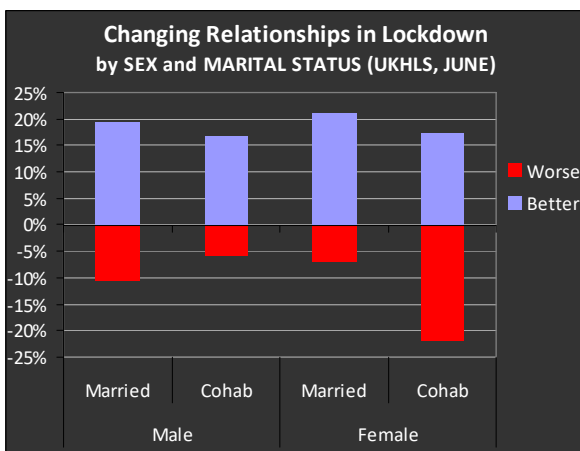




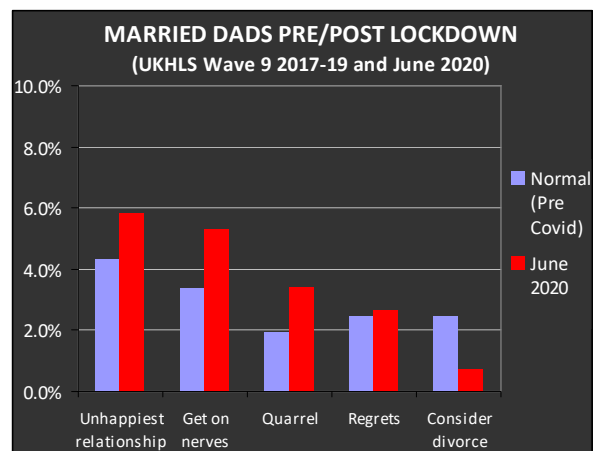
Has lockdown strengthened marriages?

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- Contrary to claims in the media, lockdown has been good news for most married parents. Speculation about a coming ‘divorce boom’ is misplaced.
- We analysed data from 2,559 parents who completed the June questionnaire for UK Household Longitudinal Survey Coronavirus Study (*University of Essex 2020*).
- Twice as many marriages improved during lockdown compared to those that worsened. Whereas 20% of married parents said their relationship got better, 9% said theirs got worse.
- Although there are clear signs that lockdown caused friction in some marriages, two thirds fewer parents than normal have been considering divorce.
- Compared to pre-covid levels in 2017-19, slightly more married fathers than normal said they were fairly or extremely unhappy, getting on each other’s nerves or quarrelling often, or often regretting getting married. However just 0.7% of married fathers were considering divorce, two thirds down on pre-covid levels. More married mothers than normal also reported being unhappy, but fewer said they were quarrelling. Two thirds fewer were considering divorce.
- Cohabiting mothers struggled most during lockdown, with 22% saying their relationship had got worse compared to 7% of married mothers, 6% of cohabiting and 11% of married fathers. They were also more likely than married parents to be unhappy, get on nerves or quarrel often.
- Although stress levels in parental relationships have risen, lockdown appears to have affirmed the commitment of married parents and exposed the insecurity faced by cohabiting mothers.



At least twice as many married parents said their relationship had got better rather than worse. However more cohabiting mothers said their relationship had got worse rather than better.



Although more married parents than normal reported being unhappy, getting on each other’s nerves or quarrelling often, two thirds fewer than usual said they were often considering divorce.

INTRODUCTION

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

In particular, commentators are anticipating a post-lockdown 'divorce boom' on the basis of online enquiries and google searches (*BBC, 12 September 2020*).

Such forecasts are both premature and highly questionable.

First, actual UK divorce data for 2020 is unlikely to appear much before October 2021. Secondly, the number of divorces has been affected by lockdown closures and associated delays.

It is therefore unlikely that an accurate picture of divorce rates in 2020 will be obtainable until the delays of the lockdown era have washed through the system and we are back to some kind of normal.

Second, early real time data from the US suggests divorces fell during lockdown. Analysis of a national survey found half of married adults said their appreciation had increased and commitment deepened (*Wilcox & Stone 2020*).

For some couples, lockdown will have crystallised the difficult decision to separate. Being forced to spend more time together will have been a profoundly unattractive experience. And with no choice in the matter, lockdown will have felt like a trap.

However commitment theory gives us good reasons to be suspicious of claims of a divorce boom (*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 couples whose 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*).

However 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 2017, 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.

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.

Although we expected to see evidence of stress in relationships, we also expected to see differences in relationship outcome between married and cohabiting parents.

And we 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 were also able to contrast most of these relationship measures with results from wave 9 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey conducted in 2017-2019 and also with an unpublished wave 1 analysis we did previously of a small sample of 110 married and cohabiting mothers in 2009-10 who went on to split before the wave 2 survey a year later.

For comparing relationship measures between parents in the June survey only, we used as controls 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.

BETTER OR WORSE

Parents were asked whether their relationship had got better, worse or stayed the same during lockdown.

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

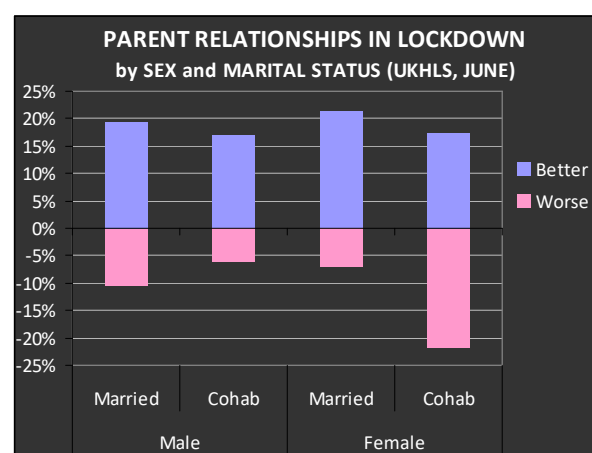
As the chart below shows (*blue columns*), married and cohabiting mothers and fathers showed similar gains, ranging from 17% to 21%.

Taking age, earnings and child's age into account, our regression equation showed that these differences were not significant,

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

The chart below also shows (*pink 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.

Compared to married mothers, the odds of a relationship worsening were 3.3 times greater for cohabiting mothers ($p<.001$) and 1.5 times greater for married fathers ($p<.05$).



RELATIONSHIP HAPPINESS

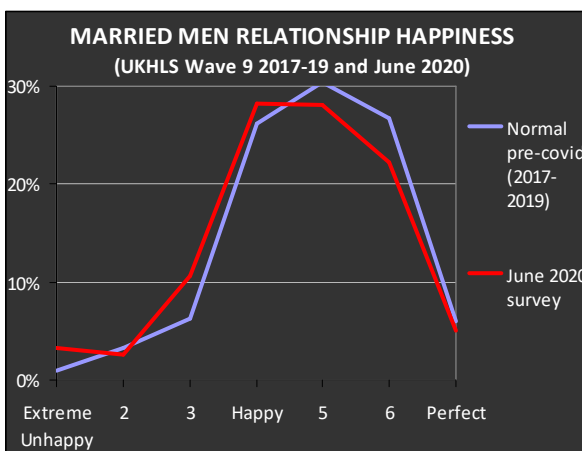
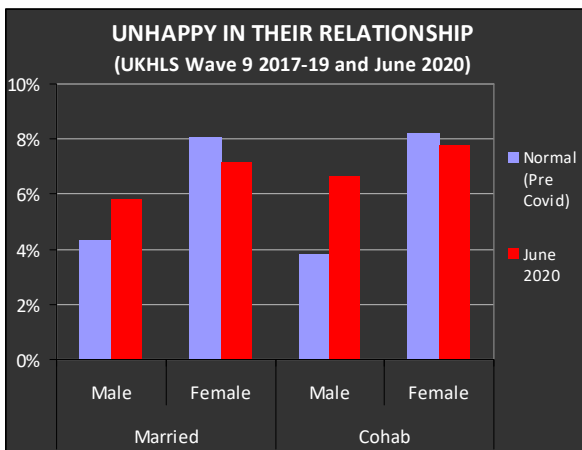
Parents were asked how happy they were in their relationship, with results scored from 1=Extremely unhappy to 7=Perfect.

Differentiated by marital status and sex, 6% of married fathers, 7% of married mothers, 7% of cohabiting fathers and 8% of cohabiting mothers reported being fairly or extremely unhappy (scoring either 1 or 2 out of 7).

These levels remain comfortably below the 23% of married mothers and 14% of cohabiting mothers who went on to split in our 2009-10 analysis, notwithstanding the small size of our sample.

The first chart below shows the slightly higher levels of unhappiness among fathers, both married and cohabiting, compared to 'normal' pre-covid levels, whereas there is little or no change in unhappiness among mothers compared to 'normal'.

The second chart shows in more detail how there was a small but noticeable reduction in the happiness of married fathers. For married mothers (not shown) the changes were negligible.



GETTING ON EACH OTHER'S NERVES

Parents were asked how much they got on each other's nerves, with results scored from 1=All of the time to 6=Never.

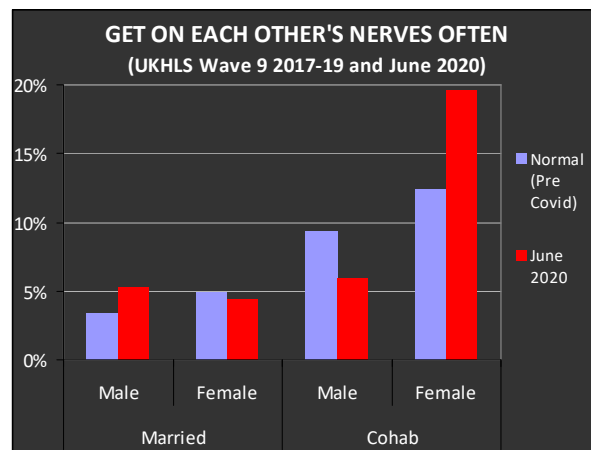
Altogether 5% of married fathers, 4% of married mothers, 6% of cohabiting fathers and 20% of cohabiting mothers reported getting on each other's nerves all of most of the time (scoring either 1 or 2 out of 6).

Among married parents, slightly more fathers and slightly fewer mothers compared to 'normal' reported getting on each other's nerves often.

These levels are well below the 20% of our sample of married mothers who reported getting on each other's nerves often before they split up.

Among cohabiting parents, levels were lower than normal among fathers but much higher than normal among mothers.

Taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed that the odds of cohabiting mothers often getting on each other's nerves were 4.6 times higher than for married mothers ($p < .001$).



QUARRELS

Parents were asked how often they had quarrels, with results scored from 1=All of the time to 6=Never.

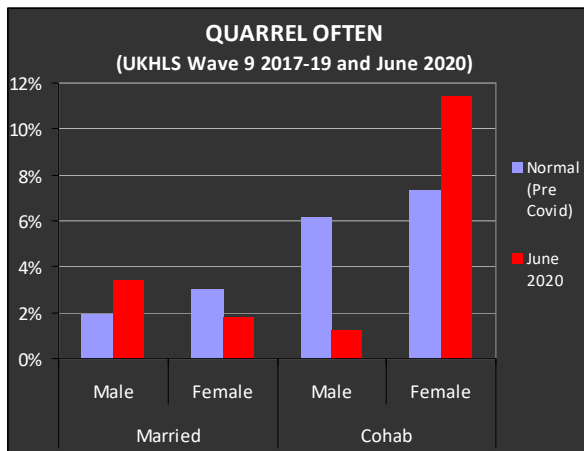
Altogether 3% of married fathers, 2% of married mothers, 1% of cohabiting fathers and 11% of cohabiting mothers reported quarrelling all of most of the time (scoring either 1 or 2 out of 6).

Among married parents, slightly more fathers and slightly fewer mothers compared to 'normal' reported often quarrelling.

These levels are again well below the 10% of our sample of married mothers who reported often quarrelling before they split up.

Among cohabiting parents, levels were also lower than normal among fathers and much higher than normal among cohabiting mothers.

Taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed that the odds of cohabiting mothers often quarrelling were 5.2 times higher than for married mothers ($p < .001$).



REGRETS ABOUT GETTING MARRIED

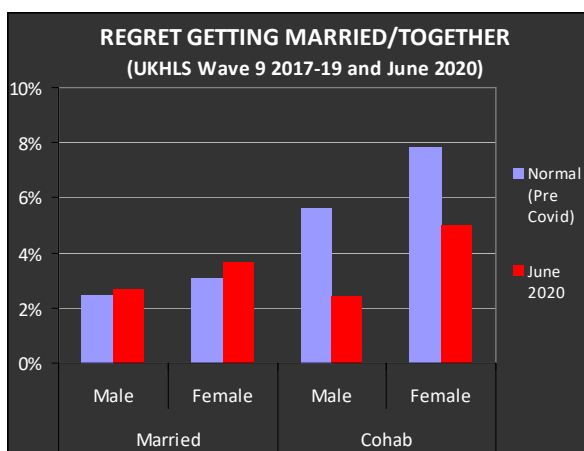
Parents were asked how often they had regrets, about getting married or together, with results scored from 1=All of the time to 6=Never.

Altogether 3% of married fathers, 4% of married mothers, 2% of cohabiting fathers and 5% of cohabiting mothers reported regrets more often than not (scoring either 1, 2 or 3 out of 6).

Among married parents, slightly more fathers and mothers compared to 'normal' reported they often had regrets.

These levels are still well below the 15% of our sample of married mothers who reported considering divorce often before they split up.

Among cohabiting parents, levels were much lower than normal among both fathers and mothers.



However, taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed that the odds of cohabiting mothers having a lot of regrets were

still 2.6 times higher than for married mothers ($p < .001$).

CONSIDERING DIVORCE

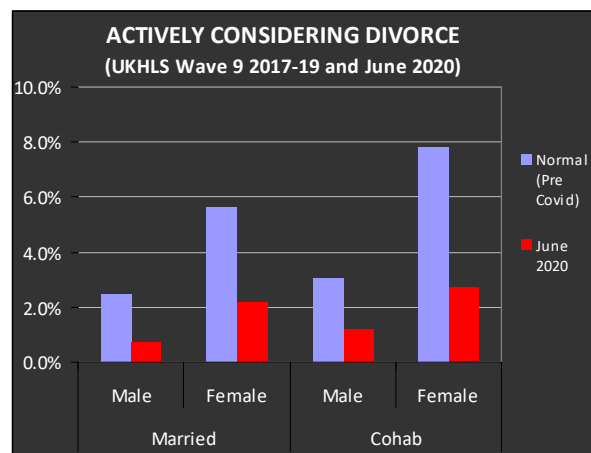
Finally, parents were asked how often they had considered divorce or separation, with results scored from 1=All of the time to 6=Never.

Altogether 0.7% of married fathers, 2.2% of married mothers, 1.2% of cohabiting fathers and 2.7% of cohabiting mothers reported considering divorce or separation more often than not (scoring either 1, 2 or 3 out of 6).

Among married and cohabiting fathers and mothers, some two thirds fewer than 'normal' reported they had often considered divorce.

These levels are also well below the 22% of married mothers and 20% of cohabiting mothers in our sample who reported often considering divorce before they split up.

Taking other factors into account, our regression equation showed married fathers to be the only group to differ significantly with 0.5 times the odds of considering divorce or separation ($p < .001$) compared to married mothers.



DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated how relationships among married and cohabiting parents have been affected by lockdown and whether we should expect to see a 'divorce boom'.

We compared responses from a major national survey conducted in June, in the midst of lockdown, with responses from the same national survey conducted in more normal pre-lockdown conditions 2017-2019.

Our main finding is that lockdown in general has been good or neutral for the vast majority of marriages.

While 20% of married parents said their relationship had got better, 71% said it had stayed the same and 9% said it had got worse.

But are those 9% sufficient to produce a divorce boom?

Our analysis of responses to more detailed relationship questions reveals that lockdown put serious pressure on a small proportion of married relationships.

More fathers than normal reported high levels of unhappiness and conflict. More mothers than normal reported high levels of unhappiness and regrets about their marriage.

However these levels are low in absolute terms and well below the much higher levels typically found among couples headed for divorce.

For example, 3.4% of married fathers and 1.8% of married mothers reported often quarrelling compared to 10% of those headed for divorce.

Most importantly, fewer parents than normal reported that they were considering divorce more often than not.

Just 0.7% of married fathers and 2.2% of married mothers were considering divorce, down by 70% and 61% respectively on more normal levels.

Results for cohabiting parents showed a similar two thirds drop in already small numbers of those considering separation.

Although fewer cohabiting fathers than normal reported high levels of unhappiness or conflict, a lot more cohabiting mothers than normal reported high levels of conflict.

Cohabiting mothers were by far the most likely group to struggle during lockdown, to say their relationship had got worse, that they were experiencing significantly higher levels of conflict, and that they had more regrets about getting together in the first place.

In our first analysis of this dataset, we described the likely reason why cohabiting mothers struggled more than others. Asymmetry of commitment is most common among cohabiting couples. And it is the man in the relationship who is more likely to be the less committed one.

Living in a relationship where there is more ambiguity is inherently stressful. Add a constraint that puts pressure on that relationship and it is easy to see why cohabiting mothers had the most problems (*Benson & McKay 2020*)

Our key findings can be summarised as follows:

- Twice as many marriages got better rather than worse
- A few more marriages than usual experienced high levels of unhappiness or conflict, but those levels were still well below the levels typically experienced by those who go on to divorce
- Two thirds fewer fathers and mothers than usual were actively considering divorce

So will there be a divorce boom? The answer seems clear. No.

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RELATIONSHIP CHANGE

	Married		Cohabiting	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Better	19%	21%	17%	17%
Same	70%	72%	77%	61%
Worse	11%	7%	6%	22%
<i>n=</i>	1079	1047	166	219

OTHER RELATIONSHIP INDICATORS

	Normal' (2017-19)	Lockdown June 2020	Difference
MARRIED FATHERS			
Unhappy relationship	4.3%	5.8%	+1.5%
Get on nerves	3.4%	5.3%	+1.9%
Quarrel	1.9%	3.4%	+1.5%
Regrets	2.5%	2.7%	+0.2%
Consider divorce	2.5%	0.7%	-1.7%
MARRIED MOTHERS			
Unhappy relationship	3.9%	7.2%	+3.3%
Get on nerves	4.9%	4.4%	-0.5%
Quarrel	3.0%	1.8%	-1.2%
Regrets	3.1%	3.6%	+0.6%
Consider divorce	5.6%	2.2%	-3.4%
COHABITING FATHERS			
Unhappy relationship	8.1%	6.7%	-1.4%
Get on nerves	9.4%	6.0%	-3.4%
Quarrel	6.2%	1.2%	-5.0%
Regrets	5.6%	2.4%	-3.2%
Consider divorce	3.1%	1.2%	-1.9%
COHABITING MOTHERS			
Unhappy relationship	8.2%	7.8%	-0.5%
Get on nerves	12.4%	19.6%	+7.3%
Quarrel	7.3%	11.4%	+4.1%
Regrets	7.8%	5.0%	-2.8%
Consider divorce	7.8%	2.7%	-5.1%

SURVEY QUESTIONS

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?

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LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Factor	n=	Better		Worse		Nerves		Quarrel		Regrets		Think Split		Fair chores	
		Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds	Sig	Odds
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%					*	+47%
Age: Over 50 (vs 40s)	590	**	-31%	*	+62%	**	-72%	*	-80%					**	+42%
Earning: Any (vs none)	1884					**	-72%	**	-52%	**	-30%			**	+60%
Children: School age (vs 0-4 years)	2204			**	-46%									**	+60%

Sample size

2559

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