RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) -- Children with disabilities are more likely to live with a single woman -- whether she is a mother, grandmother or a female foster parent -- than other children, according to a new study.

The findings by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill indicate that organizations aimed at helping disabled children must also consider the particular problems faced by the single women who often care for them, said Philip Cohen, an associate professor of sociology at the university.

"In the patchwork of arrangements to care for children with disabilities, we have to realize that the system is also dealing with issues of gender equity," Cohen said.

The study, conducted by Cohen and his former student Miruna Petrescu-Prahova, now a doctoral student at the University of California, Irvine, was published Friday in the quarterly Journal of Marriage and Family.

The study examined 2000 Census data on 2.3 million children ages 5 to 15. More than 130,000 were reported to have mental disabilities, physical disabilities, or both.

It found that while 62 percent of children without disabilities live with a married, biological parent in a two-parent home, only 46 percent of disabled children do.

Single mothers care for 17 percent of children without disabilities, but for 24.5 percent of those who are disabled. Fewer than 5 percent of disabled children live with a single father, about the same percentage of non-disabled children living with fathers.

In homes where no biological parent is present, Cohen said disabled children were more than twice as likely to be cared for by a single woman than were children without a disability.

The findings are not particularly surprising, but offer a different perspective the challenges faced by single, female caregivers, said Avis Jones-DeWeever, director of poverty, education, and social justice programs at the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, D.C.
The institute's own research has shown an inordinate number of women getting government aid are either themselves disabled or taking care of a disabled child, Jones-DeWeever said.

Single mothers often have multiple challenges causing them to fall through the cracks of existing assistance programs, she said. She agreed with Cohen that his data show "perhaps we need to think more concretely about what kinds of policy supports these families need."

Both said the largest unanswered question in all the research is why women end up dominating such caretaker roles. Most probably, it's simply "the cultural norms and a combination of what we as women tend to do," Jones-Deweever said.

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