both during **the first six months and the following six months**, in order to be able to assess the degree of self-sufficiency achieved and to make any necessary adjustments or corrections.
5. As the level of social assistance increases, **single-parent families** who have received intensive support for one year **should be able to return to apply again, if necessary, after a minimum of three years.**
6. **Increasing the level of income per family member**, which conditions eligibility for support services, currently quite low at 530 lei, in order to create access to support for more single-parent families in need.

#### **RESEARCH LIMITS**

One of the limitations of the research is that **it was carried out only in the municipality of Bucharest**, where social services have a high level of organization and functioning. Somewhat similar situations could be encountered in major cities of Romania. But it should not be overlooked that there are also many single-parent families in rural areas or small towns where the availability of social services is limited or even absent. Therefore, given the limited resources of the research, it could not provide insights into the experience of single parent families in rural or small-town settings.

There is a supposition that **a nationwide study could complement the perspective on the difficulties** faced by some single parent families and the impact of certain interventions provided by social services.

**The single parent family will continue to be an important target of social policies and programmes.** Their necessity can be argued by the fact that there are one or more children in a single-parent family for whom some form of social support is needed to ensure equal opportunities and the prospect of optimal social inclusion and functioning.

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*Anuarul Statistic*, National Institute of Statistics.

Data of the National Statistics Institute.

Data from Eurostat.

Results of the statistical analysis of the database carried out by the author.