

**Press Release from ­Marriage Foundation**

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**Busting the ‘Divorce Boom’ myth**

* **Major new study shows most married couples have weathered the COVID storm**

A major new study is busting the “divorce boom myth” as most married couples have weathered COVID restrictions well - with twice as many saying their relationship has improved rather than deteriorated. While those considering divorce dropped by two-thirds compared to before the pandemic.

The study, from the Marriage Foundation, looked at 3,005 parents who completed the UK Household Longitudinal Coronavirus survey from the ONS. The data, which covers the period up to the end of September, far from showing a surge in married couples considering divorce, found little change since June.

Just 1 per cent of married dads and 0.7 per cent of married mums said they were considering divorce. This compared to 0.6 per cent and 1.1 per cent in June. Significantly both these figures were lower when compared to pre-COVID times. Asked the same question between 2017-19, an average of 2.5 per cent of married dads and 5.6 per cent of married mums said they were considering divorce.

Harry Benson, the Marriage Foundation's Research Director commented: "This data busts the myth that there is going to be a divorce boom anytime soon. Both this study and the previous one, published last year suggests the opposite, that spending more time with your husband or wife is beneficial for many of the UK's 12.8 million married couples.

"This view is further supported by the Ministry of Justice data showing a fall in the number of divorce petitions during the third quarter of 2020. Unfortunately, while most married parents seem to be weathering the pandemic reasonably well, the picture for cohabiting parents is not as rosy.

"As we highlighted previously, cohabiting mothers struggled most during the lockdown, with 22 per cent saying their relationship had got worse compared to 7 per cent of married mothers, 6 per cent of cohabiting dads and 11 per cent 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 has remained largely unchanged in September and while there has been a drop in cohabiting mums considering splitting up, nearly one in five 18.4 per cent reported being unhappy, an increase of 124 per cent since June.”

Worryingly the data, which is produced by the ONS, found evidence of increased stress levels in parental relationships. While married fathers and mothers both continue to show slightly higher levels of unhappiness compared to ‘normal times’, both show substantially lower levels of regrets and fewer were actively considering divorce compared to normal. According to the study, those considering divorce ‘all of the time’ or ‘most of the time’ are down 59 per cent among married fathers and 87 per cent among married mothers compared to normal pre-COVID levels.

It says: “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.

“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.”

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of the Marriage Foundation commented: “This latest analysis confirms that there is unlikely to be a divorce boom in 2021 as couples have faced the pandemic together. Quite the contrary, the evidence points to those couples who already display high levels of commitment to one another have benefited from spending more time with their husband or wife. While those with lower levels of commitment in their relationship are more likely to have considered breaking up, reported feeling unhappy or quarrelling.

“We find these high levels of commitment, most frequently among married couples and lower levels of commitment among this with less formal arrangements such as cohabitation.

“When these informal relationships are pushed and tested by COVID, economic uncertainty and lockdown they are more likely to break.”

The study concludes by saying that the data up to the end of September, which many said would show a “divorce boom”, shows “no signs whatsoever of happening”.

“Although the 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. It is therefore noteworthy that 52 per cent fewer married mothers than normal are reporting regular quarrels, and 56 per cent 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.”

Mr Benson concluded: “Our study and message could not be clearer - while the global pandemic and lockdown has put considerable pressure on parents, those who are married have fared considerably better. Meaning if the Government is serious about helping families to stay together, it must direct its efforts at supporting cohabiting couples, provide more clarity around restrictions and when they will be lifted and back the institution of marriage.”

**ENDS**

**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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