

Married and unmarried family breakdown: Key statistics explained



Harry Benson

Bristol Community Family Trust

For thirty years, family breakdown has risen continuously and yet divorce rates have remained largely unchanged. In this briefing paper, I present new findings from Britain's largest and most up-to-date family surveys to illustrate how and why the trend away from marriage matters. The key points are as follows:

- *Family breakdown matters: the disadvantage of reduced parental resources consistently outweighs any advantage of reduced parental conflict.*
- *Family structure matters: marriage is the number one predictor of stability amongst new parents; marriage matters because the decision to commit is especially important for men.*
- *40% of children experience family breakdown, at least half of which occurs by age three.*
- *97% of intact couples with 15 year old children are married: long term cohabitation is very rare.*
- *Amongst married couples, divorce is concentrated in the early years of marriage: one in seven couples divorce between the 2nd and 6th anniversaries.*
- *Amongst unmarried couples, separation is concentrated in the early years of parenthood. One in three couples separate before their child's 5th birthday, four times the rate of married parents. Although background accounts for some of this gap, unmarried cohabiting parents remain at least twice as likely to split up across every category of income and education.*

Family policy: a hot topic

Nearly four years ago, the Centre for Social Justice family report, Breakdown Britain (*Callan et al, 2006*) of which I was co-author, argued strongly that the trend away from marriage is responsible for the rise in family breakdown and that both matter a great deal. The number of lone parents has doubled from around 1 million in 1980 to just under 2 million today (*Haskey, 1998; LFS*). In our subsequent report, Breakthrough Britain (*Callan et al, 2007*), we argued there is much that can be done at both policy and practical level to change the direction of these trends for the better.

Major reports published in the last year (*Chapple & Richardson, 2009; Mooney et al, 2009*) challenge this view, arguing that other background factors affect child outcomes more than either marriage or family breakdown. In their view, family policy needs to focus on relationship quality and not on family breakdown or structure.

The purpose of this briefing paper is to explain briefly why family breakdown and family structure do matter and to give an up-to-date summary of the extent of family breakdown.

Reducing family breakdown is about both marriage and relationship quality. Both matter.

Family breakdown matters

An objective observer would surely be astonished if family breakdown did not have a negative effect on children. In some cases, the effects of lone parenthood will be moderated where children are removed from the stress of a high conflict household. But in most cases, one parent rather than two inevitably experiences a reduction in the key resources of time and money as well as a reduction in mutual social support between parents. This is the reality of lone parenthood and in no sense a condemnation.

A recent OECD meta-analysis of studies investigating the overall effect of lone parenthood on children found that the average "effect size" is small (*Chapple & Richardson, 2009*). This finding has been misinterpreted as evidence that family breakdown is not a problem (*BBC, 2 Sep 2009*). However research is clear that family breakdown and conflict interact to produce different outcomes for children (*Booth & Amato, 2001*). The average effect thus includes some children who are relatively disadvantaged by reduced resources and some children who are relatively advantaged by reduced conflict. Since 94% of the non-US studies reviewed and 88% of the US studies used for comparison showed an overall negative effect

of family breakdown on children (p130), it is equally clear that the disadvantages of family breakdown consistently outweigh the advantages.

As the Centre for Social Justice papers argued, an effective policy response must focus on both family breakdown and family relationships. Both matter.

Family structure matters

Although it is well-known that married families tend to have better outcomes, the question is often raised whether this is due to a relationship effect (i.e. some characteristic of marriage itself) or a selection effect (i.e. some characteristic of the people who get married). Curiously the selection argument is rarely applied in other important policy areas. Are smokers naturally more cancer prone? Are seatbelt wearers naturally more risk averse? Are better-educated people naturally more open to education? Questions of selection in each of these areas can never be fully resolved because it is impossible to run a conventional study that randomly selects people into the condition to be tested, such as marriage.

The government-backed Family and Parenting Institute claims that the residual effect of marriage is small, once the effects of income are stripped away (*Guardian*, 9 Dec 2009). With the nuclear family no longer the norm, government efforts to rescue it are futile (*Telegraph*, 29 Nov 2009). Both of these statements are demonstrably untrue. Based on Millennium Cohort Study data of 15,000 new mothers, marriage is the single biggest predictor of couple stability, above and beyond the effects of income, education, age, ethnic group, benefit receipt and birth order (*Benson*, 2006, 2009a). In a new analysis using Census data, I found that 60% of families remain intact until their children are fifteen. Of these, 97% are married.

There is good evidence to suggest the process of marriage matters a great deal, in particular the decision by men to make a deliberate commitment. Recent studies investigating the emerging field of commitment theory show that men, but not women, who cohabit prior to engagement are significantly less committed in their subsequent marriage (*Rhoades et al*, 2006). The effect size here is "substantial" (*Stanley & Rhoades*, 2009). My own study of relational behaviours amongst new parents supports this view. Certain interactive combinations of bad habits are significantly more common amongst cohabiting than married parents, an outcome that is unlikely to be due to selection (*Benson*, 2009b).

Finally it is simply implausible to dismiss the causal effects of marriage outright. A pure selection argument implies that the rise in family breakdown is due to a diminishing stock of individuals somehow unable to sustain stable

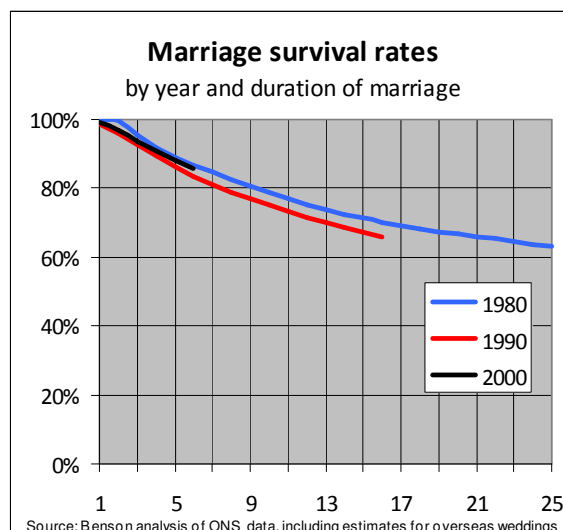
relationships. As well as being patronising, no evidence is provided to support this view.

The Millennium Cohort Study data on new parents and commitment theory findings on the importance of men's decision making provide compelling evidence that marriage matters.

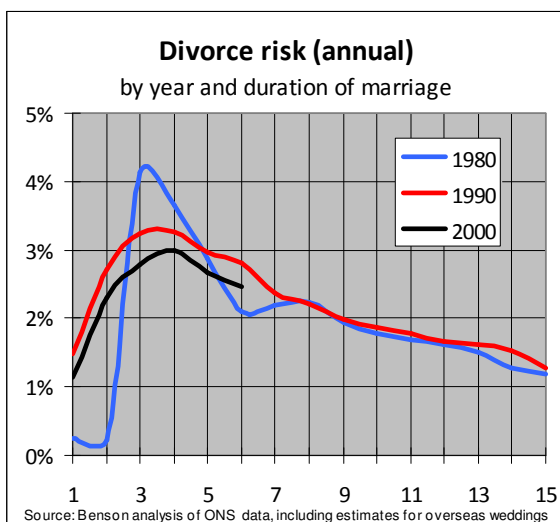
Family breakdown amongst married couples

Dramatic headlines in the media about divorce statistics can give the impression that most marriages are doomed. In fact the reverse is true. Most marriages last for life. But how do we know?

I have compared annual divorces with the year of marriage (*ONS*, various), adjusted for estimates of overseas weddings (*ONS*, 2008) to produce a divorce trajectory for any particular year group. This method is one of several used by ONS (*Wilson & Smallwood*, 2008) that produce fairly consistent findings. Here's what the data say:



- **The average marriage lasts for life.** The likelihood of staying together for life had fallen from 75% amongst couples marrying in the 1960s, to 65% amongst couples marrying in the 1970s, to 55% amongst couples marrying in the 1980s, 1990s or 2000s.
- **Divorce rates have changed little in 25 years and may now be falling.** The actual rate at which couples who married in 2000 got divorced is slightly lower than the couples who married in 1990 and more like the couples who married in 1980.
- **Divorce tends to be concentrated in the early years of marriage.** One third of all the divorces that are going to happen do so during the five year period from the 2nd to the 7th anniversaries. Annual divorce rates peak during the 4th, 5th and 6th years of marriage and then decline steadily over time. There is no "seven year itch" or "empty nest" blip in divorce rates.

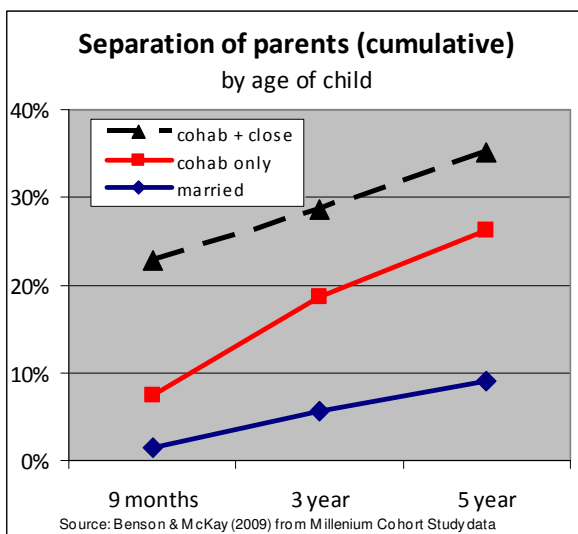


Note: 1980 curve differs slightly because at the time divorce was illegal during first two years of marriage.

Family breakdown amongst unmarried couples

Whereas ONS produces regular data on couple formation and dissolution for married couples, based on the legal documents signed at entry and exit, there is no such data collection point for unmarried couples. So what do we know about separation rates for unmarried couples?

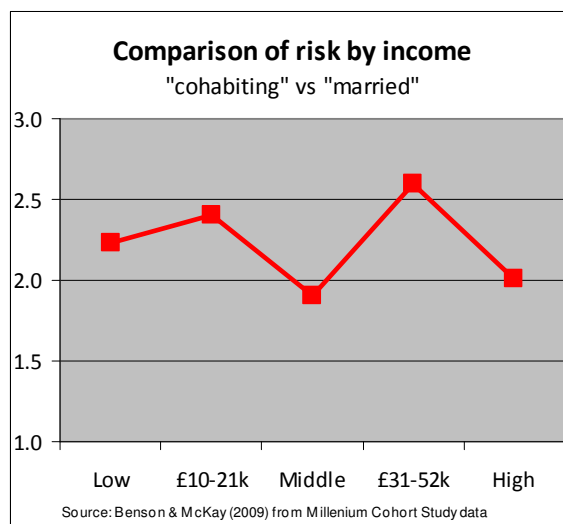
Collection of data on unmarried couples relies on the analysis of data from large national samples or panel surveys. Arguably the most robust and up-to-date panel survey concerning young families is the Millennium Cohort Study, initially comprising a single cohort of 18,000 mothers who gave birth during 2000 or 2001. Here's what the data say:



- **Unmarried parents are four times as likely to split up as married parents.** By the child's fifth birthday, 9% of married couples have split up compared to 35% of "unmarried couples" (Benson, 2009a). ("Unmarried couples" here

includes mothers who described themselves as either "cohabiting" or "closely involved")

- **Unmarried "cohabiting" parents are twice as likely to split up as married parents, regardless of income or education.** Excluding the higher risk "closely involved" couples, "cohabiting" couples are consistently 2 to 2.5 times more likely to split up compared to their married counterparts, across all income groups, by their child's fifth birthday (Benson, 2009a). Much the same applies across five different bands of education (not shown).



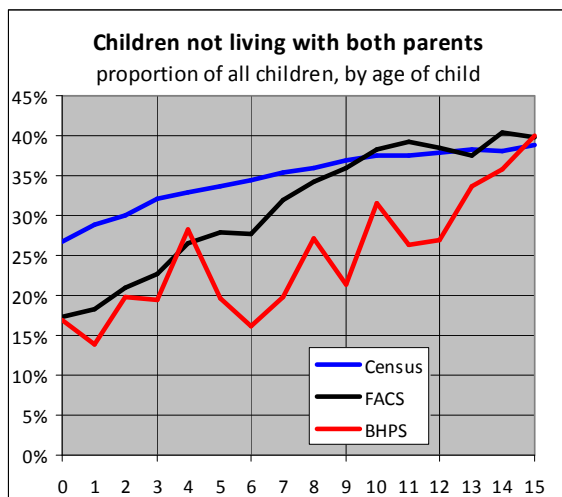
Family breakdown throughout childhood

Finally, what is the probability that a child will experience the separation of their parents at some stage during childhood?

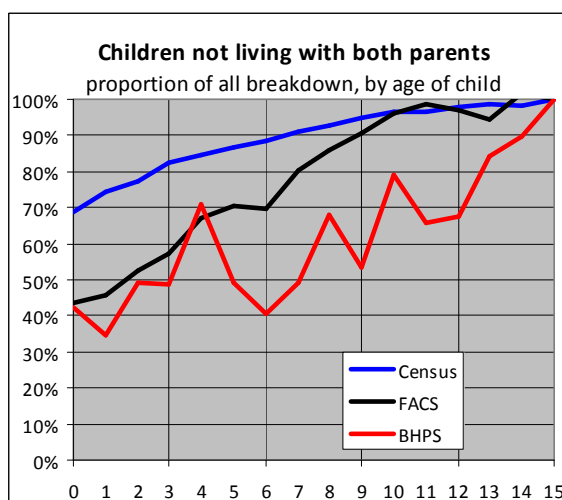
Although the longitudinal Millennium Cohort Study will provide a definitive answer in ten years time, several large national datasets give a good idea of the answer now. The Census national survey, Family & Children Study (FACS) and British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) all ask questions about household living arrangements. Although the responses are cross-sectional in nature, they give a good idea of trend because divorce rates have changed so little in recent years. Here's what the data say:

- **40% of children experience family breakdown.** The Census, FACS and BHPS all agree that 40% of 15 year old children no longer live with both natural parents. (The differences at earlier ages are due to different survey design and methodologies – see note).
- **At least half of family breakdown takes place during the first three years of childhood.** Again, all three surveys agree, as shown in the first chart on the next page: Census (32 out of 39%), FACS (23/40), BHPS (20/40). The second chart shows these as proportions: all three surveys show that at

least 40% of family breakdown occurs very early, at birth or during the child's first year.



- **Very few long-term relationships involve unmarried cohabiters.** According to the Census data, 60% of couples with 15 year old children have remained intact. Of these, 97% are married. Just 3% of couples who bring up their children together are not married. Long-term cohabiting is not the norm.



Note: The surveys produce different results partly because of the sample and partly because of the questions they ask. It is likely that the FACS survey (the black line) provides the most reliable indicator here for two main reasons. Unlike Census, FACS starts at the right level (MCS finds that 17% of babies do not live with both parents). Unlike BHPS, FACS progresses smoothly to 40% (FACS sample is about three times bigger than BHPS).

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