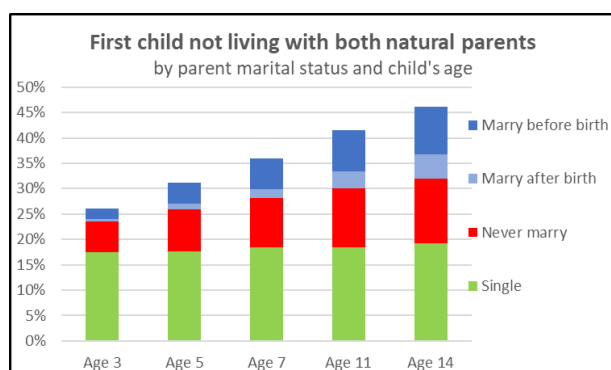




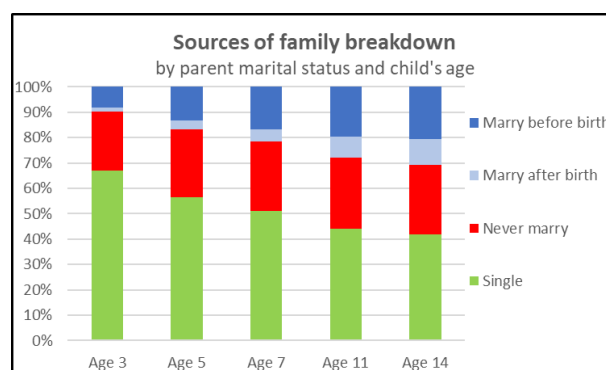
## Sources of family breakdown in the UK

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation

- The media love divorce statistics. Here are three recent headlines from the UK media: *'Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce'*; *'Divorce rates in UK set to reach 50 year high'*; *'Why so many Brits are considering separation or divorce in 2023'*.
- Part of the focus on divorce is that divorces are easy to count and record. But what is rarely reported is that couples who don't marry have a much higher risk of separation. Data on couples who don't marry is only available through surveys. Analysis of this is difficult.
- As a spin-off from a wider analysis that I am doing for a PhD at the University of Bristol, I have used data from the Millennium Cohort Study following the parents of 4,476 first-born children born in 2000-2002 over their first 14 years. My analysis shows that those who never married were significantly more likely to have split up compared to those who married at some stage, whether before or after their child was born.
- In terms of raw data, 60% of parents who never married split up compared to 21% of those who married before their child was born and 32% who married afterwards. But even when considering a wide range of socio-demographic controls – such as ethnicity, age, time lived together, education and relationship happiness – the probability of splitting up was still 46% for never married parents, significantly higher than the 26% for those marrying before and 27% for those marrying after their child was born.
- The result of this is that 46% of first-born children aged 14-years-old were not living with both natural parents. This comprised 19% who were born to single parents, 14% whose parents married at some stage then divorced and 13% whose parents never married but split up.
- Divorce accounts for less than a third of all family breakdown, rising from 10% of breakdown involving first-born children aged 3 to 31% of breakdown involving children aged 14.
- Among natural parents of 14-year-olds still living together, 84% were married.



Divorce affects just 14% of first-born children whereas the separation of unmarried parents, before or after the birth, affects 32% of children.



Divorce, whether the parents married before or after the birth of their first child, accounts for between 10% and 31% of all family breakdown.

## Introduction and background

Marriage and divorce statistics present an open goal for a story-hungry media. In almost all of the 100 or so pieces of media coverage each year involving Marriage Foundation, marriage and divorce statistics are also cited. Family data and their interpretation are our business.

As the headlines previously quoted show, negative stories about 'high divorce rates' and 'rising divorce' make good copy, invariably exaggerating short-term comparisons which are easy to calculate from national data.

The harder to calculate long-term data tell a different story. Our research from the past five years, for example, shows that divorce rates are down by up to half among newlyweds (*Benson 2018*), down by a quarter overall from their peak (*Benson & McKay 2019*), the change almost entirely due to fewer divorces granted to wives (*Benson 2019a*), now back to low levels not seen since the 1960s (*Benson 2019b*), falling across Europe more generally (*Benson 2020*), and not likely to rise significantly following lockdown (*Benson & McKay 2021*).

Hardest of all is analysis of data from surveys that allow comparison of couples who get married with couples who don't. These studies are difficult to do but produce far more interesting findings. For example, we have shown that married parents are less likely to split up by the time their children are teenagers (*Benson & McKay 2018*), less likely to split up in any given year regardless of income (*Benson 2022*), and less likely to say their relationship deteriorated during lockdown (*Benson & McKay 2020*).

Their teenage sons are less likely to experience mental health problems (*Benson & McKay 2017*), their teenage girls are more likely to achieve both maths and English GCSE (*Benson & McKay 2023*), and their adult children are more likely to go to university and less likely ever to need benefits (*Benson & James 2018*).

## This analysis

We do these analyses to present the longer-term context to the short-term headlines. My most detailed work is in the PhD analysis I have been doing for the past two years at the University of Bristol, looking at the timing of marriage and divorce among first time parents in Great Britain. For this I have used data from the Millennium

Cohort Study that follows some 18,000 families with children born in 2000-2002 from soon after their birth on into their teenage years (*CLS 2023*).

Although I can't publish my findings until the end of my PhD, hopefully late next year, I can use Stata software and my coding to take a broader look at couples who marry either before or after their child is born or who never marry at all.

In this analysis I have looked at which couples are still together after 3, 5, 7, 11 and 14 years. I am only looking at first born children and their parents who have either married for the first time or never married. Because the raw data in surveys never quite match up to the national population, all calculations are also adjusted using population weightings.

## The Millennium Cohort Study sample

Of the 18,000 or so mothers originally in the cohort, I have needed to exclude mothers in second marriages or with second born children. The available sample therefore begins with 6,668 mothers at age 3 and reduces further to 4,476 at age 14 mostly due to survey non-response.

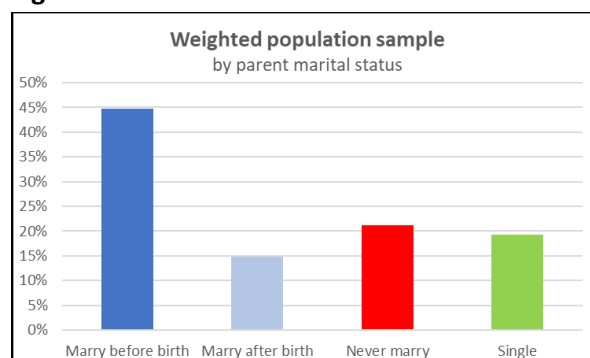
Table 1 shows how the sample varies across five survey waves because the weightings aren't perfect. However, the variation is never more than 4%. Figure 1 illustrates that when the child was aged 14, 45% of mothers had married before birth, 15% married after, 21% cohabited but never married, and 19% had started single without a father in the house.

Table 1

Sample size	Age 3	Age 5	Age 7	Age 11	Age 14
Marry before birth	48%	48%	47%	47%	45%
Marry after birth	11%	11%	11%	13%	15%
Never marry	23%	23%	24%	22%	21%
Single	18%	18%	18%	18%	19%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n=	6,668	6,657	5,870	5,187	4,476

Sample reduces between waves due to attrition. Population weights adjust well for marital status but not precisely.

Figure 1



## Family breakdown in this sample

Table 2 and Figure 2 below show the proportion of mothers in each marital category who split up over time. By age 14, 21% of those who married before childbirth had split up compared to 32% of those who married after and 60% of those who cohabited but never married.

To account for socio-demographic factors that select couples into marriage earlier, later or not at all, I have included the probability of breakdown occurring for each group after taking into account a wide range of controls and also imputing missing data to improve the representativeness of the sample.

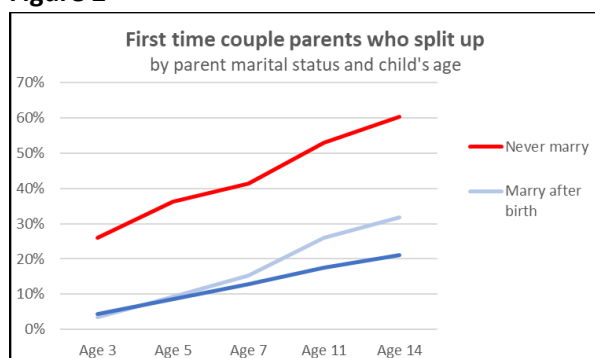
These controls include mother's ethnicity, religion, education, employment status, whether her own parents split, household income and housing tenure, whether she had previous partners, whether her birth was planned or she smoked during pregnancy, her age and time spent living with the father before the birth, and finally her reported relationship quality and level of individual relationship distress.

**Table 2**

First time couple parents who split up	Without controls					With controls
	Age 3	Age 5	Age 7	Age 11	Age 14	Age 14
Marry before birth	4%	9%	13%	18%	21%	27%
Marry after birth	3%	9%	15%	26%	32%	26%
Never marry	26%	36%	41%	53%	60%	46%
Single	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Total	26%	31%	36%	42%	46%	
n=	6,668	6,657	5,870	5,187	4,476	3,276

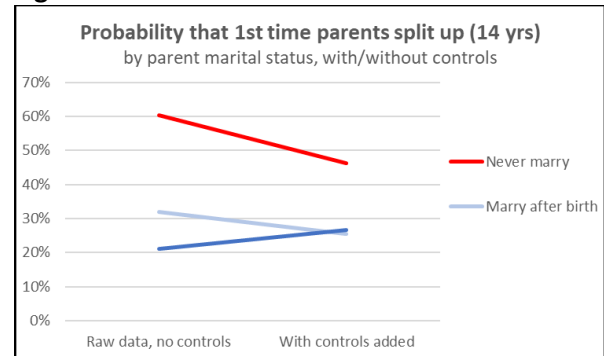
*Sample reduces between waves due to attrition. This is adjusted using population weights. Sample with controls includes imputed missing data but is smaller because it excludes parents who start off as singles.*

**Figure 2**



Even with controls included, the final column in Table 2 and Figure 3 show that the probability of a split was 27% for mothers who married before birth and 26% for mothers who married afterwards. In both cases these were significantly lower than the 46% probability of a split faced by cohabiting mothers who never married.

**Figure 3**



## Sources of family breakdown

Table 3 and Figure 4 below look at the sources of family breakdown. In other words, who splits up?

By age 3 years, 26% of children were not living with both natural parents. Perhaps not surprisingly 18% of this 26% is accounted for by mothers not living with the father when the child was born. Married mothers account for 2% whereas never married cohabiting mothers account for 6%.

By age 14 years, 46% of children were not living with both natural parents. Married mothers account for 14% out of this 46%, never married cohabiting mothers account for 13%, and single mothers the remaining 19%.

**Table 3**

Who splits up?	Age 3	Age 5	Age 7	Age 11	Age 14
Marry before birth	2%	4%	6%	8%	9%
Marry after birth	0%	1%	2%	3%	5%
Never marry	6%	8%	10%	12%	13%
Single	18%	18%	18%	18%	19%
Total	26%	31%	36%	42%	46%
Married as %	10%	17%	22%	28%	31%

*Table shows % not living with both natural parents at each wave, by parent marital status.*

**Figure 4**

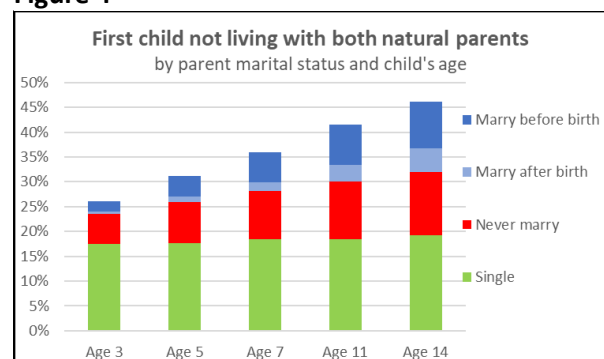
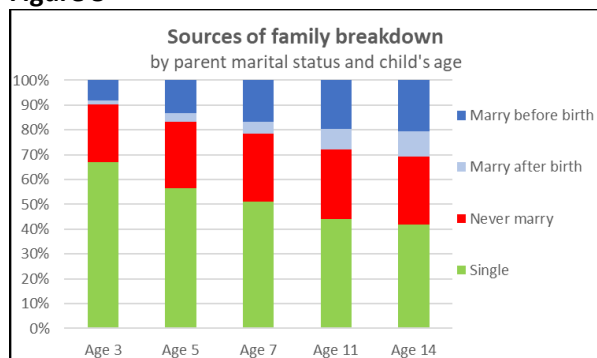


Figure 5 shows the proportion of family breakdown accounted for by each category. Married parents account for just 10% of all family

breakdown by age 3, rising to 17% by age 5, 22% by age 7, 28% by age 11, and 31% by age 14.

**Figure 5**



## Sources of family stability

Table 4 and Figure 6 below address the reverse issue, the sources of family stability. In other words, who stays together?

At aged 3 years, 74% of children were living with both natural parents. Married mothers account for 57% whereas never married cohabiting mothers account for 17%.

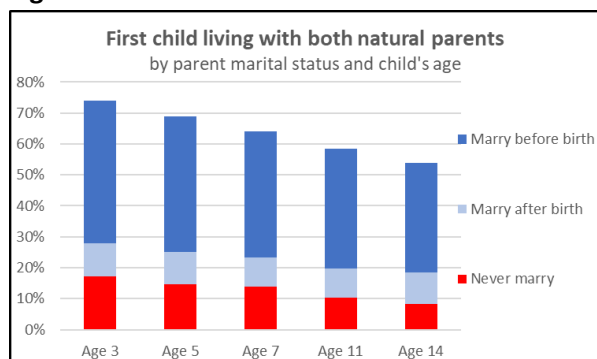
By age 14 years, 54% of children were not living with both natural parents. Married mothers account for 45% of this 54% while never married cohabiting mothers account for just 8%.

**Table 4**

Who stays together?	Age 3	Age 5	Age 7	Age 11	Age 14
Marry before birth	46%	44%	41%	39%	35%
Marry after birth	11%	10%	9%	9%	10%
Never marry	17%	15%	14%	10%	8%
Single	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total	74%	69%	64%	58%	54%
Married as %	77%	79%	78%	82%	84%

*Table shows % still living with both natural parents at each wave, by parent marital status.*

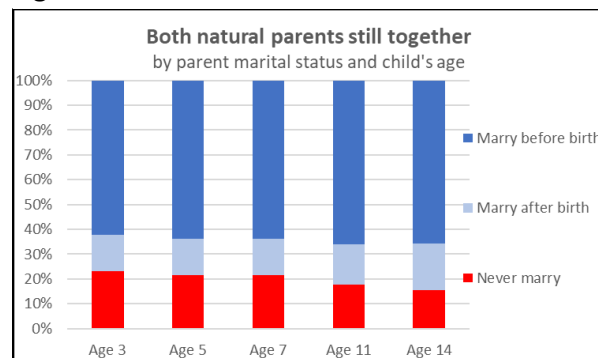
**Figure 6**



Finally, figure 7 shows the proportion of couples still together accounted for by each category. Married parents account for 77% of all couples

together at age 3, rising to 79% at age 5, 78% at age 7, 82% at age 11 and 84% at age 14.

**Figure 7**



## Discussion and conclusions

Our previous research has already established that divorce rates have now fallen to the lowest levels since the late 1960s or early 1970s, that couples who marry are more likely to stay together, and that their children tend to have better educational and mental health outcomes. This analysis aims to add a significant new dimension to the media narrative surrounding divorce.

However, a presumption persists that sees divorce as synonymous with family breakdown and lone parenthood. This analysis uses coding of Millennium Cohort Study data that I have developed for my PhD project at the University of Bristol to look at the broad trajectory of family breakdown during parenthood.

In this analysis I have tracked the trajectory of more than 4,000 families over the first 14 years of parenthood. I have demonstrated that parents who marry before or after the birth of their child are significantly more likely to stay together than cohabiting couples who never marry, even after considering a wide range of controls.

But I have also demonstrated that most family breakdown does not involve divorce at all and that most couples who stay together are married.

Altogether 46% of children reach age 14 not living with both their natural parents. Among these, just 31% come from families where there has been a divorce. The vast majority of family breakdown therefore comes from mothers who either never lived with the father or who cohabited but never married the father.

Among the 54% of children still living with both natural parents, 84% live with parents who are married.

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