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Single parents' social integration: differences between East and West Germany

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This paper investigates the relationship between single parenthood and social contacts in East and West Germany. Social contacts are an important resource for single parents, not only for practical and emotional support, but also in facilitating their labour market integration. But the degree to which single parents are socially integrated varies considerably. This paper asks what explains differences and changes in single parents' social integration and whether explanations vary between East and West Germany. In East Germany, social integration has been said to generally depend less on the nuclear family than in West Germany. Particular attention is paid to specific markers of the family life course, such as children's reaching school age and repartnering, in explaining extension or contraction of social contacts. It is expected that contacts to friends and relatives are extended when children reach school age and reduced upon repartnering. For East Germany, following findings from previous research, changes in social contacts are expected to be less marked than for West Germany, especially regarding contacts with relatives. Fixed effects regression is applied to a sample of single parents using data from four waves of the Socio-economic Panel (1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013). Two main findings emerge. Firstly, contacts to friends are indeed extended when single parents' children reach preschool age, and this relationship is stronger for West Germans. Secondly, contacts to relatives are strong among single parents in both East and West Germany, but entering a new partnership turns out to contract single parents' family relationships only in the West.

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