



## Marriage as a social justice issue

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All of us want reliable love, a relationship that works, children who turn out healthy and well.

The research we have produced over the past seven years – together with some of the world's leading researchers – shows that marriage, for all its faults, provides the surest foundation upon which these things are most likely to happen.

Our work has shown that those who marry are far more likely to remain together as parents and to bring up children without mental health problems (*Benson & McKay 2017a, 2018a*).

For those who don't marry, the odds are stacked against staying together. The consequences extend well beyond teen mental health. A recent major survey links family breakdown with other social justice outcomes such as homelessness, prison, alcoholism, debt and benefits (*CSJ 2019*).

The good news – as our latest research shows – is that UK family breakdown is now reducing as divorce rates fall. We expect this pattern to keep improving as today's stable newlyweds become tomorrow's intact families with teenagers (*Benson & McKay 2019a*).

Yet as a society we continue to lose confidence in marriage. Marriage rates have stopped falling. But we don't yet see signs of the rebound in the UK that is now happening in parts of Europe.

Our policy-makers – most of whom are or were married – defy the evidence and insist that marriage is not a policy issue (*Benson 2017b*).

Marriage remains the norm among the better-off. However among those least well-off – who need the stability of marriage most because they have fewest resources – marriage has become the exception (*Benson & McKay 2015*).

The old norm of marriage – the shared and clear plan for the future with which it begins – used to help most families remain intact and stable.

The new norm of cohabitation, with its ambiguity and asymmetric commitment, often brings

instability and break-up. The result is a double-whammy of low income and family instability.

We now spend substantially more on family breakdown than on, say, defence (*Ashcroft 2018*).

So the trend away from marriage has become a serious social justice issue. We didn't expect this when we started Marriage Foundation in 2012.

**Our nation has become divided into the better-off who mostly marry and mostly stay together and the less well-off who mostly do neither.**

Over seven years, we've produced at least 40 research notes. We've been interviewed, quoted or cited at least 1,000 times in the mainstream media, including most major current affairs programmes and several front page stories.

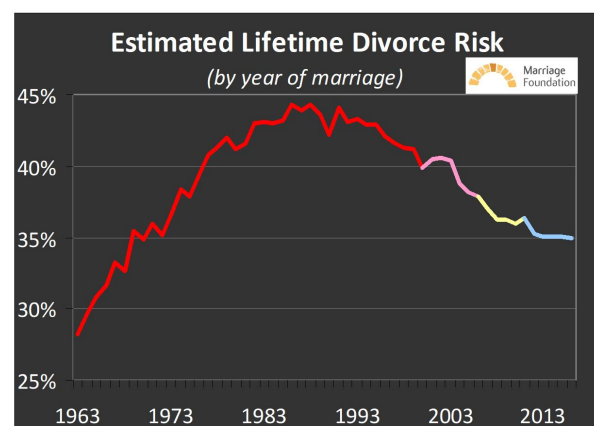
We have established ourselves as '**champions of marriage**'. Now our work enters a new phase, where we aim to **rebuild confidence in marriage for the good of society, especially children**.

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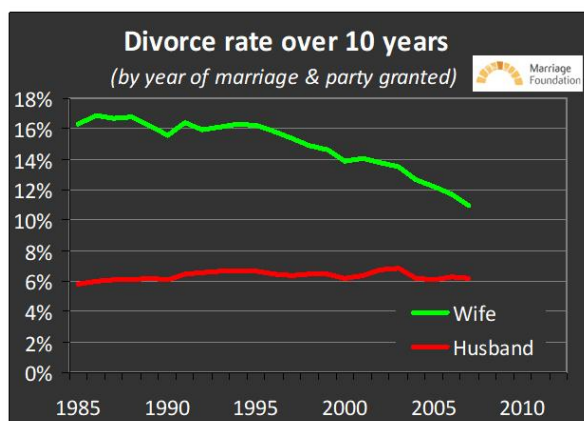
### OUR TOP FINDINGS

- **DIVORCE RATES ARE NOW AT 1960S LEVELS**

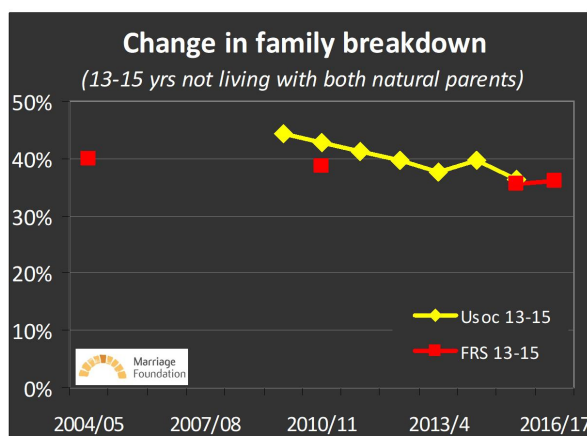
Yes, it's true! Actual divorce rates in the early years of marriage have now fallen by as much as half. Using the latest rates, we predict that 35% of today's newlyweds will divorce, well down from the divorce rate of 44% faced by couples who married in the late 1980s and early 1990s. (*Benson 2019a*)



- **...BECAUSE MEN ARE DOING BETTER** One of our most extraordinary findings is that almost all of the fall in UK divorce rates since the 1980s can be attributed to fewer divorces granted to wives during their first decade of married life. There are only two possible explanations. Either women have become more tolerant or men have become more committed. We think the most likely explanation is that as social pressure to marry gradually disappears, those men who do marry are those who really mean it. (*Benson 2019b*)

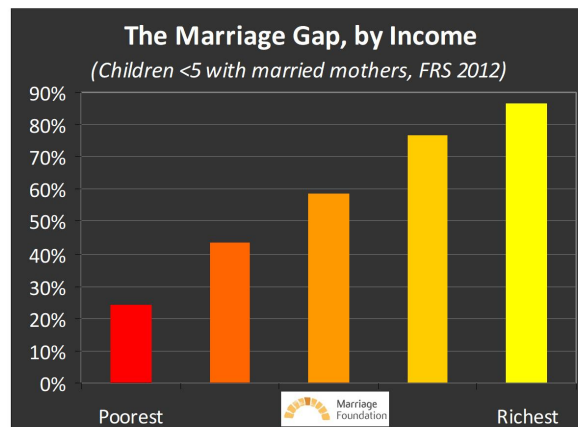


- **THE RESULT IS LESS FAMILY BREAKDOWN** ... but only because divorce rates have fallen so much. In two national surveys, we found the proportion of teens not living with both parents has fallen to 36%, down from 40-44% depending on the survey. Because 90% of parents who remain intact are married, what happens to married families is the main driver of breakdown. We have yet to find any evidence that the stability of cohabiting couples is improving as it is for married couples (*Benson & McKay 2019a*)

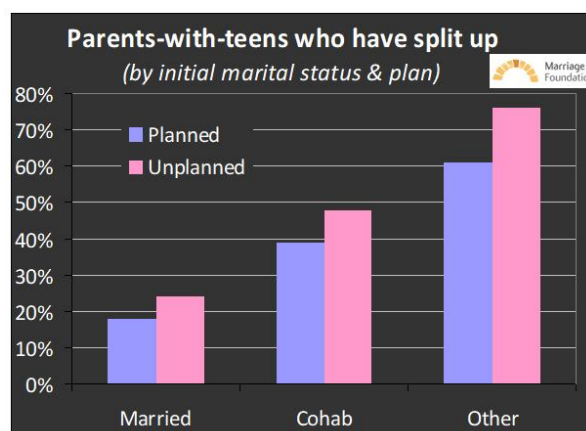


- **THE SOCIALLY UNJUST MARRIAGE GAP** Marriage remains the norm among those better-off. Yet it has become the exception

among lower income groups. Among mothers with children under five, 87 per cent of those in higher income groups are married compared to just 24 per cent of those in lower income groups (*Benson & McKay 2015*). Latest figures from ONS show that 76% of new mothers in the top two social groups are married compared to just 28% in the bottom two groups (*ONS 2019*). This 'marriage gap' also applies right across Europe (*Benson & James 2015a*).

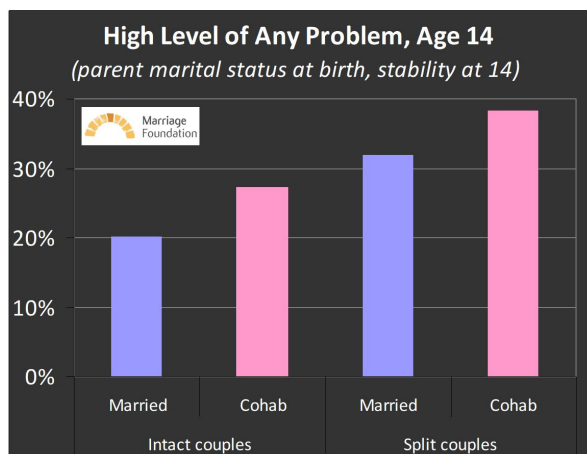


- **MARRIAGE IS BEST FOR STABILITY** In study after study, we find that parents who are married when their child is born are more likely to stay together than unmarried parents, even after taking relationship happiness, age, education and ethnicity into account. The study below added planned birth as a factor; and we've also looked at religion (*Benson & McKay 2016, 2018a*). We have also shown that it is marriage before, rather than after, the child is born that gives the best odds for parents to stay together (*Benson 2015*)

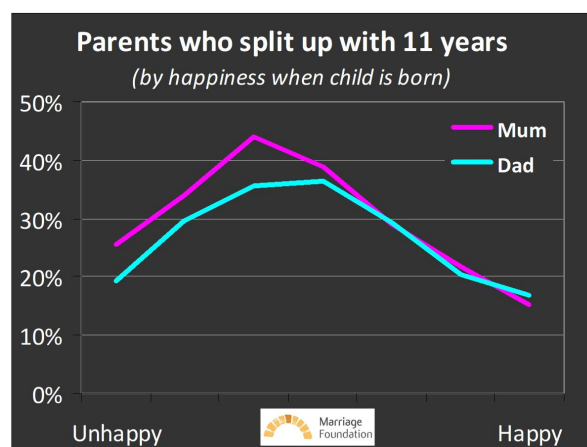


- **MARRIAGE IS BEST FOR TEENAGE MENTAL HEALTH** Although teenage mental health is a hot subject in the news, there is surprisingly little UK research that links with family

experience. Our research shows a very strong link with family breakdown. Whether the parents were married or not particularly impacts boys (*Benson & McKay 2017a, 2018b*)



- IT'S NOT THE UNHAPPIEST COUPLES WHO ARE MOST AT RISK** Another remarkable finding is that it is parents who report moderate happiness with their relationship – neither happy nor unhappy – who tend to have the worst family outcomes. This group are least likely to share meals together, least likely to stay together, and their subsequent children are most at risk for mental health problems. (*Benson & McKay 2017a, 2017b, 2019b*). Part of the explanation may be that the unhappiest find a way to deal with the problem. Just 6% of the two thirds of unhappy couples who remain together are still unhappy ten years later (*Benson & McKay 2017b*).



## THE CASE FOR MARRIAGE IN BRIEF

Our original research was the first to reveal the full extent of the problem created by the UK having the highest level of family instability in the developed world across education groups (*DeRose et al 2017*).

We showed that nearly half of all today's teenagers aged 13 to 15 were not living with both natural parents (*Benson 2013*). Most recently, we have shown this has dropped to 36% as divorce rates plummet (*Benson & McKay 2019a*).

Family instability 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*).

The result is an enormous annual bill to the taxpayer of £51 billion (*Ashcroft 2018*). For example 60% of lone parents receive housing benefit compared to 10% of couple parents (*DWP 2015; ONS 2015*).

**Our research was the first to show that unmarried cohabitation is the main driver of instability.** The 21% of couple parents who are not married account for 51% of all family breakdown involving children (*Benson 2017a*).

The explanation for this is the relative instability of unmarried cohabitation, compared to marriage, across all socio-economic groups. The hard evidence is that whereas 24% of couple parents who are married before having children split up before their child is aged 16, 69% of couple parents who remain unmarried do so (*Benson 2015*).

This huge differential in outcomes is clear evidence that most couples who marry stay together whereas only a minority of unmarried cohabitantes do so. This finding holds true independent of age and education.

**Our research is also responsible for revealing the growing 'Marriage Gap' that divides the UK both by income and age** (*Benson & McKay 2015, Benson & James 2015a*).

This has been widely followed up in the media.

Nobody has to marry. Birth control has obviated the need for commitment before cohabitation. Yet the rich overwhelmingly still get married.

87% of better off parents with young children are married compared to 24% of those least well off (*Benson & McKay 2015*). This 'marriage gap' runs throughout Europe, even in Scandinavia (*Benson & James 2015a*).

Why? The rich know what our own findings strongly suggest, that marriage matters. Family

stability can and will be strengthened by a return to formal commitment and marriage.

**We have also combated the once widely-held view against marriage is that it is the ‘quality of the relationship that matters, not the status’ (Daily Mail 2017; Relate 2017).**

We showed that this argument fails to account for decades of worsening stability during which background factors linked to relationship quality – such as age and education – should have caused stability to improve, not worsen.

The most plausible explanation for why couples who marry tend to be more stable is all about ‘sliding, deciding and inertia’ (Stanley et al 2006).

Stability is high when couples ‘decide’ rather than ‘slide’ through relationship transitions, and low where the ‘inertia’ of living together without a clear plan for the future tempts and traps fragile relationships to continue onward into even more fragile parenthood (Knopp et al 2015).

The reason why encouragement to marry will increase stability is that discussing plans for the future, and then making a decision about it, will bring greater mutual clarity and intent than might otherwise have been the case had the couple continued without making a formal commitment.

**Our research has shown that substantial improvement in stability ought to be possible.**

Most family breakdown is far from inevitable. Remarkably, two of three parents who split up reported just a year earlier that they were at least somewhat happy and not arguing excessively (Benson & James 2015b; James 2015).

Moreover even when couples are unhappy in their relationship, the vast majority of those who stick it out report they are happy ten years later (Benson & McKay 2017b).

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**For further information:**

**[www.marriagefoundation.org.uk](http://www.marriagefoundation.org.uk)**