



Marriage Foundation

Europe's Marriage Gap between Rich and Poor

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- In this briefing note we show how a marriage gap between rich and poor parents exists throughout Europe, contrasting marriage rates between top and bottom income quintiles.
- Using data from the 2014 European Social Survey, we find that 82% of the richest parents across Europe are married compared to 42% of the poorest parents.
- In all twenty countries examined, rich parents were consistently more likely to be married than poor parents, the ratio ranging from 3.8 times more likely in Denmark and the Czech Republic to 1.4 times more likely in Portugal and Slovenia.
- The marriage gap in Britain is 2.1 times, just above the 1.9 times mean for Europe: 84% of better-off parents in Britain are married compared to 40% of worse-off parents. Britain has the highest proportion of married adults in Europe at 69%, compared to 32% of the poorest.
- This analysis shows that the trend away from marriage, and stability that it brings, is closely linked to lower income. Policy solutions aimed at reducing family breakdown must therefore focus on increasing stability, commitment and marriage among lower income groups.

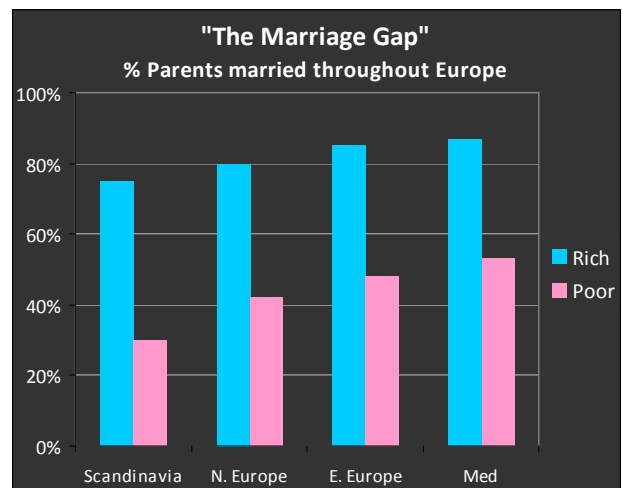
Across Europe, couples who don't marry are far more likely to split up than those who do, even after controls for age, education, religion, partner and parental divorce, and the presence of children (*Dronkers, 2015*).

The consequences of instability are far reaching for both adult and child outcomes. UK data, for example, shows that lone parents are seven times more likely than couple parents to rely on state benefits, and the children of lone parents are twice as likely to have problems with their health or at school (*Maplethorpe et al, 2010*).

Recent research from Marriage Foundation has also showed that marriage is increasingly the preserve of the rich. Among UK parents with children under five, 87% of those in the top income quintile were married compared to 24% in the bottom quintile (*Benson & MacKay, 2015*).

For this briefing note, we analysed data from the seventh round of the European Social Survey 2014, looking at the proportion of all parents with dependent children, and all adults, who were married.

Among parents and adults alike, a marriage gap exists between rich and poor throughout Europe. The same pattern found previously in the UK, by Benson &



MacKay, was replicated in every one of the twenty European countries examined.

Poor parents were much less likely to be married than their rich counterparts. In some countries, marriage rates are higher still in the fourth income quintile.

This analysis shows that the trend away from marriage – and the relative stability that marriage provides – has barely affected the rich, but is strongly linked to lower income levels and, thus, the wellbeing of adults, children, and the communities in which they reside.

THE MARRIAGE GAP

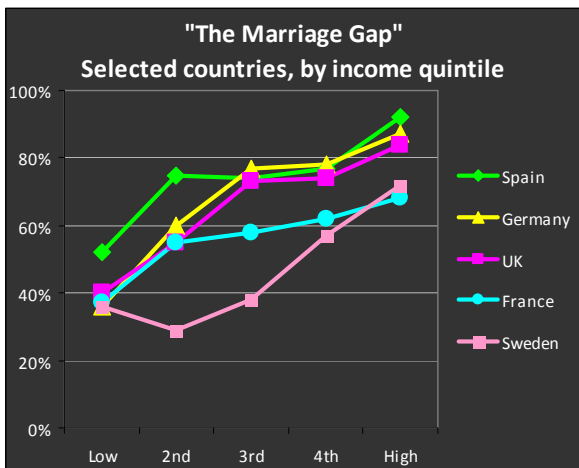
Our new data shows for the first time that the pattern of marriage among parents and all adults remains remarkably similar across Europe.

On average, 82% of parents in the highest income quintile are married compared to 42% of parents in the lowest income quintile.

The chart below illustrates the pattern among five of the twenty countries examined – **Spain, Germany, UK, France and Sweden.**

Sweden is unusual as the only country examined where marriage rates are actually lowest among parents in the second quintile.

In six of the twenty countries – **Belgium, Israel, Lithuania, Norway, Slovenia, and Switzerland** – the highest marriage rates were found in the fourth quintile.



However, across all twenty countries, marriage rates among rich parents were consistently higher than among poor parents.

Dividing countries into regions – Mediterranean, Scandinavia, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe (see next chart) – offers no distinctly regional characteristic of the marriage gap.

There appears to be as much variation within regions as between them.

The highest marriage gap overall is found in **Denmark**, where 81% of the richest parents are married, 3.9 times the level of 26% among the poorest parents.

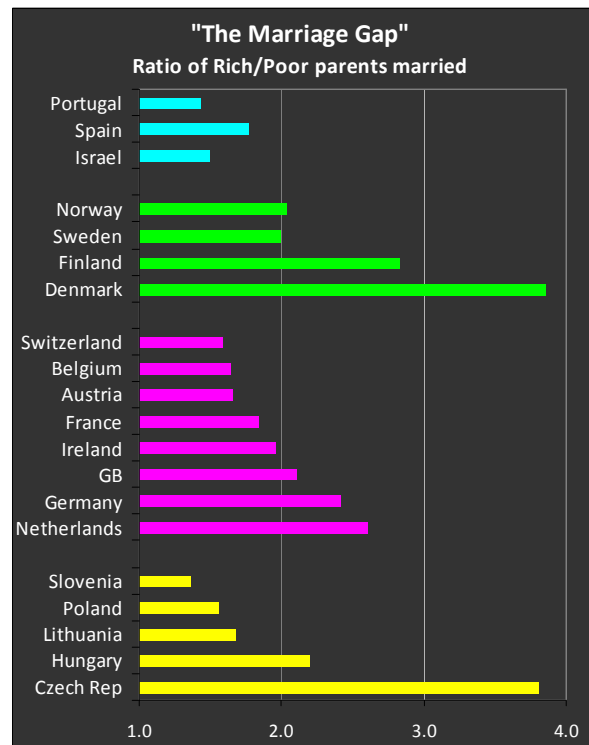
Czech Republic comes a close second with a gap of 3.8 times, between the 99% of rich parents and the 26% of poor parents who are married.

The marriage gap in **Britain** sits at 2.1 times, just above the European average of 1.9 times, where

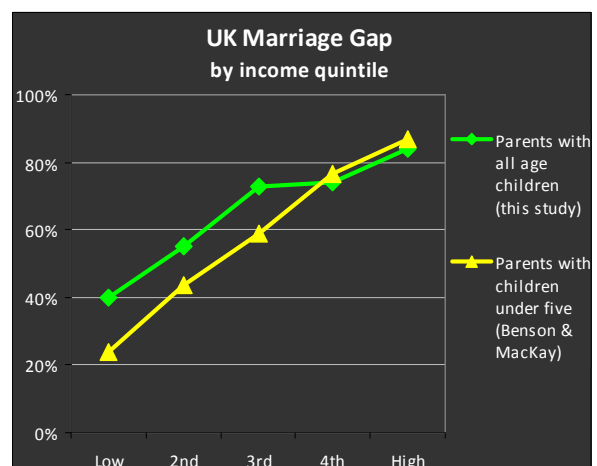
84% of rich parents are married compared to 44% of poor parents.

The marriage gap is lowest in **Slovenia**, where the difference between rich and poor is 19% or 1.4 times, and **Portugal**, where the gap is 23% or also 1.4 times.

Data on all countries is available on the next page.



Note: The UK figures in this study of parents with all age children compare favourably with those previously found by Benson & MacKay among only parents of children under five. Although the proportions of married parents among the middle and lower income groups differ, the degree of overlap is clear from the chart below. The discrepancy is most likely due to comparison of two relatively small samples.



Proportion Married by Income Quintile
EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY 2014

By Country	MARRIED PARENTS			MARRIED ADULTS		
	1st	5th	Marriage Gap	1st	5th	Marriage Gap
Denmark	21%	81%	60%	17%	66%	49%
Finland	29%	82%	53%	10%	65%	55%
Sweden	36%	72%	36%	15%	57%	42%
Norway	31%	63%	32%	21%	50%	29%
Germany	36%	87%	51%	24%	65%	41%
Ireland	47%	92%	45%	33%	61%	28%
Netherlands	28%	73%	45%	14%	63%	49%
Great Britain	40%	84%	44%	32%	69%	37%
Austria	52%	86%	34%	18%	55%	37%
Switzerland	56%	89%	33%	37%	57%	20%
France	37%	68%	31%	34%	57%	23%
Belgium	42%	69%	27%	28%	53%	25%
Czech Republic	26%	99%	73%	13%	69%	56%
Hungary	35%	77%	42%	19%	58%	39%
Poland	61%	95%	34%	36%	64%	28%
Lithuania	49%	82%	33%	22%	56%	34%
Slovenia	53%	72%	19%	37%	41%	4%
Spain	52%	92%	40%	41%	57%	16%
Israel	62%	93%	31%	41%	64%	23%
Portugal	54%	77%	23%	41%	53%	12%
Mean	42%	82%	39%	27%	59%	32%

By Region	MARRIED PARENTS			MARRIED ADULTS		
	1st	5th	Marriage Gap	1st	5th	Marriage Gap
Scandinavia	30%	75%	45%	16%	60%	44%
Northern Europe	42%	80%	38%	28%	62%	34%
Eastern Europe	48%	85%	37%	26%	58%	32%
Mediterranean	53%	87%	34%	41%	55%	14%

Note: Where figures are highlighted in grey, married proportion is higher in the 4th quintile

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