

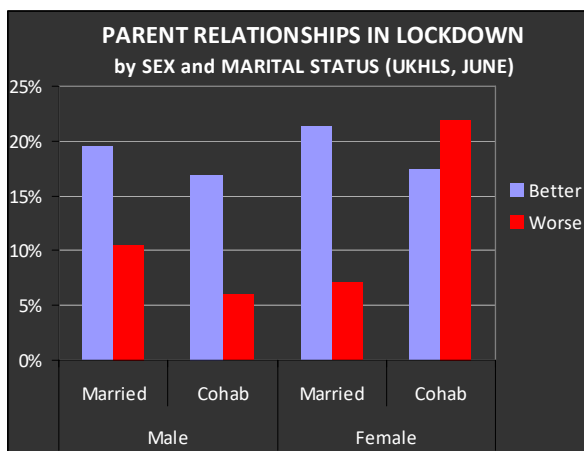


Marriage Foundation

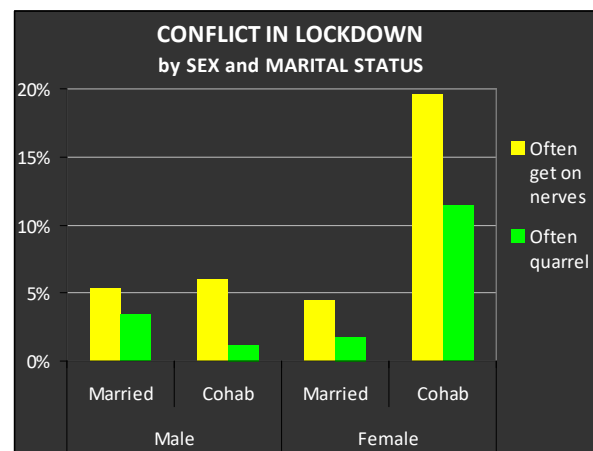
Parents in lockdown

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation
Stephen McKay, University of Lincoln
September 2020

- We analysed data from 2,559 parents who completed the June questionnaire for UK Household Longitudinal Survey Coronavirus Study (*University of Essex 2020*) revealing that 20% of parent-parent relationships got better, 70% stayed the same, and 10% got worse during lockdown.
- While parents in all groups showed improvements across the board, regardless of sex, age, income or child's age, there was a lot more variation where relationships worsened.
- Lockdown has proved especially difficult for cohabiting mothers: 22% of cohabiting mothers said their relationship had got worse, compared to 6% of cohabiting fathers, 7% of married mothers and 11% of married fathers.
- Cohabiting mothers 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, all compared to married mothers.
- To a lesser extent, married fathers also had a worse lockdown and quarrelled more. However their relationships were more secure with less chance of ever thinking about divorce, more chance of thinking chores were fair, and no additional regrets about getting married or getting on each other's nerves, compared to married mothers.
- The stress testing of parental relationships during lockdown has exposed the lack of relational security faced by cohabiting mothers in particular, as commitment theory and research predict.



While a significant proportion of parents across all groups – married or cohabiting, fathers or mothers – have done better during lockdown, this chart clearly shows the higher proportion of cohabiting mothers who have done worse.



Specifically, cohabiting mothers were consistently more likely to say they had got on each others nerves or quarrelled 'most' or 'all' of the time, they regretted living together and they viewed their share of household chores as unfair.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal of speculation in the media about how relationships have fared during lockdown.

Commitment theory sheds some interesting light on the matter in terms of predicting potential winners and losers (*Stanley et al 2006*).

Commitment has two different facets:

- **Dedication** is the internal bond between two people that reflects their identity as a couple and sense of future. Dedication is what makes you **want** to be together.
- **Constraints** are the external bonds that make it harder to leave a relationship, should you wish to do so. These include children, friends, shared history and cohabitation. Constraints are what make you **have** to be together.

Government-mandated confinement of couples to their homes from the middle of March onwards has undoubtedly added an additional constraint to couple relationships.

For some couples, where levels of dedication were relatively low or the state of the relationship was ambiguous, that extra constraint will have added to the negative sense of being trapped and possibly push some couples to the brink of divorce (*Knopp et al 2014*).

Although there is little to no evidence yet that divorce rates might have risen – or that separation among cohabiting couples might have increased – it is at least plausible that some couples will accelerate their plans to leave their relationships as a result of lockdown.

For other couples, the additional constraint will reinforce pre-existing high levels of dedication, in much the way the act of marriage signals and reinforces the clear and unambiguous decision to be a couple with a permanent future.

It is therefore reasonable to expect some relationships to have thrived in lockdown and others to have suffered – above and beyond what might otherwise have been the case without a prolonged period of lockdown.

Preliminary evidence in support of this comes from the May survey of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey Coronavirus Study (*University of Essex 2020*).

Researchers found that 26% of parents reported improved relationships with their children and 4% reported worse relationships (*Benzeval et al 2020, Perelli-Harris & Walzenbach 2020*).

Given that parents generally **want** to be with their children, it is not surprising that **having** to be with them for longer has reinforced the positive experience for many.

Among couples, there is likely to be an additional gender effect because some fathers, especially among those not married, have lower levels of dedication.

Several studies suggest men's commitment is tied more to the active decision to commit, rather than the act of moving in, as it seems to be for women.

For example, men who moved in with their future wives before getting engaged had lower subsequent levels of commitment compared to men who did not move in before getting engaged. The timing of the decision to marry (building dedication) relative to the date of moving in together (adding a constraint) did not affect women's subsequent commitment (*Stanley et al 2004, Rhoades et al 2006*).

Similarly, among young unmarried couples where partner commitment is asymmetric, it is more likely to be the man who is the less committed partner (*Stanley et al 2018, Benson 2020*).

The June survey of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey Coronavirus Study included a 'partner module' that included a series of questions about their relationships and how they had changed during lockdown. The survey also asked whether respondents were married or cohabiting, their age and the age of their children, their earnings and their gender.

For the first time, we were therefore able to look at how married and cohabiting mothers and fathers had fared during lockdown.

Our baseline hypothesis was that married and cohabiting parents differ by levels of dedication.

Therefore we expected to see differences in relationship outcome between married and cohabiting parents.

We also anticipated some evidence of a gender effect where those mothers living with less committed fathers would view the constraint of lockdown negatively.

METHOD and RESULTS

We analysed data from 2,559 parents living as either married or cohabiting couples who responded to the June survey of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey's Coronavirus study.

The survey included questions on whether the relationship had got better, worse or remained the same, the extent to which they had got on each other's nerves, quarrelled, had regrets about getting married or living together, thought about getting divorced or separating, and considered the division of household chores to be fair.

We also looked at the age of the respondent parent, the age of their children, and the parent's income.

Because only 12-15% of the sample were cohabiting parents, we collapsed our measures of income and child's age to whether the parents earned at all or not and whether the child was of school age 5-15 or not.

RELATIONSHIP CHANGE

Altogether 20% of the parents in our sample reported that their relationships had improved during lockdown.

Married parents who were self-employed showed the greatest gains with 29% reporting a better relationship. Married parents who were not employed reported the lowest gain at 15%.

As the chart below shows (*blue columns*), married and cohabiting mothers and fathers showed similar gains, ranging from 17% to 21%.

Taking into account all other factors, our regression equation (*see page 6*) showed that those over 50 were the only group to show gains that were significantly different from other groups, with 18% reporting a better relationship ($p < .01$).

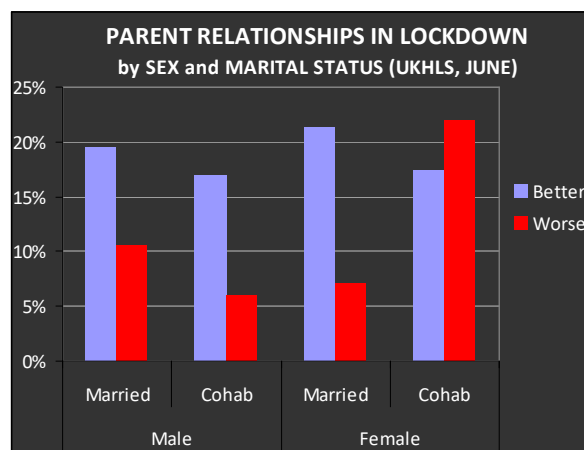
At the other end of the spectrum, 10% of all parents reported that their relationship had got worse during lockdown.

Within this, there was a great deal more variation between groups (*Coefficient of Variation: Worse=52%; Better=14%*).

'Cohabiting parents with no earnings' showed the biggest deterioration with 27% reporting a worse relationship. 'Cohabiting fathers' reported the least deterioration at 6%.

The chart below also shows (*red columns*) that 22% of cohabiting mothers reported their relationship had become worse compared to just 6% of cohabiting fathers, 7% of married mothers and 11% of married fathers.

Taking into account all other factors, our regression equation showed the odds of a relationship worsening were 3.3 times greater for cohabiting mothers ($p < .001$), 1.5 times greater for married fathers ($p < .05$), and 1.6 times greater for those over 50 ($p < .05$). The odds of a worse relationship for parents with school age children, aged 5-15, were half as great compared to those with younger children ($p < .01$).



CONFLICT

Altogether 6% of the parents in our sample reported that they got on each other's nerves 'most' or 'all of the time' and 3% reported they quarrelled 'most' or all of the time'.

There was more variation between groups in these two measures of conflict than in any other analysis we did (*CV: Nerves=89%, Quarrel=99%*).

'Cohabiting mothers' were the most likely group to say they got on each others nerves a lot at 20% whereas just 2% of 'cohabiting parents without school age children' were the least likely group.

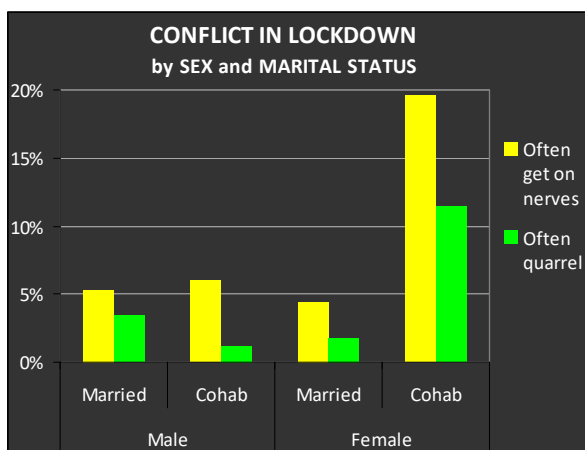
'Cohabitees in their 30s' were most likely group to report a lot of quarrelling at 13% whereas just 1% of 'cohabiting fathers' were the least likely group.

The chart below shows (*yellow and green columns*) how cohabiting mothers were more likely than other parents to get on each other's nerves or quarrel a lot.

Taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed that cohabiting mothers were most likely to report getting on each other's nerves a lot with 4.6 times the odds of married mothers ($p < .001$) and also most likely to report a lot of quarrelling with 5.2 times the odds of married mothers ($p < .001$).

Those over 50 were less likely to get on each other's nerves a lot (*odds 0.3, $p < .01$*) or quarrel a lot (*odds 0.2, $p < .05$*), compared to those in their 40s. Those under 40 were more likely to quarrel a lot (*odds 1.8, $p < .05$*) but not more likely to get on each other's nerves.

Those with any earnings were also less likely to get on each other's nerves a lot (*odds 0.6, $p < .01$*) and quarrel a lot (*odds 0.5, $p < .01$*), compared to those with no earnings.



COMMITMENT

Altogether 15% of the parents in our sample reported that they regretted getting married or living together at least occasionally and 6% considered divorce or separation at least occasionally.

Once again, there was a great deal of variation between groups (*CV: Regret=48%, Think Split=35%*), with 31% of cohabitees without young children the most likely group to regret living together, and 8% of married parents with more than two young children the least likely.

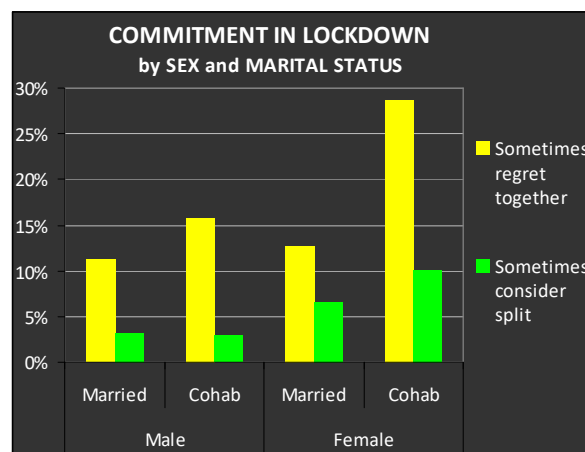
'Cohabiting mothers' were most likely to consider separation at 10%, and 'fathers in general' and

'cohabiting parents with one young child' least likely at 3%.

The chart below shows (*yellow and green columns*) how cohabiting mothers were more likely than other parents to regret being together and slightly less more likely to consider separation.

Taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed that cohabiting mothers were most likely to regret living together with 2.6 times the odds of married mothers ($p < .001$). Those with any earnings were less likely to regret living together (*odds 0.7, $p < .01$*).

Married fathers had 0.5 times the odds of considering divorce or separation ($p < .001$) compared to married mothers, and were the only group to differ significantly from the rest of the sample for this factor.



FAIRNESS

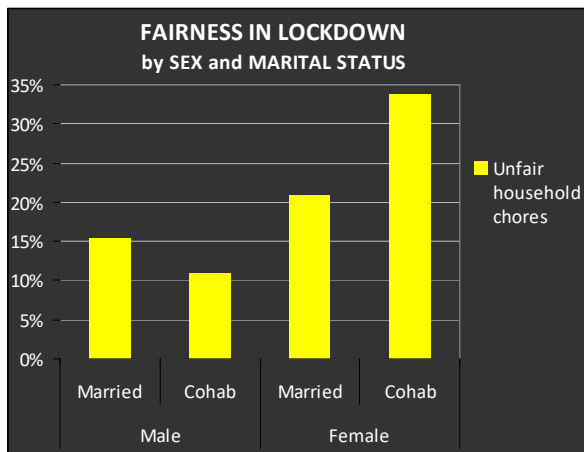
Altogether 19% of the parents in our sample reported that chores were split 'somewhat' or 'not at all' fairly.

The chart below shows (*yellow columns*) how cohabiting mothers were most likely of all groups to report unfairness at 34% while cohabiting fathers were least likely of all groups to report unfairness at 11% (*CV: Fair=29%*)

Taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed that cohabiting mothers were less likely to rate chores as fair with 0.6 times the odds of married mothers ($p < .01$).

Married fathers (*odds 1.5, $p < .01$*), cohabiting fathers (*odds 2.2, $p < .01$*), those over 50 (*odds 1.5, $p < .05$*), those with any earnings (*odds 1.4, $p < .01$*)

and those with school age children (*odds 1.6, $p < .01$*) were all more likely to rate chores as fair.



DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated how relationships among married and cohabiting parents have been affected by lockdown.

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.

We found that cohabiting mothers have been especially badly affected by lockdown.

Cohabiting mothers were more likely than any other group of parents to report that their relationship had got worse during lockdown.

They also reported abnormally high levels of conflict – getting on each other’s nerves and quarrelling most or all of the time – regrets about living together, and thoughts that the division of household chores was unfair.

These findings were highly significant, regardless of parent’s age, child’s age, and parent’s income.

So consider what might have been going on to explain these remarkable findings.

The vast majority of parents, whether married or cohabiting, live in relationships characterised by relatively high levels of happiness and relatively low levels of conflict (*Benson & James 2015*).

However married and cohabiting parents differ substantially in terms of their future stability.

Whereas the relative stability of marriage has improved in recent decades – divorce rates are now at the lowest levels since the 1960s – there is little evidence to suggest the relative instability of cohabiting couples has improved similarly (*Benson & McKay 2019*).

So 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.

Because less committed partners are most likely to be found among the group of cohabiting fathers, the group who have struggled most during lockdown are the cohabiting mothers who have to live with them.

REFERENCES

- Benson, H. (2020) *Commit or Quit: the Two Year Rule and Other Rules for Romance*. Oxford: Lion Hudson.
- Benson, H. & James, S. (2015). *Out of the blue: Family breakdown in the UK*. Cambridge: Marriage Foundation
- Benson, H. & McKay, S. (2019). *Family stability improves as divorce rates fall*. Cambridge: Marriage Foundation.
- Benzeval, M., Burton, J., Crossley, TF., Fisher, P., Jäckle, A., Perelli-Harris, B., & Walzenbach, S. (2020) *Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey May Briefing Note: Family relationships*.

Understanding Society Working Paper No 13/2020, ISER, University of Essex.

Knopp, K., Rhoades, G., Stanley, S., & Markman, H., (2015). "Stuck on you: How dedication moderates the way constraints feel", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 32, 119–37

Perelli-Harris B, & Walzenbach S, (2020). How has the Covid-19 crisis impacted parents relationships with their children? University of Southampton, CPC. Series Number: 54.

Rhoades, G., Stanley, S., & Markman, H., (2006). "Pre-engagement cohabitation and gender asymmetry in marital commitment", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 553.

Rhoades, G., Stanley, S., & Markman, H., (2010). "Should I stay or should I go? Predicting dating relationship stability from four aspects of commitment", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24, 543.

Stanley, S., Whitton, S., & Markman, H. (2004). Maybe I do: Interpersonal commitment and premarital or nonmarital cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25, 496–519.

Stanley, S., Rhoades, G. & Markman, H. (2006), Sliding Versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect. *Family Relations*, 55: 499-509.

University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). *Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020*. [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-3>

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Understanding Society COVID-19 study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Health Foundation. Fieldwork for the survey is carried out by Ipsos MORI and Kantar. Understanding Society is an initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and various Government Departments, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex. The research data are distributed by the UK Data Service.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

In our analysis, we compared 12v3456 for NERVES and QUARREL (i.e. whether it happened a lot), 1234v56 for REGRET and THINK SPLIT (i.e. whether it happened occasionally or more often), and 12vs34 for FAIR CHORES (i.e. whether it was mainly fair or mainly unfair).

BETTER/WORSE: How has your relationship with your partner changed since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic? Is it...

1. Better than before
2. About the same
3. Worse than before?

NERVES: Thinking about the last 4 weeks, how often did you and your partner "get on each other's nerves"?

1. All of the time
2. Most of the time
3. More often than not
4. Occasionally
5. Rarely
6. Never

QUARREL: And how often did you and your partner quarrel?

1. All of the time
2. Most of the time
3. More often than not
4. Occasionally
5. Rarely
6. Never

REGRET: Do you ever regret that you married or lived together?

1. All of the time
2. Most of the time
3. More often than not
4. Occasionally
5. Rarely
6. Never

THINK SPLIT: How often have you discussed or considered divorce, separation or terminating your relationship recently?

1. All of the time
2. Most of the time
3. More often than not
4. Occasionally
5. Rarely
6. Never

FAIR CHORES: In your view, is the way you and your partner share additional housework and caring responsibilities these days...

1. Very fair
2. Somewhat fair
3. Somewhat unfair
4. Or not at all fair?

LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Factor	n=	Better	Worse	Nerves	Quarrel	Regrets	Think Split	Fair chores
		Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig
Marital status overall	2559							
Married men (vs married women)	924		* +49%	***	* +94%		*** -54%	** +46%
Cohab men (...)	122							** +122%
Cohab women (...)	195		*** +226%	*** +363%	*** +421%	*** +164%		** -43%
Age: Under 40 (vs 40s)	799				* +81%			
Age: Over 50 (vs 40s)	590	** -31%	* +62%	** -72%	* -80%			* +47%
Earning: Any (vs none)	1884			** -72%	** -52%	** -30%		** +42%
Children: School age (vs 0-4 years)	2204		** -46%					** +60%

Sample size

2559

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05