



The myth of “long-term stable relationships” outside marriage

Harry Benson, The Marriage Foundation

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New data from Understanding Society shows that

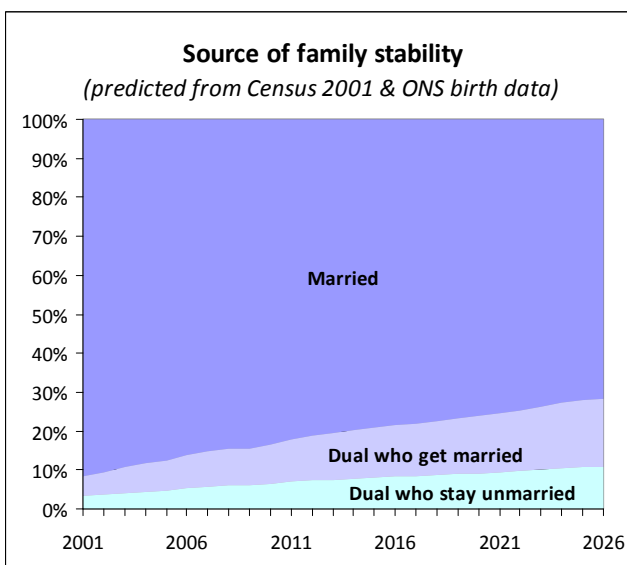
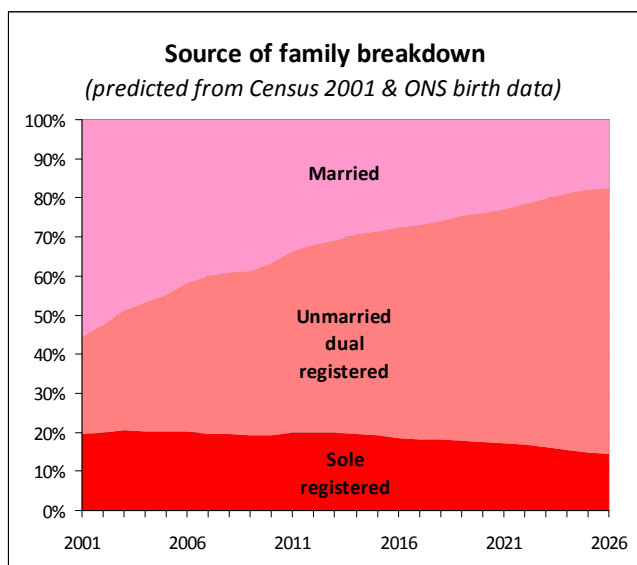
- **45% of young teenagers (aged 13 - 15 years old) are not living with both parents**
- **Half of all family breakdown takes place during the first two years**
- **Amongst parents who remain intact, 93% are married**

These actual data are almost exactly as predicted from a model based on previous 2001 Census data. The model assumes that the increase in births to unmarried parents will lead to an increase in family breakdown.

Validation of this model provides further evidence that the trend away from marriage is the driving force behind rising family breakdown.

- **Out of the 47% of children born to unmarried parents today, the model predicts that just 11% will reach their 16th birthday with both parents intact and unmarried. The rest will either marry or split up.**

The relative scarcity of “long-term stable relationships” outside of marriage confirms that it is disingenuous and untenable for government to keep “airbrushing” marriage from family policy papers.



INTRODUCTION

A recently produced government paper on Social Justice (DWP, 2013) discusses the effect of family breakdown on children. This should be an important issue for government since the direct costs of family breakdown are estimated at £46 billion (Relationships Foundation, 2013), more than the defence budget. It is clearly in the interest of government and taxpayer to understand the causes of this huge social and economic cost. Yet despite mentioning “complex factors”, the DWP report follows in a line of government-sponsored family policy reviews (e.g. Mooney et al, 2009; DCSF, 2010; Field, 2010; Hunt, 2010; Allen, 2011; DWP, 2012) that overlook, disregard, or dismiss altogether the robust link between marital status and family breakdown whilst talking glowingly of so-called “long term stable relationships”.

Over the last decade, I have written or co-written many papers about family stability and family breakdown (Benson 2005, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013; Callan et al, 2006, 2007). In sharp contrast to government, my papers point to one simple conclusion.

- **The trend away from marriage is the main driver of rising family breakdown.**

This paper reviews new findings from Understanding Society that test predictions for family breakdown I made based on Census 2001 and birth rate data from the Office for National Statistics (Benson, 2010c).

The key actual findings from Census 2001 were that:

- **40% of 15 year olds were not living with both parents**
- **97% of intact parents of 15 year olds were married**

I then built a forecasting model based largely on the different rates of family breakdown experienced by married and unmarried parents. Using a set of assumptions – all of which outlined below in Appendix A – I was able to predict the following:

- **48% of children born in 2010 will experience family breakdown – i.e. will not be living with both parents at age 15**

Understanding Society is a large national longitudinal survey of 40,000 households. The second wave was conducted during 2010 and 2011. This new dataset allows me to track the progress of my Census 2001 predictive model on the actual level of family stability and breakdown some nine years later.

My Census 2001 model predicted the following for 2010:

- **44% of 15 year olds would not be living with both parents**
- **93% of intact parents of 15 year olds would be married**

(Note that Census 2011 data is not yet available and is expected later this year)

If it continues to be the case that almost all couples who remain intact through bringing up their children are married, it renders the “airbrushing” of marriage from government family policy papers incompatible with the evidence.

NEW FINDINGS FROM UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY FOR 2010/2011

Data from Wave 2 of Understanding Society shows the following:

Family breakdown

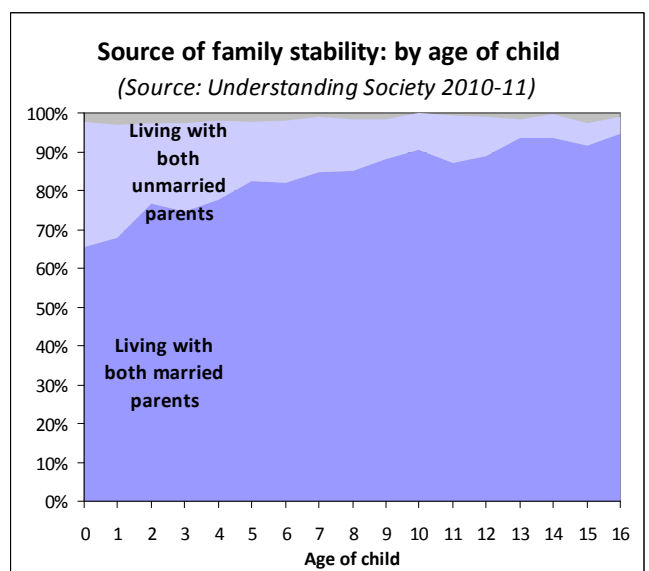
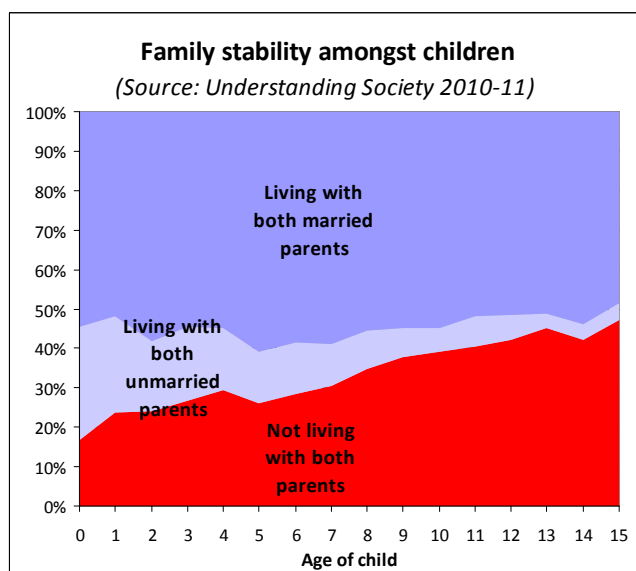
- 17% of babies under one year old do not live with both natural parents
- 47% of 15 year olds do not live with both natural parents (**see note below**)
- On this basis, half of all family breakdown takes place within the first two years
- **45% of young teenagers (aged 13-15) do not live with both natural parents**

Family stability

- 83% of babies aged under one year old live with both parents
- Of these, 54% are married and 29% not married
- 53% of 15 year olds live with both parents (**see note below**)
- Of these, 49% are married and 4% not married
- **Amongst all parents of young teenagers (13-15), 51% are married & intact whereas just 4% are unmarried & intact**

Source of family stability

- 91% of intact couples with 15 year olds are married (**see note below**)
- **93% of intact couples with teens (13-15) are married**
- 91% of intact couples with older children (10-15) are married
- 82% of all intact couples with children (0-15) are married



Note: The data for 15 year olds living with both parents shows a dip below the adjacent ratios for 13, 14 and 16 year olds. In a sample size of 375 children, it only takes a handful of outliers to change the outcome by 1-2%. It might therefore be more reliable to use a 3 year moving average. This “smoothed” ratio for intact couples with 15 year olds who are married would be 93%.

THE TREND AWAY FROM MARRIAGE

Full details of the assumptions and calculation for my original model are at **Appendix A**. This model forecast family breakdown for children born in 2009 based on what had already been experienced for children born in 1986 (who were then aged 15 during the Census survey of 2001). I have included a further calculation at **Appendix B** from the same model for babies born in 1995 (who were then aged 15 for the Understanding Society survey of 2010/11).

A whole body of evidence shows that married parents tend to be more stable than unmarried parents. For example, several analyses of Millennium Cohort Study data have showed that, amongst mothers giving birth in 2000/01, 26% of cohabiting mothers had separated before their child's fifth birthday compared to 9% of married mothers (Benson, 2009a; Goodman & Grieves, 2010).

My Census model relies on this differential remaining constant over time. If this assumption is broadly correct, then the key variable in calculating family stability over time becomes marital status at birth. Fewer married parents means fewer relatively stable couples. More unmarried parents means more relatively unstable couples.

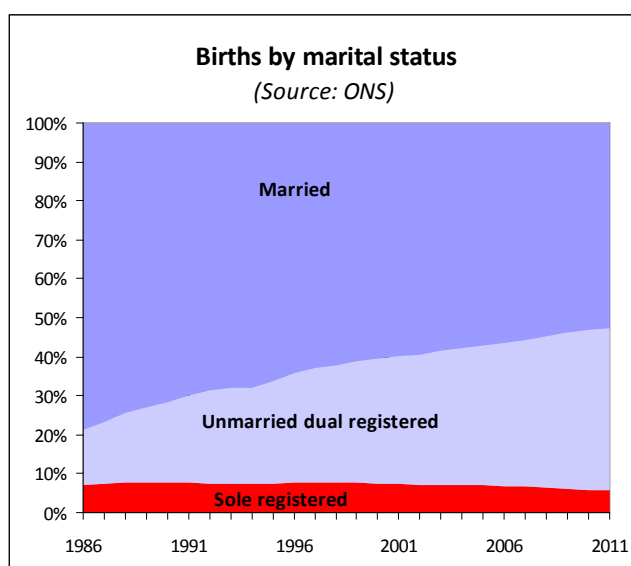
A trend away from marriage, all other factors remaining constant, should therefore lead to an increase in family breakdown.

The chart below shows the trend away from marriage clearly:

- Births to married parents fell from 79% in 1986 to 66% in 1985 (these are the relevant birth years of 15 year olds surveyed for Census 2001 and Understanding Society 2010/11)
- Births to dual registered unmarried parents increased from 14% to 26% during the same period
- Births to sole registered parents remained at a fairly constant 7% of all births

The trend continues unabated:

- In 2011, births to married parents had fallen further to 53%
- Births to dual registered unmarried parents has increased to 41%



PREDICTED FAMILY BREAKDOWN BASED ON THE TREND AWAY FROM MARRIAGE

My Census 2001 model has proven to be extremely reliable.

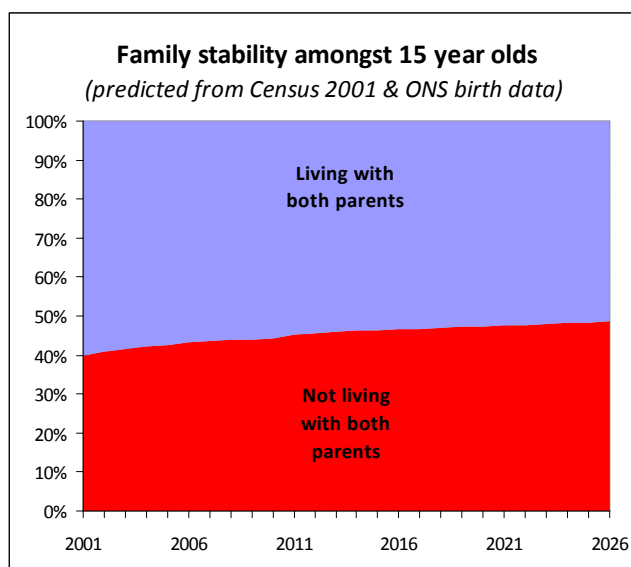
Using the actual level of family breakdown in 2001 and the relevant change in birth rates between married and unmarried parents, my model predicted that 44% of 15 year olds would have experienced family breakdown in 2010/11. The actual level of family breakdown in Wave 1 of Understanding Society was 45%.

My model also predicted that the proportion of intact couples with 15 year olds who are married would reduce from 97% in 2001 to 93% in 2010/11. The actual level from Understanding Society was 91% although, as noted earlier, the smoothed level was 93%.

This is clear evidence that the differential in break down rates between married and unmarried couples has remained relatively constant.

The chart below shows the effect of the trend away from relatively stable marriage and towards relatively less stable unmarried parenthood.

- In 2001, 40% of 15 year olds had experienced some form of family breakdown, whether before or after their birth, and were not by not living with both natural parents.
- Today, 46% of 15 year olds are not living with both natural parents
- On current trends for family breakdown inside and outside marriage, an estimated 49% of children born today will not live with both natural parents before their 16th birthday



SOURCES OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN

The Census 2001 model predicts a total figure for both family breakdown and family stability by looking separately at married parents who stay married or divorce, dual registered unmarried parents who stay unmarried or separate, dual registered unmarried parents who get and stay married, and sole-registered parents.

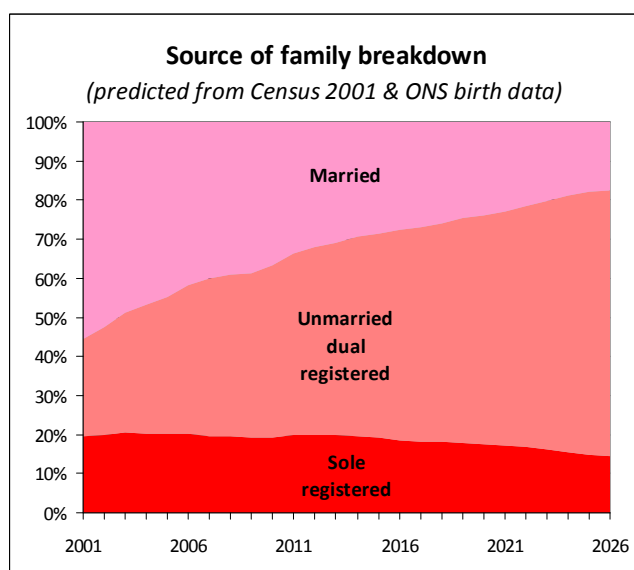
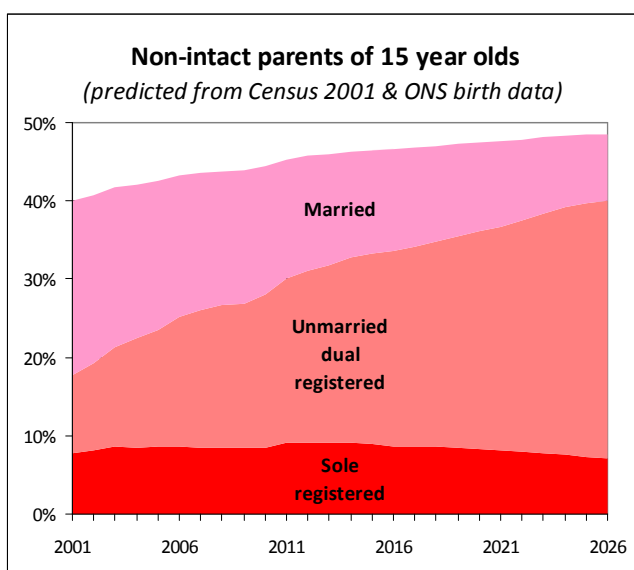
Because the model predicted 2010/11 actual data on family breakdown with such accuracy, on current trends, I can reasonably predict the following

Family breakdown today

- The proportion of 15 year olds not living with both natural parents has risen from 40% in 2001 to an estimated 46% in 2013
- The contribution of unmarried couples to family breakdown has more than doubled from 10% to 23%
- Sole registered parents have remained unchanged at 8%
- The contribution of married couples to family breakdown has fallen by a third from 22% to 13%
- The continuing trend away from marriage means that 49% of babies born today will not live with both natural parents

Sources of family breakdown

- Unmarried dual registered parents who separate now account for 49% of all family breakdown, up from 25% in 2001
- Unmarried sole registered parents account for a further unchanged 20%
- Married parents who divorce account for 31% of all family breakdown, down from 56% in 2001
- On present trends, the separation of unmarried parents will contribute to 68% of family breakdown affecting babies born today



SOURCES OF FAMILY STABILITY

The reverse of these figures involves couples who manage to stay together until at least their child's sixteenth birthday.

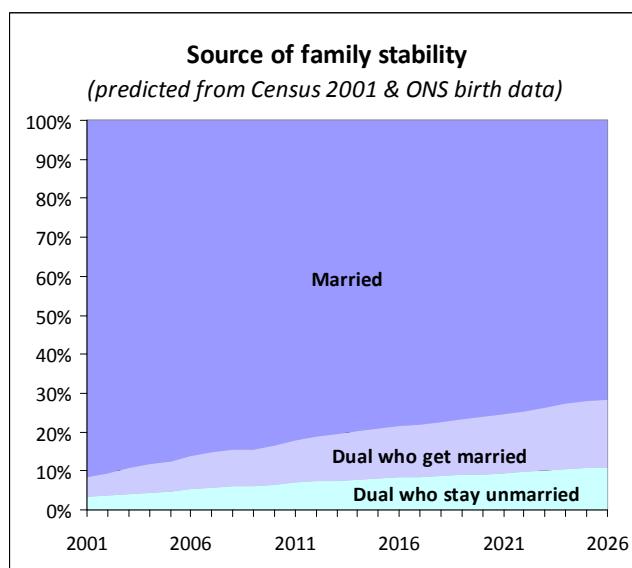
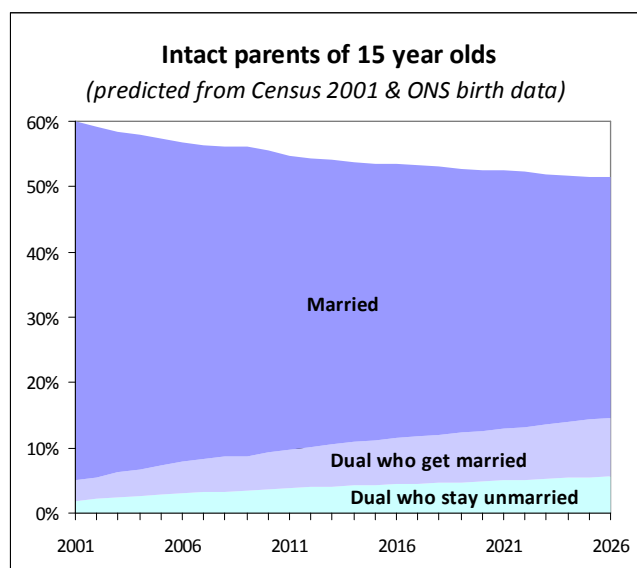
The Census 2001 model predicts the following:

Family stability today

- The proportion of 15 year olds living with both natural parents has fallen from 60% in 2001 to an estimated 54% in 2013
- The contribution of married couples has fallen from 55% to 44%
- The contribution of dual registered couples who subsequently get and stay married has doubled from 3% to 6%
- The contribution of dual registered couples who stay unmarried has also doubled from 2% to 4%
- These trends reflect the trend from fewer marriages and more unmarried cohabitation

Sources of family breakdown

- Almost all intact couples with 15 year olds are married.
- From 97% of all intact couples with 15 year olds in 2001, married parents still account for around 93% today.
- Within this, the contribution of dual registered couples who get and stay married has doubled from 5% to 12%.
- The contribution of unmarried couples who stay unmarried and together has risen from 3% to 8%.
- Couples who stay together without getting married will remain the exception, accounting for 11% of today's babies who will spend all their childhood with both natural parents



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APPENDIX A – Original Census 2001 model (Benson 2010c)

Children who experience family breakdown		Calculation (assumptions in red)	Births in	Births in	Calculation
			1986	2009	
Births to married parents	<i>a</i>	ONS	519,673	380,069	ONS
Births to unmarried parents	<i>b</i>	ONS	93,660	282,440	ONS
Births to sole parents	<i>c</i>	ONS	47,685	43,739	ONS
All births	<i>d</i>	ONS	661,018	706,248	ONS
Overall breakdown rate %	<i>e</i>	Census	40%	48%	$1 - f/d$
All intact families	<i>f</i>	<i>exd</i>	396,611	365,079	$g + m$
All intact married couples	<i>g</i>	96.8% x f	383,919	326,807	$h + k$
Intact married who start married	<i>h</i>	70% x a	363,771	266,048	70% x a
Intact unmarried who marry	<i>k</i>	$h - g$	20,148	60,759	$l \times b$
Intact unmarried who marry %	<i>l</i>	k/b	22%	22%	1986 l
Intact unmarried who stay unmarried	<i>m</i>	3.2% x f	12,692	38,272	$n \times b$
Intact unmarried who stay unmarried %	<i>n</i>	m/b	14%	14%	1986 n
Check - Intact unmarried % - should be 35%		$(k + m)/b$	35%	35%	$(k + m)/b$
Intact married		<i>h</i>	363,771	266,048	<i>h</i>
Intact unmarried who marry		<i>k</i>	20,148	60,759	<i>k</i>
Intact unmarried		<i>m</i>	12,692	38,272	<i>m</i>
Intact married, as %		h/f	92%	73%	h/f
Intact unmarried who marry, as %		k/f	5%	17%	k/f
Intact unmarried who stay unmarried, as %		m/f	3%	10%	m/f

Notes

- **Overall:** I have assumed that the survival rates for married couples, unmarried couples who marry and unmarried couples who stay unmarried, remains the same for both 1986 and 2009 cohorts.
- **Line g:** Census data shows that married families comprise 96.8% of all families that remain intact through their child's upbringing.
- **Line h:** This is the first part of estimating how many of the intact married couples started off as married and how many as married. The only reliable starting point for this is Ermisch (2001) who reports that the overall survival rates are 70% for married couples and 35% for unmarried couples. I have assumed the 70% survival rate also remains good for the 2009 cohort.
- **Line l:** The 70% assumption now allows calculation of the number of intact married couples who started off unmarried. I have applied this same 22% survival rate to the 2009 cohort.
- **Line m:** Census data shows that unmarried families comprise 3.2% of all families that remain intact through their child's upbringing.
- **Line n:** This gives a 14% survival rate of intact unmarried couples who stayed unmarried. I have also applied this same 14% rate to the 2009 cohort.

Ermisch, J. (2001) When Forever is No-More: Economic Implications of Changing Family Structure. University of Essex: ISER.

APPENDIX B – predicted model for 15 year olds in 2010

Children who experience family breakdown		Births in	Births in	
	Calculation	1986	1995	Calculation
<i>(assumptions in red)</i>				
		aged 15 in 2001 Census	aged 15 in 2010 Understand Soc Wave 2	
Births to married parents	<i>a</i> ONS	519,673	428,189	ONS
Births to unmarried parents	<i>b</i> ONS	93,660	170,410	ONS
Births to sole parents	<i>c</i> ONS	47,685	47,916	ONS
All births	<i>d</i> ONS	661,018	646,515	ONS
Overall breakdown rate %	<i>e</i> Census	40%	44%	$1 - f / d$
All intact families	<i>f</i> <i>exd</i>	396,611	359,483	$g + m$
All intact married couples	<i>g</i> 96.8% x f	383,919	336,391	$h + k$
Intact married who start married	<i>h</i> 70% x a	363,771	299,732	70% x a
Intact unmarried who marry	<i>k</i> $h - g$	20,148	36,659	$l \times b$
Intact unmarried who marry %	<i>l</i> k / b	22%	22%	1986 l
Intact unmarried who stay unmarried	<i>m</i> 3.2% x f	12,692	23,092	$n \times b$
Intact unmarried who stay unmarried %	<i>n</i> m / b	14%	14%	1986 n
Intact unmarried %	$(k + m) / b$	35%	35%	$(k + m) / b$
Intact married	<i>h</i>	363,771	299,732	<i>h</i>
Intact unmarried who marry	<i>k</i>	20,148	36,659	<i>k</i>
Intact unmarried	<i>m</i>	12,692	23,092	<i>m</i>
Intact married, as %	h / f	92%	83%	h / f
Intact unmarried who marry, as %	k / f	5%	10%	k / f
Intact unmarried who stay unmarried, as %	m / f	3%	6%	m / f

Note on assumptions

- **The main assumption** concerns **line h**. The relative stability of divorce rates since 1980 suggests that original marriage survival rates are unlikely to have strayed far from 70%.
- If this is still the case, then actual data for both 2001 (Census) and 2010 (Understanding Society) both imply that 22% of original unmarried couples survive having got married at some stage (**line l**) and 14% of original unmarried couples survive having stayed unmarried (**line n**) – combining to produce a plausible total survival rate for unmarried couples of 35% (as per Ermisch, 2001).
- Varying this key assumption of 70% by more than +/- 5% produces implausible proportions of unmarried couples who remain intact to age 15 (not shown), compared alongside known survival rates to age 7 from Millennium Cohort Study.
- So are Ermisch's survival rates of 70% and 35% still valid? The answer appears to be yes.

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