ORPHANHOOD IN FRANCE : MEASUREMENT, EVOLUTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

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Orphanhood in developed countries is a subject that has been neglected by demographers. Until recently, the number of orphans in a country like France remained unknown, and this is not an isolated case. In fact, our work has made it possible to estimate the number of orphans under the age of 21 living in France at half a million; therefore, it is not a negligible group.

The first part of the presentation will examine the methods used to calculate the proportion and the number of orphans, depending on the type of data available (either macro-demographic data or survey data). The second part will describe this population's present characteristics in France and the third part will answer questions such as: How did orphanhood evolve in France over the twentieth century? Does the loss of one parent increase the likelihood of losing the other? Are there more orphans among blue-collar workers than among white-collar workers? Are orphans at a disadvantage with regards to scholastic or professional success?

I: THE NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF ORPHANS: DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OR SURVEY DATA?

In order to measure orphanhood we can use a result established by Alfred Lotka which shows that the proportion of orphans at a given age is equal to the risk of the mother or father dying during the period stretching from the child's birth to the chosen age.

$$\Omega_x = 1 - S(\overline{a} + x) / S(\overline{a})$$

with :

S = survivors from the life table
$\overline{a}$ = mean age at motherhood (fatherhood)
x = the age reached by the child

Modern computer technology makes it possible to carry out complete calculations, without having to give a simplified estimate for average age, so we find:

$$\Omega_x = 1 \quad - \sum_{a=\min}^{Max} \frac{Na}{N} \cdot \frac{Sa + x}{Sa}$$

with:

S = survivors of the life table
N_a = the number of births by mother's age (father's age)
N = total number of births

a = mother's age (father's age) at birth of child
x = the age reached by the child

Calculation results derived from general life tables will be compared to observations based on a survey carried out in France in 1999 which contained a question concerning survival of respondent's parents.

Furthermore, a comparison will be carried out between the results obtained using cohort life tables and others obtained using the more widely available cross-sectional life tables.

The 1999 « History of family life » survey is a self-report survey taken in conjunction with the population census, and concerns a large number of respondents (380,000) aged 18 and over.
This survey is of interest since :

- We can make direct and indirect estimates of the number of orphans. The direct estimate comes from responses to the question « Is your father/mother still alive? ». It gives, by age in 1999, the numbers fatherless, motherless and having lost both parents. However, the orphans under 18 years old are not covered, as the survey respondents were at least 18. So to obtain the number of orphans aged under 18, we have used indirect estimation and extrapolations.
- Not only can we estimate the number of orphans and their age structure from the survey data, but we can also analyse this population in terms of socio-economic characteristics, behaviour etc.

II : ORPHANS IN FRANCE TODAY

In order to properly understand orphans' family or social characteristics, survey data must be used. These data make it possible:

- to define the type of family in which orphans live: in France, 81% of 15 to 19 year-old orphans live in one-parent families if they are fatherless, 62% if they are motherless.
- to estimate the proportion of orphans among children in one-parent families: one in five children between the ages of 15 and 19 and living in a one-parent family is an orphan.
- to indicate the specific nature of the one-parent families that come into existence following the death of a parent: they are made up of more children, the remaining parent is older and often comes from a relatively modest social category.

III QUESTIONS CONCERNING ORPHANHOOD

How did orphanhood evolve over the twentieth century?

The survey's retrospective data, combined with demographic calculations, capture the evolution of the proportion of orphans during the twentieth century. At the end of World War I, 20% of ten-year-olds were fatherless, as were 30% of twenty-year-olds. The proportion of orphans has fallen consistently since 1950, due to a decrease in adult mortality.

What influences trends in the proportions of orphans?

The risk of losing one's mother (father) depends on the evolution of mortality but also on age at motherhood (fatherhood). The data used enable us to analyse the effect of each of these factors.

Does the loss of one parent increase the risk of losing the other?

The risk of losing one's mother (father) is higher among children who have already lost their father (mother) than among those who still have both parents. This risk increases about tenfold around the age of 15.

Is the risk of becoming orphaned related to social category?

The risk of becoming a fatherless orphan is about 2.5 times higher among children whose father is a blue-collar worker than among those whose father works in senior management; the risk of losing one's mother is twice as high among the former than among the latter.

Is being an orphan a handicap?

The available data make it possible to test whether or not scholastic success, professional insertion or entry into a union are affected by whether or not a person is an orphan.