

2. OVERCOMING SOCIAL BACKGROUND

How do students from single-parent families perform in reading?

- In most countries, children from single-parent families do not perform as well as students from two-parent or other types of families.
- In the United States and several partner countries, children from single-parent families score much lower in reading than their peers from two-parent or other types of families, even after accounting for socio-economic background.
- In nearly half of all participating countries, there is no difference in reading performance between students from single-parent families and those from other types of families, after accounting for socio-economic background.

What it means

Across the OECD area, 17% of the students who participated in PISA 2009 are from single-parent families. In general, the parents of these students have lower educational qualifications and lower occupational status than parents on average across OECD countries. But PISA results show that these disadvantages do not necessarily translate into lower performance among children from single-parent households. These findings prompt the question of whether public policy, including policies on welfare and childcare as well as on education, can help to make it easier for single parents to support their children's education.

Findings

On average across OECD countries, the performance gap between students from single-parent families and students from other types of families is 18 score points, before taking socio-economic background into account. However, after adjusting for student background, the gap is, on average, just five points.

In some countries, even after taking socio-economic background into account, children from single-parent households still face considerable challenges. Among OECD countries, the disadvantage is highest in the United States, where 15-year-olds from single-parent families score more than 40 points below their peers from other types of families in reading, and 23 score points below even after accounting for socio-economic

background. Score point differences after accounting for socio-economic background range from 13 points in Ireland, Poland and Mexico, to 28 points in the partner country Trinidad and Tobago, 38 points in the partner country Jordan, and to as high as 61 points in the partner country Qatar. In all of these countries, at least one in ten students live in a single-parent family; in the United States and Trinidad and Tobago, nearly 25% of students do.

However, in half of the countries that participated in PISA 2009, there was no significant relationship between living in a single-parent family and reading performance, once socio-economic background had been taken into account. In the partner countries, Croatia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Peru, students from single-parent families performed better-than-average in reading, after accounting for socio-economic background.

Definitions

This analysis measures the score point difference in reading performance between 15-year-olds who live with one parent compared to other 15-year-olds. In accounting for socio-economic background, it shows the average difference in reading performance between students from different types of families with similar backgrounds.

Information on data for Israel: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

Going further

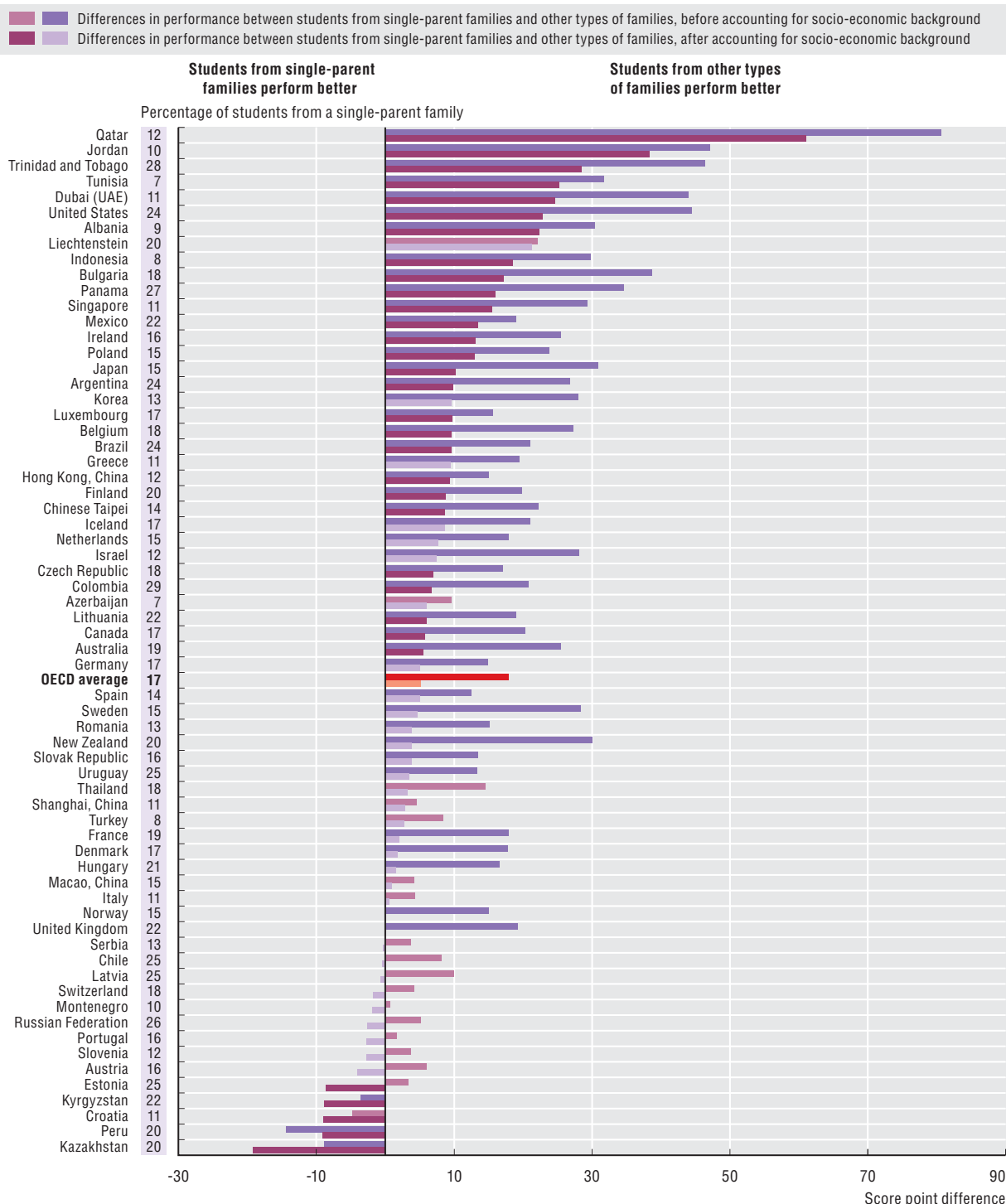
Further analysis is presented in Chapter 2 of *PISA 2009 Results Volume II, Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*. Full data are shown in Table II.2.5 at the back of that volume.

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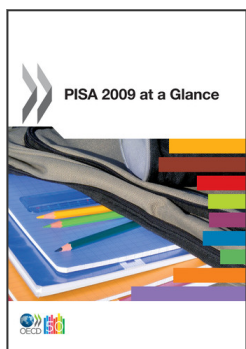
Figure 2.3. **Reading performance difference between students from single-parent families and those from other types of families**

Differences in performance before and after accounting for socio-economic background



Note: Score point differences that are statistically significant are marked in a darker tone. Countries are ranked in descending order of the score point differences between students from single-parent families and other types of families after accounting for socio-economic background.

Source: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results, Volume II, Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes, Figure II.2.5, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343570>.



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