



The
Marriage
Foundation

Response to DWP Family Stability Review
Invitation to contribute to the review of evidence

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Understanding the trends in family stability; what do families look like today and how has this changed over time?

- By far the biggest social trend in family stability has been the trend away from marriage since the 1960s.
- From the 1800s up until the early 1960s, family stability varied little. Almost all new parents were married. Some 5% of births took place outside marriage annually, with temporary increases during each of the world wars (ONS births outside marriage data). Annual divorce rates remained low, less than 2 divorces per '000 married couples compared to the 11-14 divorces per '000 couples seen in recent decades (ONS divorce data).
- Since the 1960s, the trend away from marriage has taken place in two distinct phases (see [Callan et al, 2006](#) Section B, pages 22-44, for a full description of this).
- The first phase involved the increase in divorce rates seen during the 1960s and 1970s (ONS divorce data). This led to a steady increase in lone parent family formation, evidenced by the doubling of lone parent households between 1970 and 1980 (ONS household data, Labour Force Survey).
- The second phase was the emergence of cohabitation since the late 1970s (ONS births outside marriage data). The self-evident explanation for this phenomenon was the availability of birth control, the pill. For the first time, birth control gave women the freedom to have sex without the risk of childbirth. This removed the

individual pressure for a couple to establish a clear commitment to the future – ie get married – before moving in together. Further encouraging this new trend, the myth of “common law marriage” emerged, a legal status that has never actually existed in English law ([Probert 2011](#)).

- Today, nearly half of all children are now born outside marriage (ONS birth data). The growing popularity and acceptance of cohabitation has also removed much or all of the social pressure to marry (British Social Attitudes Survey).
- However a consistent feature of cohabitation has been its relative instability compared to marriage (see examples of UK and Europe studies [Kiernan 1999](#), [Benson 2006](#), [Goodman & Greaves 2010](#)). This cohabitation gap has been the subject of much debate amongst social scientists regarding selection vs relationship effect (see discussion article and US references from [Scott Stanley](#)).
- Looking at trends in divorce rates alone, research for the Marriage Foundation highlights the folly of trying to interpret trends based only on the year in which divorces occur. This method, most commonly reported in the media, conflates shorter and longer lasting marriages as if they were a single cohort. The more informative and accurate method of assessing divorce rates is to analyse divorces based on the year of marriage so that individual marriage cohorts can be followed over time ([Benson 2013a](#)).
- Using this method, it becomes clear that virtually all of the change in divorce rates amongst couples marrying since the 1960s has taken place during the first five to ten years of marriage. After couples pass five to ten years of marriage, marriage cohorts look near enough identical in terms of divorce risk, regardless of year of marriage. The continuous decay of divorce rates along with duration of marriage also demonstrates how media hype about the rise of so-called “silver splitters” is over-stated ([Benson 2013a](#)).
- The conclusion from this remarkable finding is that – despite all of the social trends and changes of the last fifty years – the stability of marriage has remained largely unchanged.
- The contribution of married couples to family breakdown thus relies entirely on the relative stability of couples during their early years of marriage.
- The contribution of unmarried couples to family breakdown relies on the popularity of cohabitation. The result of ever more couples living as unmarried cohabitantes has been the continued rise in lone parent family formation, again evidenced by a further doubling of lone parent households between 1980 and today (ONS household data).
- Combining new data on family breakdown from Understanding Society with household data from ONS, further new research from Marriage Foundation shows that cohabiting parents now account for 19% of couples with dependent children yet 50% of family breakdown ([Benson 2013b](#)).
- The key driver of family breakdown today is therefore not the failure of marriages but the failure of unmarried cohabitations ([Benson 2010](#), [Benson 2013b](#)).

Why do some families stay together while others do not?

- The link between socio-economic and other background factors with individual family stability is well-established and well-known. For example, age, income, education, ethnicity, and benefit receipt, parental divorce, are all factors that are linked to family stability (eg [Amato & DeBoer 2001](#), [Benson 2006](#), [Goodman & Greaves 2010](#)).
- However, it is a mistake to assume this link with income and education also applies to overall levels of family breakdown. Unless one believes that standards of income and education have somehow been in continuous decline for the past fifty years, there is no obvious link between economic factors and the continuous increase in family breakdown rates and numbers between the 1960s and present day. Moreover, there is no evidence whatsoever to link economic boom or bust with short-term rises or falls in divorce rates ([Benson 2013c](#)).
- There is however a plausible causal explanation for why the growing popularity of cohabitation has had both direct effect on the stability of unmarried couples and indirect knock-on effect on the stability of married couples during their early years of marriage.
- The “inertia” hypothesis ([Stanley et al, 2006a](#)) emerges from commitment theory and, in a series of later studies ([Stanley et al, 2010](#)), is proving an increasingly robust account of family stability.
- This theory proposes that commitment comes in two forms. “Dedication” involves the inner bond of commitment, essentially the strength of the decision to be a couple with a future. “Constraints” involve the outer bonds that affirm the couple from the outside – such as memories, living together, being married, having children, lack of alternatives. These outer bonds also make it harder to leave.
- Couples can either “slide” through key relationship transitions – such as moving in or childbirth – as a matter of convenience or social pressure. Or they can “decide” through them as a deliberate intentional act. Dedication, the inner bond of commitment, depends on “deciding”.
- The inertia hypothesis proposes that couples with relatively lower levels of dedication will be more tempted to remain in that relationship if they are subject to more constraints. In other words, the very act of living together traps a proportion of couples in low quality relationships which might otherwise never have got going or continued. Other researchers describe this phenomenon as “premature entanglement” ([Glenn 2002](#)).
- The effect of this is that some proportion of low quality relationships “slide” into parenthood, and even into marriage, more by virtue of inertia – the constraint of living together – rather than an act of dedication to “decide” about their future together. It is the addition of a new additional constraint, whether childbirth or marriage, that then destabilises the couple sufficiently to overcome inertia.

- One final point concerns conflict. It is commonly assumed that couples who split up are highly conflicted. This is a myth. A preliminary analysis of Understanding Society data by Marriage Foundation (to be published later in 2014) shows that the vast majority of parents – married and unmarried couples – are happy and not in regular conflict within the year before they split up.
- This is a really important finding for several reasons. First and most importantly, the effects of family breakdown on children are greatest amongst low conflict couples who split up ([Booth & Amato 2001](#)). Second, since it turns out that most couples at risk are happy and not conflicted, this makes it nigh on impossible to consider any kind of predictive screening programme based on relationship quality. Third, many of these happy non-conflicted relationships really ought to be salvageable.

Who is most at risk of family breakdown?

When are families most at risk of family breakdown?

- The preliminary analysis of Understanding Society data by Marriage Foundation (to be published later in 2014) highlights that neither happiness nor conflict – ie relationship quality – are reliable predictors of family breakdown. Most couples who split up were happy within a year of splitting up. Most couples who were previously conflicted remain together.
- By far the most reliable indicators of separation risk are marital status and age of child.
- For married couples (with or without children) rates of divorce during the first five to ten years of marriage rose steadily from the 1960s, peaked in the 1990s, and have now fallen by a third. After ten years of marriage, rates of divorce share a common pattern of steady decline regardless of year of marriage. Although rates of divorce have varied during the early years, the period of greatest risk of divorce has consistently remained years three to six ([Benson 2013a](#)).
- For unmarried couples (with children) rates of separation are greatest during the earliest years of parenthood. This is consistent with the “inertia” hypothesis. The constraint of living together makes it more tempting for couples who are low on dedication to keep going rather than split up. Sheer inertia keeps them “sliding” onwards towards childbirth, perhaps in hope that the arrival of a baby will improve things. Cohabiting couples are less likely to have a planned birth as a result ([Goodman & Greaves 2010](#)). The consequence is that the arrival of a baby exposes their lack of dedication to the future, acts as a constraint too far, and the relationship crumbles.
- Using data from Understanding Society, research from Marriage Foundation showed how overall rates of family breakdown are heavily concentrated in the early years of parenthood. Half of all family breakdown takes place before a

child's second birthday. Three quarters of this involves unmarried parents ([Benson 2013d](#))

Who should the government target to provide support?

- Data from Understanding Society shows that unmarried parents comprise just 19% of couples with dependent children of all ages yet account for 50% of all family breakdown ([Benson 2013b](#)).
- Data from both Millennium Cohort Study and Understanding Society show how the risk of breakdown amongst unmarried couples is heavily concentrated in the first two or three years of parenthood ([Benson 2006](#), [Goodman & Greaves 2010](#), [Benson 2013d](#)).
- Any government serious about preventing family breakdown must make its primary concern the improvement of stability amongst unmarried new parents.
- A secondary concern is the reduction of divorce rates during the early years of marriage, given that the entire variation in divorce rates since the 1960s has taken place during the first five to ten years of marriage ([Benson 2013a](#)).
- The remarkable consistency of divorce rates amongst marriages beyond ten years duration strongly suggests that there is little point in attempting to improve stability of established marriages.

How might government best support families to: (a) stay together; (b) improve the quality of their relationships; or in the case of separation, (c) form a stable parental relationship apart? (what works?)

(a) stay together

- Previous government papers have focused their policy recommendations on the reasonable premise that stronger relationships are more likely to remain stable and thereby avoid family breakdown. The fundamental problem with this hypothesis is that it is nigh on impossible to identify couples at risk (preliminary analysis of Understanding Society data by Marriage Foundation to be published later in 2014).
- The far more robust approach, largely overlooked in government policy to date, is to recognise the reality that cohabitation entraps couples who are low on dedication and that the decision to marry *per se* promotes commitment (e.g. [Stanley et al, 2006a](#)). The strongest outcome evidence for this is that just 7% of all parents of teens who are still an intact couple are not married ([Benson 2013d](#))
- The government's best strategy to strengthen stability and reduce family breakdown is therefore to attempt to reverse the trend away from marriage by distinguishing, encouraging, promoting and incentivising marriage. This was the

key policy recommendation made by the Centre for Social Justice in “Breakthrough Britain” ([Callan et al 2007](#)) and is the key recommendation of the Marriage Foundation today.

- Policies that support marriage do not have to cost a great deal.
- It would cost almost nothing to ensure that Cabinet ministers and senior Civil Servants are properly briefed and aware of the outcome evidence that family breakdown costs more than the defence budget (or half of the education budget), is almost entirely driven by the trend away from marriage, is heavily concentrated amongst unmarried couples with young children, and that almost all intact couples with teens are married; or that there are simple and compelling theoretical explanations behind the relative instability of cohabitation and relative stability of marriage.
- It would cost little to distinguish “married” and “living together as if married” as separate categories of marital status on all government forms. The current conflation of categories, as if they are the same, helps perpetuate the bogus myth of “common law marriage”, a legal status that has never existed in English law ([Probert 2011](#)) and thus convince young unmarried couples that they similar rights to married couples if they split up. They do not.
- The government has recently expressed its willingness to introduce a tax break for married couples that will reduce government revenue from married couples by £700m. Marriage Foundation has previously argued that, although support for marriage is welcome, this general tax break for married couples is poorly targeted, further complicates the tax system, does nothing to address the “couple penalty”, and potentially undermines marriage in the long run because of the derisory net amount accruing per couple. Nobody marries for £3.85 a week.
- Instead, the government could and should use a similar amount to counter the “couple penalty” that currently pays couples with one child up to £7,000 per year extra in tax credits if they live apart, or pretend to do so. Research by Marriage Foundation has shown that hundreds of thousands of couples with children are pretending to live apart ([Benson 2013e](#)). By introducing an additional child benefit involving £’000s – not £00s – per year and targeting this only at married mothers with a first child aged under three, the government would be spending much the same money but with a far simpler policy that also has a realistic chance of changing family outcomes. Such policy would counter the bizarre “couple penalty” that disincentivises family formation and marriage in particular. It would also incentivise precisely the group most at risk of family breakdown – namely unmarried parents with children under three – to get married and thereby improve their odds of staying together, which is exactly what many will want to do anyway.

(b) improve the quality of their relationships

- An extensive scheme for improving relationship quality should be a serious priority for government. This should come second to a primary policy in support of marriage, because of the near impossibility of identifying at risk couples.
- Nonetheless, there is sound evidence that relationship education programmes can be very effective at reducing both relationship conflict and breakdown risk, and improving relationship quality in a variety of settings – such as for engaged couples, prison couples, individuals, cohabiters, and military couples (e.g [Carroll & Doherty 2003](#), [Einhorn et al 2008](#), [Hawkins et al 2008](#), [Rhoades & Stanley 2009](#), [Rhoades et al 2009](#), [Stanley et al 2005](#), [Stanley et al 2006b](#)).
- The Centre for Social Justice in Breakthrough Britain ([Callan et al 2007](#), Chapter 2) proposed a detailed and extensive voucher scheme for relationship education across the life cycle.
- Present day examples of widespread programmes that access post-natal mothers, engaged couples, and couples in crisis have recently been evaluated for their effectiveness by DfE. The report is due out imminently. Such programmes would benefit greatly from a substantial increase in government support.
- A large scale relationship intervention directly targeting new unmarried parents in Oklahoma, under the US Healthy Marriage Initiative programme, proved extremely successful at 15 and 36 month follow-up. It is noteworthy that the success of Oklahoma’s programme, amongst seven other similar but less successful programmes, was due to its excellent record of implementation ([Wood et al 2012](#))

(c) form a stable parental relationship apart

- Marriage Foundation is concerned with improving family stability and strengthening families rather than trying to support families after they have split up. However policy-makers should be aware of the following two studies that question the effectiveness of attempts to improve post-divorce parenting.
- The first study is a review of post-divorce parenting programmes that suggests no programme to date has yet reduced inter-parental conflict ([Haine et al 2003](#)). It does however highlight the effectiveness of parenting programmes aimed specifically at single parents.
- The second study is an exploration of the “good divorce” hypothesis by one of the most respected US sociologists, Paul Amato. The study finds limited support for the concept ([Amato et al 2011](#))

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