



# Marriage Foundation

**Press Release from Marriage Foundation**

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## **Landmark study exposes catastrophic “systemic underestimation” of the importance of marriage**

A landmark study, part of a PHD, exposes a “systemic underestimation” of the importance of marriage in the UK, challenging the foundation of Government social policy over the last quarter of a century.

The major new report, from the Marriage Foundation, shatters established thinking on the importance of the institution in family policy, revealing that marriage is a primary driver of family stability, directly contradicting long-standing and flawed academic claims that the “marriage gap” is merely a result of income and education.

*The Timing of Marriage and Union Dissolution*, authored by Dr Harry Benson, PhD, research director of the Marriage Foundation and published in partnership the Centre for Social Justice, finds that couples who marry before the conception of their first child are half as likely to split up as couples who do not wed, accounting for more than half of the stability gap between parents.

Most explosive of all it identifies a “major methodological flaw” in previous influential studies that defined Government policy, discounting the importance of marriage, to just one of many types of relationship, falsely claiming that the difference was due to other factors.

For over two decades, UK policy has been guided by studies from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) suggesting that married parents stay together longer only because they are “older, better educated, and better off.”

However, Dr Benson’s research systematically debunks their conclusions and exposes that their findings rested on analysing only three-quarters of the available survey sample. By using state-of-the-art “multiple imputation” to restore missing data and analysing the full representative sample of 3,324 couples over 14 years, the new report reveals a significant “marriage effect” that persists regardless of socio-economic background, race, religion, education, region, and dozens of other controlling factors.

It says: “The benefits of marriage have been systematically underestimated in academic research and public policy. ...Their [the IFS] conclusions rest on a major methodological flaw: analysing only three quarters of parents in their survey sample. My analysis of the entire sample, using improved state-of-the-art methodology, shows that marriage accounts for more than half of the gap in union dissolution. In short, being married substantially increases the chances that parents stay together, regardless of when marriage occurs and regardless of socio-economic background.”

It goes on: “These findings are consistent with well-established psychological theories that have been largely neglected in sociological research. Commitment theory, cognitive consistency theory, and signal theory all suggest that marriage functions as a commitment device, reinforcing dedication, aligning behaviour with long-term intentions, and increasing the costs of exit. The results also align closely with the long-term shift away from marriage and the rise in family instability.”

The study followed children born in the early 2000s (Millennium Cohort Study) through to their 14th birthday. Dr Benson then controlled for 27 variables, including religion, age, education, tenure even smoking, to remove all bias. The data reveals a distinct and significant "benefit from marriage, regardless of when the marriage occurs, (before conception, during pregnancy or after birth).

It confirms that

- The Early Years Risk: Dissolution risk is highest for cohabiting couples during the first three years of parenthood (4.1 per cent per year), compared to a stable 2.5 per cent for married parents.
- The GCSE Gap: While the stability gap narrows when children start school, it widens significantly again by the time they reach age 14. By this point, the probability of separation is 45 per cent for never-married couples, compared to just 26 per cent for those married – nearly a 20 percentage point difference.

Dr Harry Benson, the Research Director of the Marriage Foundation, commented: “This groundbreaking study categorically demonstrates the benefits of marrying, and blows apart decades of Government policy that has consistently downgraded marriage to just another form of relationship like cohabitating. It also serves as a rebuke to those politicians who have sneered at the institution and have, through their actions, actively discouraged marriage among the poorest couples with punitive welfare policies and a lack of courage to promote marriage for fear of being seen as old-fashioned or judgmental.”

Drawing on “Commitment Theory”, the report explains why marriage works and creates more stable relationship structures. It distinguishes between couples who “slide” into transitions (cohabitation or parenthood without deliberate consideration) and those who “decide”.

The research found that marriages formed during pregnancy carry a higher risk (34 per cent dissolution) than pre-conception marriages (26 per cent), likely due to the “sliding” effect of

social or familial constraints. However, even these “constraint-driven” marriages remain significantly more stable than cohabitation by 11 per cent.

The report concludes that the UK government’s current “neutral” stance on marriage, by treating cohabitation as functionally equivalent, contributes to family breakdown. And it sets out a series of policy recommendations that it urges the Government to adopt. These include:

- Social messaging should actively promote marriage, raising awareness of its psychological benefits and stabilising role, particularly around early parenthood.
- Fiscal policy and benefits should favour married and civil-partnered couples over cohabitation to reduce financial and cognitive barriers (the couple penalty).
- Targeted incentives for low- and middle-income couples at key family stages to encourage marriage at an early stage.
- Specific measures to support those who have experience of intergenerational divorce, prior cohabiting experiences, and negative family culture.
- Future research should also incorporate direct measures of dedication, explore commitment among unmarried couples, and examine downstream outcomes, including child well-being.

Dr Benson concluded: “Reducing the social and fiscal barriers to marriage would play a meaningful role in strengthening family stability and reducing the massive social and economic costs of family breakdown, estimated at over £51 billion in 2018. But even if they only addressed the appalling couple penalty in the benefits systems that have actively deterred people from getting married, and stopped spouting the crazy and factually inaccurate mantra that all relationships are the same, and that marriage is the gold standard of relationships types, that would be a step in the right direction.”

**ENDS**

#### **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.

The Report: The Timing of Marriage and Union Dissolution (May 2026) is the summary of Harry Benson’s PhD thesis at the University of Bristol. Dr Benson replicated and extended the IFS study, using the full representative sample, by restoring “missing data”, which is standard practice now across the Government and academia, but when the report was first written, multiple imputation was not widely used. Indeed, the European Journal of Epidemiology quoted in a recent paper: “Multiple imputation addresses biases and inefficiencies associated with incomplete data, providing more reliable estimates than single-imputation or data-reduction approaches”.

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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