

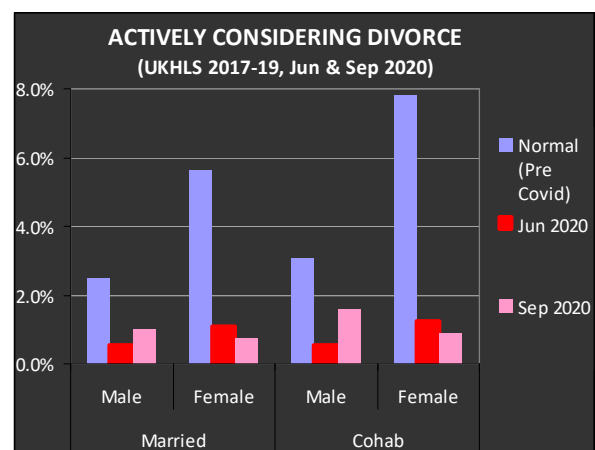
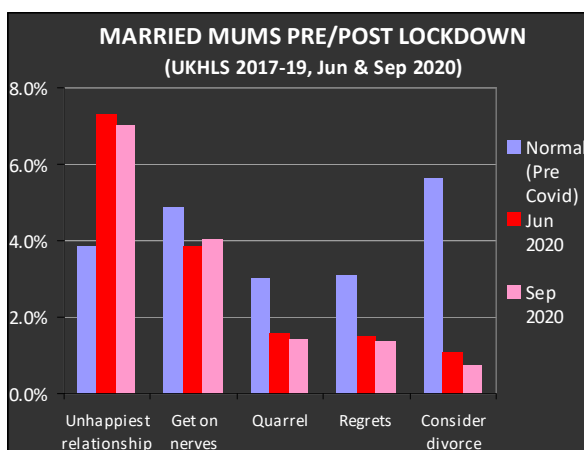


Marriage Foundation

No 'divorce boom' in sight

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- Several articles in the media have anticipated a post-lockdown 'divorce boom' on the basis of online enquiries and google searches.
- Last year, we published analysis of June survey data from UK Household Longitudinal Study revealing twice as many marriages had improved rather than deteriorated during lockdown #1. Moreover the proportion of parents actively considering divorce was down by two thirds on pre-COVID levels (*Benson & McKay 2020*).
- Our analysis of September survey data from UKLHS on 3,005 parents shows little change in couple relationship indicators – relationship happiness, frequency of getting on each other's nerves and quarrels, regrets about marriage, and couples actively considering divorce.
- In other words, up until September, there was no sign whatsoever of a pending 'divorce boom' as regards those saying they were considering divorce.
- This is supported by Ministry of Justice data showing a fall in the number of divorce petitions during the third quarter of 2020.
- As we have highlighted previously, 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..
- Our updated analysis shows that this situation had remained largely unchanged in September.
- Although stress levels in parental relationships were apparent in June and September, lockdown appears to have affirmed the commitment of married parents and exposed the insecurity faced especially by a significant proportion of cohabiting mothers.



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 (*Daily Mail* 2/6/20 and 28/8/20, *BBC* 12/9/20 and 17/11/20, *Times* 6/12/20, *Telegraph* 12/1/21).

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 and September COVID surveys of the UK Household Longitudinal Study included a 'partner module' with a series of questions about their relationships and how they had changed during lockdown. The surveys 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.

Our analysis of the June survey results confirmed increases in both stress and stability during lockdown, revealing a two thirds drop in the proportion of couples actively considering divorce or separation compared to normal levels pre-COVID (*Benson & McKay 2020*).

September survey results would reveal the extent to which relationship indicators had returned to normal.

METHOD and RESULTS

As well as looking at data on 3,005 parents (2,941 when weighted) living as either married or cohabiting couples who responded to the September survey of the UK Household Longitudinal Study, we also reanalysed data on 3,427 parents (3,247 when weighted) who responded to the June survey in order to make a like-for-like comparison.

Both surveys included questions on how happy they were in their relationship, as well as how much they had got on each other's nerves, quarrelled, had regrets about getting married or living together, and thought about getting divorced or separating.

We were also able to contrast these relationship measures with results from wave 9 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey conducted in 2017-2019.

UKLHS JUNE & SEPTEMBER

Parents were asked how happy they were in their relationship, with results scored from 1=Extremely unhappy to 7=Perfect. We report the percentage who said they were either 1=Extremely unhappy or 2=Fairly unhappy.

For all of the other questions, results were scored from 1=All of the time to 6=Never. We report the percentage who said either 1=All of the time or 2=Most of the time.

The table below shows the proportions of parents reporting high levels of problems during each survey. We also show the absolute change between June and September as well as the relative change between 'Normal' pre-COVID levels and September.

	'Normal' (2017-19) (a)	June 2020 (b)	Sept 2020 (c)	Sep-Jun (c-b)	Sep vs Normal (c vs a)
MARRIED FATHERS					
Unhappiness	4.3%	5.8%	5.5%	-0%	+26%
Get on nerves	3.4%	4.8%	2.5%	-2%	-26%
Quarrel	1.9%	3.0%	2.0%	-1%	+2%
Regrets	2.5%	1.3%	0.5%	-1%	-78%
Consider divorce	2.5%	0.6%	1.0%	+0%	-59%
MARRIED MOTHERS					
Unhappiness	3.9%	7.3%	7.0%	-0%	+82%
Get on nerves	4.9%	3.9%	4.0%	+0%	-18%
Quarrel	3.0%	1.6%	1.4%	-0%	-52%
Regrets	3.1%	1.5%	1.4%	-0%	-56%
Consider divorce	5.6%	1.1%	0.7%	-0%	-87%
COHABITING FATHERS					
Unhappiness	8.1%	7.9%	8.9%	+1%	+10%
Get on nerves	9.4%	5.3%	3.7%	-2%	-61%
Quarrel	6.2%	1.0%	0.5%	-1%	-92%
Regrets	5.6%	1.1%	2.6%	+2%	-53%
Consider divorce	3.1%	0.5%	1.6%	+1%	-48%
COHABITING MOTHERS					
Unhappiness	8.2%	9.2%	18.4%	+9%	+124%
Get on nerves	12.4%	12.9%	8.4%	-5%	-32%
Quarrel	7.3%	3.8%	2.6%	-1%	-64%
Regrets	7.8%	2.9%	4.0%	+1%	-49%
Consider divorce	7.8%	1.3%	0.9%	-0%	-89%

Results for married parents show little absolute change between June and September. The one exception is that married fathers report lower levels of 'getting on each others nerves'.

Although married fathers and mothers both continue to show higher levels of unhappiness compared to normal, both also show substantially lower levels of regrets and those actively considering divorce compared to normal.

Those considering divorce 'all of the time' or 'most of the time' are down 59% among married

fathers and 87% among married mothers compared to normal pre-COVID levels.

Results for cohabiting parents show some absolute changes between June and September.

However these changes reflect the responses of very small numbers of parents. For example, the apparent doubling of unhappiness levels among cohabiting mothers involves an increase of unhappy mothers in the two surveys from 22 to 42 (weighted).

As in June, cohabiting mothers continue to report in September the highest levels of relationship problems – in unhappiness, getting on each other’s nerves, quarrels and regrets about living together.

In a very similar way to married parents, levels of those actively considering separation are down 48% for cohabiting fathers and 89% for cohabiting mothers compared to normal pre-COVID levels.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE ‘DIVORCE STARTS’

To look at whether parents actively considering divorce are translating their thoughts into actions, we can review figures from the Ministry of Justice on divorce petitions filed or starts during the second and third quarters of 2020 (MoJ 2021).

In the second quarter, divorce starts were down 15% on 2019 and 17% on the previous five year average. In the third quarter, divorce starts were down 10% on 2019 and 4% on the previous five year average.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE PETITIONS FILED

	2020	vs 2019	vs 5 yr ave
Q1	29,709	-2%	+3%
Q2	24,214	-15%	-17%
Q3	27,803	-10%	-4%

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 and September with responses from the same national survey conducted in more normal pre-lockdown conditions 2017-2019.

Our main finding is that, compared to pre-COVID levels, more married and cohabiting parents than normal were experiencing high levels of relationship unhappiness during both June and September. However fewer married and cohabiting parents than normal were actively considering divorce or separation during June or September.

These findings are supported by figures from the Ministry of Justice showing fewer applications for divorce in the third quarter of 2020 than normal.

We can therefore be confident that, certainly up to the end of September, the supposed ‘divorce boom’ is showing no signs whatsoever of happening.

Although increased level of unhappiness among a small minority of parents most likely reflects the generally stressful and uncertain circumstances of lockdown, most other indicators of relationship stress are showing lower levels compared to normal.

In our previous research, we have shown the key driver of divorce changes over the last few decades has been wives filing for divorce in the early years of marriage (Benson 2019). It is therefore noteworthy that 52% fewer married mothers than normal are reporting regular quarrels, and 56% fewer than normal are expressing regular regrets about getting married.

So will there be a divorce boom? At the moment, the answer seems clear. No.

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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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