



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from the Marriage Foundation

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One in five cohabiting Mums say their relationship has got worse during COVID lockdown, finds major new study

- 20 per cent of all couples say lockdown has been positive
- Third of cohabiting mums complain about unfair distribution of household chores
- 18 per cent of over 50s report positive lockdown experience as do three in 10 self-employed parents
- Cohabiting couples with children and no earnings showed biggest deterioration in relationships

One in five cohabiting Mums say their relationship has worsened during COVID lockdown, with housework a major factor in disputes, finds major new study

The study, from the Marriage Foundation, looked at 2,559 parents who completed the recent UK Household Longitudinal Coronavirus survey, carried out by the University of Essex.

Overall the data found one in five (20 per cent) of couples reported an improved relationship as they were forced to spend more time together, but there were wide variations between different groups.

Cohabiting mums fared worse in almost every category. They had more than treble the odds of a worse relationship, four times the odds of getting on each other's nerves 'most' or 'all' of the time, five times the odds of quarrelling 'most' or 'all' of the time, double the odds of ever regretting living together, and less than half the odds of thinking household chores were divided fairly, compared to married mothers.

Harry Benson, the Marriage Foundation's Research Director and one of the report's authors commented: "The study provides a fascinating insight on to how the UK's 16.3 million couples have been surviving the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions.

“The data clearly shows that Britain’s three and half million cohabiting mums have had the toughest time, with one in five (22 per cent), saying their relationship had got worse and an almost identical number (20 per cent), saying they had ‘got on each other’s nerves most, or all of the time’ during lockdown. Inequalities in the division of household chores, such as cooking and cleaning were a major cause of conflict. Put another way, a third (34 per cent), of cohabiting women think their partners still aren’t pulling their weight around the home.

“This dire picture was compounded when age and income were added to the picture. The study found 27 per cent of cohabiting parents with no earnings reported a worse relationship. Worryingly, one in ten cohabiting mums said they had considered, or were considering separating. Married couples and those in Civil Partnerships fared significantly better.”

The report found significant numbers of married couples, those in civil partnerships and those over the age 50, had benefited from lockdown and spending more time together.

Interestingly, married parents who were self-employed showed the greatest gains with three in 10 (29 per cent,) reporting a better relationship.

The report concludes: “Our baseline hypothesis was that those with higher initial levels of dedication in their relationship would view the additional constraint of lockdown positively whereas those with lower initial levels of dedication would view it negatively. We also expected a gender effect whereby a lower level of dedication among cohabiting men would lead to less satisfied cohabiting women. Our results strongly support this view.”

It continues: “...the average married parent entered lockdown with relatively high levels of dedication. Most thrived as a result. For them, enforced time together at home has been (mostly) a pleasure.

“However for the average cohabiting parent, overall levels of commitment are less explicit and levels of ambiguity are typically higher. If some proportion of cohabiting mothers are more dedicated to the relationship and some proportion of the cohabiting fathers less dedicated, then it will be the cohabiting mothers who feel the weight of the additional constraint most negatively.

“For them, lockdown has taken a relationship with a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty that is manageable under normal circumstances and forced them to spend extra time with somebody who they suspected may not be as committed.

“In short, lockdown shines a spotlight on relationships where one partner is either explicitly or secretly less committed.”

Mr Benson continued: “As we emerge from lockdown, this study debunks the myth that we should be braced for a tsunami of divorces, as the data and our analysis shows this is unlikely to be the case.

“For a majority of the UK’s 12.8 million couples who are either married or in a civil partnership, spending more time with their husbands or wives and children has been a positive experience, or at worst neutral. Compare and contrast this with the experience of cohabiting mums, where a significant number felt their relationship had got worse. These findings accord with ‘Commitment Theory’, which measures relationships against two factors, dedication and constraints. Using this model we can explain why some couples have prospered under the lockdown and other less committed ones are struggling.”

He concluded: “This model also explains why the Government must target support at the groups who have experienced the most negative side effects of lockdown and redouble its efforts to promote stable committed relationships - the gold standard of which are marriage and civil partnerships.”

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About Marriage Foundation

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

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