

(Late Draft)

Press release from the Social Justice Policy Group

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CHILDREN AT RISK FROM GOVERNMENT POLICY TO DISREGARD MARRIAGE, WARNS NEW STUDY

Official policy to abolish marital status and disregard marriage in government-sponsored research is incompatible with the claim that every child matters, according to new independent research.

The biggest study of family breakdown yet conducted in the UK has found "marital status" to be the single most important factor predicting whether couples with young children stay together or not.

Even the poorest married couples are more stable than all but the richest unmarried couples.

The research sends a warning to policy-makers whose personal experience of relatively stable unmarried couples, cushioned by wealth, is not representative of the relatively unstable wider population.

Regardless of income and social background, unmarried cohabiting parents are still more than twice as likely to split up compared to married parents. Higher income explains only part of the reason why married parents are more stable.

Overall, young children are five times as likely to experience family breakdown if their parents are not married, according to the study of 15,000 mothers with three year old children.

The warning comes from a new paper submitted in evidence by family policy expert Harry Benson to the Social Justice Policy Group set up by David Cameron, the Conservative Party Leader, to make recommendations on tackling poverty and social disadvantage. The SJPG plans to publish an interim report on the late autumn and a final report next summer.

The research suggests that by tacitly promoting cohabitation and undermining marriage, policy-makers are exposing more children to the perils of family breakdown, reflected in higher levels of crime, anti-social behaviour, educational failure and mental and emotional disturbance.

The estimated annual cost of family breakdown in the UK, which has one of the highest rates of divorce and births outside marriage in the Western world, is as much as £24 billion or around £800 per taxpayer per year.

The study affirms how it is the collapse of unmarried families, and not divorce, that is driving family breakdown. Three quarters of family breakdown involved unmarried parents.

But the government message – that marital status does not matter – ignores the fact that for the vast majority of parents being married helps to stabilise their lives and to bring up their children in a secure environment.

Policy-makers are especially criticised for their decision to “airbrush” marriage out of government-sponsored family research.

Since 2003, the term “marital status” has been removed from government forms, reflecting the politically correct official view that marriage is irrelevant to the well-being of children. Government-sponsored research now misleadingly refers to “couple parents” or “couple families”, terms that conceal differences in outcomes between married and unmarried couples and their children.

Iain Duncan Smith, chairman of the Social Justice Policy Group said: "I am very pleased to receive this report from Harry Benson. This is a serious study and will help the policy group establish the causes of the UK's very high levels of family breakdown.

“What is particularly interesting is the way the report shows that the Government’s assumption that children's outcomes are solely dictated by socioeconomic factors is wrong. The structure within which they grow up and are nurtured is vital to their well-being.

“The Government’s corresponding attempt to airbrush out references to marriage from family research is a form of censorship.”

The study was written by Harry Benson, deputy chairman of the SJPG’s family breakdown sub-group, and director of Bristol Community Family Trust, an independent charity that runs relationship and parenting courses and funded the research. Data analysis was provided by Stephen McKay of Bristol University.

The new study is the largest and most up-to-date comparison of married and unmarried family stability yet conducted in the UK.

Analysis of newly released Millennium Cohort Study data on 15,000 mothers who gave birth during 2000/01 found that cohabiting couples face more than double the odds of family breakdown in the early years of parenthood compared to married couples on the same income. Amongst all unmarried couples, comprising those who described themselves as either "cohabiting" or "closely involved" at the time of birth, family breakdown is five times more common than amongst married couples.

Nearly 3,000 mothers, 20 per cent of the entire sample, had become lone parents during the first three years of their child's life. However the risk of breakdown was 6 per cent among married couples and 32 per cent among unmarried couples, comprising 20 per cent of those "cohabiting" and 74 per cent of those "closely involved".

The study concludes by highlighting possible explanations for why married couples are more likely to stay together than unmarried couples after they have a baby.

Evidence from outside the UK suggests commitment, communication skills, father involvement, specialisation of household roles and social support all play a part. Some of these factors may coincide with the decision to marry. Some may result directly from the experience of being married.

Government policy should encourage and reopen investigation into marriage, an area almost wholly neglected by UK researchers in recent years and yet rich with opportunity for policy impact.

Mr Benson concludes "Family breakdown leads adults and children into poverty and other social problems. Our study shows that it is not enough to say that families split up because of their circumstances. Any government that wants to reduce poverty and inequality for both children and adults alike has to address the issue of marriage and what it is that makes marriages work better than the alternatives."

For more information, please contact Nick Wood of Media Intelligence Partners on 07889 617003. Mr Benson's paper can be viewed at www.socialjusticechallenge.com

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