



Marriage Foundation

Family stability improves as divorce rates fall

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation
Stephen McKay, University of Lincoln
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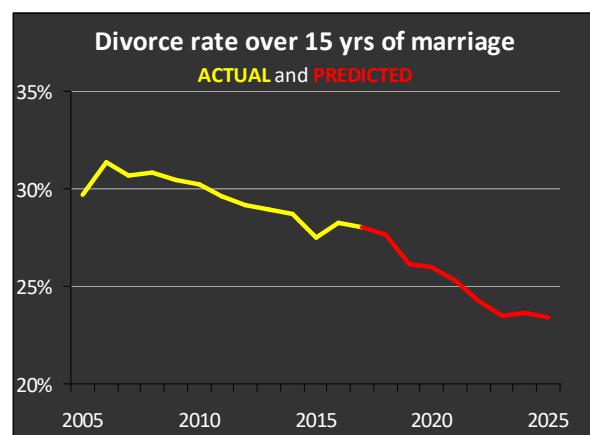
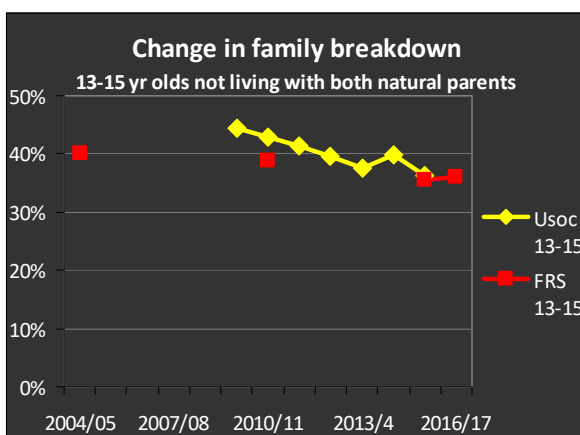
- New analysis of data from two large national surveys provides the first clear evidence that family stability in the UK is improving as a direct result of the fall in divorce rates.
- Data from the Family Resources Survey shows that the proportion of teens aged 13 to 15 not living with both natural parents has fallen from 40 per cent in 2004/5 to 36 per cent in 2016/17.
- Equivalent data from Understanding Society shows that the proportion has fallen from 44 per cent in 2009/10 to 36 per cent in 2015/16.
- Although there is a discrepancy in the prevalence of breakdown in earlier years, both surveys show a consistent downward trend and both surveys now report the same level of breakdown.
- Throughout the first 15 years of marriage, our parallel analysis of data from the Office for National Statistics shows that divorce rates have already fallen by 11 per cent and are predicted to fall by 28 per cent from their peak at current trends.
- Since 90 per cent of intact parents with teens are married, what happens to divorce rates is vastly more important than what happens to unmarried breakup rates. Moreover, we think it is entirely possible that as more 'deciders' boost the stability of marriages, more 'sliders' further undermine cohabitation. Alas there is currently no suitable UK data to test this.

Our new analysis of data from two major surveys – Family Resources Survey is repeated cross section, Understanding Society is longitudinal – reveals a clear fall in the overall level of family breakdown among UK teenagers aged 13 to 15.

This provides the first hard evidence that falling divorce rates are now translating into falling rates of family breakdown among teens.

Separate analysis of divorce data from Office for National Statistics shows how actual cumulative divorce rates among couples completing 15 years of marriage have fallen from 31 per cent in 2005 to 28 per cent in 2017, and are predicted to fall further to 23 per cent within the next decade.

It is therefore likely that overall rates of family breakdown will fall further.



INTRODUCTION

According to Social Trends Institute, the UK has the highest level of family instability in the developed world.

By the time a child reaches their 12th birthday, 62% of children born to unmarried cohabiting parents and 32% of children born to married parents will have experienced more than one transition by their parents, whether into or out of a relationship (*DeRose et al 2017*).

This has serious and well-known consequences for children's outcomes, whether due to lack of parental resources, father absence, or instability (*Amato 2005; Brown 2004; Lee & McLanahan 2015; McLanahan et al 2013; Panico et al 2010*), especially following low conflict splits (*Booth & Amato 2001*).

In particular, our own research has shown that family breakdown is the single biggest predictor of teenage mental health problems (*Benson & McKay 2017*).

The end result is that family breakdown costs the taxpayer £51 billion per year, much of which on benefits to support lone parent families (*Ashcroft 2018*). For example, 60% of lone parents receive housing benefit compared to 10% of couple parents (*DWP 2015; ONS 2017*).

In our previous analysis of data from Understanding Society, we found that nearly half of all today's teenagers aged 13 to 15 in 2010/11 were not living with both natural parents (*Benson 2013*).

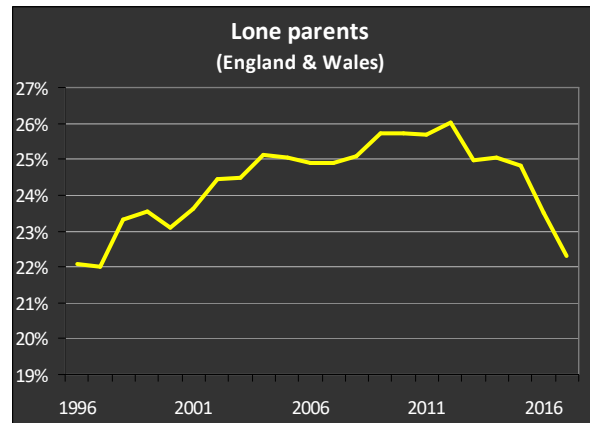
However what has not been clear to date is whether overall levels of family breakdown have been rising or falling.

The argument in favour of rising breakdown rests on the assumption that more relatively unstable cohabiting families means more breakdown.

The argument in favour of falling breakdown rests on the assumption that falling divorce rates will feed through to falling breakdown.

Data (below) from the most recent Office for National Statistics Families and Household report shows that the proportion of lone parent households has fallen from a peak of 26 per cent in 2012 to 22 per cent in 2017 (*ONS 2017*).

This definitely points towards lower rates of breakdown, but offers no explanation for why lone parenthood should have peaked in 2012.

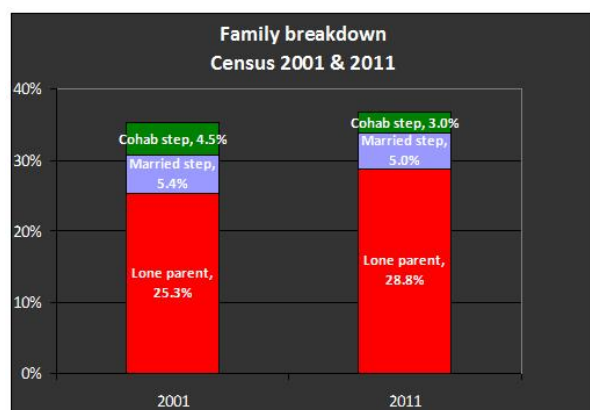


As a measure of family breakdown, the proportion of lone parents can only ever be an indicator, for two reasons: firstly that this reflects lone parents with children of all ages, not just teens; secondly that lone parents remarry or repartner.

Data from the Census 2001 and Census 2011 (*ONS 2014*) (below) show how the figure for the proportion of lone parents understates the overall scale of family breakdown.

Whereas lone parents comprise 28 per cent of parents with all age children, lone parents plus step parents comprise 36 per cent of those with all age children.

This still falls well short of our previous figure showing that 44 per cent of teens do not live with both natural parents.



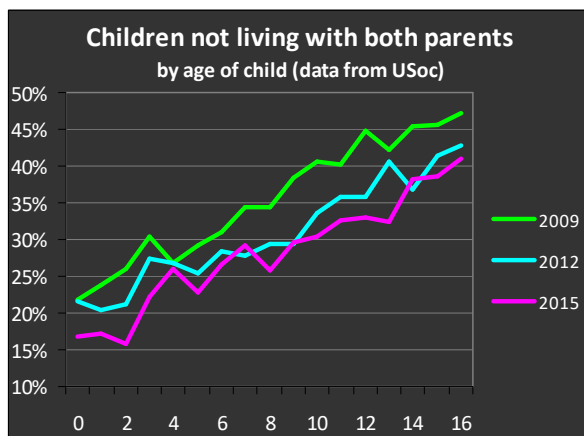
METHOD and RESULTS

To explore trends in family breakdown among teens in particular, we looked at data from two large national studies, identifying the proportion of children in each age group who were still living with both natural parents.

In Family Resources Survey, we used data from 2004/5. In Understanding Society, we used data from 2009/10.

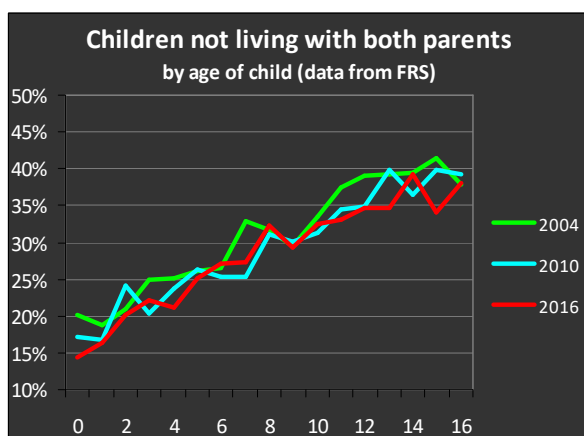
A table of selected data is available at the end of this paper.

Beginning with Understanding Society (USoc), the chart below shows firstly how family breakdown rises with child age, and secondly how family breakdown has consistently fallen between the 2009 wave (green line) and the 2015 wave (purple line).

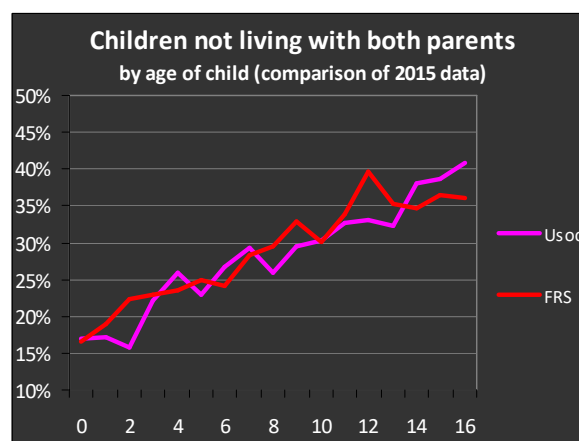


Moving on to Family Resources Survey (FRS), we see much the same patterns, how family breakdown rises with child age, and how the overall level of family breakdown has fallen between the 2004 wave (green line) and 2016 wave (red line).

Although the trends are similar, it is noteworthy that FRS does not show such a marked reduction in family breakdown.

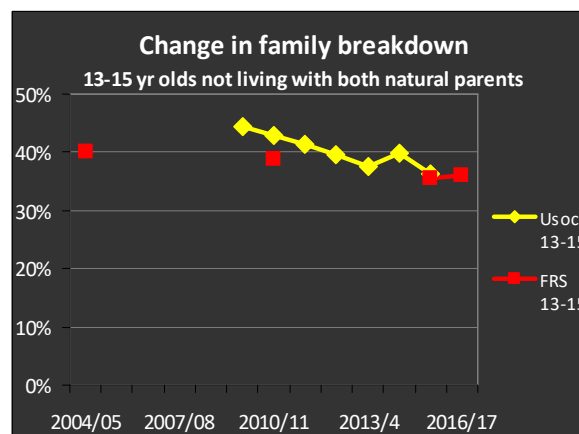


However this comparison of 2015/16 data from both surveys shows a considerable consistency.



Averaging the proportions for 13 to 15 year olds has the effect of smoothing the data.

The summary chart below shows the sequence of data for 13 to 15 year olds between 2004/5 and 2016/17, revealing that family breakdown has fallen from 40 to 36 per cent since 2004/5 – according to FRS – and from 45 to 36 per cent since 2009/10 – according to Understanding Society.

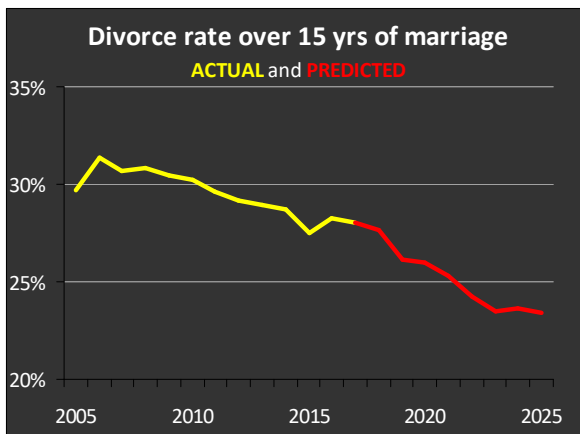


Our final analysis looks for comparison at the trend in divorce rates over the first 15 years of marriage.

To calculate divorce rates, we use divorce and marriage data from Office for National Statistics, mapping divorce by duration onto year of marriage. We also adjust the marriage figures to include a conservative estimate of 50 per cent of overseas weddings.

The chart below shows the actual and predicted cumulative divorce rates throughout the first 15 years of marriage.

For ease of comparison, the horizontal scale shows the year in which those 15 years were completed. So those who married in 1990 completed 15 years in 2005, and so on.



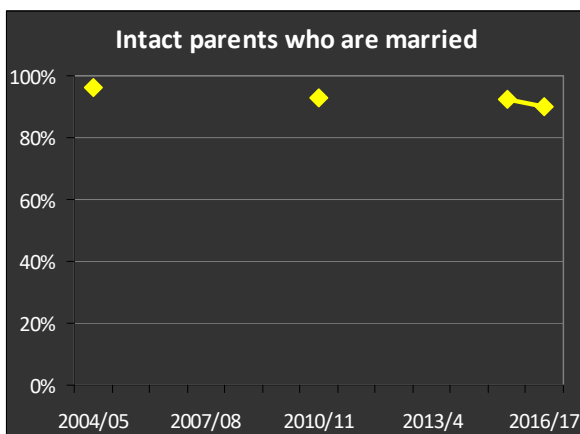
What this shows is that divorce rates have fallen from a peak of 31.4 per cent in 2006 (i.e. couples who married in 1991) to 28.1 per cent in 2017 (i.e. couples who married in 2002).

Our data allows predictions that begin with divorce in the actual years married to date and then adding an estimate based on the latest data.

This suggests that divorce rates are likely to fall further towards 23 per cent within the next decade.

And finally, we looked at the percentage of intact couples who are married, depending on child's age.

Data from FRS shows that this proportion has fallen from 96 per cent in 2004/05 to 90 per cent in 2016/17.



It is clear from this finding that what happens to the breakup rates of married couples is vastly more important to overall levels of family breakdown than what happens to the breakup rates of unmarried couples.

DISCUSSION

Our new analysis of two major national household surveys resolves the question of whether the overall level of family stability in the UK is deteriorating – because more unmarried couples means more family breakdown – or improving – because marriages are becoming more stable.

Although it remains the case that unmarried couples are relatively less stable – and therefore more cohabitation means more family breakdown – it is clear that what happens to married couples has a far bigger effect on overall levels of breakdown.

We demonstrate this with three pieces of interconnected analysis.

The first analysis looks at the proportion of 13-15 year olds not living with both natural parents.

In two large national datasets – Family Resources Survey and Understanding Society – we have shown that family breakdown has fallen over the past decade or so.

Although each dataset reports slightly different proportions of breakdown in earlier waves – FRS suggests the level was 40 per cent in 2004/5 whereas USoc suggests the level was 44 per cent in 2009/10 – both datasets show that the trend is downward and both datasets agree that the most recent figure is 36 per cent.

The second analysis confirms that over the first 15 years of marriage, actual divorce rates have fallen by 11 per cent in recent years. However because divorce rates are continuing to fall among couples who have been married more recently, we expect the trend to continue downwards, a total fall of 28 per cent from the peak.

Thirdly, we have replicated our previous finding that over 90 per cent of parents of teens who are still intact as a couple are married (*Benson 2013*).

Using data from FRS, we found that this proportion has fallen from 96 per cent in 2004/5 to 90 per cent in 2016/17.

Combining these three analyses allows us to conclude that family stability is improving because of the downward trend in divorce rates.

We expect this downtrend to continue.

We have also shown in previous research that the cohabiting parents are relatively unstable compared to equivalent married parents, taking into account age, education, ethnicity and relationship happiness (*Benson & McKay 2016, 2018*).

Although cohabiting couples represent only 10 per cent of all intact parents with teens, it is not possible with current data to see whether the stability of cohabiting parents is improving alongside the stability of married parents.

We have argued that the fall in divorce rates is the result of a higher proportion of men in particular marrying because they want to, rather than have to under social or family pressure.

In other words, those who marry comprise relatively more 'deciders' and relatively fewer 'sliders' (*Stanley et al 2006*). This is why divorce rates – mostly due to fewer wives filing for divorce – are falling in the early years of marriage.

However it does not follow that those who cohabit should also comprise more 'deciders' and fewer 'sliders'. If anything, the reverse may be true, in which case the stability of cohabiting couples may even be getting worse.

Alas, to resolve this question either way requires further and highly complex analysis.

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Selected Data

Per cent of children NOT living with both natural parents, by age

Age	Understanding Society			Family Resources Survey		
	Wave 1	Wave 4	Wave 7	2004/5	2010/11	2016/17
	2009/10	2012/13	2015/16			
0	21.8%	21.6%	16.9%	20.2%	17.2%	14.3%
1	23.9%	20.4%	17.1%	18.7%	16.8%	16.5%
2	26.0%	21.2%	15.8%	20.9%	24.1%	20.2%
3	30.3%	27.5%	22.1%	24.9%	20.3%	22.2%
4	26.7%	26.9%	25.9%	25.2%	23.7%	21.2%
5	29.2%	25.4%	22.9%	26.1%	26.3%	25.0%
6	31.0%	28.4%	26.6%	26.6%	25.2%	27.1%
7	34.4%	27.9%	29.2%	32.9%	25.4%	27.4%
8	34.4%	29.4%	25.9%	31.6%	31.2%	32.2%
9	38.4%	29.3%	29.5%	29.4%	30.1%	29.2%
10	40.6%	33.7%	30.4%	33.5%	31.4%	32.5%
11	40.1%	35.7%	32.7%	37.5%	34.5%	33.0%
12	44.8%	35.9%	33.1%	39.1%	34.9%	34.8%
13	42.2%	40.5%	32.4%	39.2%	39.9%	34.6%
14	45.4%	36.9%	38.2%	39.4%	36.4%	39.3%
15	45.6%	41.3%	38.6%	41.4%	40.0%	34.2%
16	47.3%	42.8%	40.9%	37.8%	39.2%	38.0%
13-15	44.4%	39.6%	36.4%	40.0%	38.7%	36.0%