



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

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Nearly half of teens not living with both biological parents, finds shocking new study

Nearly half (45 per cent) of teenagers, by the time they are 14 years of age are not living with both of their natural parents almost double official statistic, finds a shocking new study by the Marriage Foundation.

The study, ***We need to talk about marriage – finding reliable love*** says this level of family breakdown is the highest since records began and predicts that as family breakdown is intergenerational these figures will worsen in future years.

Challenging a widely held myth, that this level of family breakdown is not because of an increase in the divorce rate, which is at the lowest level since 1970, but the collapse in marriage rates.

“The driver of family breakdown is not divorce, now at its lowest level since 1970, but the collapse of unmarried families. Married families account for 85 per cent of intact parents yet just 30 per cent of family breakdown,” it says.

“Some level of family breakdown is inevitable and even welcome. But 45 percent? This should be a national scandal and yet almost no one involved with public policy – with the notable exception of the Children’s Commissioner – ever mentions it. This figure is also roughly double the ONS figure usually cited where 24 per cent of all families in 2023 were headed by a lone parent (Office for National Statistics, 2024). This dramatically understates the real level of family breakdown as it includes parents with young children who will go on to split up later and excludes parents who have re-partnered...”

“...The reality therefore is that family breakdown has trebled since the 1970s. Almost every negative social indicator you care to mention is linked to this. Our own research shows that family breakdown is the number one predictor of teenage mental health problems. We’ve

also linked it with poor GCSE results and lower self-esteem. Other national studies find a strong link with poverty.

“When families split up, finance becomes a major problem. The Centre for Social Justice recently updated figures on the likely cost of family breakdown to the taxpayer at £64 billion per year. This is what it costs to support families in need and is substantially more than the defence budget.

“Even if most young adults say they would like to marry one day, our research shows that on current trends only just over half will do so. Fewer marriages means lone parenthood figures in the next decade or so are likely to be dominated by the continued trend away from relatively stable marriage and towards relatively unstable cohabitation.”

It continues: “The analysis I have done for my nearly complete PhD shows the risk of union dissolution is nearly double for couples who don’t marry, regardless of a host of other background factors such as age, income, education and happiness. Two other major published studies find similar results.

“Politicians and commentators overlook family breakdown because the overall level of lone parenthood has averaged a steady 22-26 per cent since the year 2000 (Office for National Statistics, 2024). But the collapse in divorce rates back to 1970s levels has camouflaged an underlying rise in cohabiting families who are typically more at risk of breaking up. This offset won’t continue.”

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation’s Research Director and the author of the study commented: “The level of family breakdown in the UK is at epidemic proportions and is set to get worse with all the knock-on effects on those affected and in societal costs. Yet no politicians or policy makers are talking about this. So why this deafening wall of silence? Those in power might be blissfully ignorant of the facts, with official stats massively underestimating the scale of the problem in the UK, but more likely senior politicians, who are overwhelmingly married, don’t want to be seen as ‘preaching’ about the construct or make-up of families. They miss the fact that overwhelmingly young people want to marry and find reliable love, but the current benefits system hammers the poorest couples when they wed, coupled with the perception that the ceremony, wedding breakfast etc is hugely expensive. This is why up to eight in 10 of the richest couples still marry, while less than half of the poorest do and for the bottom quintile, it could be as low as one in five.”

The report goes on to explain the psychology behind marriage - the desire of most couples to find what it calls “reliable love”.

“We want reliable love in which we can trust, so we can be free to be ourselves without fear the one we love will stop loving us. If we have reliable love, we can have a row or a tiff, wake up in the morning, and know our relationship is still intact. We don’t even doubt it...

“Reliable love can only be rooted in commitment. What commitment means for most of us is that we have a plan for our future as a couple, not just as two individuals. Commitment also means making the choice to give up other choices. If I am committed to you, it means I

have decided to remove any other options. This is the only shot I get. With my commitment to a future with you, I know I am committed. But how can I know that you are committed to me? The same way we commit to anything. The answer is that you tell me. And I tell you. Then we both tell everyone else. We make a decision to do something. We agree what needs to be done. We send a signal that we're serious. Then we tell everyone about it. Dedication means I want to be with you. Reliable love means I know you want to be with me.

"This is the basis of marriage. The act of marriage has all the ingredients of the psychology of commitment automatically built in. We decide. One of us proposes a life together. The other agrees. Then we have a celebration in front of our friends and family.

"The purpose of a wedding is to affirm this risky decision to choose one person and give up all other options. 'Your risky choice is a really great choice', they are telling us. 'But our approval also makes it harder for you to backout'. Having just told everyone about our plan, it would be embarrassing to give up too easily. That's a good thing. Social constraints help us stick at our marriage whenever we blow it. We stick to the long-term plan we all agreed was such a brilliant idea at the beginning.

"This act of dedication is why study after study shows that married couples are so much more likely to make relationships last. The process works as well for rich and poor alike... Marriage is not a guarantee, but it stacks the odds in your favour."

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation's Research Director concluded: "Being pro-marriage doesn't mean that you are anti-single parent, it simply means that you recognise that marriage is the most effective pathway to reliable love, which is why married parents account for 85 per cent of intact families when their children are teens and just 30 per cent of family breakdown. While the poorest married couples are more likely to stay together than the richest cohabitees. This is why we urgently need to talk about marriage and address the systemic problems in the benefit system that is acting as a roadblock for many young couples from tying the knot."

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Notes to editors

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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