



Marriage Foundation

Annual family breakdown in the UK

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March 2017

- By combining survey and population data, this short briefing note estimates the number of couples with children who split up each year, depending on their previous marital status.
- According to data from Office for National Statistics, married parents comprise 79.0% of all couples with dependent children in the UK; cohabiting parents make up 20.7% of couples; same sex parents – cohabiting or those in civil partnerships – account for 0.3% (ONS, 2016).
- Previous MF research, using data from Understanding Society, found that 1.3% of married parents and 5.3% of cohabiting parents split up during a period of one year (Benson, 2013).
- By applying these proportions to the ONS population data, we can estimate that some 62,500 married parents and 66,900 cohabiting parents will have split up during 2016.
- Family breakdown has risen by 8% in the last decade due to the increase in cohabitation.
- Cohabiting parents now account for the majority of family breakdown in the UK.

The UK has the highest rate of family instability among the developed world, in particular among cohabiting couples with children under twelve (DeRose et al, 2017).

Family breakdown matters because of the well-established association with a range of negative social and economic indicators among parents and children (Amato, 2005; Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Maplethorpe et al, 2010) and annual costs of at least £48 billion per year (Ashcroft, 2016).

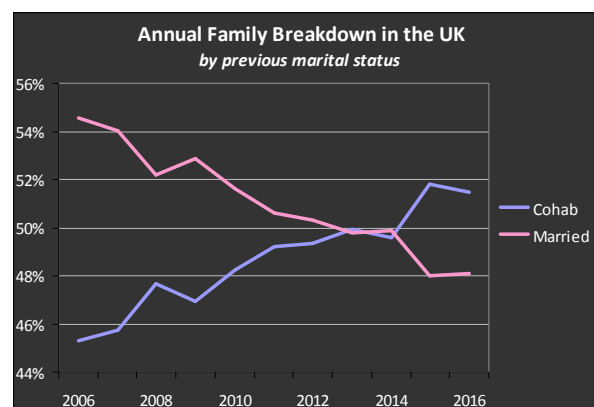
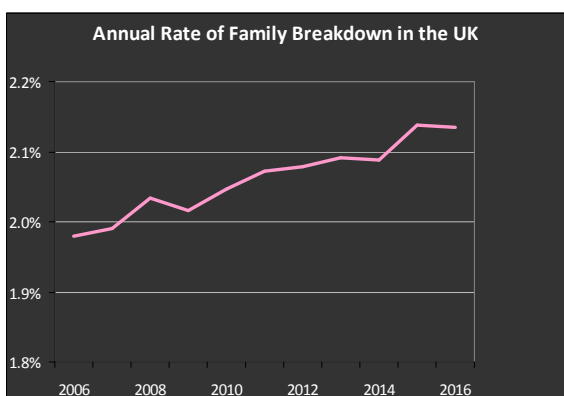
Previous Marriage Foundation research has shown that parents who are not married before having a child are far more likely to split up than those who are married (Benson, 2015).

This new analysis applies annual break-up rates found among married and cohabiting parents to national population data.

For the first time, this shows the proportion of family breakdown attributable to married, cohabiting and same sex parents.

- **Married** parents account for 79.0% of couples and 48.1% of annual family breakdown
- **Cohabiting** parents account for 20.7% of couples and 51.4% of annual family breakdown
- **Same sex** parents account for 0.3% of couples and 0.5% of annual family breakdown

(Note: ONS caution same sex estimates are unreliable)



DATA

MF estimate of % annual family breakdown by couple status

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
NUMBER OF COUPLES WITH CHILDREN (a)											
Married	4,682,000	4,689,000	4,642,000	4,709,000	4,701,000	4,641,000	4,697,000	4,757,000	4,767,000	4,722,000	4,809,000
Cohab	954,000	974,000	1,040,000	1,025,000	1,077,000	1,107,000	1,130,000	1,170,000	1,163,000	1,250,000	1,262,000
SS CP	0	4,000	3,000	4,000	2,000	5,000	6,000	9,000	12,000	4,000	10,000
SS Cohab	3,000	4,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	6,000	5,000	9,000	3,000	9,000
AS % OF COUPLES											
Married	83.0%	82.7%	81.6%	82.0%	81.3%	80.6%	80.4%	80.1%	80.1%	79.0%	79.0%
Cohab	16.9%	17.2%	18.3%	17.9%	18.6%	19.2%	19.4%	19.7%	19.5%	20.9%	20.7%
Same sex	0.05%	0.14%	0.11%	0.12%	0.09%	0.14%	0.21%	0.24%	0.35%	0.12%	0.31%
ANNUAL FAMILY BREAKDOWN (b)											
Married	60,866	60,957	60,346	61,217	61,113	60,333	61,061	61,841	61,971	61,386	62,517
Cohab	50,562	51,622	55,120	54,325	57,081	58,671	59,890	62,010	61,639	66,250	66,886
SS CP	0	52	39	52	26	65	78	117	156	52	130
SS Cohab	159	212	159	159	159	159	318	265	477	159	477
AS % OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN											
Married	54.5%	54.0%	52.2%	52.9%	51.6%	50.6%	50.3%	49.8%	49.9%	48.0%	48.1%
Cohab	45.3%	45.7%	47.7%	46.9%	48.2%	49.2%	49.4%	49.9%	49.6%	51.8%	51.4%
Same Sex	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.5%	0.2%	0.5%
ANNUAL RATE OF BREAKDOWN (c)											
Overall	1.98%	1.99%	2.03%	2.02%	2.05%	2.07%	2.08%	2.09%	2.09%	2.14%	2.13%

NOTES

- Data from Office for National Statistics, Families and Households, 2016
ONS point out that estimates for same sex couple parents are 'unreliable for practical purposes'.
- Assumes married couples split at 1.3% per year and cohabiting couples at 5.3% per year
Data is from Understanding Society 2009-12 (Benson, 2013).
For same sex couples, break-up rates are assumed to be similar to different sex couples.
- Calculated as sum of all breakdown divided by sum of all couples

REFERENCES

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