



The
Marriage
Foundation

Unmarried parents account for one fifth of couples but half of all family breakdown

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- To my knowledge, no official paper to date has published any estimate of total annual family breakdown in the UK. Whereas it is relatively simple to record and count data on the breakdown of married couples, it is far more difficult to do this for unmarried cohabiting couples due to the lack of formal beginning or end.
- However, for the first time, new data from the national survey Understanding Society is sufficiently large to permit a good estimate of the source of family breakdown in the UK from both married and unmarried cohabiting parents.
- Across the first three survey waves (between calendar years 2009 and 2012) an average of 1.3% of married parents with dependent children under sixteen split up per year compared to 5.3% of unmarried cohabiting parents per year.
- By applying these ratios to Office for National Statistics data on Families and Households – sourced from the Labour Force survey – it can now be shown that some 116,800 couples with dependent children under sixteen split up during 2010. These comprised 60,400 married parents and 56,400 cohabiting parents.
- Although cohabiting parents account for 19% of all couples, the separation of cohabiting parents accounts for 48% of all family breakdown.
- As the increase in births outside of marriage leads directly to an increase in the proportion of cohabiting parents, so too does the greater instability of cohabiting parents lead directly to an increase in family breakdown.
- Although selection factors (e.g. age, education, income, ethnicity) explain part of the consistently higher break-up rates amongst cohabiting parents, none of these factors explain the doubling of family breakdown since 1980.
- If the same or very similar break-up rates apply to the latest population data for 2013, this suggests that cohabiting parents may now account for slightly more than half of all family breakdown.

I am most grateful to Professor Stephen McKay, University of Lincoln, for his help with this early analysis of data on family transitions and modern family life in the survey Understanding Society.

ASSESSING THE SCALE AND SOURCE OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN

Family breakdown has a consistently negative impact on families and children. This effect has been comprehensively established, for example across 94% of studies in OECD countries (Chapple & Richardson, 2009) and 88% of studies in the US (Amato, 2000). Economic hardship, poorer quality of parenting, higher stress levels, and pre-existing selection factors are all potential explanations (Amato, 2005).

In the UK, family breakdown is estimated to cost the taxpayer directly £46 billion per year (Ashcroft, 2013). This huge bill is due to the greater likelihood that single parents require additional financial support – benefits, tax credits, and housing – as well as other support and interventions – such as health, domestic violence – in comparison with couple parents.

It is also well-established that cohabiting parents are more likely to split up compared to married parents (e.g. Benson, 2006; Goodman & Greaves, 2010). In the absence of a controlled study that randomly assigns some couples to marry and other to cohabit, it is harder to establish whether this gap in stability is due more to the nature of the relationship or to pre-existing selection factors.

My own interpretation of the research is that both cause and selection play important roles (Marriage Foundation, 2013). “Inertia” provides a causal explanation for why some lower quality cohabiting relationships sustain just long enough to have a baby before then splitting up. “Sliding vs Deciding” provides a further causal explanation for why the act of marriage itself may cause couples to become more resilient (Stanley, Kline & Markman, 2006).

The biggest question mark against selection as an all-encompassing explanation is that it fails to account for the doubling of lone parenthood between 1980 and the present day, a period during which selection factors – such as income and education – have actually improved while divorce rates have remained remarkably stable (Callan et al, 2006).

To my knowledge, no official study has yet been able to make an accurate assessment of the scale of family breakdown annually. Unlike marriage and divorce, where there is at least a formal entry and exit point that is officially recorded and counted, the formation and dissolution of cohabiting couples is much harder to track.

Cross-sectional surveys, such as the Census, give an excellent snapshot of family life at one moment in time but provide no real picture of change over time. Large panel surveys, such as the Millennium Cohort Study, give an excellent account of change but only for one particular group. Household panel surveys, such as the former British Household Panel Survey, give both snapshot and change. However the relative infrequency of annual family breakdown – overall divorce rates are around 1.1% per year – mean that the numbers of couples in the survey who split up are too small from which to generalise.

Studies already give us the cumulative effect of family breakdown, such as numbers of lone parents (e.g. ONS, 2013). They also give us the rate of family breakdown (e.g. Benson, 2006).

However the new dataset from Understanding Society (University of Essex, 2013) – the significantly boosted and upgraded version of the former British Household panel Survey – is now sufficiently large to provide a meaningful number of both married and cohabiting parents who were together during the first wave 2009-10 yet separated or divorced during the third wave 2011-12.

By applying the annual break-up ratios to the total population of married and cohabiting parents with dependent children (ONS, 2013), it is possible to assess the source of family breakdown for the very first time.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

Understanding Society is a large national panel survey of 40,000 UK households. The first Wave survey took place during the calendar years 2009 and 2010. Second and third waves took place one year later respectively across 2010/11 and then 2011/12.

In order to make generalisations about how the rate of family breakdown applies to the wider population, the sample really needs to be big enough to find 100 couples in each category who have experienced family breakdown. For example, that would require a sample size of 10,000 couples if family breakdown averaged 1% per year and 2,000 couples if family breakdown averaged 5% per year.

Between Waves 1 and 2 of Understanding Society, a total of 139 couples experienced family breakdown. However between Waves 1 and 3, a total of 194 couples experienced family breakdown. These comprised 104 formerly married couples and 90 formerly cohabiting couples. This is now of sufficient size from which to establish the break-up rate of married and cohabiting parents. Allocating the two year rate between Waves 1 and 3 evenly between years now gives the first reasonable estimate of the annual rate at which cohabiting couples with children split up.

This is the first time such calculation has been possible. In part it is because cohabitation is now sufficiently normalised. So there is a much larger pool of cohabiting couples today than in previous years. In part it is also the sheer scale of this survey that allows a useful analysis of family breakdown year by year.

The table below shows “weighted” data from Understanding Society on 2,788 mothers with dependent children who were either married or cohabiting at Wave 1 (2009-10) and their subsequent relationship status two years later at Wave 3 (2011-12).

The 104 married and 90 cohabiting couples who split up in the “unweighted” sample show that the survey is big enough. Although the “weighted” numbers in the table below show only 73 married and 81 cohabiting couples splitting up, it is now the proportion that counts.

Using compound rates over the two year period of the survey, the data shows – for the first time – that 1.3% of married parents and 5.3% of cohabiting parents split up during each year. Overall, 2.2% of all parents split up.

Understanding Society status between waves 1 and 3

	Married couples	Cohab couples	% splits over two years	% splits per year (compound)
Married > married	2715	-	-	-
Married > split	73	-	2.6%	1.3%
Cohab > cohab	-	563	-	-
Cohab > married	-	107	-	-
Cohab > split	-	81	10.8%	5.3%
Couples at Wave 1	2788	751	-	-
Couples at Wave 3	2715	670	-	-
Couples who split	73	81	4.4%	2.2%

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Having established that married and cohabiting couples split up at an annual rate of 1.3% and 5.3% respectively per year, these rates now need to be applied to the entire population of married and cohabiting couples with dependent children.

The Office for National Statistics produce annual population data on Families and Households, sourced from the Labour Force Survey. Although the timing of the two surveys – Understanding Society and Labour Force Survey – don't match up precisely, there is sufficient overlap that the most appropriate population dataset onto which to apply these break-up rates is 2010.

The table below shows the population of married and cohabiting couples with dependent children in 2010.

When the relevant break-up rates are applied (*% who split*) the table shows that some 116,776 parents split up during the year, of whom 60,393 married and 56,383 cohabiting.

The figure of 60,393 for married break-ups in this estimate corresponds closely to the figure previously produced by Office for National Statistics of 59,309 divorces involving children under sixteen. This gives added confidence that the figure for cohabiting break-ups is accurate.

Whereas cohabiting couples account for 19% of couples with dependent children, their disproportionately higher break-up rate means that they account for 48% of splits.

Families and Household: Couples with Dependent Children

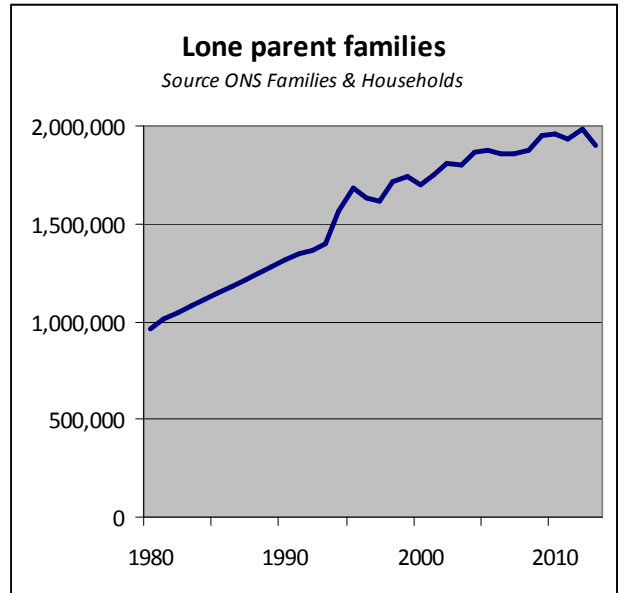
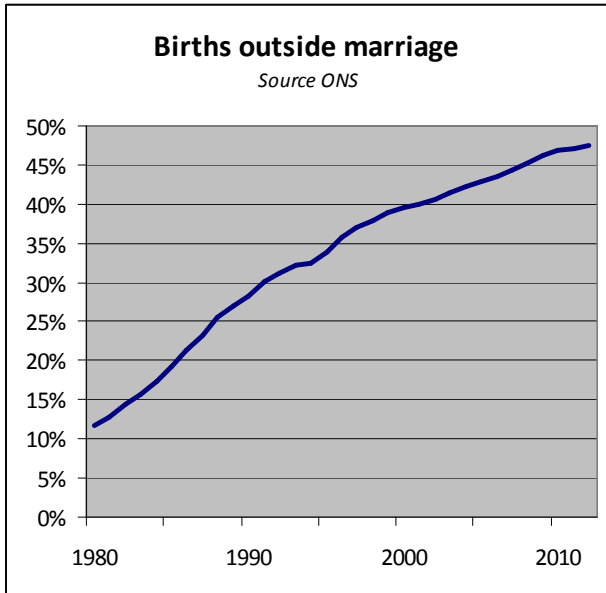
	2010 Couples	% <i>who split</i>	Couples who split	% 2010 couples	% who split
Married	4,643,000	1.3%	60,393	81%	52%
Cohabiting	1,073,000	5.3%	56,383	19%	48%
All couples	5,716,000		116,776		

FAMILY BREAKDOWN IS DRIVEN BY BIRTHS OUTSIDE MARRIAGE

The equation is a simple one.

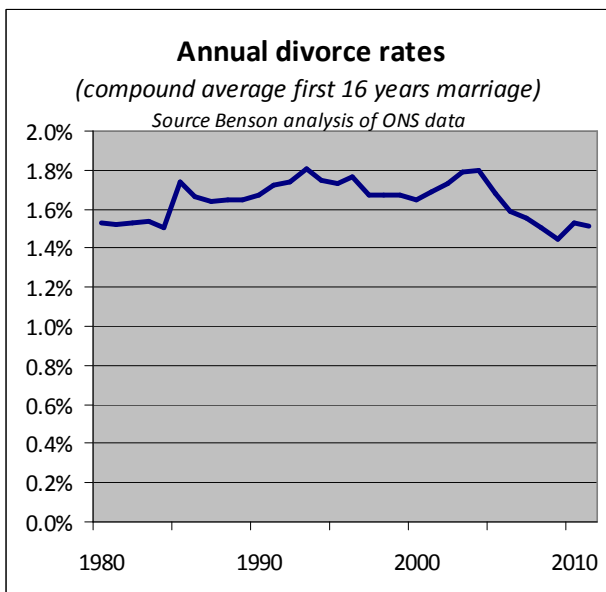
- More births outside marriage = more family breakdown.

As the proportion of births outside marriage rises, the higher break-up rate amongst unmarried cohabiting parents necessarily leads to an increase in family breakdown.



Divorce cannot be responsible for this increase in lone parenthood. The chart below shows how the compound annual rate of divorce throughout the first sixteen years of marriage has remained steady, averaging between 1.6% and 1.8% per year throughout the 1980s, until divorce rates began falling after 2004.

Were the higher rate of breakdown amongst cohabiting couples simply the result of the riskiest couples no longer marrying, then this should have been apparent in a steady decrease in divorce rates throughout the 1980s as cohabitation grew in popularity. Instead, the stability of marriages during the child-rearing years has remained remarkably consistent.



MOST FAMILY BREAKDOWN FROM COHABITATION IN 2013?

The rising trend of births outside marriage has a knock-on effect into rising lone parent family formation.

Because divorce rates have been so steady over time and there is no evidence to suggest that cohabiting couples are becoming substantially more stable, it is reasonable to assume that the break up rates found in the analysis of Understanding Society (in effect throughout the calendar years 2010, 2011 and the first half of 2012) will be very similar to the break-up rates actually experienced during calendar year 2013.

The table below shows the effect of these annual break-up rates on the actual population of couples with dependent children in 2013, data sourced once again from the Office for National Statistics report Families and Households.

By applying the average annual break-up rates established from Understanding Society for married and cohabiting couples, I can therefore estimate the level of family breakdown for 2013.

This suggests that just over half of all family breakdown in 2013 will come from cohabiting parents.

Families and Household: Couples with Dependent Children

	2013 Couples	% <i>who split</i>	Couples who split	% 2013 couples	% who split
Married	4,658,000	1.3%	60,588	80%	49.5%
Cohabiting	1,175,000	5.3%	61,743	20%	50.5%
All couples	5,833,000		122,331		

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