

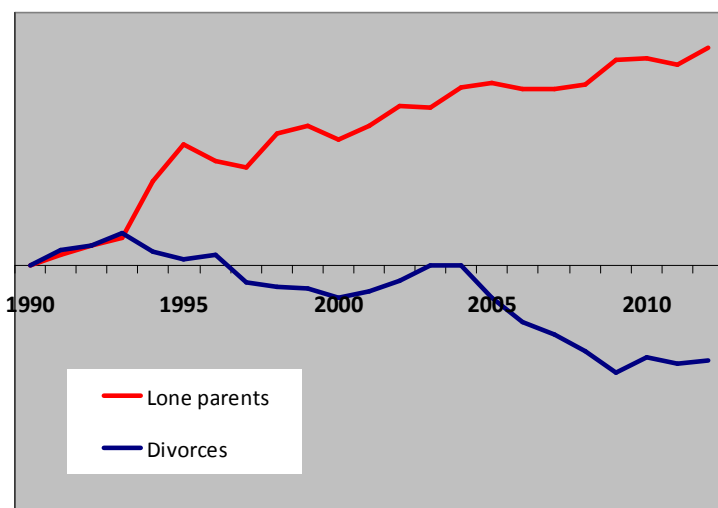


Unmarried births turn UK into the family breakdown capital of Western Europe

Harry Benson, The Marriage Foundation, October 2014

- Family breakdown affecting children can only come from one of two sources: the breakdown of relationship between married or unmarried parents.
- As a measure of family breakdown, lone parenthood inevitably understates the full extent of the problem as many lone parents go on to form new relationships. Nonetheless it is a good measure of trends.
- Across Europe, 16% of children live in lone parent families. In 2012, the UK had the highest level of lone parenthood in Western Europe at 24%, pipped only by Latvia in Eastern Europe at 29%.
- This paper looks at whether the main driver of family breakdown is the failure of marriages – as measured by divorce rates – or of unmarried couples – as measured by births outside marriage.
- In Western Europe, the driver is very clearly the breakdown of unmarried couples. There is no correlation whatsoever between lone parenthood and divorce in previous years.
- In Eastern Europe, the reverse is true. The driver is the breakdown of married couples. Here there is no correlation between lone parenthood and births outside marriage.
- For policymakers keen to address the huge and growing social costs of family breakdown, the implications are clear.
- In Western Europe, policy must focus on encouraging couples to marry in the first place.
- In Eastern Europe, policy must focus on supporting existing marriages.

UK: fewer divorces, more family breakdown



UK: Family breakdown capital of Western Europe

Latest data from Eurostat show that the UK has the highest rate of family breakdown in Western Europe.

As measured by the proportion of children living in lone parent households, the UK has jumped to the number one spot in 2012, having fluctuated between second and fifth since 2005.

According to Eurostat, 24% of UK children lived in lone parent households in 2012. This concurs with the 23.8% figure produced by Office for National Statistics Families and Households dataset.

While 'lone parenthood' is a good indicator of the trend, it inevitably understates the full extent of family breakdown as many lone parents go on to form new relationships. Those who do so have still experienced family breakdown, but are no longer classified as lone parents.

The following table shows proportions and ranking of selected countries.

Lone parenthood across Western Europe

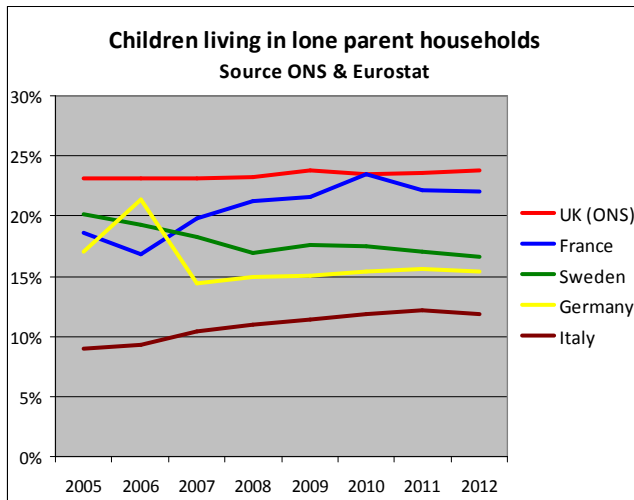
(Source Eurostat)

	2005	2007	2010	2012	2005	2007	2010	2012
	<i>Proportion</i>				<i>Ranking</i>			
UK	26%	22%	21%	24%	2	4	5	1
Belgium	23%	23%	22%	24%	4	3	4	2
Denmark	24%	25%	25%	23%	3	2	2	3
France	19%	20%	24%	22%	6	6	3	4
Ireland	28%	26%	26%	22%	1	1	1	4
Iceland	16%	17%	20%	21%	9	9	7	6
Portugal	12%	13%	15%	18%	12	13	12	7
Malta	10%	14%	16%	17%	14	12	10	8
Norway	17%	21%	21%	17%	7	5	6	8
Sweden	20%	18%	18%	17%	5	7	8	10
Austria	15%	18%	17%	16%	10	8	9	11
Germany	17%	14%	15%	15%	8	10	11	12
Spain	11%	11%	14%	13%	13	15	13	13
Finland	14%	14%	12%	13%	11	10	15	14
Netherlands	10%	12%	12%	13%	14	14	16	15
Italy	9%	10%	12%	12%	16	17	17	16
Luxembourg	9%	10%	12%	12%	18	18	18	16
Switzerland		11%	12%	11%		16	18	18
Cyprus	9%	9%	13%	10%	17	19	14	19
Greece	7%	6%	5%	5%	19	20	20	20

Note: Eurostat and ONS data don't always match exactly as they draw on different surveys. So although the ONS figure for 2013 reduced unexpectedly to 22.3%, this fall may or may not be seen in the next Eurostat figures.

Rising family breakdown is not about rising divorce

Although the overall trend in family breakdown is rising across Europe, there are differences in absolute levels of lone parenthood and in trends within individual countries.



In Western Europe, UK and France for example have high levels of lone parenthood. Yet lone parenthood is rising more obviously in France.

Sweden and Germany have lower levels of lone parenthood. Yet In Sweden the trend is downward.

In Italy, lone parenthood is lowest amongst the major European nations but is also very much on an uptrend.

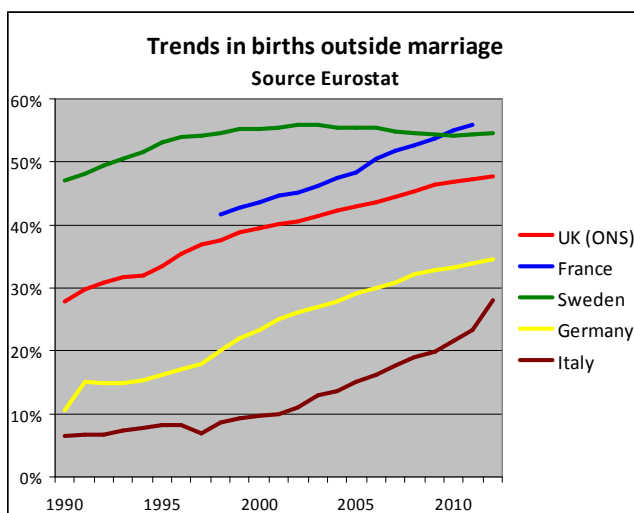
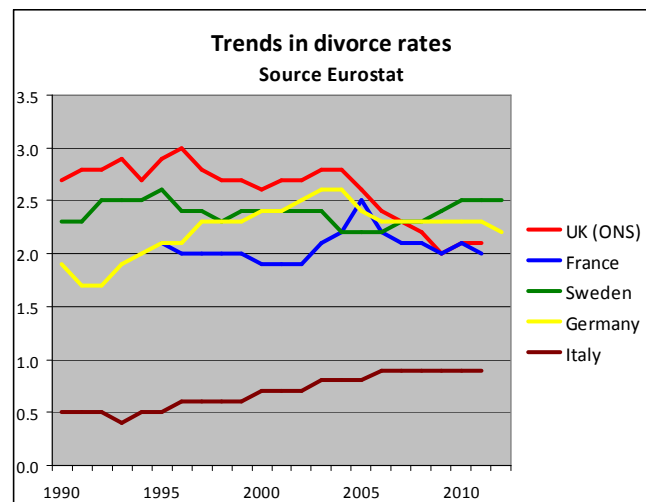
However if there is a common theme here, it isn't divorce.

Increases in lone parenthood in Italy might coincide with a rising trend in divorce rates. But that is not the case for France where recent divorce rates are trending downwards.

In Sweden, lone parenthood is falling yet divorce rates are flat.

In the UK, lone parenthood is on a steady uptrend. Yet divorce rates are very clearly on their way down.

The common theme is the trend in births outside marriage.



With the possible exception of Sweden where rates have plateaued, births outside marriage have risen steadily across all countries in Western Europe.

This is true even in Mediterranean countries, such as Italy (28%), Spain (36%) and Malta (26%), where unmarried births were the exception even twenty years ago.

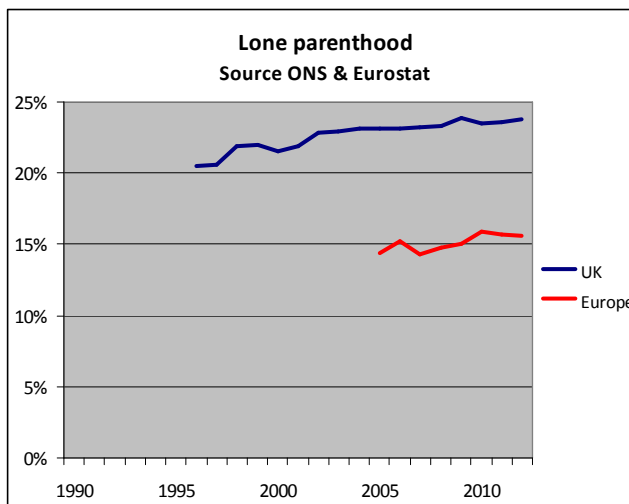
Only Greece (8%) is holding out, with restrained rises in Cyprus (19%) and Switzerland (20%).

Long term trends in family breakdown – it's about more than divorce

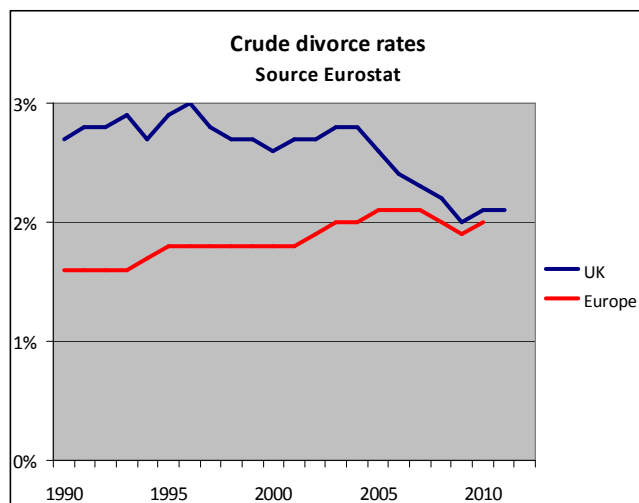
Comparing data from the UK with Europe as a whole provides an excellent study in how divorce is no longer the driving force behind family breakdown – at least across Western Europe.

Data from ONS show that family breakdown in the UK has been rising continuously since the 1960s. Specifically, the proportion of children living in lone parent households rose from 20.5% in 1996 to 22.3% in 2013.

This is consistently 50% higher than lone parenthood across the rest of Western Europe. Based on Eurostat data for eighteen countries within the Euro area, the proportion of children living in lone parent households has risen steadily from 14.4% in 2005 to 15.6% in 2012.



The most obvious source of lone parenthood is the divorce of married couples.



In Western Europe, 'crude divorce rates' have risen from 1.6 divorces per 1,000 adults in 1990 to 2.6 in 2010.

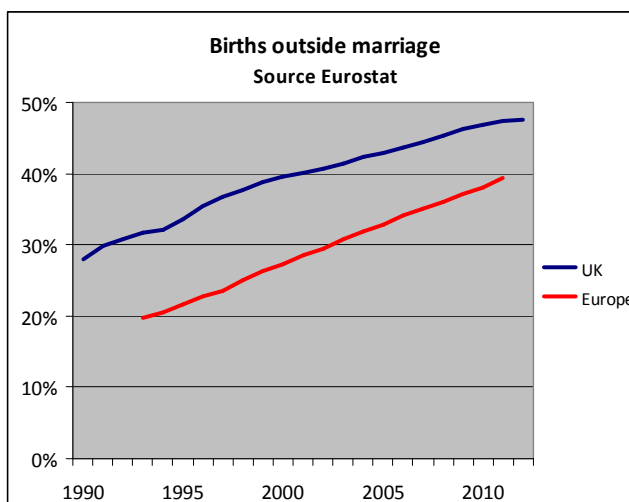
On the face of it, this appears to provide at least part of the explanation for why family breakdown is rising. More divorces means more lone parenthood.

However in the UK, 'crude divorce rates' have fallen from 2.7 per 1,000 adults in 1990 to 2.1 in 2011, showing that – in the UK at least – divorce is not the driver of family breakdown.

The alternative source of family breakdown is dissolution – or lack of formation – of unmarried couples.

Across both UK and Europe, births outside of marriage have risen steadily. In Europe, the proportion has doubled from 20% in 1993 to 39% in 2011.

In the UK, the proportion has risen and remained consistently higher, increasing from 28% in 1990 to 48% in 2012.



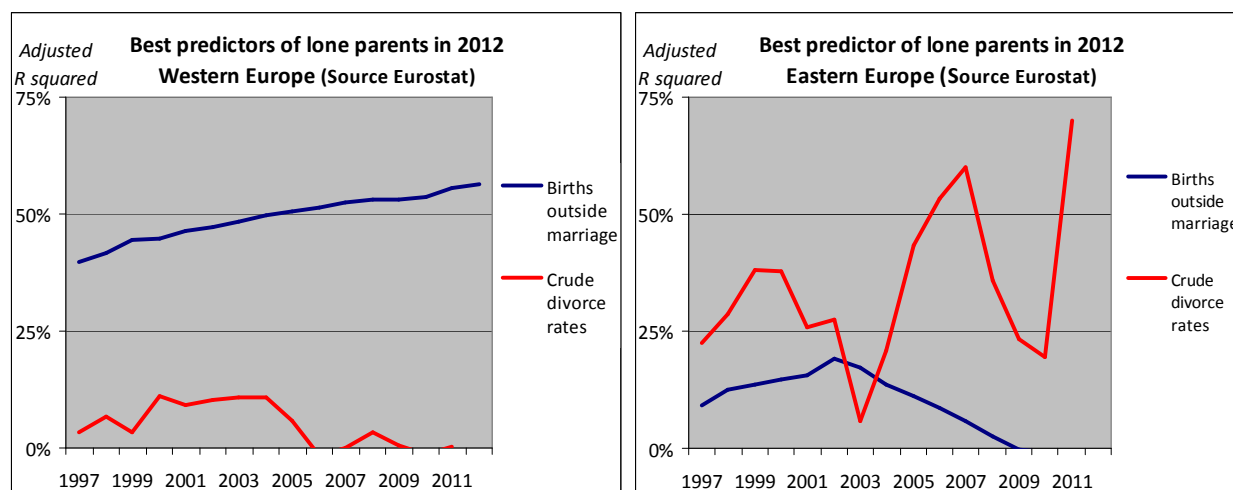
Family breakdown in Western and Eastern Europe

Levels of lone parenthood depend on the level of family breakdown that has taken place in recent years.

Divorce rates have an immediate impact on lone parenthood as those who divorce today become lone parents today. Divorce rates in previous years will have a lesser impact on lone parenthood because, over time, many of those who become lone parents will build new relationships and change status to cohabiting or married.

To find the link between divorce rates and lone parenthood therefore requires a correlation between lone parents today and divorce over the past few years. If the average previously married lone parent had been divorced for, say, five years, then divorce rates five years earlier is when the correlation should be strongest.

Births outside of marriage, on the other hand, have a delayed impact on lone parenthood. In the UK, for example, half of all family breakdown takes place within the first two years of childhood; three quarters of that involves unmarried parents. Therefore the correlation with lone parenthood should be most apparent in births outside marriage one to two years earlier.



These charts reveal very different drivers of lone parenthood in 2012.

In Western Europe, the link with births outside of marriage is very strong, with data from the most recent two years each explaining over 50% of the variance in lone parenthood (left chart, blue line). The strength of the link reduces as expected in earlier years. Nonetheless the link remains highly significant even fifteen years earlier. This would seem to reflect the trend away from marriage in Western countries rather than any specific direct link. By contrast, there is no significant link with divorce rates (red line).

In Eastern Europe, the link between lone parenthood and births outside of marriage is not apparent (right chart, blue line). In contrast, divorce rates in previous years do appear to predict later lone parenthood (red line).

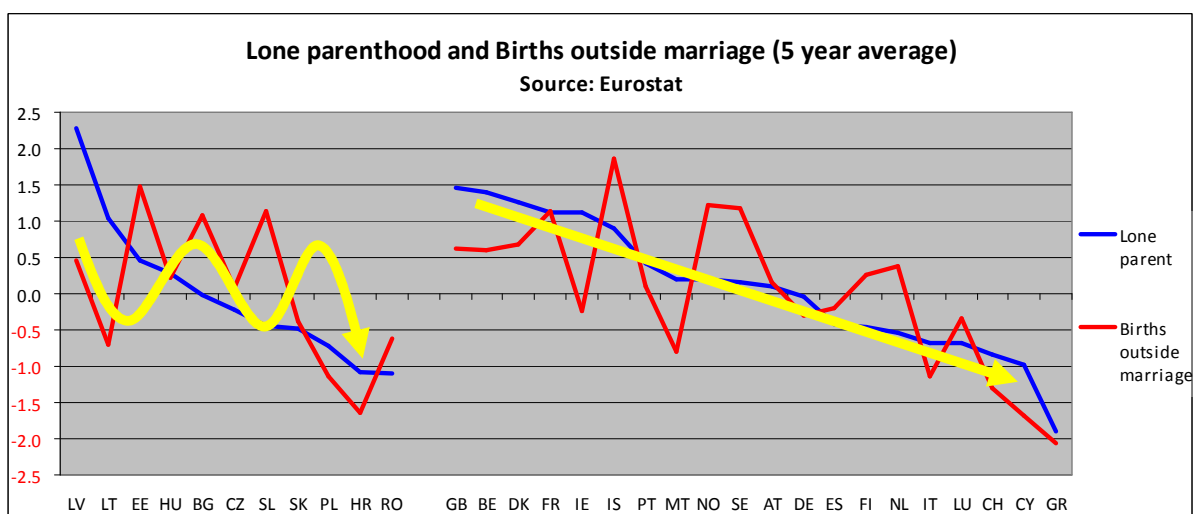
The conclusion from this is that it is the separation of unmarried couples that drives family breakdown in the West but the divorce of married couples that drives family breakdown in the East.

Births outside marriage in the West

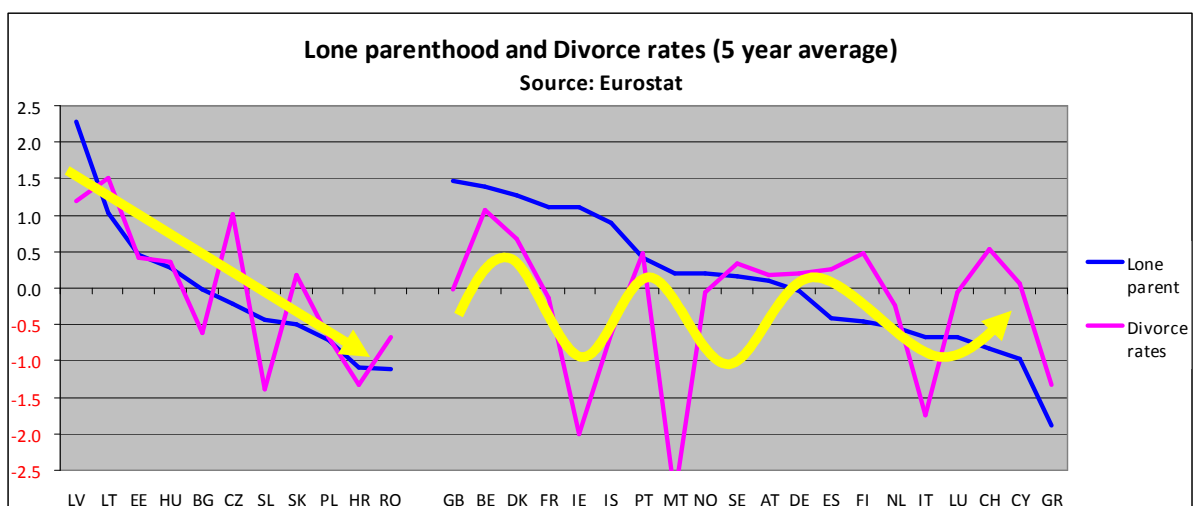
Divorce in the East

A more visual way of illustrating this is to show the correlation between lone parenthood in 2012 with the mean proportion of births outside marriage over the previous five years 2007 to 2011, and with the mean level of divorce rates over the previous five years 2007 to 2011.

The first chart shows that the link with births outside marriage is far clearer in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe. Lone parenthood in Western Europe is driven by births outside of marriage and not by divorce.



The second chart shows that the reverse is true for divorce rates. Lone parenthood in Eastern Europe is driven by divorce and not by births outside of marriage.



Both charts use standardised scales for ease of comparison.

Implications for policy makers

Family breakdown is linked both directly and indirectly with a range of poorer outcomes for adults, children and parents, negatively influencing children's achievement, adjustment and well-being (eg Amato & Anthony, 2014; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007; McLanahan et al, 2013; Potter, 2010; Sammons et al, 2014), adult well-being and attitudes to their own relationships (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Barrett & Turner, 2005; Whitton et al, 2008) and parents own adjustment to their children's divorce (Kalmijn & De Graaf, 2012).

In the UK, for example, the direct cost to the taxpayer of picking up the pieces of family breakdown is estimated at £46 billion per year, more than the defence budget (Ashcroft, 2013). The bulk of these costs derive from the additional benefits and tax credits paid to lone parents. For example, 63% of lone parents claim housing benefits compared to 10% of couple parents (DWP, 2014; ONS, 2014).

There is therefore a tremendous incentive for policymakers to reduce family breakdown, or at least bring it under control. In the UK, there are 1.9 million lone parent families (ONS, 2014) and 45% of all teenagers have already experienced family breakdown (Benson, 2013).

This paper concludes that attempts to reduce family breakdown need to focus on births outside marriage in the West and divorce in the East.

For western policymakers, the key driver of family breakdown is the trend away from marriage. Effective policy on family stability will therefore focus on encouraging more unmarried couples to get married as a priority, more than worrying about whether married couples stay married.

For eastern policymakers, the key driver of family breakdown is divorce amongst married couples. Effective policy on family stability will therefore focus on strengthening existing marriages as a priority, more than worrying about whether couples marry in the first place.

Family breakdown rankings across Europe

(Source Eurostat)

Western Europe			Eastern Europe		
Lone parents	Births outside marriage	Divorce	Lone parents	Births outside marriage	Divorce
1 United Kingdom	Iceland	Denmark	1 Latvia	Estonia	Latvia
2 Belgium	France	Sweden	2 Lithuania	Slovenia	Lithuania
3 Denmark	Norway	Belgium	3 Estonia	Bulgaria	Czech Republic
4 France	Sweden	Portugal	4 Hungary	Latvia	Estonia
5 Ireland	Belgium	Finland	5 Bulgaria	Hungary	Hungary
6 Iceland	Denmark	Cyprus	6 Czech Republic	Czech Republic	Slovakia
7 Portugal	United Kingdom	Spain	7 Slovenia	Slovakia	Poland
8 Norway	Netherlands	Germany	8 Slovakia	Romania	Bulgaria
9 Malta	Portugal	Switzerland	9 Poland	Lithuania	Romania
10 Sweden	Austria	United Kingdom	10 Croatia	Poland	Croatia
11 Austria	Finland	Netherlands	11 Romania	Croatia	Slovenia
12 Germany	Luxembourg	Luxembourg			
13 Spain	Spain	France			
14 Finland	Ireland	Norway			
15 Netherlands	Germany	Austria			
16 Luxembourg	Italy	Iceland			
17 Italy	Malta	Greece			
18 Switzerland	Switzerland	Malta			
19 Cyprus	Cyprus	Italy			
20 Greece	Greece	Ireland			

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