

# Marriage Foundation

## The cost to Britain's children of the trend away from marriage

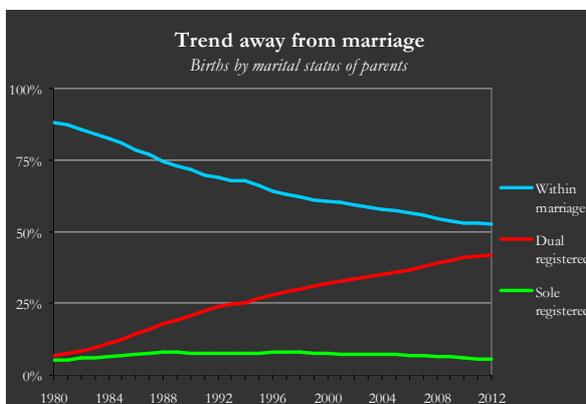
Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation  
April, 2015

- The trend away from marriage since 1980 has increased family breakdown in England & Wales by up to 44%.
- An estimated **1.8 million additional children** born since then either are not living with both natural parents already or are likely to experience family breakdown.
- Up to 80,000 children born this year will experience family breakdown as a direct result of the trend away from marriage.

Since 1980, the proportion of children born to married couples has fallen from 88% to 53%.

Recent research from Marriage Foundation has shown that couples who were not married at the time of their child's birth are more than twice as likely to split up during the succeeding 15 years, even if they subsequently married.

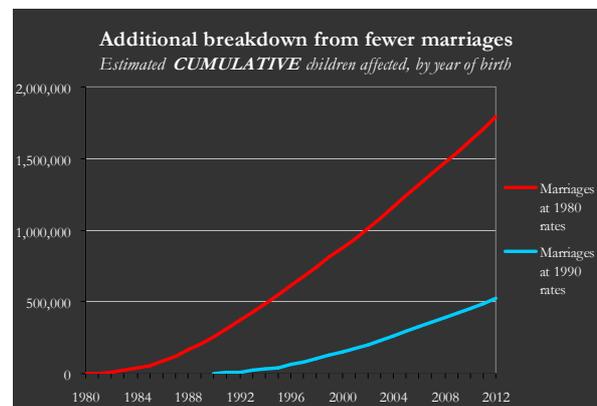
Changes to the main socio-economic factors known to influence family stability suggest that family breakdown should have **decreased** since 1980 – due to rising age, education and income of mothers. The switch from relatively stable married couples to relatively unstable unmarried couples therefore remains by far the most plausible explanation for why lone parenthood has in reality consistently **increased**.



In order to estimate the number of additional children affected by the trend away from

marriage – and its relatively high associated level of stability – I assumed that the proportion of births within marriage remained constant at either 1980 or 1990 rates, instead of declining.

I applied these break-up rates to England & Wales birth data, adjusting for the minor actual changes in overall divorce rate during this period.



The result is that family breakdown is up to 44% higher today than it would have been, had the proportion of births to married couples remained at 1980 levels.

The trend away from marriage is therefore affecting as many as 80,000 additional children per year, and cumulatively nearly 2 million of all children born since 1980.

Had marriage rates remained at 1990 levels, the trend away from marriage would still have affected up to 500,000 children born since then.

## Marriage Foundation Short Analysis

### Introduction

A recent paper by Marriage Foundation (Benson, 2015) used data from Understanding Society to determine the rate of break-up among parents of 14/15 year olds who started off as a couple when their child was born.

The figures showed a sharp difference in family stability that varied with both initial and subsequent marital status.

- **24%** of mothers who were married when their child was born split up
- **56%** of mothers who were unmarried when their child was born but subsequently married the father split up
- **69%** of mothers who were a couple when their child was born but never married split up

The analysis also showed that neither mother's age nor education significantly influenced these outcomes.

What this analysis shows – for the very first time – is a link between 'births by marital status' and 'outcomes by marital status'.

Assuming that the gap in outcomes therefore remains relatively consistent over time, it is therefore possible to estimate the amount of family breakdown applying to any birth cohort by applying these ratios to the number of actual births – adjusting all three ratios to take account of the prevailing overall divorce rate in any given year.

This is not an exact method. It may well be possible to establish more exact figures from a longitudinal data set.

However it does allow a plausible estimate to be made of family breakdown since 1980 – which was about the time when unmarried births really began to increase, from 12% of all births then to the current level of 47%.

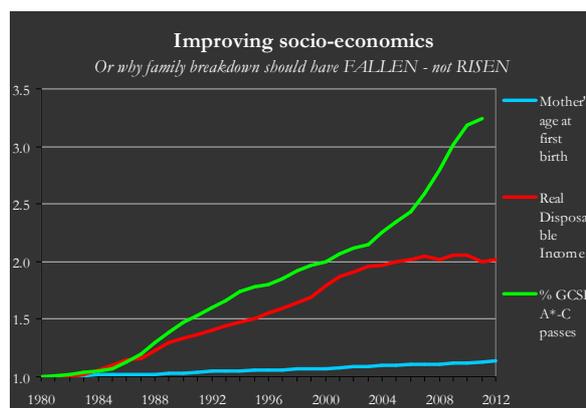
This short analysis estimates what might have happened had that trend away from marriage – and consequent shift of births to couples in relatively unstable cohabiting relationships – not happened.

## Socio-economic factors

Marriage Foundation analysis shows no significant link between stability over 15 years of parenthood with either age or education.

However, because other research over shorter periods of parenthood does show a link (eg Goodman & Greaves, 2010), it is important to consider their potential effect.

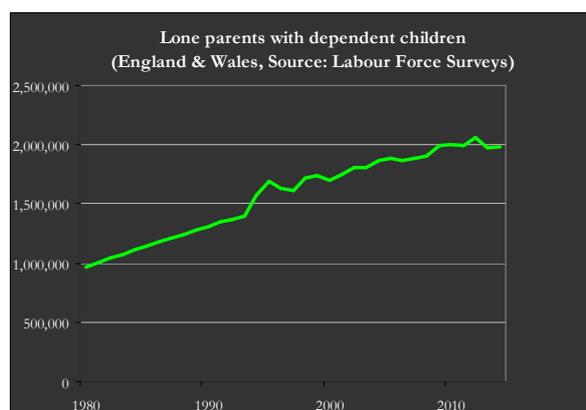
Since 1980, the main predictors – age, education and income – have all improved, suggesting that family breakdown should have fallen during this period.



## Family breakdown

Of course, it has not. Over the last thirty five years, family breakdown – as measured by the number of lone parent families – has doubled from one million in 1980 to two million today.

This consistent upward trend has taken place under all governments.



*NOTE It's important to recognise that 'lone parenthood' significantly understates the full extent of family breakdown, because it excludes parents who repartner, and it represents children of all ages, some of whom have yet to experience family breakdown.*

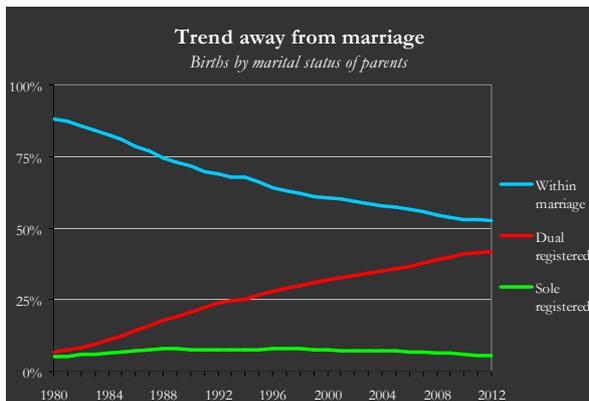
*Whereas lone parents represent one in four families with children, the inclusion of step-families pushes up*

the proportion to one in three. Looking only at teenagers aged 12-15 takes the real proportion up to nearly one in two.

## The trend away from marriage

Since 1980, there has been a marked reduction in the proportion of births born to married mothers.

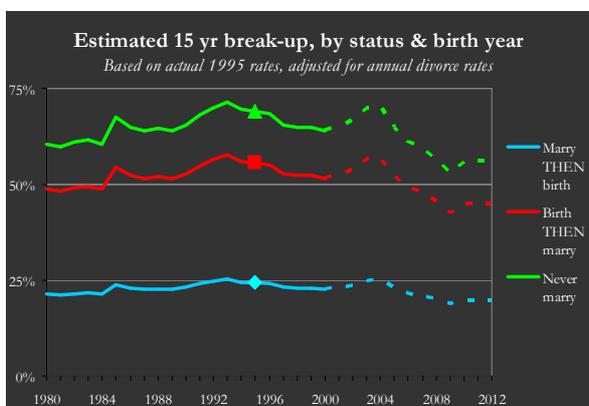
Whereas 88% of births in 1980 were to unmarried mothers, only 53% were in 2012.



## Breakdown by marital status

Applying the family breakdown rates (found in the Marriage Foundation analysis of Understanding Society data) to each birth cohort, and adjusting for actual overall annual divorce rates, gives the following time series.

The full lines show breakdown among families that has already happened – i.e. involving children born before 2000 who are all at least 15 years old now. The dotted lines show families where some proportion of breakdown has yet to happen. The symbols show the actual level of breakdown experienced by families with 14/15 year olds in 2009/10 – i.e. born in 1995.

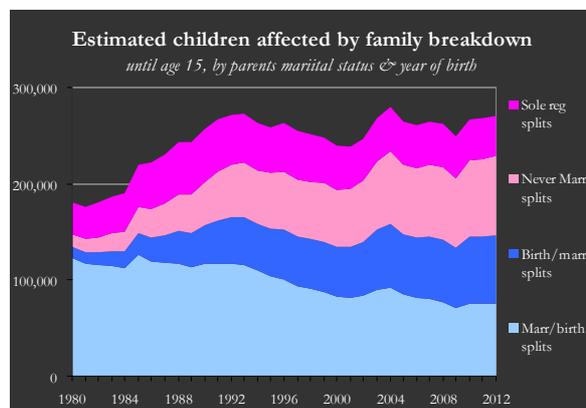


The next chart shows how these rates translate into actual numbers of children experiencing family breakdown for each birth cohort – using one final assumption that the proportion of

initially unmarried couples who subsequently married remained at 52%, the proportion found in the Understanding Society dataset (which represents what actually happened to the 1995 birth cohort over the next fifteen years).

This shows a cumulative strong rise in breakdown among children born in the 1980s and early 1990s with a levelling off thereafter – and therefore a much better fit with the reality of rising family breakdown from the 1980s and on into the 2000s.

Whereas married parents accounted for the bulk of family breakdown in the early 1980s, current estimates show a more even split between those married before they have children, those who marry later, those who never marry, and those who never formed a relationship in the first place.



## What if the trend hadn't happened?

Had there been no trend away from marriage since 1980, the proportion of births to married parents in 2012 would be 88%, rather than 53%.

Had this trend stopped in 1990 instead, the proportion of births to married parents would be 72%, rather than 53%.

In either case, the shift in births away from relatively stable married couples to relatively unstable unmarried couples has led to an increase in the number of children experiencing family breakdown.

The following chart shows the estimated number of children from each birth cohort who have, or will have, experienced family breakdown (red line).

This line shows the rapid increase in family breakdown from around 180,000 children per year for those born in 1980 to 270,000 children per year for those born in the early 1990s. This

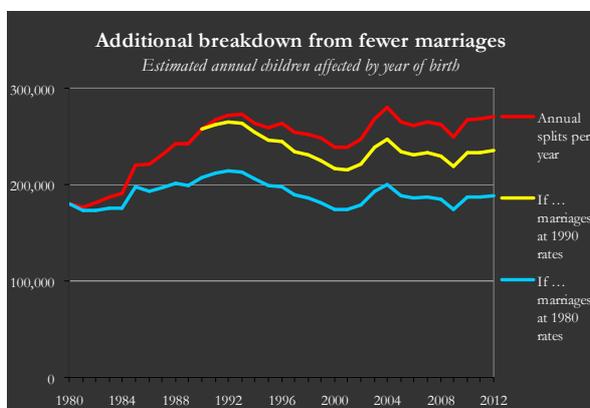
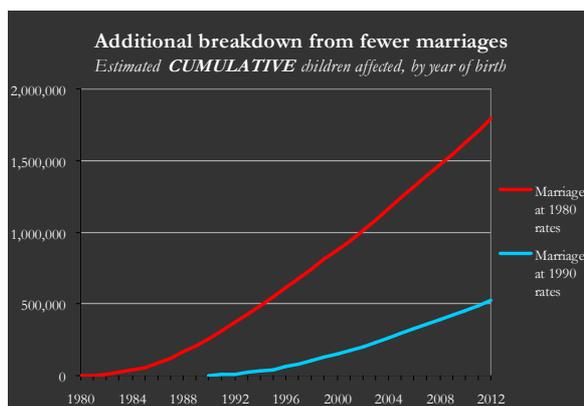
number remains the level likely to be experienced by children born in 2012.

Holding marriage rates constant at 1980 levels (blue line) shows that the number of children experiencing family breakdown should be around 190,000 per year.

On this basis, the trend away from marriage since 1980 means up to 80,000 more children per year will experience family breakdown.

Holding marriage rates at 1990 levels (yellow line) suggests that 235,000 children should be experiencing family breakdown.

The trend away from marriage since 1990 therefore means up to 35,000 more children per year will experience family breakdown.



Additional children experiencing family breakdown					
	1980	1990	2000	2010	2012
1980 rates	0	49,642	64,969	80,421	82,069
	0%	24%	37%	43%	44%
1990 rates		0	23,079	34,153	35,385
		0%	11%	15%	15%

## Additional family breakdown

The net result is that, since 1980, up to an estimated cumulative 1.8 million additional children either have experienced or will experience family breakdown as a direct result of the trend away from marriage.

Since 1990, the trend away from marriage is responsible for up to half a million additional children experiencing family breakdown.

While it is implausible to suggest that every one of these children would have avoided family breakdown had the trend away from marriage not taken place, these figures give a good idea of the scale of the problem – and also therefore the potential prize to be gained if we as a society can re-establish the stronger sense of commitment afforded by marriage.

## References

- Benson, H. (2015) Get married BEFORE you have children. Marriage Foundation; Cambridge.
- Goodman, A. & Greaves, E. (2010) Cohabitation, marriage and relationship stability. IFS briefing note BN107.
- University of Essex. Institute for Social and Economic Research and NatCen Social Research, Understanding Society: Waves 1-4, 2009-2013 [computer file]. 6th Edition. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], November 2014. SN: 6614 , <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-6>

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Professor Stephen McKay of the University of Lincoln for his analysis of data on family transitions and modern family life from the survey Understanding Society.

Understanding Society data used in this publication were made available through the ESRC Data Archive. The data were originally collected by the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change at the University of Essex (now incorporated within the Institute for Social and Economic Research). Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Archive bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.