

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Living Arrangements of Single Mothers in Latin America: Stratification by Education and Partnership Status

FEDERICA BECCA , DIEGO ALBUREZ-GUTIERREZ 
AND ALBERT ESTEVE 

One in four young mothers in Latin America raises her children without a partner, yet more than two-thirds do so within extended households, typically with their own parents. Despite the social implications of single-parent families, it remains unclear to what extent the prevalence and living arrangements of single mothers have evolved over recent decades or how they vary by education and partnership status. Using Integrated Public Use of Microdata Series (IPUMS) census microdata from 17 countries (1963–2020), we show that the share of single mothers has increased over time and across all educational groups. Most continue to live in extended family households, with coresidence with parents becoming increasingly common. Living arrangements of single mothers are strongly stratified: highly educated single mothers are the most likely to live with their parents, while those with lower education and who have ever been in a union more frequently live in nuclear households. These findings highlight the central, yet socially unequal, role of extended family support in the lives of single mothers in Latin America.

Introduction

In Latin America, roughly one in four mothers between the ages of 25 and 34 is raising children without a coresidential partner. In this work, we will refer to this group as single mothers. Strikingly, two-thirds of these women live in extended family households, most often with their parents

Federica Becca, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics (CED-CERCA), Bellaterra, Spain. E-mail: federica.becca@autonoma.cat. Diego Alburez-Gutierrez, Kinship Inequalities Research Group, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR), Rostock, Germany. Albert Esteve, Federica Becca, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics (CED-CERCA), Bellaterra, Spain.

(Esteve, García-Román, Lesthaeghe 2012). Despite the social significance of this family pattern, little is known about how both the prevalence of single motherhood and the household arrangements in which single mothers live are shaped by education (primary, secondary, tertiary) and partnership status (never in union; separated, divorced, widowed; partner absent). The answer to this question has important implications for understanding how family solidarity operates in the region and how single mothers organize their living arrangements. They also speak to the conditions under which children are raised and to whether different forms of single mothers' coresidence reproduce patterns of disadvantage or, alternatively, function as strategies of intergenerational support across all social groups in contexts of high inequality and informality (Aragao and Villanueva 2021). This study provides systematic evidence on the gradients by education and partnership status of single motherhood and living arrangements across Latin American countries.

To achieve this goal, we draw on census microdata from Integrated Public Use of Microdata Series International (IPUMS-I; Ruggles et al. 2025) covering 17 countries in Latin America between 1963 and 2020. We adopt a regional perspective that highlights country trajectories without delving into within-region differences. Previous research supports this approach as, from a global perspective, Latin America is characterized by a relatively young and stable age at first union and first birth (Fussell and Palloni 2004; López Ruiz, Spijker, Esteve 2011); a long-standing prevalence of consensual unions, a pattern that has expanded in recent decades (Covre-Sussai et al. 2015; Esteve, Lesthaeghe, López-Gay 2012); high levels of union dissolution (Ruiz-Vallejo and Solsona i Pairó 2020); and transitions to adulthood that often occur within extended households (Becca and Esteve 2025). These patterns are broadly shared across countries, as are most of the results we present in this study.

We focus on single mothers between ages 25 and 34 and classify them according to their living arrangements: those who live only with their children (nuclear arrangement); those who live with their children and at least one of their parents (extended with parents); and those who live with their children and other relatives or nonrelatives, but not with their parents (extended without parents). Although census data provide only cross-sectional observations, they offer unparalleled temporal and geographical coverage for cross-national analysis and contain sufficient information to approximate pathways into single motherhood and associated living arrangements.

The article begins by presenting key figures that highlight both the significance and the growing prevalence of single motherhood in the region. We briefly discuss the structural factors that underlie these trends, although they are not the primary focus of this study. The paper proceeds by describing the family configurations of single mothers and outlining the central research questions, which explore differences by education and

partnership status. The following sections describe the data sources and analytical strategy and present findings from the descriptive analyses and regression models. The paper concludes with a discussion and final reflections.

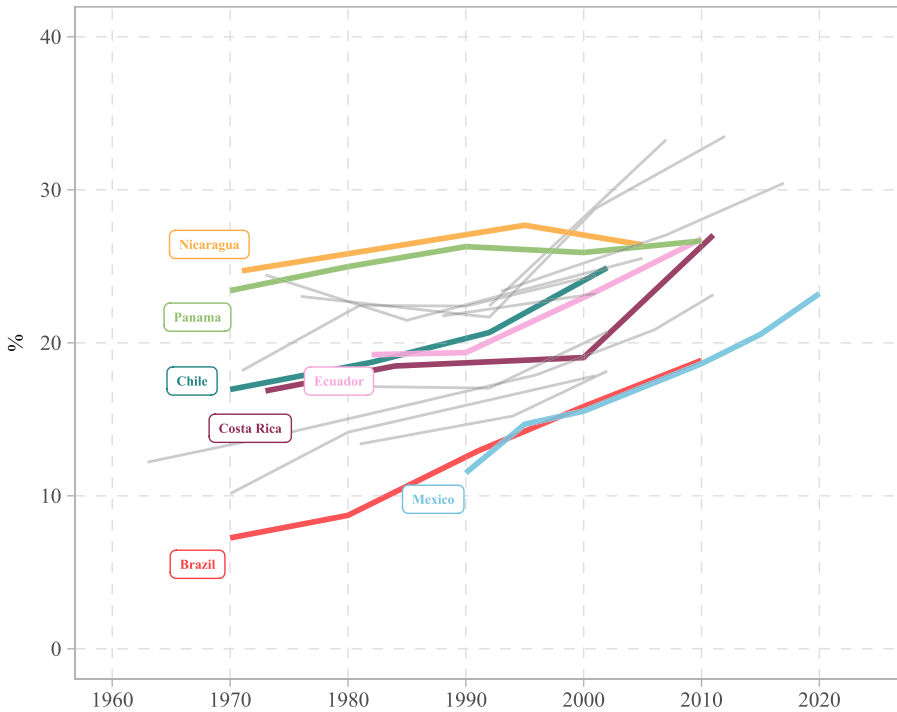
Background

Single motherhood in Latin America

Most Latin American countries share a set of distinctive family patterns that contribute to the high proportion of relatively young women raising their children without a partner. Early ages at first union and first birth coincide with a high prevalence of informal unions and union dissolution (Castro-Martin 2002; Ruiz-Vallejo and Solsona i Pairó 2020). The combination of these factors results in a large number of women who become mothers before age 30, many of whom raise their children without a coresidential partner (Laplanche, Castro Martín, and Cortina 2018). This constitutes a distinctive pattern at the global level, which can be illustrated using data from the Global Living Arrangements Database (GLAD) (Galeano and Esteve 2025). A brief look at recent GLAD data shows that, among women aged 30 who live with children, whether in nuclear or extended households, the share who coreside with their own children as single mothers ranges from 17 percent to 40 percent across countries, with a regional average of 26 percent. These levels are higher than in any other region of the world. In Europe, for example, the regional average reaches 17 percent, with the highest country-level value at 29, while in Asia less than 12 percent of women raise children without a partner. In Africa, despite South Africa and Botswana having levels of single motherhood above 50 percent, the regional average in recent decades is 24, with the highest values largely attributable to elevated adult mortality.

Moreover, the share of single mothers in Latin American countries has risen over recent decades, a trend also observed in other regions of the world, such as Asia (Raymo et al. 2014; Raymo and Zhou 2012), North America (Dunifon, Ziol-Guest, and Kopko 2014; Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Osborne and McLanahan 2007), Europe (Härkönen 2017; Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023), and Africa (Adewoyin et al. 2022). Previous research has already documented the rise in single motherhood (Esteve, García-Román, Lesthaeghe 2012; UN Women 2019), but trends can now be updated with more recent data and a broader set of countries. Using the census microdata that will be described in detail in the methodological section, we constructed Figure 1 to provide context on the levels and continuous rise in the proportion of women without a coresidential partner among those aged 25–34 living with their children. The data reveal a generalized increase across all countries, with a relatively uniform pace of growth that has nonetheless preserved cross-national

FIGURE 1 Proportion of single mothers among mothers aged 25–34 who coreside with their children in 17 Latin American countries, by census year



NOTE: Single motherhood is measured as the weighted proportion of mothers not residing with a partner, among all mothers, in each country-year sample.

SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-I).

differences. For illustrative purposes, several countries are highlighted (see Online Appendix T1 for country-year values). Among the 17 countries for which data are available between 1963 and 2020, the absolute increase in single motherhood ranged from 1 percentage point in Colombia to 12 percentage points in Mexico.

The reasons underlying trends in single motherhood are potentially diverse and call for a closer examination of the trajectories that may lead women into this situation. We distinguish three primary pathways.

The first, and most common, involves union dissolution among women with children. While ages at first union and first birth have remained relatively stable, rates of union dissolution have risen steadily across the region. This increase has occurred alongside a marked expansion of consensual unions at the expense of marriage (Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022). Consensual unions have historically exhibited higher risks of dissolution (Cerrutti and Binstock 2009; Esteve, Castro Torres, and Becca 2025; Pérez Amador 2008; Ruiz-Vallejo and Solsona i Pairó 2020), which likely contributed to growing family instability. The case of Colombia illustrates the sustained rise in dissolution for both consensual and

marital unions, with consistently higher rates among the former. According to Colombian DHS data analyzed in Ruiz's dissertation (Ruiz-Vallejo 2018), the share of consensual unions that dissolve within 10 years increased from 34 percent to 47 percent between the cohorts of union formed before 1991 and after 2004. Similar patterns are reported for Mexico (Quilodrán Salgado and Arrieta-Arrieta 2022), Uruguay (Cabella 2010), Brazil (Leone and Hinde 2007), and other countries in the region. Thus, the persistence of relatively early ages at first union and first birth, combined with rising union instability, has likely played a central role in the increase in single motherhood.

The second pathway includes women who have had children and live with them without ever having coresided with a partner. These women enter single motherhood from the time of pregnancy. Latin America has long been characterized by high levels of adolescent fertility, a substantial share of which occurs outside stable unions (Garbett et al. 2025; Lima, Zeman, and Nathan 2021; Neal et al. 2018; Rodríguez Vignoli and Cavenaghi 2014). Castro-Martín and colleagues estimated that, across several Latin American countries, 7 percent of births in 1970 occurred outside a union, compared with 15 percent in 2000 (Castro-Martín et al. 2011; Laplante, Castro Martín, and Cortina 2018). As fertility has fallen, the relative contribution of these women to the single-mother population may have increased. Identifying this pathway in census and survey data is challenging, given the absence of retrospective or longitudinal information, although marital status provides a partial approximation.

The third pathway concerns women who live with their children while their partners are absent due to migration or residence elsewhere. In Latin America, partner absence related to internal and international migration may contribute to the rise in single motherhood (Creighton, Park, and Teruel 2009). These women are formally in a union but assume parenting responsibilities within the household without a coresidential partner. In this situation, remittances from partners may improve their economic well-being (Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2010; Sana and Massey 2005), thus increasing the opportunities for independent living compared to divorced or never partnered mothers (DeWaard, Nobles, and Donato 2018). At the same time, partner migration could also be disruptive, elevating the risk of union dissolution due to financial strain or prolonged separation (Lindstrom, Hernández-Jabalera, and Saucedo 2021). As with the previous pathways, capturing this process in census data is challenging. In the absence of longitudinal information, combining household composition with marital status offers the most realistic approximation to partnered mothers who raise their children with absent partners.

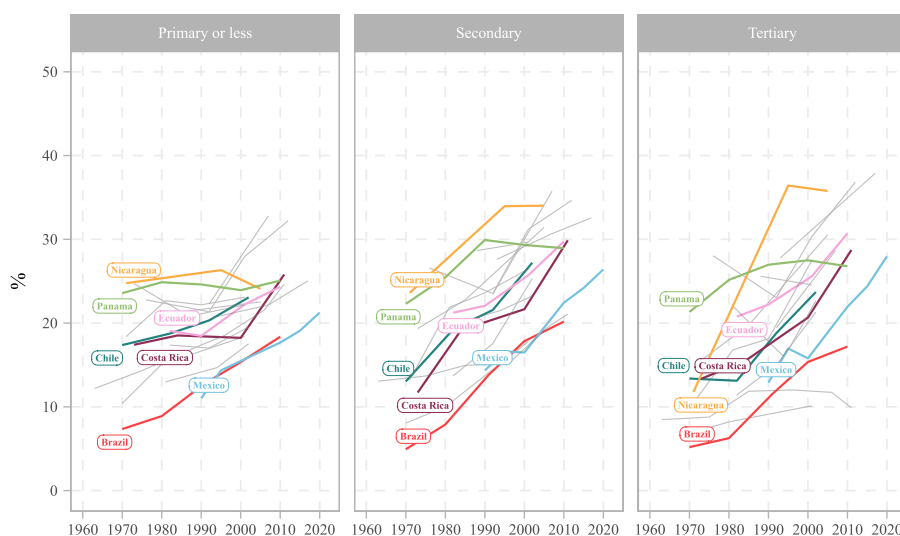
The family dynamics underlying the three pathways discussed above are strongly stratified by social class. Years of schooling offer the most direct and common way to approximate such social differences.

Educational attainment in Latin America continues to reflect substantial social inequalities, and despite the marked educational expansion of recent decades, most transitions to adulthood remain strongly differentiated by education (Batyra 2016; Blanco, Solís, and Robles 2014; Rios-Neto, Miranda-Ribeiro, and Miranda-Ribeiro 2018). A large body of research shows that higher levels of schooling are associated with later union formation and childbearing (Batyra 2020; Lima, Zeman, and Nathan 2021; Pesando et al. 2021). However, increases in schooling have not translated into significant delays in the age at first union or first birth at the population level (Esteve, López-Ruiz, and Spijker 2013). This apparent paradox, often referred to as the “stability paradox,” suggests that improvements in educational attainment have not fundamentally altered the timing of family formation but rather have reproduced social inequalities at higher average levels of schooling (Castro Torres 2021).

Educational gradients in family dynamics are visible across multiple dimensions. Women with lower levels of education have historically faced higher chances of entering unions through cohabitation, faster transitions into motherhood, and greater risks of union dissolution (Batyra and Kohler 2022). Although recent evidence points to a gradual convergence in family patterns across social strata (Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022; Laplante et al. 2015), educational differences still persist. At the same time, many family behaviors that were once concentrated among the least educated have progressively extended to more highly educated groups. The expansion of cohabitation is a clear example of this diffusion. The rise in nonmarital cohabitation, although likely driven by different meanings and motivations among more advantaged groups (Covre-Sussai et al. 2015), has been particularly pronounced among highly educated women (Esteve, Lesthaeghe, and López-Gay 2012; Rios-Neto, Miranda-Ribeiro, and Miranda-Ribeiro 2018). In line with this trend, nonmarital childbearing has also increased among women with higher education, reaching approximately 25 percent of births to tertiary-educated women across several countries by the early 2000s (Castro-Martín et al. 2011).

Despite existing differences by educational level in the share of young women who are partnered and have children, an important finding of this study is that the proportion of mothers raising their children without a coresidential partner has increased across all educational groups. In relative terms, the rise has been most pronounced among women with secondary and tertiary education. Moreover, when looking at the most recent data points, educational differences have narrowed, with the levels of single motherhood observed among university-educated women now approaching, and even exceeding, those of women with only primary schooling. These trends are clearly illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the proportion of single mothers among women aged 25–34 who live with their children, by educational attainment. Single motherhood is therefore a phenomenon

FIGURE 2 Trends in the proportion of single mothers among mothers aged 25–34 who coreside with their children by educational attainment in 17 Latin American countries, by census year



NOTE: Primary or less include less than primary and primary completed; secondary and tertiary education refer to completed levels.

SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-I).

that affects all educational strata. The question that follows, however, is whether the living arrangements of these groups differ from one another, and whether such differences persist once we account for factors that may explain them, such as the varying weight of the pathways described earlier within each educational group. In the next section, we turn to the issue of living arrangements.

Single mothers' living arrangements and intergenerational support

We began this article by noting that approximately two-thirds of single mothers in Latin America live in extended households (Esteve, García-Román, and Lesthaeghe 2012), coresiding with members of their extended families. In most cases, these are their own parents, who play a central role in the provision of childcare (Aragao and Villanueva 2021). Intergenerational coresidence between two adult generations is a common feature of family systems characterized by strong intergenerational ties (Becca, Esteve, and Castro Torres 2025; Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023; Raymo and Zhou 2012). It often constitutes a normative form of intergenerational support, typically expressed through shared housing and pooled resources among relatives (Reyes 2020). Extended households represent an adaptive family strategy, in which intergenerational transfers of resources may contribute to the well-being of all family members (Bengtson 2001; Bianchi 2014).

The most extensively studied forms of intergenerational coresidence are those typically associated with patrilocal family systems, in which filial obligations establish stable patterns of coresidence between adult children, especially sons, and their parents, and often involve two adult couples living together and are commonly found across several Asian contexts (Dai, Esteve, García-Román 2025). Such systems have historically contrasted with settings where neolocal residence predominates, raising ongoing debates about whether patrilocality reflects deeply rooted cultural norms or functional adaptations to economic conditions (Becca and Esteve 2025; Gruijters and Ermisch 2019). Latin America, given its mestizo heritage, does not fit neatly within either framework (Cuno 2010), and extended households in the region are generally understood to arise less from culturally prescribed patrilocal norms and more from material need and adversity (De Vos 1987, 517).

In the case of women raising children without a coresidential partner, whether or not such a partner ever existed, coresidence with other relatives, typically their own parents, is particularly widespread and plays a central role in everyday family organization. This pattern is common across much of the Global South. Nevertheless, data from the GLAD (Galeano and Esteve 2025) confirm that Latin America is the only region where the prevalence of extended living arrangements among single mothers consistently exceeds 50 percent in all countries. Evidence from other sources further underscores this pronounced regional contrast. For instance, intergenerational coresidence among single mothers in Europe varies substantially, from 0 percent to 6 percent in Northern and Western countries to 13–39 percent in Southern and Eastern Europe (Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023). In Japan, roughly one in three single mothers lives with their parents (Raymo and Zhou 2012), compared with about 20 percent and 10 percent in Taiwan and Korea, respectively (Chen 2016; Park, Choi, and Jo 2016). In the United States, Pilkauskas and Cross (2018) estimate that 20 percent of unmarried mothers and 10 percent of children of separated, divorced, or widowed women reside in multigenerational households. Against this comparative backdrop, Latin America stands out: intergenerational coresidence among single mothers is not merely common but a defining feature of family organization in the region, reaching around 70 percent in most contexts (Esteve, García-Román, and Lesthaeghe 2012). Longitudinal data for Mexico show that more than two-thirds of extended households among single mothers are formed at the moment of union dissolution (Trias-Prats, Floridi, and Esteve 2026). Among Mexican women born in the 1980s, over half move into an extended household in the same year they become single mothers, according to previous research based on retrospective data from the *Encuesta Demográfica Retrospectiva* (EDER) (Becca and Esteve 2026).

For single mothers, coresidential arrangements can substantially mitigate the economic, temporal, and emotional strains associated with raising

children without a partner (Shirahase and Raymo 2014). Living with extended family members provides an important source of support, as single mothers typically shoulder both caregiving and breadwinning responsibilities (Guarin et al. 2025; Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023). Intergenerational coresidence with parents or other relatives can buffer these pressures by pooling resources and sharing childcare, thereby improving the well-being of mothers and their children (Amorim, Dunifon, and Pilkauskas 2017; Guarin et al. 2025). A growing body of research, particularly in the United States, also highlights potential benefits for children: those living with single mothers and grandparents have access to greater economic resources, perform better in school, and are more likely to enroll in college compared to children living solely with a single parent (Deleire and Kalil 2002; Pohl, Batyra, and Esteve 2026; Sun and Li 2002). Evidence from Latin America points in a similar direction. Previous work shows that children growing up with a single mother, whether or not other extended kin are present, perform better in school and exhibit higher levels of school participation than those living with unmarried cohabiting parents (Esteve, Castro Torres, and Becca 2025). Likewise, female-headed households are not necessarily associated with more precarious material conditions than other household types (Liu, Esteve, and Treviño 2017). These findings challenge traditional perspectives that link single motherhood to poverty and adverse child outcomes (McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994), particularly when analyses do not incorporate mediating mechanisms such as intergenerational support and coresidence.

While these patterns underscore the importance of intergenerational coresidence as a key mechanism of support for single mothers, the extent to which such arrangements can materialize depends fundamentally on the availability of kin with whom to share a household. In other words, even when the need for support is high and the benefits of coresidence are clear, single mothers' living arrangements are ultimately shaped by the demographic opportunities and constraints of their kin networks. Fertility declines across all education levels have reduced household size and the number of lateral kin, such as siblings, aunts, and uncles (Alburez-Gutierrez, Williams, and Caswell 2023; Becca, Esteve, and Castro Torres 2025). In contrast, declining mortality and rising life expectancy (Martinez et al. 2021) have increased the availability of vertical kin, such as parents and grandparents, with whom single mothers now share more years of life (Settles et al. 2009). Improvements in healthy life expectancy also mean that parents remain able to provide childcare for longer periods (Alburez-Gutierrez, Mason, and Zagheni 2021). At the same time, intergenerational coresidence will depend not only on kin availability but also on competing demands for familial support. For instance, parents with multiple adult children may have limited capacity to support all of them (Lawson and Mace

2009), and single mothers with larger numbers of children may face housing constraints that reduce the feasibility of shared living arrangements.

Variation in extended households by education and partnership status

Building on the importance of single mothers in Latin America and the prevalence of extended households among them, this study examines whether coresidence patterns vary by education and partnership trajectories, and whether these patterns have changed over time. While our data do not allow for causal inference, they can reveal associations and patterns that have not yet been documented. To date, no research has systematically examined how single mothers' living arrangements are stratified by education, partnership status, and household type across countries in the region, or how these patterns have evolved over time.

We first consider the nature of living arrangements. Has the proportion of single mothers living in extended households changed, and how has the composition of these households evolved, particularly regarding the presence of parents versus other adults? In the context of demographic change, including declining fertility, increased parental survival, and shrinking extended families, we expect parents to play a relatively larger role in extended households compared to more complex arrangements.

Coresidence strategies are likely to vary by partnership status. If economic disadvantage shapes living arrangements, we would expect to find differences between single mothers who identify as single, who likely never coresided with a partner in a stable union, and those who are separated, divorced, widowed, or in union with an absent partner. The latter group may be more likely to have maintained an independent nuclear household with children following union dissolution or the partner's migration and to be receiving economic support.

Educational stratification may also shape living arrangements in complex ways. Less-educated single mothers may rely more on extended households due to economic constraints, yet their families may have fewer resources or face greater competition for support (Lawson and Mace 2009). Conversely, higher educated single mothers may be better positioned to live independently, but their families may also have greater capacity to provide coresidential support or to offset the opportunity costs associated with raising children without a partner. Although single motherhood has increased across all educational groups, suggesting some convergence in family behaviors, pathways into single motherhood remain stratified by education and social class (Castro Torres 2021).

While fully verifying these assumptions is difficult, they have been approximated using longitudinal data, for example, with the EDER in Mexico (Coubès, Solís, and Zavala de Cosío 2017; Zavala De Cosío and Seville 2023). Prior research on Mexico using EDER indicates that coresidence is not only

a strategy of the disadvantaged: better educated single mothers, and particularly those who have never partnered, are more likely to coreside with parents at the onset of single motherhood (Becca and Esteve 2025; Trias-Prats, Floridi, and Esteve 2026). Drawing on these assumptions and prior findings, we expect single mothers' living arrangements in Latin America to be stratified by both education and partnership status.

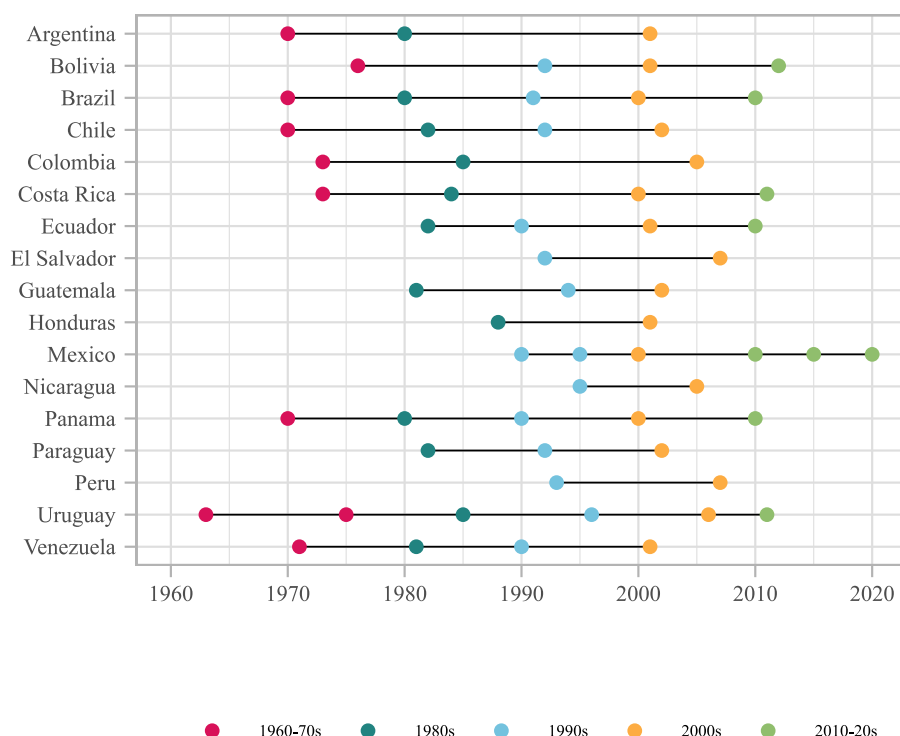
Together, these considerations motivate our central research questions: How has the composition of extended households changed over time? How do living arrangements of single mothers vary by education and partnership status? And how do education and partnership trajectories intersect to shape patterns of intergenerational support? While we cannot establish causal links, analyzing these associations can clarify some mechanisms underlying the variation in living arrangements of single mothers in contemporary Latin America.

Data and methods

Data and classification of living arrangements typologies

We use harmonized census microdata from the IPUMS-I project (Ruggles et al. 2025), which allows for comparative studies over time and across countries, with the earliest data dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. Our sample pools 62 census datasets from 17 countries spanning five decades, as shown in Figure 3, and focuses on women aged 25–34 who reside with at least one child but do not coreside with a partner. For our analysis, we select all private household, including a single mother. Single mothers are defined as women in this age range who live with at least one child without a coresidential partner, regardless of marital status. This age range was chosen because, in Latin America, the mean age at first birth is relatively early, so most women have already transitioned into motherhood and are at risk of becoming single mothers. Women younger than age 25 are excluded because adolescent and early fertility are strongly associated with extended coresidence, which would inflate the prevalence of such arrangements for reasons primarily related to age rather than to the socioeconomic and partnership characteristics central to our analysis. Selecting this range also minimizes cohort overlap, given that censuses are typically conducted at intervals of at least 10 years, while maximizing the proportion of women who have completed their educational trajectories, particularly at the tertiary level. Variations in the age groups selected may affect the absolute levels of single motherhood, but they do not alter the overall patterns or the educational and partnership gradients that we illustrate here. To identify women who coreside with their children, we use pointer variables derived from household members' relationships (Sobek and Kennedy 2009). Pointer variables are individual-level variables that combine information on the relationship

FIGURE 3 IPUMS samples of census microdata by country and decade used in this analysis



SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-I).

of each household member to the reference person with basic demographics, like age, sex, and marital status. Specifically, we use NCHILD (number of own children in the household) to determine whether a woman coresides with her children, and the partner location variable SPLOC, to determine whether a woman's partner is present, with a value of 0 indicating that the partner is absent.

Once the reference population has been identified, the next step is to classify women according to their living arrangements. We distinguish three typologies: (1) nuclear, consisting of women who live only with their children; (2) extended with parents, including women who live with at least one child and at least one of their parents, with other extended kin possibly present; and (3) extended without parents, grouping women who live with at least one child and at least one other relative, but with neither parent present.

To construct these typologies, we use pointer variables and the household classification provided by IPUMS. The most relevant pointer variables indicate whether the respondent lives with a partner (SPLOC), information already used to identify single mothers, and whether they live with their

father (POPLOC) or mother (MOMLOC). The household classification is a constructed variable that describes the composition of the household based on members' relationship to the head and position pointer variables. It includes 12 possible categories, some of which are particularly relevant for this study, such as "single-parent family" or "extended family, relatives only." Single mothers living in households classified as "single-parent family" are assigned to the nuclear category. For single mothers living in extended households with at least one parent present, we use the MOMLOC and POPLOC variables to identify whether a parent resides in the household. Finally, for the third group (extended without parents), we exclude those already classified in the first two categories and cross-check household composition using the IPUMS-I household classification variable, including categories such as "extended family, relatives only," "composite household, family and nonrelatives," and "nonfamily household."

In the end, our sample includes 2,131,170 observations, representing approximately 21 million single mothers across five decades and 17 Latin American countries.

Key individual characteristics and controls

In this section, we describe the individual-level variables used to examine single mothers' living arrangements, focusing on both the main predictors of interest, education and partnership status, and relevant controls. Educational level, based on the harmonized IPUMS variable EDATTAN, serves as our main predictor, as family trajectories in Latin America remain strongly stratified by education and social class. For clarity, incomplete and complete primary education are combined into a single category ("primary or less"), while secondary and tertiary categories refer to completed education.

Partnership status, proxied by marital status and based on the harmonized IPUMS variable MARST, is categorized into three groups to capture different pathways into single motherhood. The first group, never in union, includes single mothers who have never experienced either a legal or consensual union, serving as a proxy for out-of-union births. The second group combines separated, divorced, and widowed single mothers, who have experienced a partnership that ended either through union dissolution or the partner's death. The third category, partner absent, refers to single mothers who are currently in a partnership but do not coreside with their partner, reflecting situations such as partner out-migration, particularly relevant in countries with high emigration rates (e.g., Venezuela, Mexico, Nicaragua).

We also include control variables to account for factors that may influence living arrangements. Age is treated categorically, with two five-year groups (25–29 and 30–34). Household composition is captured through the number of resident children (1, 2, or 3+) and the age of the youngest child (0–4, 5–9, 10–14, 15+), as a proxy for child dependency. Employment status

distinguishes women who are employed from those who are unemployed or economically inactive, providing a broad measure of labor market participation. We acknowledge that employment alone does not necessarily indicate higher living standards and that more detailed occupational information is unavailable across all samples.

Table 1 reports the samples, number of cases, and variables included in this study. It presents mean values for each variable along with the range observed across available samples within each decade. In total, the data comprises 2,131,170 observations drawn from 17 countries over five decades. Country-level details are provided in Online Appendix T2. The descriptive patterns confirm the expansion of educational attainment across the region and the increase in the distribution of separated, divorced, or widowed mothers. Those never in union remained relatively stable, while the proportion of mothers with absent partners decreased over the decades. The age composition of single mothers has remained fairly stable. Most single mothers reside in urban areas. The share of single mothers with only one child has increased over time, reflecting declining fertility levels in the region. Finally, the percentage of single mothers who are employed has risen over the decades.

Analytical strategy

In the first part of the analysis, we present descriptive trends on the prevalence of single mothers among the three typologies of living arrangements and change over time. Then we break this prevalence down by education and partnership status to compare groups and change over time.

In the second part of the analysis, we explore how educational background and partnership status are associated with different living arrangements typologies among single mothers. Our analytical strategy follows a hierarchical two-stage process. We fit two binary logistic regression models with country-fixed effects to account for unobserved country-specific characteristics. In the first stage (outcome 1), we model the probability of a single mother living in an extended household, of any type (extended with parents and extended without parents are grouped), as opposed to living in nuclear. Here, we aim to understand how single mothers' education and pathway into single motherhood explain differences between extended and non-extended typologies.

In the second stage (outcome 2), conditional on living in an extended household, we model the probability of living in an extended household with parents, as opposed to living in extended without parents (single mothers living in nuclear are not included). With this model, we narrow our analysis by modeling only the extended typologies of living arrangements. We control for all other abovementioned variables, and we report results in odds ratios. All estimations are weighted by census person-weights, and models

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics across decades

	1960–1970s			1980s			1990s			2000s			2010–2020s		
	Mean	(min - max)		Mean	(min-max)		Mean	(min-max)		Mean	(min-max)		Mean	(min-max)	
Percentage of single mothers	17.3	(7.1–24.7)		17.8	(8.8–25.0)		19.7	(11.5–27.7)		23.3	(16.0–33.3)		25.4	(19.7–33.5)	
Living arrangements typology															
Nuclear	32.9	(25.9–43.3)		29.8	(20.7–38.2)		33.7	(22.0–53.0)		34.8	(25.2–48.2)		37.4	(27.9–47.5)	
Extended with parents	36.4	(14.9–47.5)		44.7	(39.9–50.2)		43.5	(21.5–56.8)		46.0	(22.0–56.0)		47.8	(29.7–61.2)	
Extended without parents	30.7	(22.0–46.8)		25.6	(19.0–30.3)		22.8	(15.7–28.7)		19.2	(11.3–29.8)		14.8	(10.9–24.2)	
Education															
Primary or less	92.7	(84.9–97.0)		83.9	(75.2–95.5)		76.2	(53.5–88.1)		66.1	(37.4–85.6)		58.4	(46.8–76.5)	
Secondary	6.4	(2.6–14.3)		13.9	(3.4–22.9)		19.9	(8.9–40.7)		28.9	(11.5–51.9)		30.2	(20.2–37.9)	
Tertiary	1.0	(0.3–3.3)		2.2	(1.1–4.5)		3.9	(1.6–7.5)		5.0	(0.2–10.8)		11.4	(1.9–18.1)	
Age															
25–29	50.1	(45.0–55.0)		52.1	(49.5–53.8)		49.7	(45.4–54.1)		49.5	(45.5–53.3)		47.7	(44.9–50.1)	
30–34	49.9	(45.0–55.0)		47.9	(46.2–50.5)		50.3	(45.9–54.6)		50.5	(46.7–54.5)		52.3	(49.9–55.1)	
Marital Status															
Never in union	33.9	(11.1–56.9)		39.1	(20.0–65.6)		32.7	(15.8–58.8)		40.9	(19.5–63.6)		34.0	(18.0–56.0)	
Sep/Div/Wid	29.3	(13.4–67.0)		34.0	(11.8–59.3)		36.5	(13.0–63.2)		31.6	(14.9–75.0)		45.7	(10.3–74.1)	
Partner absent	36.8	(1.9–53.8)		26.9	(0.0–41.3)		30.8	(0.0–53.3)		27.5	(0.4–56.7)		20.3	(0.5–48.6)	
Urban/rural residence															
Rural	30.0	(11.5–50.2)		27.8	(9.1–50.2)		23.9	(11.2–51.6)		24.6	(7.8–45.4)		22.5	(9.1–33.2)	
Urban	70.0	(49.8–88.5)		72.2	(49.8–90.9)		76.1	(48.4–88.8)		75.4	(54.6–92.2)		77.5	(66.8–90.9)	
Number of coresident children															
1	36.6	(24.6–50.9)		38.7	(26.4–47.3)		38.6	(27.8–52.5)		42.7	(29.6–58.8)		47.3	(43.2–51.9)	
2	25.6	(21.1–30.8)		27.5	(25.0–30.5)		28.6	(26.6–31.9)		29.4	(26.9–33.4)		30.9	(29.0–33.5)	

...

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	1960–1970s		1980s		1990s		2000s		2010–2020s	
	Mean	(min - max)	Mean	(min-max)	Mean	(min-max)	Mean	(min-max)	Mean	(min-max)
Age of youngest child										
3+	37.8	(22.4–53.0)	33.9	(23.1–48.2)	32.9	(17.0–44.9)	27.9	(12.5–43.2)	21.8	(19.0–27.4)
0–4	62.8	(52.5–73.1)	60.9	(52.0–71.2)	58.7	(52.3–66.5)	53.6	(45.5–62.9)	48.8	(41.7–57.0)
5–9	26.7	(19.9–33.4)	29.4	(22.6–37.9)	30.2	(24.2–35.9)	34.3	(28.3–39.6)	36.3	(29.3–40.1)
10–14	9.1	(5.5–12.9)	8.5	(5.5–10.6)	9.8	(7.4–13.2)	10.7	(7.5–13.6)	13.1	(10.3–17.9)
15+	1.4	(0.7–2.4)	1.2	(0.7–1.8)	1.3	(0.8–1.9)	1.4	(0.9–2.1)	1.8	(1.0–2.6)
Employment status										
Employed	43.3	(33.3–56.1)	47.4	(32.3–66.0)	52.4	(35.4–68.6)	53.7	(38.8–68.2)	64.4	(53.7–76.4)
Unemployed/inactive	56.7	(43.9–66.7)	52.6	(34.0–67.7)	47.6	(31.4–64.6)	46.3	(31.8–61.2)	35.6	(23.6–46.3)
Number of samples	10		12		14		17		9	
N (unweighted)	141,453		253,606		424,968		573,233		737,910	

NOTE: Mean is the pooled mean across all individual observations from all countries within each decade. Min-max reports the minimum and maximum country-level values observed in that decade.

SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-1).

are estimated using the Survey package in R for the analysis of complex survey samples (Lumley 2004). Because there could be more than one single mother living together, we cluster single mothers in households. More than 75 percent live in separate households; thus, this unlikely biases our estimates.

When designing the analysis, we faced the choice between estimating a single model including all countries with country fixed effects or running separate models for each country. The second approach would generate a much larger number of results, while the first is simpler but limits some country-specific insights. Preliminary country-specific analyses indicate that the direction of the results is consistent across countries and that the stratification patterns we present do not vary substantially by country. For this reason, we opted to estimate a single pooled model, reinforcing the idea that certain family patterns are common across Latin America, as previous studies on family dynamics have also shown.

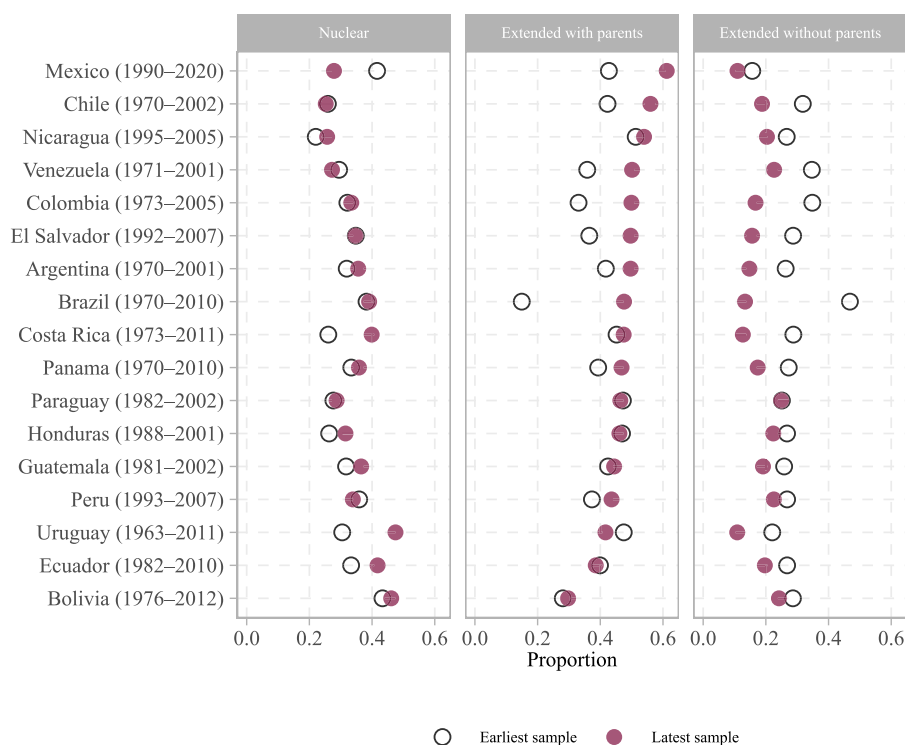
Results

Time trend in single mothers' living arrangements typologies

Figure 4 shows the distribution of single mothers in Latin America by typology of living arrangement. Panels correspond to the three typologies, and within each panel the values from the earliest and latest sample for each country are displayed, with exact sample years shown in brackets after the country name. Solid purple circles represent the latest sample, while black-outlined circles indicate the earliest, allowing for straightforward comparison over time. Countries are ordered by the values of the latest sample for single mothers living in extended-with-parents arrangements. The results show that the proportion of single mothers living in nuclear (only children) households does not exceed 50 percent in any country or year observed. Thus, the data confirm that most single mothers reside in extended households, and the balance between nuclear and extended arrangements has remained relatively stable over time. Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Mexico stand out as the countries with the largest shifts. In Uruguay and Costa Rica, the share of single mothers living in nuclear households increased by at least 13 percentage points, whereas in Mexico it decreased by approximately 14 points.

This stability over time between nuclear and extended households does not apply to the two types of extended living arrangements. First, the most common extended arrangement is coresidence with parents, while extended households without parents are generally less frequent and represent the least common option overall. In many countries, living with parents accounts for more than 50 percent of all single mothers, and it is the form of extended living that has either grown the most or remained stable. In fact,

FIGURE 4 Share of single mothers by living arrangement, country, and earliest and latest census year available

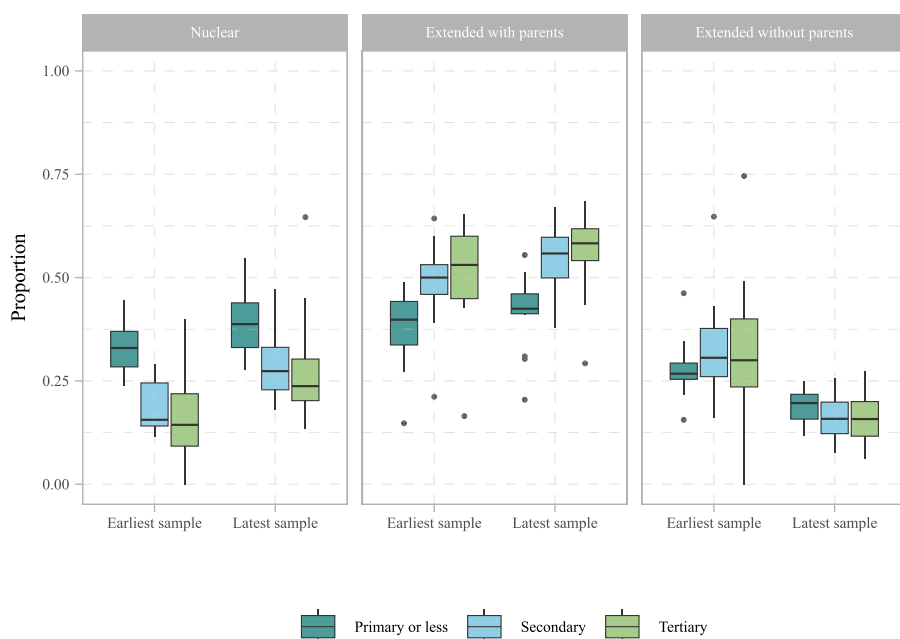


SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-I).

the share of single mothers living with parents has increased in nine countries. In contrast, there has been a widespread decline in the proportion of single mothers living in extended households without parents in almost all countries. Overall, we find that the prevalence of extended households has remained stable throughout the study period and continues to be a widely used strategy among single mothers, especially in the context of rising single motherhood at these ages. However, we also observe changes in the nature of these arrangements, marked by a growing presence of parents compared to earlier decades.

Living arrangements by education and partnership status

Figure 5 shows the proportion of single mothers in each typology of living arrangements by educational attainment. As in Figure 4, we compare values from the earliest and the latest census samples available. Two main results emerge. First, there are significant differences by education. The share of single mothers living with their parents is higher at higher levels of education, whereas the share living in nuclear households, without other adult

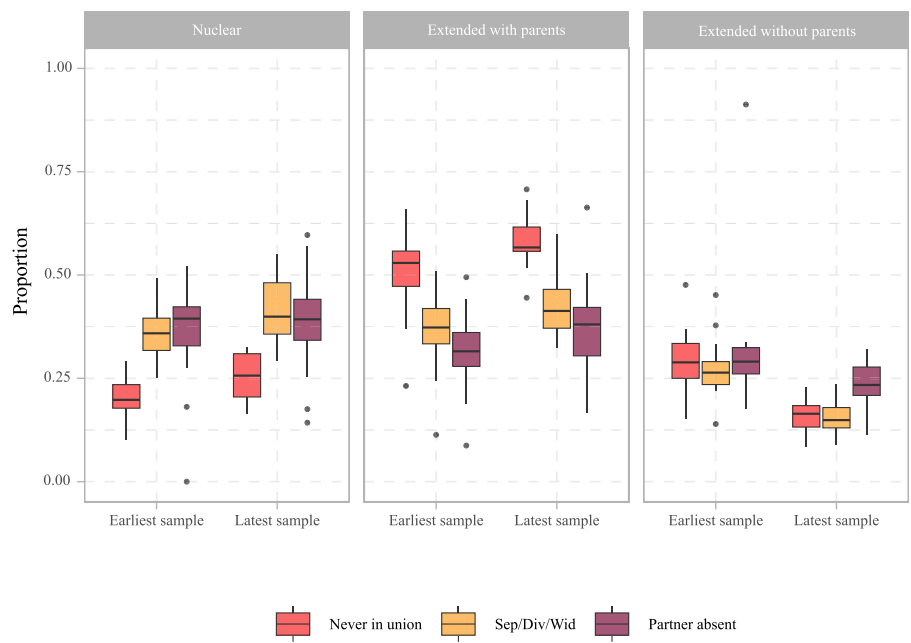
FIGURE 5 Cross-country distribution of single mothers' living arrangements by educational attainment in the earliest and latest census years

SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-I).

members, declines as education rises. By contrast, no clear educational gradient appears among single mothers living in extended households without their parents. Second, educational differences in living arrangements remain relatively stable over time. Consistent with Figure 4, we observe an expansion of extended living with parents and a decline in extended households without parents across all educational groups.

Figure 6 presents the cross-country distribution of the share of single mothers in each living arrangement typology by partnership status: never in union, separated/divorced/widowed, and partner absent. As before, we compare the earliest and latest census observations available for each country. Two main findings emerge. First, as in the case of education, there are clear differences by partnership status. Never-in-union mothers are the most likely to live with their parents and the least likely to live independently, whereas mothers in unions whose partners are absent, as well as those who were ever in a union (separated, divorced, or widowed), show higher levels of residential independence and a lower tendency to live with their parents than never-in-union mothers. Differences by partnership status in the likelihood of living in extended households without parents are less pronounced. Second, the overall pattern remains relatively stable over time.

FIGURE 6 Cross-country distribution of single mothers' living arrangements by partnership status in the earliest and latest census years



SOURCE: Census microdata (IPUMS-I).

Factors associated with single mothers' living arrangement types

Table 2 reports the estimates from two binary logistic regression models. The first two columns represent results for Model 1 and Model 2 (M1 and M2), whose dependent variable (outcome 1) is living any typology of extended living arrangements ($= 1$), compared to living in nuclear ($= 0$). The last two columns correspond to the second set of models, Model 3 and Model 4 (M3 and M4), whose outcome variable (outcome 2) is living in extended with parents ($= 1$) as opposed to living in extended without parents ($= 0$). For outcome 2, single mothers living in nuclear are excluded from the analysis. M1 and M3 include only education, partnership status, and decade as predictors, while M2 and M4 add the full set of controls described in the Data and Methods section. References categories are reported in brackets. Coefficients are expressed in odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals. Odds ratios below 1 indicate a lower likelihood of the outcome, and those above 1 a higher likelihood, compared to the respective reference category. We opted for two sequential binary logistic models, rather than a single multinomial regression, because of our interest in a hierarchical comparison. In the first stage, we place the focus on the differences between living in extended and non-extended typologies. In the second stage, we disaggregate the extended typologies to narrow our results and identify the characteristics associated with each one.

TABLE 2 Logistic regression results (odds ratios) predicting the likelihood of living in an extended versus a nuclear household (Models 1 and 2) and of living in an extended household with parents versus without parents (Models 3 and 4)

	Outcome 1 (Any extended = 1)				Outcome 2 [Extended with parents = 1)			
	M1 ^a		M2 ^b		M3 ^a		M4 ²	
	OR	[CI 95%]	OR	[CI 95%]	OR	[CI 95%]	OR	[CI 95%]
Intercept	2.52	[2.45, 2.59]	4.77	[4.61, 4.93]	3.93	[3.78, 4.09]	3.54	[3.39, 3.70]
Decade								
1960–1970s	1.27	[1.25, 1.30]	1.39	[1.37, 1.42]	0.33	[0.32, 0.34]	0.27	[0.27, 0.28]
1980s	1.43	[1.41, 1.45]	1.47	[1.45, 1.49]	0.67	[0.66, 0.68]	0.66	[0.65, 0.67]
1990s	1.11	[1.07, 1.14]	1.12	[1.09, 1.16]	0.85	[0.82, 0.88]	0.88	[0.84, 0.92]
2000 (ref.)	-		-		-		-	
2010–2020s	1.09	[1.07, 1.10]	1.09	[1.07, 1.11]	1.22	[1.19, 1.25]	1.24	[1.21, 1.27]
Educational level (ref. primary or less)								
Secondary	1.51	[1.47, 1.55]	1.24	[1.20, 1.27]	1.43	[1.39, 1.47]	1.50	[1.45, 1.54]
Tertiary	1.55	[1.48, 1.62]	1.21	[1.15, 1.28]	1.52	[1.40, 1.64]	1.65	[1.52, 1.79]
Marital Status (ref. never in union)								
Sep/Div/Wid	0.39	[0.38, 0.40]	0.49	[0.48, 0.51]	0.71	[0.68, 0.73]	0.74	[0.71, 0.76]
Partner absent	0.43	[0.41, 0.44]	0.48	[0.46, 0.50]	0.42	[0.40, 0.44]	0.39	[0.37, 0.41]
Age (ref. 25–29)								
30–34			0.64	[0.63, 0.66]			0.78	[0.75, 0.80]
Urban/rural residence (ref. urban)								
Rural			0.90	[0.88, 0.93]			1.34	[1.29, 1.40]

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Outcome 1 (Any extended = 1)			Outcome 2 [Extended with parents = 1]		
	M1 ^a		M2 ^b	M3 ^a		M4 ²
	OR	[CI 95 %]		OR	[CI 95 %]	
Number of children (ref. 1)						
2			0.55	[0.53, 0.56]		0.98
3+			0.33	[0.32, 0.35]		0.92
Age of youngest child (ref. 0–4)						
5–9			0.85	[0.83, 0.87]		0.99
10–14			0.72	[0.70, 0.75]		0.90
15+			0.62	[0.59, 0.67]		0.54
Employment status (ref. employed)						
Unemployed/inactive			1.30	[1.27, 1.33]		1.13
N (unweighted)						
	2,095,549		2,024,979	1,359,214		1,311,855
Deviance (×10 ³)	2,570,315		2,362,953	1,528,369		1,444,806
Pseudo R ²	0.05		0.13	0.07		0.12

NOTE: Country fixed effect included in all models to account for between-country differences; results omitted for brevity.
OR stands for odds ratios; CI stands for confidence interval.
^aEducation + marital status.
^bEducation + marital status + age + urban/rural + number of resident children + age of youngest child + employment status.

The first two models (M1 and M2) estimate the likelihood of living in an extended household rather than in an independent nuclear household without other adults. Consistent with Figures 5 and 6, we find that both education and partnership status are strongly associated with household type: women with higher educational attainment and those never in union have a higher likelihood of living in extended households compared to less educated women and those who have ever been in a union or whose partner is absent from the household. These two variables operate independently and do not show meaningful interactions, which is why we do not include an interaction term in the model. M1 also includes decade. The temporal pattern shows a modest decline over time, suggesting that, net of education and partnership status, the probability of living in an extended household has decreased slightly across decades. The model also adjusts for country of residence. Importantly, the influence of education and partnership status remains consistent when estimating the models separately for each country (results not shown).

Model 2 adds five additional controls to assess whether education and partnership status continue to play a key role. Although the controls introduce nuance, both variables remain significant predictors. Higher educational attainment continues to be associated with a greater likelihood of living in an extended household, and never-in-union mothers also show a higher probability than mothers in the other partnership categories. The control variables provide additional insights worth highlighting. Extended living arrangements are less common among the older age group, less frequent in rural than in urban areas, less likely as the number of children increases, and less likely as the age of the youngest child increases. In contrast, extended living arrangements are more common among unemployed or inactive single mothers.

Models 3 and 4 examine whether extended households include the single mother's parents or not, and in both models, with or without controls, education and partnership status are significantly associated with the likelihood of coresiding with parents. As educational attainment increases, the probability of living with parents also rises, and never-in-union single mothers are more likely to coreside with their parents than those who are separated, divorced, widowed, or in non-coresidential unions. Changes over time show a clear increase in parent-child coresidence, replacing other forms of extended households without parents. Adding control variables does not alter these main patterns, but it provides additional nuances: living with parents is less common among women aged 30–34 than among those aged 25–29, more frequent in rural than in urban areas, relatively stable across different numbers of children, substantially less likely when the youngest child is aged 15 or older, and more prevalent among inactive or unemployed single mothers.

Conclusions

In this study, we have examined the living arrangements of single mothers in Latin America and how these vary according to education and partnership status. The article complements and updates earlier research that documented the numerical importance and social relevance of extended coresidence among single mothers in the region. Building on the existing literature, our study deepens the analysis of behavioral heterogeneity across social groups and partnership trajectories. Results from both the descriptive analysis and the multivariable models reveal clear and stable patterns of stratification over time, generalizable to the set of 17 countries analyzed. We organize the conclusions into those that confirm and update previously observed trends, and those that offer new insights into family organization dynamics in Latin America as a whole.

Regarding the results that update long-term trends, three conclusions stand out. First, the share of mothers aged 25–34 who do not live with a partner has increased over time in a context where age at first union has remained stable and consensual unions have replaced marriage as the main pathway into partnership (Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022). Second, the proportion of mothers without a partner has grown across all educational levels, but most notably among women with higher levels of education. In the most recent census rounds, differences across educational groups have nearly disappeared. This trend has unfolded alongside a major expansion of education in the region. Third, two-thirds of these mothers live in extended households, a share that has remained stable in recent decades. In summary, the high and persistent prevalence of single mothers raising children in extended households confirms that this living arrangement is a structural feature of family life in Latin America (De Vos 1995).

Turning to the original contributions of this research, four main points emerge. First, although the overall prevalence of extended households among single mothers has remained stable, their internal composition has changed markedly: coresidence with parents has become increasingly common over time, replacing more complex extended arrangements without parents. Second, the residential organization of single mothers is strongly stratified by education and partnership status. Women with higher levels of education and those identifying as never in union are the most likely to live in extended households, whereas such arrangements are less frequent among mothers who have ever been in a union or have a non-coresidential partner, and among those with lower educational attainment. Third, the inclusion of controls, such as number of children, urban–rural residence, and employment status, does not weaken these associations, underscoring the central role of education and partnership trajectories in shaping living arrangements. Fourth, these stratified patterns show remarkable stability over time, suggesting that inequalities in residential strategies are a

persistent feature of family organization in the region. In summary, the interplay between education, partnership histories, and access to family support consistently and enduringly shapes the living arrangements of single mothers in Latin America.

The findings of this study also raise broader considerations beyond the empirical contributions presented above. To begin with, the category of “single mother” conceals substantial heterogeneity in residential arrangements and pronounced social stratification, factors that must be incorporated into any research examining implications for mothers and their children. Material conditions and children’s opportunities vary significantly across household types (Cross 2018; Esteve, Castro Torres, and Becca 2025; Pilkauskas and Cross 2018). In contexts where the nuclear family predominates, and where single mothers therefore tend to raise children without support from other adult relatives, single motherhood is often associated with social disadvantage (Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023). Indeed, because poverty measures commonly relate household income to the number of household members, single-parent households routinely appear among those most likely to fall below the poverty line (McLanahan and Percheski 2008). However, although we did not directly assess this dimension, single motherhood within extended households may be associated with lower poverty levels, given the presence of additional adult earners and a similar number of dependent children. In this sense, intergenerational coresidence constitutes an essential protective mechanism in Latin America, challenging assumptions drawn from Western societies.

Relatedly, several studies indicate that single motherhood is not necessarily associated with poorer educational outcomes for children. In a comparative study of 25 Latin American countries, Esteve and colleagues (2025) show that the schooling levels of children in single-mother households are similar to or only slightly lower than those in married-couple households, and higher than those observed among children living with parents in consensual unions or other family arrangements. This pattern suggests that extended households may play a protective role. Similar conclusions have emerged from studies in African contexts, which find that children in single-mother households do not necessarily experience worse schooling outcomes, likely due to support from extended family members (Pohl, Batyra, and Esteve 2026). Yet, single mothers must not be treated as a homogeneous group. For example, among single mothers whose partners have migrated, remittances and other forms of support may alleviate economic hardship. It is likely that women with lower levels of education and from more disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those in nuclear households, experience the most acute material and socioeconomic constraints and work–family tensions. Capturing these differences, as well as the economic and caregiving transfers that occur within and between households, is essential for advancing research in this area.

The growing number of single mothers, together with the high and persistent prevalence of extended family structures among them, invites reflection on how these patterns compare with those documented elsewhere, particularly in Western societies. A central question concerns the relative importance of different pathways into single motherhood across contexts. Increases in single motherhood may arise from the spread of transnational family arrangements, rising divorce and union instability, or the expansion of childbearing outside stable unions, each with distinct social implications for mothers and children that are strongly conditioned by women's class positions. However, the patterns documented in this study do not fit well with narratives of individualization or family disengagement commonly associated with the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 2010). Instead, our findings point to dynamics rooted in social disadvantage in settings characterized by widespread informal unions, where available evidence suggests that women with higher education and status are disproportionately able to rely on family support for childrearing.

Many of the assumptions and interpretative hypotheses raised in this discussion would require more detailed data than those currently available for a period this long and a sample of countries this large, although they could be examined in-depth using specialized surveys in selected national contexts. Nonetheless, the analysis presented here provides a broad comparative overview of the phenomenon, despite limitations related to the use of cross-sectional data from censuses, which constrain the measurement of stratification by partnership status and social class. Regarding partnership status, we relied on marital status as a proxy. While it captures the bulk of union histories, it does not do so with complete precision. The widespread prevalence of consensual unions in the region complicates the identification of individuals who are unpartnered at the time of the census but were previously in nonmarital unions, and it also conceals the status of non-coresidential partners among women who report being married or in a union. Regarding education as a proxy for social class, it remains a widely used indicator in the region due to its strong correlation with parental education and socioeconomic background, as demonstrated in previous research (De Vos 1995; Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022). However, in a context of rapid educational expansion, its explanatory power may be diminishing, underscoring the need for more refined measures of social stratification in future work. Further consideration concerns the age range of mothers included in our sample. Restricting the analysis to women aged 25–34 likely leads to an underestimation of both the prevalence of single motherhood and the proportion living in extended households, particularly given the high levels of adolescent fertility in the region. At the same time, the analysis does not assess whether these patterns persist at older ages, when processes such as repartnering and multipartner fertility may further shape household arrangements.

Future research should draw on longitudinal information, such as panel surveys or retrospective histories, to address the limitations inherent in cross-sectional census data. Longitudinal information would allow for a detailed analysis of partnership histories into single motherhood, as well as of full living arrangements trajectories. Such data would provide a more nuanced understanding of single motherhood and household dynamics in Latin America by addressing several unanswered questions. For example, is the increase in single motherhood among tertiary-educated mothers led by rising union dissolution rates? Are extended arrangements among single mothers temporary, or do they represent long-term household configurations? To what extent is exiting an extended household associated with repartnering among single mothers? These questions can be adequately addressed using longitudinal data; however, the limited availability of such data in the region constrains cross-national comparability.

Finally, this article contributes to reconstructing the map of family forms and strategies in the region by highlighting a pattern insufficiently recognized in the comparative literature and largely overlooked in global theories of family change. The persistence and centrality of extended households among single mothers in Latin America challenge dominant interpretations, call for a rethinking of global models of family systems, and highlight the universal, yet contextually shaped, role of family and coresidence as strategies of support and protection.

Acknowledgments

This article is part of Federica Becca's doctoral thesis in Demography at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics (CED-CERCA). This work was supported by the CORESIDENCE project, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under Grant No. 101052787, and by the Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca (AGAUR) under Grant No. 2024 FI-2 00111. The authors appreciated valuable feedback from the members of the CORESIDENCE project and colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR). The authors used an AI-based tool for language editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Harmonized Census microdata can be accessed via IPUMS-International, at the following link: <https://international.ipums.org/international/index.shtml>

References

- Adewoyin, Yemi, Olukemi F. Awelewa, Ifeoma Evan Uzoma, and Nkemdilim Patricia Anazonwu. 2022. "Prevalence Pattern and Sociodemographic Correlates of Single Motherhood in Nigeria." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 19 (1): 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-020-00523-0>.
- Alburez-Gutierrez, Diego, Carl Mason, and Emilio Zagheni. 2021. "The 'Sandwich Generation' Revisited: Global Demographic Drivers of Care Time Demands." *Population and Development Review* 47 (4): 997–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12436>.
- Alburez-Gutierrez, Diego, Iván Williams, and Hal Caswell. 2023. "Projections of Human Kinship for All Countries." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120 (52): e2315722120. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2315722120>.
- Amorim, Mariana, Rachel Dunifon, and Natasha Pilkauskas. 2017. "The Magnitude and Timing of Grandparental Coresidence during Childhood in the United States." *Demographic Research* 37 (32): 1695–706. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2017.37.52>.
- Amuedo-Dorantes, Catalina, and Susan Pozo. 2010. "Accounting for Remittance and Migration Effects on Children's Schooling." *World Development* 38 (12): 1747–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2010.05.008>.
- Aragao, Carolina, and Aida Villanueva. 2021. "How Do Mothers Work? Kin Coresidence and Mothers' Work in Latin America." *Demographic Research* 45 (30): 917–56. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2021.45.30>.
- Batya, Ewa. 2016. "Fertility and the Changing Pattern of the Timing of Childbearing in Colombia." *Demographic Research* 35 (46): 1343–72. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.46>.
- Batya, Ewa. 2020. "Increasing Educational Disparities in the Timing of Motherhood in the Andean Region: A Cohort Perspective." *Population Research and Policy Review* 39 (2): 283–309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-019-09535-0>.
- Batya, Ewa, and Hans-Peter Kohler. 2022. "Unequal Transitions to Adulthood: Widening Disparities in Age at First Union, Sex, and Birth in Many Low- and Middle-Income Countries." *Studies in Family Planning* 53 (3): 549–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sifp.12211>.
- Becca, Federica, and Albert Esteve. 2026. "'Family-Anchored' Transitions to Adult Life in Mexico." *Demographic Research* 54 (2): 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2026.54.2>.
- Becca, Federica, Albert Esteve, and Andrés F. Castro Torres. 2025. "Changes in Latin American and Caribbean Household Structure Amidst Fertility Decline, 1960–2020." *Studies in Family Planning* 56 (1): 135–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sifp.12282>.
- Bengtson, Vern L. 2001. "Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Bonds." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (1): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00001.x>.
- Bianchi, Suzanne M. 2014. "A Demographic Perspective on Family Change: Demographic Perspective on Family Change." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 6 (1): 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12029>.
- Blanco, Emilio, Patricio Solís, and Héctor Robles, eds. 2014. *Caminos Desiguales: Trayectorias Educativas y Laborales de Los Jóvenes En La Ciudad de México*, 1st ed. Mexico City: El Colegio de México.
- Cabella, Wanda. 2010. "Los Determinantes de la Ruptura de la Primera Unión en el Uruguay: un Análisis a partir de Dos Encuestas Retrospectivas." *Revista Latinoamericana de Población* 4 (7): 31–56.
- Castro Torres, Andrés Felipe. 2021. "Analysis of Latin American Fertility in Terms of Probable Social Classes." *European Journal of Population = Revue Européenne De Démographie* 37 (2): 297–339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-020-09569-7>.
- Castro-Martin, Teresa. 2002. "Consensual Unions in Latin America: Persistence of a Dual Nuptiality System." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 33 (1): 35–55. <https://doi.org/10.1138/jcfs.33.1.35>.
- Castro-Martín, Teresa, Clara Cortina, Teresa Martín García, and Ignacio Pardo. 2011. "Maternidad Sin Matrimonio En América Latina: Análisis Comparativo a Partir de Datos Censales." *Notas*

- de Población, no. 93. Mexico City: Naciones Unidas Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL).
- Cerrutti, Marcela S., and Georgina Binstock. 2009. "Familias Latinoamericanas En Transformación: Desafíos y Demandas Para La Acción Pública." *Serie Políticas Sociales*, no. 147: 1–61.
- Chen, Wan-Chi. 2016. "The Role of Grandparents in Single-Parent Families in Taiwan." *Marriage & Family Review* 52 (1–2): 41–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2015.1073654>.
- Coubès, Marie-Laure, María Eugenia Zavala De Cosío, and Patricio Solís, eds. 2017. *Generaciones, Cursos de Vida y Desigualdad Social En Mexico*, 1st ed. Conocer Para Decidir. Mexico City: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, El Colegio de México.
- Covre-Sussai, Maira, Bart Meuleman, Sarah Botterman, and Koen Matthijs. 2015. "Traditional and Modern Cohabitation in Latin America: A Comparative Typology." *Demographic Research* 32 (32): 873–914. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2015.32.32>.
- Creighton, Mathew J., Hyunjoon Park, and Graciela M. Teruel. 2009. "The Role of Migration and Single Motherhood in Upper Secondary Education in Mexico." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71 (5): 1325–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00671.x>.
- Cross, Christina J. 2018. "Extended Family Households among Children in the United States: Differences by Race/Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Status." *Population Studies* 72 (2): 235–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2018.1468476>.
- Cuno, Kenneth M. 2010. "Family Ideals, Colonialism and Law." *Journal of Women's History* 22 (4): 282–92. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.a405427>.
- Dai, Simin, Albert Esteve, and Joan García-Román. 2025. "Determinants of Regional Disparities in Older Adult – Child Coresidence in China." *Population, Space and Place* 31 (6): e70081. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.70081>.
- De Vos, Susan. 1987. "Latin American Households in Comparative Perspective." *Population Studies* 41 (3): 501–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0032472031000143026>.
- De Vos, Susan. 1995. *Household Composition in Latin America*. New York: Springer.
- Deleire, Thomas, and Ariel Kalil. 2002. "Good Things Come in Threes: Single-Parent Multigenerational Family Structure and Adolescent Adjustment." *Demography* 39 (2): 393–413. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.2002.0016>.
- DeWaard, Jack, Jenna Nobles, and Katharine M. Donato. 2018. "Migration and Parental Absence: A Comparative Assessment of Transnational Families in Latin America: Migration and Parental Absence in Latin America." *Population, Space and Place* 24 (7): e2166. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2166>.
- Dunifon, Rachel E., Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest, and Kimberly Kopko. 2014. "Grandparent Coresidence and Family Well-Being: Implications for Research and Policy." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 654 (1): 110–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716214526530>.
- Elliott, Sinikka, Rachel Powell, and Joslyn Brenton. 2015. "Being a Good Mom: Low-Income, Black Single Mothers Negotiate Intensive Mothering." *Journal of Family Issues* 36 (3): 351–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x13490279>.
- Esteve, Albert, Andrés F. Castro Torres, and Federica Becca. 2025. "Family Change in Latin America: Schooling and Labor Market Implications for Children and Women." *Oxford Open Economics* 4 (Supplement_1): i292–306. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oec/odae026>.
- Esteve, Albert, Teresa Castro-Martín, and Andrés Felipe Castro Torres. 2022. "Families in Latin America: Trends, Singularities, and Contextual Factors." *Annual Review of Sociology* 48 (1): 485–505. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030420-015156>.
- Esteve, Albert, Joan García-Román, and Ron Lesthaeghe. 2012. "The Family Context of Cohabitation and Single Motherhood in Latin America." *Population and Development Review* 38 (4): 707–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2012.00533.x>.
- Esteve, Albert, Ron Lesthaeghe, and Antonio López-Gay. 2012. "The Latin American Cohabitation Boom, 1970–2007." *Population and Development Review* 38 (1): 55–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2012.00472.x>.

- Esteve, Albert, Luis Ángel López-Ruiz, and Jeroen Spijker. 2013. "Disentangling How Educational Expansion Did Not Increase Women's Age at Union Formation in Latin America from 1970 to 2000." *Demographic Research* 28 (3): 63–76. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2013.28.3>.
- Fussell, Elizabeth, and Alberto Palloni. 2004. "Persistent Marriage Regimes in Changing Times." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (5): 1201–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-2445.2004.00087.x>.
- Galeano, Juan, and Albert Esteve. 2025. "The Global Living Arrangements Database, 1960–2021." *Scientific Data* 12 (1): 1483. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-025-05787-y>.
- Garbett, Ann, Sarah Neal, Angela Luna Hernandez, and Nikos Tzavidis. 2025. "Reframing the Relationship Between Fertility and Education in Adolescence: 60 Years of Evidence From Latin America." *Population and Development Review* 51 (2): 656–701. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12720>.
- Grujters, Rob J., and John Ermisch. 2019. "Patrilocal, Matrilocal, or Neolocal? Intergenerational Proximity of Married Couples in China." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 81 (3): 549–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12538>.
- Guarin, Angela, Merita Mesäisleshto, Mia Hakovirta, and Molly Costanzo. 2025. "Single Mothers and Child Support in Extended-Family Households: Insights from Six Latin American Countries." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 32 (4): 1000–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaf011>.
- Härkönen, Juho. 2017. "Diverging Destinies in International Perspective: Education, Single Motherhood, and Child Poverty." LIS Working Paper Series, no. 713. Luxembourg: Luxembourg Income Study (LIS).
- Hogendoorn, Bram, and Juho Härkönen. 2023. "Single Motherhood and Multigenerational Coresidence in Europe." *Population and Development Review* 49 (1): 105–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12540>.
- Laplante, Benoît, Teresa CastroMartín, and Clara Cortina. 2018. "Change and Continuity in the Fertility of Unpartnered Women in Latin America, 1980–2010." *Demographic Research* 38 (51): 1577–604. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2018.38.51>.
- Laplante, Benoît, Teresa Castro-Martín, Clara Cortina, and Teresa Martín-García. 2015. "Childbearing within Marriage and Consensual Union in Latin America, 1980–2010." *Population and Development Review* 41 (1): 85–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2015.00027.x>.
- Lawson, David W., and Ruth Mace. 2009. "Trade-Offs in Modern Parenting: A Longitudinal Study of Sibling Competition for Parental Care." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30 (3): 170–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2008.12.001>.
- Leone, Tiziana, and Andrew Hinde. 2007. "Fertility and Union Dissolution in Brazil: An Example of Multi-Process Modelling Using the Demographic and Health Survey Calendar Data." *Demographic Research* 17 (7): 157–80. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2007.17.7>.
- Lesthaeghe, Ron. 2010. "The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition." *Population and Development Review* 36 (2): 211–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2010.00328.x>.
- Lima, Everton E. C., Kryštof Zeman, and Mathias Nathan. 2021. "Twin Peaks: The Emergence of Bimodal Fertility Profiles in Latin America." *Institut Für Demographie - VID* 1: 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1553/0x003ccff8>.
- Lindstrom, David P., Anairis Hernandez-Jabalera, and Silvia Giorguli Saucedo. 2021. "Migration, Family Formation and Fertility in the Americas." *International Migration Review* 55 (1): 280–314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918320923353>.
- Liu, Chia, Albert Esteve, and Rocío Treviño. 2017. "Female-Headed Households and Living Conditions in Latin America." *World Development* 90: 311–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.10.008>.
- López Ruiz, Luis, Jeroen Spijker, and Albert Esteve. 2011. "Edad de Entrada en Unión y Expansión Educativa en América Latina, 1970–2000." In *Nupcialidad y familia en América Latina actual. Serie Investigaciones 11*. Rio de Janeiro: Asociación Latinoamericana de Población (ALAP).
- Lumley, Thomas. 2004. "Analysis of Complex Survey Samples." *Journal of Statistical Software* 9 (8): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v009.i08>.

- Martinez, Ramon, Patricia Morsch, Patricia Soliz, Carolina Hommes, Pedro Ordunez, and Enrique Vega. 2021. "Life Expectancy, Healthy Life Expectancy, and Burden of Disease in Older People in the Americas, 1990–2019: A Population-Based Study." *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública* 45: 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.26633/rpsp.2021.114>.
- McLanahan, Sara, and Christine Percheski. 2008. "Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (1): 257–76. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134549>.
- Neal, Sarah, Chloe Harvey, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, Sonja Caffe, and Alma Virginia Camacho. 2018. "Trends in Adolescent First Births in Five Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: Disaggregated Data from Demographic and Health Surveys." *Reproductive Health* 15 (1): 146. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-018-0578-4>.
- Osborne, Cynthia, and Sara McLanahan. 2007. "Partnership Instability and Child Well-Being." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (4): 1065–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00431.x>.
- Park, Hyunjoon, Jaesung Choi, and Hyejeong Jo. 2016. "Living Arrangements of Single Parents and Their Children in South Korea." *Marriage & Family Review* 52 (1–2): 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2015.1073653>.
- Pérez Amador, Julieta. 2008. "Análisis multiestado multivariado de la formación y disolución de las parejas conyugales en México." *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 23 (3): 481–511.
- Pesando, Luca Maria, Nicola Barban, Maria Sironi, and Frank F. Furstenberg. 2021. "A Sequence-Analysis Approach to the Study of the Transition to Adulthood in Low- and Middle-Income Countries." *Population and Development Review* 47 (3): 719–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12425>.
- Pilkaskas, Natasha V., and Christina Cross. 2018. "Beyond the Nuclear Family: Trends in Children Living in Shared Households." *Demography* 55 (6): 2283–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-018-0719-y>.
- Pohl, Maria, Ewa Batyra, and Albert Esteve. 2026. "School Enrollment and Living Arrangements of Children in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Population and Development Review*. Ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.70045>.
- Quilodrán Salgado, Julieta, and Alí Miguel Arrieta-Arrieta. 2022. "Segundas Uniones Conyugales: Rematrimonios y Reemparejamientos En México." *Revista Latinoamericana de Población* 16 (May): e202128. <https://doi.org/10.31406/relap2022.v16.e202128>.
- Raymo, James M., Hyunjoon Park, Miho Iwasawa, and Yanfei Zhou. 2014. "Single Motherhood, Living Arrangements, and Time With Children in Japan." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76 (4): 843–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12126>.
- Raymo, James M., and Yanfei Zhou. 2012. "Living Arrangements and the Well-Being of Single Mothers in Japan." *Population Research and Policy Review* 31 (5): 727–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-012-9247-4>.
- Reyes, Adriana M. 2020. "Mitigating Poverty through the Formation of Extended Family Households: Race and Ethnic Differences." *Social Problems* 67 (4): 782–99. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spz046>.
- Rios-Neto, Eduardo L. G., Adriana Miranda-Ribeiro, and Paula Miranda-Ribeiro. 2018. "Fertility Differentials by Education in Brazil: From the Conclusion of Fertility to the Onset of Postponement Transition." *Population and Development Review* 44 (3): 489–517. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12165>.
- Rodriguez Vignoli, Jorge, and Suzana Cavenaghi. 2014. "Adolescent and Youth Fertility and Social Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean: What Role Has Education Played?" *Genus* 70 (1): 1–25.
- Ruggles, Steven, Lara L. Cleveland, Rodrigo Lovatón Dávila, et al. 2025. "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International: Version 7.7." Version 7.7. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D020.V7.7>.
- Ruiz-Vallejo, Herney Fernando. 2018. "La separación conyugal en Colombia, 1951–2015: geografías y biografías en clave de género." Doctoral dissertation, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

- Ruiz-Vallejo, Fernando, and Montserrat Solsona i Pairó. 2020. "Antecedentes En La Investigación Sociodemográfica Sobre Las Separaciones Conyugales En Latinoamérica, 1980–2017." *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 36 (1): 291–325. <https://doi.org/10.24201/edu.v36i1.1932>.
- Sana, Mariano, and Douglas S. Massey. 2005. "Household Composition, Family Migration, and Community Context: Migrant Remittances in Four Countries*." *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (2): 509–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0038-4941.2005.00315.x>.
- Settles, Barbara H., Jia Zhao, Karen Doneker Mancini, Amanda Rich, Shawneila Pierre, and Atieno Oduor. 2009. "Grandparents Caring for Their Grandchildren: Emerging Roles and Exchanges in Global Perspectives." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 40 (5): 827–48. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.40.5.827>.
- Shirahase, S., and J. M. Raymo. 2014. "Single Mothers and Poverty in Japan: The Role of Intergenerational Coresidence." *Social Forces* 93 (2): 545–69. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sou077>.
- Sobek, Matthew, and Sheela Kennedy. 2009. "The Development of Family Interrelationship Variables for International Census Data." Minnesota Population Center Working Paper Series 2009-02. Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota. <https://doi.org/10.18128/MPC2009-02>.
- Sun, Yongmin, and Yuanzhang Li. 2002. "Children's Well-Being during Parents' Marital Disruption Process: A Pooled Time-Series Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2): 472–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00472.x>.
- Thomson, Elizabeth, Thomas L. Hanson, and Sara S. McLanahan. 1994. "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Economic Resources vs. Parental Behaviors." *Social Forces* 73 (1): 221. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579924>.
- Trias-Prats, Rita, Ginevra Floridi, and Albert Esteve. 2026. "Young Women's Living Arrangements in Mexico: Diversity, Stability, and Social Stratification." *Advances in Life Course Research*, 68: 100743. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2026.100743>.
- UN Women, ed. 2019. *Families in a Changing World*. Progress of the World's Women 2019/2020. New York: UN Women.
- Zavala De Cosío, Maria Eugenia, and Pascal Sebillé. 2023. *La Odissea de Las Generaciones En México: De Las Historias de Vida a Los Territorios*, 1st ed. Mexico City: El Colegio de México.