



BRIEF: STRENGTHENING FAMILIES – Turning off the Tap

Problem: understanding the source of family breakdown

- Sit amongst family experts and you quickly realise how few have identified the key problem.
- The source of rising lone parenthood is not divorce but the collapse of unmarried families. While divorce rates have remained steady since 1980, the number of lone parents has doubled from 1m to 2m, costing £42,000 million p.a.
- The government's £7.5 million relationship support fund is a wholly inadequate response to the problem, equivalent to £1 on prevention for every £5,500 on treatment.
- The key problem is the trend away from marriage. Couples who don't marry are far more likely to split. More couples are not marrying. Improving stability amongst unmarried parents must be number one priority.

Solution: a family policy that addresses BOTH structure AND process

- **Marriage matters.** Couples are more committed and stable when they make deliberate decisions about their future as a couple – “acts of dedication”. Cohabiting and childbirth do not predict stability because they do not require decisions! Government must prioritise marriage as the ultimate “act of dedication”; send clear policy signals through tax breaks and affirmative language on official forms; commission ONS to study the source of lone parenthood; stop pretending that cohabiting is the same. Let the evidence, not the ideology, shine.
- **Relationship quality also matters.** Relationship education has a great track record but is not widely known. Government needs to back a national programme of relationship education to strengthen relationships across life stages (marriage, childbirth, school) and other key access points (military, prison, accessing welfare). **Lets Stick Together** is a stepping stone to this. But we can do so much more.

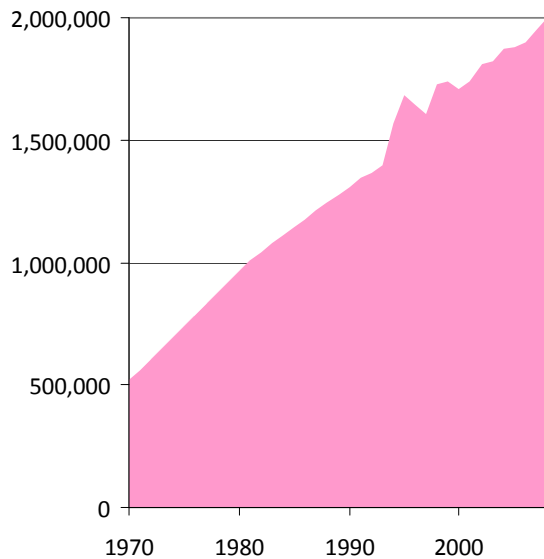
This is a £42,000 million flood that is guaranteed to get worse. Government needs to start turning off the tap.

KEY ISSUE: "The Tap" = The Trend Away from Marriage

Lone parenthood has increased under all governments ...

Lone parents

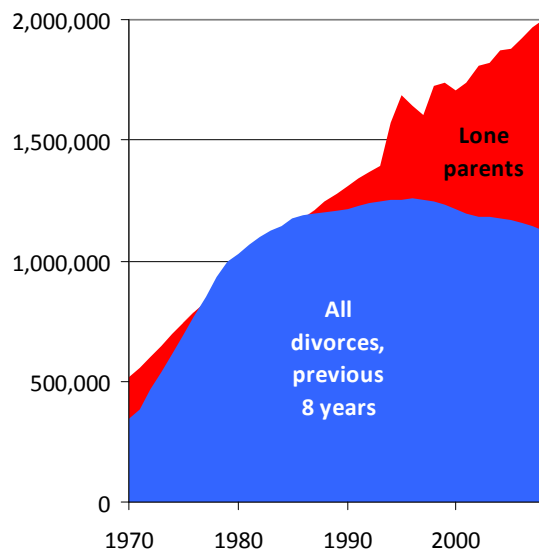
(Source: Labour Force Surveys)



... yet since the 1980s, the source has NOT been divorce

Lone Parents & Divorce

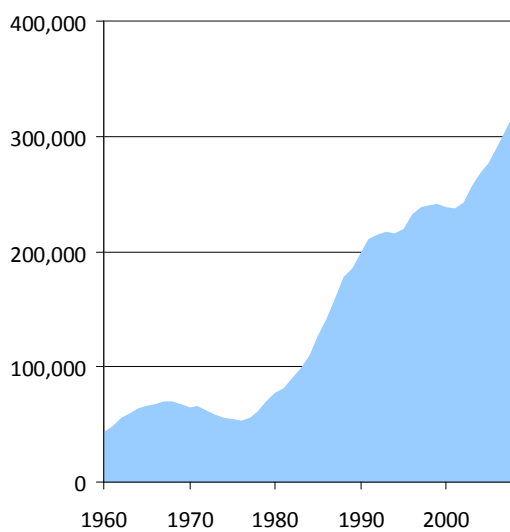
(Source: ONS)



The big change since the 1980s is the trend away from marriage

Births outside marriage

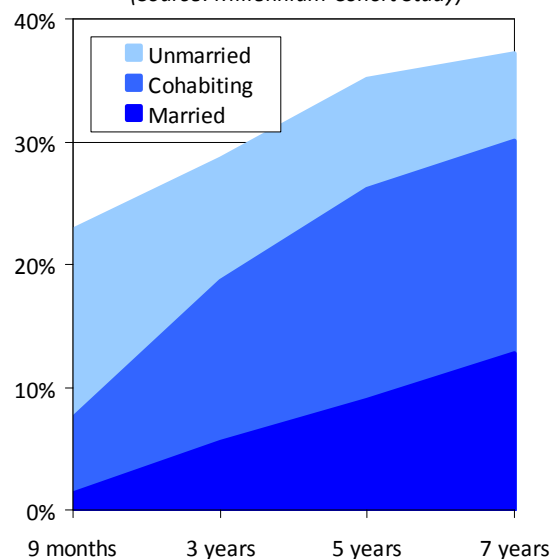
(Source: ONS)



... parents who don't marry are much more likely to split up

Parents who split

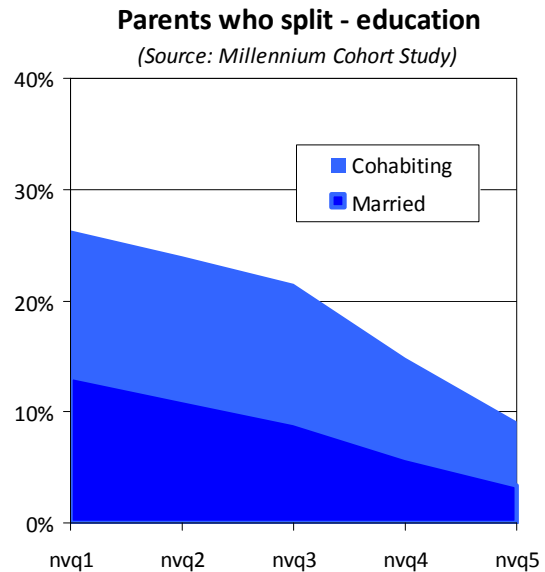
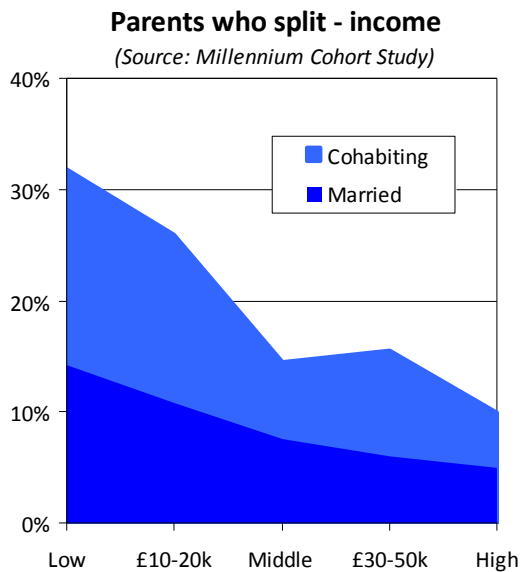
(Source: Millennium Cohort Study)



Millennium Cohort Study data refers to parents with 5 year old children. "Unmarried" combines parents who describe themselves as either "cohabiting" or "closely involved"

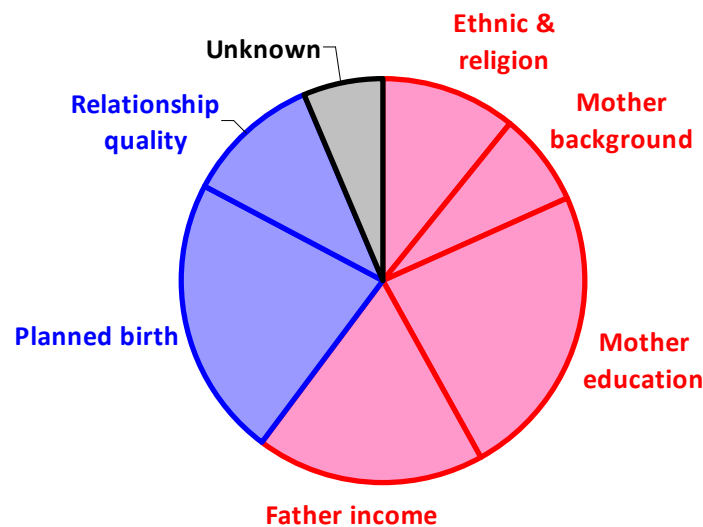
Married parents are more stable, regardless of INCOME ...

... and regardless of EDUCATION



(Note: The charts above - and IFS data below - only compare "married" and "cohabiting" unmarried couples. They exclude the highest risk category "closely involved" couples)

IFS (source: note BN107, 2010) claim this gap is explained by other factors These still CANNOT ACCOUNT for rising lone parenthood since 1980



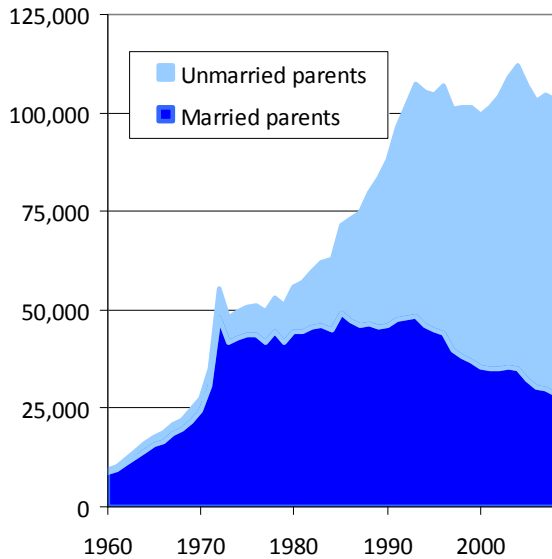
- Education – have we really become less well educated?
- Income – have we really become poorer?
- Planned births – have we really become poor planners?
- Relationship quality – have we really become poor at relationships?

The collapse of young unmarried families ...

... now accounts for 70% of all family breakdown

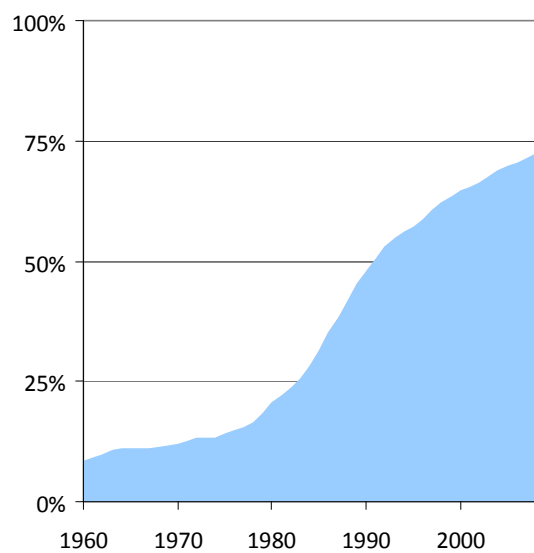
Children whose parents split

(Source: ONS/MCS data, Benson estimates)



Unmarried as % of breakdown

(Source: ONS/MCS data, Benson estimates)

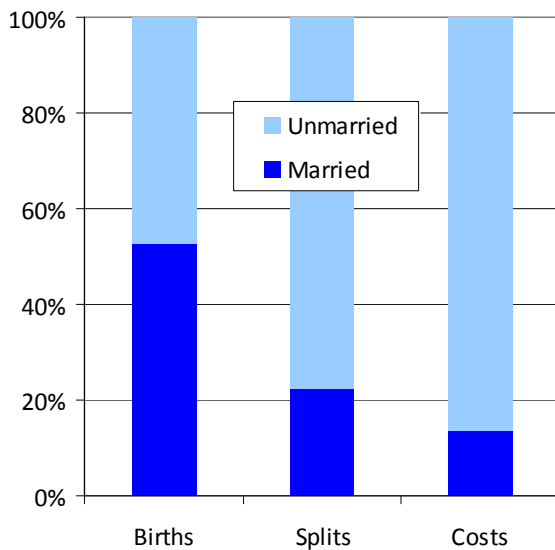


Unmarried couples represent 87% of costs amongst those who are going to split ...

... married couples represent just 9% of costs amongst all parents who split

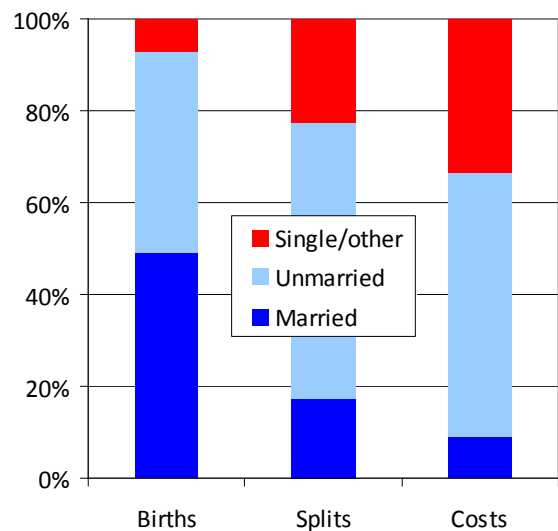
The cost of couples who split

(Source: ONS/MCS data, Benson estimates)



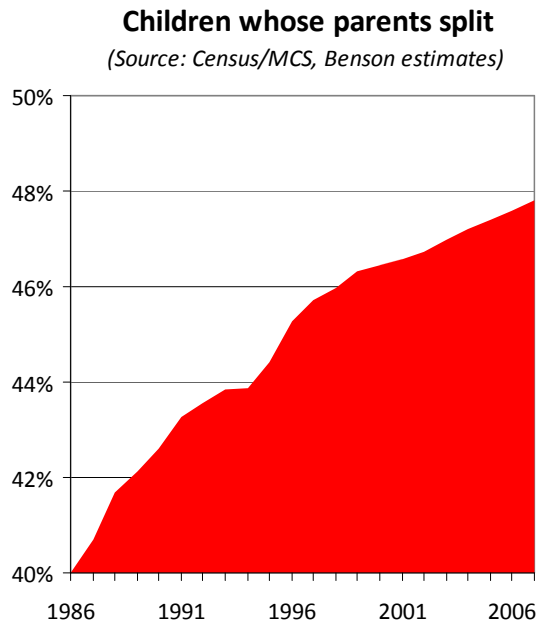
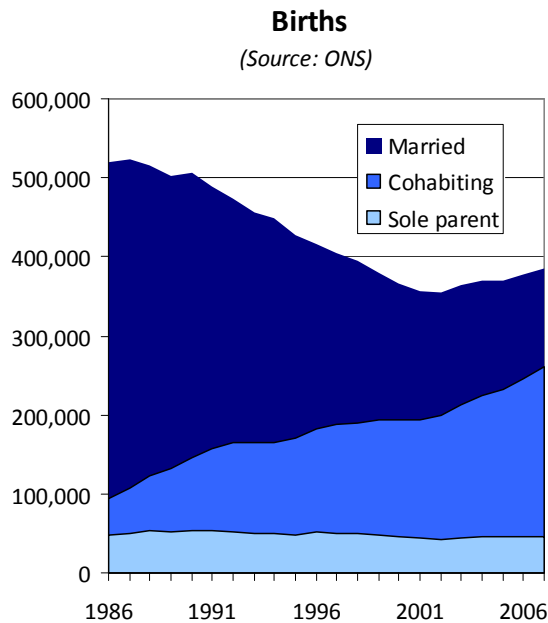
The cost of all parents who split

(Source: ONS/MCS data, Benson estimates)



The increase in births to couples who are not married ...

... GUARANTEES that the rise in family breakdown will continue



- 40% of today's teenagers have experienced family breakdown
- As the unmarried birth rate has risen in recent years, overall break-up rates have also risen (as evidenced by rising lone parenthood)
- By adjusting these ratios accordingly, I estimate that 48% of today's babies will experience family breakdown, unless the stability of young unmarried parents improves dramatically

**The £42,000 million flood is guaranteed to get worse
When will government even recognise the problem?**

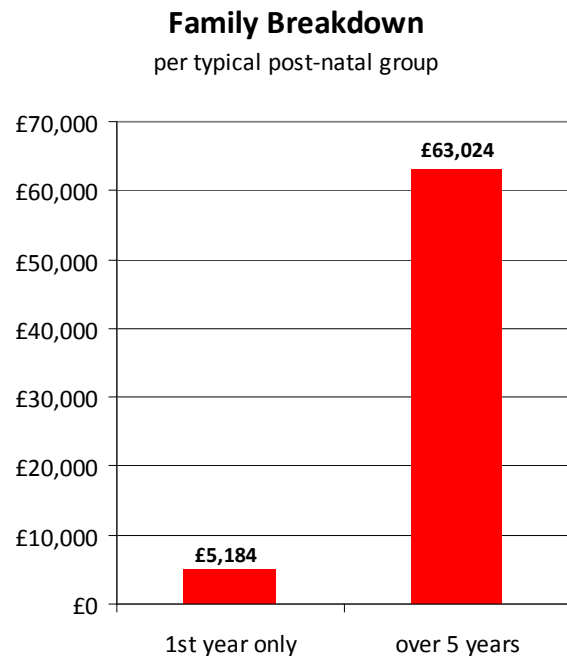
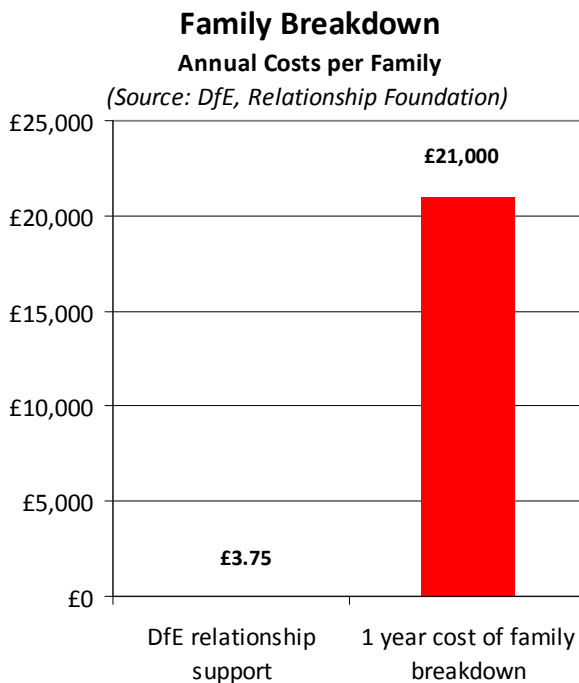
COSTS: So what would you spend in order to save?

The government thinks the tap is worth £4 per lone parent family ...

Yet a typical post-natal group is going to cost over £5,000

... that's just next year ...

... and that's family breakdown that has not yet happened



Start with a typical post-natal group of 9 mothers

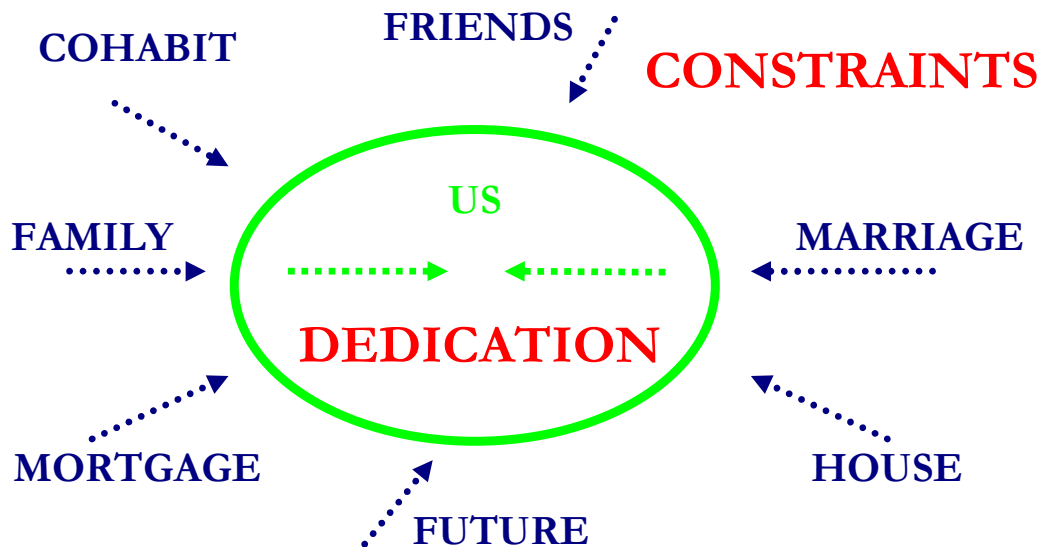
Do nothing and the coming flood will cost £5,000 in the next year alone and £63,000 in the next five years

This flood is not inevitable, by the way

So how much would you spend on this group to help them keep dry?

Understanding relationships: A quick primer on commitment theory¹

- Start in the middle with two individuals who form a couple, an “us”.



- **Dedication** is the inner commitment, representing their new identity as a couple. It is measured by how much they prioritise “we” or “us” over “you” or “me”, their sense of future together, their willingness to sacrifice their own or other choices for the sake of “we” or “us”.
- **Constraints** are the outer bonds that make it harder to leave. These feel positive so long as dedication is strong. When dedication weakens, constraints feel negative, like a trap.
- The secret of success as a couple is therefore to build and maintain sufficient dedication to support the constraints. Marriage is key here. As well as being a legal and social constraint, marriage is the ultimate representation of dedication – an “us with a future”. These deliberate decisions about the future are especially important for men².
- A theory of why cohabiting is so unstable is that couples acquire the constraint of living together before achieving sufficient dedication. In this way, the inertia of cohabitation encourages some high risk relationships to continue through to pregnancy, which then becomes one constraint too many.

¹ Stanley & Rhoades (2009) Marriages at risk: Relationship formation and opportunities for relationship education. In H. Benson and S. Callan (Eds.), *What works in relationship education* (pp21-44). Doha, Qatar: Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

² Rhoades, G., Stanley, S., Markman, H. (2006). Pre-engagement cohabitation and gender asymmetry in marital commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 553-560.