



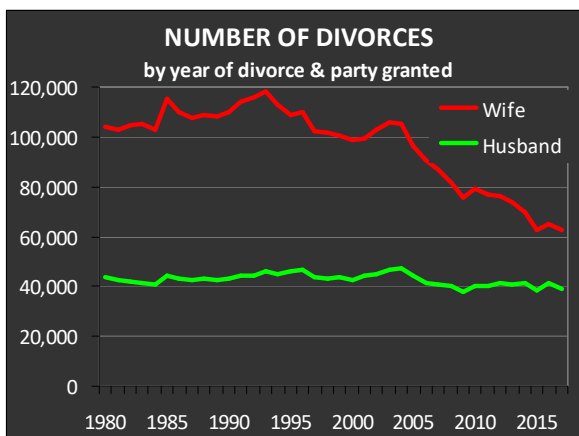
Marriage Foundation

Men behaving well

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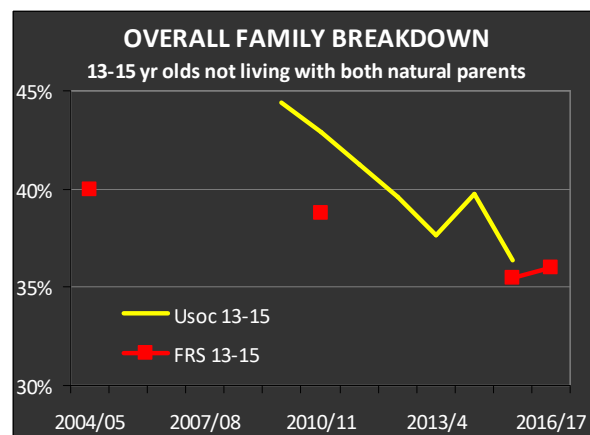
- Analysis of the latest data from the Office for National Statistics confirms that the fall in divorce since the 1980s is almost entirely due to a halving in the number of divorces granted to wives.
- Whereas 55,689 fewer divorces were granted to wives in 2017 compared to 1993, the peak year – a fall of 47 per cent from 118,401 to 62,712 – divorces granted to husbands fell by only 7,314 during the same period – a fall of 15 per cent from 46,271 to 38,957.
- Previous analysis by Marriage Foundation has shown that this reduction is heavily concentrated in the first decade of marriage and is also directly responsible for a reduction in overall levels of family breakdown affecting teenagers.
- We can therefore conclude that family stability has improved – and will continue to improve over the next decade – predominantly because of greater commitment among men.
- This evidence is at odds with the current narrative of men behaving badly.

This new data (*ONS 2019*), which track divorces by 'year of divorce', highlights clearly the extent to which the fall in divorces granted to wives in particular is driving the fall in divorce rates.



Our usual analysis, which tracks divorce by 'year of marriage', gives a better indication of trends and has shown that the fall in divorce granted to wives is heavily concentrated in the early years of marriage (*Benson 2015*).

However our most recent analysis of two large national surveys has also revealed that overall levels of family breakdown affecting teenagers have similarly reduced (*Benson & McKay 2019*).



Because 90 per cent of intact parents with teens are married, this improvement in stability is directly attributable to the improvement in marriage, not cohabitation. We expect this trend to continue as lower divorce rates among the most recently married feed through.

Commitment theory studies demonstrate that men who 'decide' rather than 'slide' tend to be more committed. We believe that reduced social pressure to marry accounts for increased commitment among those men who do marry.

The increase in family stability is thus a direct function of greater commitment among men.

DISCUSSION

This new data from ONS confirms the big shift that has taken place during the last decade in the way couples either stay married or get divorced (ONS 2019).

Whereas there has been relatively little change in the number of divorces granted to husbands each year since the 1980s, the number of divorces granted to wives has fallen sharply.

Our previous analysis, which looks at ONS data in more depth, has shown that this reduction in divorces granted to wives is heavily concentrated in the early years of marriage (Benson 2015).

What might explain this shift? Have wives become more tolerant of their husbands in these early years of marriage?

Any explanation for falling divorce rates needs to account for this gender gap.

It is therefore far from obvious why shifts in work patterns or the continued increase in age at marriage should have affected women only in such a dramatic way. These shifts should have affected men equally. Yet they haven't.

The most plausible explanation comes from reduced social and family pressure to marry.

This would especially affect the level of commitment among men, which is much more dependent on making clear and deliberate decisions about the future (Rhoades et al, 2006 and 2009)

The improvement in stability is thus because those men who do get married today do so with clearer intent.

Almost the entire fall in divorce rates over the last quarter century or so can be explained by this: a few less men half-heartedly 'sliding' into marriage and a few more men 'deciding' into marriage with real intent.

Here's how it might work.

Imagine a man who marries in the 1980s under social pressure from his family or friends. 'Do the right thing,' they say. 'Make an honest woman of her. Tie the knot.'

So he enters marriage under a certain amount of duress, without ever fully buying in. His sense of dedication is weaker than that of his wife. However, so long as things are good, he is broadly content with his new arrangement.

But over time, and perhaps with the arrival of a young baby, inevitable little conflicts emerge between him and his wife. Instead of dealing with them responsibly, he feels less constrained in the way he behaves because he knows he never really bought in to a long term plan in the first place. But just as he was sucked into marriage without making the decision for himself, inertia and indecision keep him in the marriage.

His behaviour appears increasingly indifferent and disrespectful to his wife. After only a few years, she has become well aware of his indifference. Fed up with treading on eggshells around him, it is she who pulls the plug.

Imagine now a man who marries in the 2000s.

He is under no such family or social pressure to marry. So when he does commit to his wife and his marriage, he commits with all his heart.

When the conflicts emerge, he knows that he has a responsibility to sort them out. There is a long term plan at stake here. His wife appreciates the effort he makes to sort things out and thus knows he is fully committed to her. Serious difficulties are therefore much less likely to materialise in these early years.

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