



Broken Hearts

Family decline and the consequences for society

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CONTENTS

Introduction

1	Poverty and the Family	1
2	The Evidence	12
3	What's in a name?	27
4	The Bigger Picture – Social Consequences	30
5	Breaking the Cycle	36

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INTRODUCTION

To corrupt family relations is to poison fountains; for the sources of the commonwealth are in the households, and errors there are irretrievable...

Edmund Burke, *Correspondence*, Volume III

OUR SOCIETY IS IN THE grip of collective insecurity. There is a sense that social disintegration lies not far beneath the surface. The most disturbing aspect of rising levels of violent crime is the increased prevalence of youth crime, including attacks by children on their peers. If a child stands accused of a violent or murderous assault on another child, public reaction is confused. Our sympathies lie principally with the victim, but we also know that we have failed the perpetrator.

Britain today is an outwardly prosperous nation, with unprecedented levels of spending. Yet it is also a nation of uncomfortable contrasts. In our towns and cities, the Georgian terraces are immaculately restored, but the council estates across the street remain bleak and neglected. They are blighted by poverty, drugs and crime, the yellow incident boards on every corner a warning not to venture out after dark. Raising children or growing old on these estates is a precarious and often unhappy business.

We also see growing evidence of child homelessness, drug abuse among the young, the physical abuse and neglect of babies and children, high rates of teenage pregnancy and a continuing cycle of broken relationships. As the evidence continues to accumulate, there is one persistent factor that so often links all this unhappiness. It is the disintegration of the family.

BROKEN HEARTS

This paper summarises the evidence on family breakdown in Britain today and the outcomes for children. It considers the politics of the family and why there seems to be such reluctance to face up to solutions. It also calls for a set of policies to reverse the current decline in family stability.

The nurture of children should be a primary objective of every civilised society. The perverse consequence of our fiscal, social and welfare policies has been to incentivise and institutionalise child neglect. It is time for a new approach.

CHAPTER ONE

POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

THERE IS A PROJECT which unites old and New Labour. It is a project to which millions of pounds and hundreds of press releases have been devoted in the last five years. It is an ambitious and, on the face of it laudable, project. It is the proclaimed desire of this Labour Government to close the gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. In the Prime Minister's words, "to end child poverty in a generation."

Midway through its first term in office, the Government summarised its proposals for achieving this objective, in a document entitled *Opportunity for All*.¹ Using familiar New Labour cadences, the Government claims to be 'tackling the causes of poverty and social exclusion, not just the symptoms' with 'long-term, flexible and joined-up solutions.'² But can these noble aspirations succeed as long as the Government refuses to confront the most persistent underlying cause of child poverty and deprivation – the collapse of the two-parent family?

The increase in the number of broken families and children born outside marriage is striking:

¹ CM 4445 September 1999.

² *Opportunity for All*, Chapter One.

BROKEN HEARTS

More divorce, more children born outside marriage

	1961	1971	1981	1991	1999
No. of divorces/1000 married population	2.1	5.9	11.9	13.5	13.0
Proportion of children born outside marriage	6.3%	8.4%	14.1%	30.8%	39.0%

Source: *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

In the early 1970s, it was exceptional for children to be born and raised outside the married family, nowadays it is commonplace. Thirty years ago, more than two-thirds of British women in their late twenties were married and had children; now it is less than a third.³ In the same period, the number of ‘work-rich’ dual-earner households has steadily increased, but this has been paralleled by the increase in ‘work-poor’ households with no earner. This has been accompanied by a huge rise in the number of people, especially children, living in relative poverty.⁴

More children in poverty

	1979	1999
Proportion of children living in poverty	10%	35%
Proportion of children living in families receiving social assistance	7%	23%

Source: J, Bradshaw, *Poverty: the outcomes for children*, Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000.

The losers and the dispossessed are the children who are growing up outside the protection of the married family. Too often these children not only endure the material deprivation, poor prospects and inadequate public services endemic to our

³ Berthoud, R. and Gershuny, J., *Seven Years in the Lives of British Families: The Dynamics of Social Change*, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research 2000 based on General Household Survey.

⁴ Households in “relative poverty” are defined as those households whose income is below half the national average.

POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

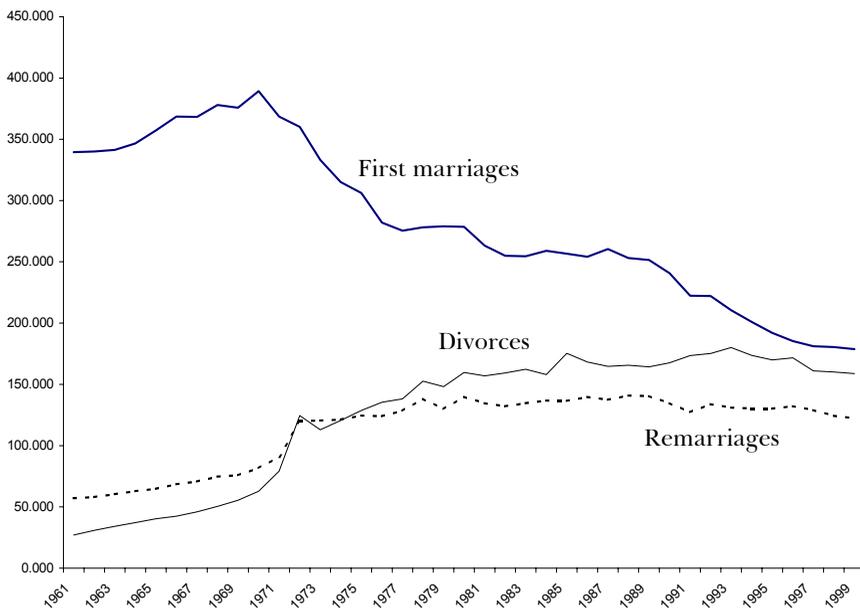
most impoverished communities but also suffer the insecurities and emotional setbacks which are the legacy of broken homes.

Unless we are prepared to recognise that the family is under siege and that marriage is under threat, we can have no hope of reversing the trend and improving the lives of the children who are afflicted. So should a reluctance to discuss marriage and the family be allowed to further undermine the foundation stone of society?

The M word

The first delicate topic, from which flows all the reticence about family formation, is marriage. The institution of marriage appears to be going out of fashion. Marriage rates are at their lowest level since records began 160 years ago. The decline over the last 40 years is striking:

Fewer marriages, more divorce

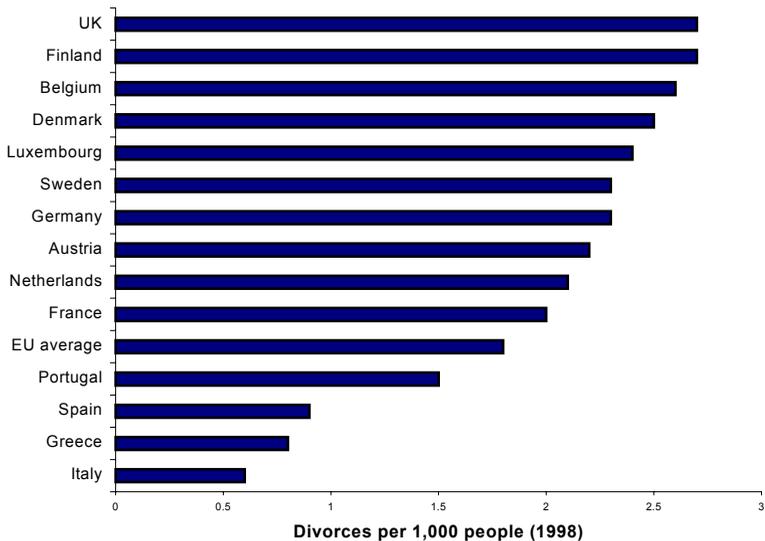


Source: *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001. Note that while the number of marriages in 2000 rose by 2%, this has been largely attributed to the “millennium effect”. See *Social Trends 2002*, ONS, 2002.

BROKEN HEARTS

The number of marriages has fallen by nearly 40% since the early 1970s. And today, nearly one third of all marriages are remarriages.⁵ While some commentators saw cause for celebration at last year's news of British divorce rates falling to a 20-year low, closer inspection of the figures provided little to cheer about.⁶ The main reason why divorce is in decline is that there are fewer married people to get divorced. And Britain retains its record as the divorce capital of Europe, with a rate of 2.7 divorces per thousand of population, compared with a European average of 1.8.

The divorce capital of Europe



Source: *Eurostat Yearbook 2001*, Eurostat, 2001. Figures for Ireland are not available.

⁵ There were 301,083 marriages in the UK in 1999, down from 480,285 in 1972. Of those 301,083 marriages in 1999, 122,324 were remarriages. Source: *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

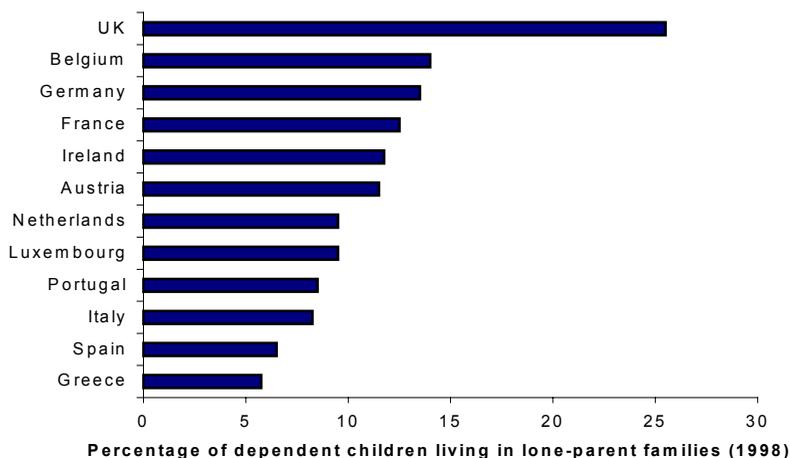
⁶ There were 141,135 divorces in England & Wales in 2000, compared to 27,152 in 1961 (*Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001). Note, however, that the number of divorces more than doubled between 1970 and 1990 following the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, peaking in 1993 at 180,000.

POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

So what is replacing marriage as the favoured form of family life? Cohabitation continues on an upward trend, as does lone motherhood.⁷ Four in ten children in the UK are now born outside marriage.⁸ Data also shows that in the year 2000 more children were conceived outside marriage than within (although one third of conceptions outside marriage were aborted compared to 8% of conceptions within marriage).⁹

And a quarter of all children in the UK are living in one-parent families, far more than in any other EU country.

Top of the table for lone-parenting



Source: *The Social Situation in the European Union 2000*, Eurostat, 2001.
Data for Denmark, Finland and Sweden are not available.

⁷ In the period from 1979 to 1998 the proportion of non-married cohabiting women almost tripled, rising from 11% to 29%. It is estimated that in 1996 there were over 1.5 million cohabiting couples in England and Wales, one in six of the adult non-married population. On present trends this is expected to double by 2021. *Social Trends 2001* op cit.

⁸ *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

⁹ 48% of conceptions occurred inside marriage, of which 4% aborted; conceptions outside marriage accounted for 51% of all conceptions, of which 18% aborted. Source: *Social Trends*, ONS, 2001.

BROKEN HEARTS

As the trend against stable two-parent families has become so much a feature of British life, so a mass of evidence has accumulated which demonstrates the overwhelming importance of marriage in maintaining family stability and in protecting children. Copious evidence is also available from the US, where social fragmentation reached more extreme and disturbing levels than we have so far witnessed in this country and as a result of which efforts are now being made by US policy makers to stem family breakdown.

These efforts have taken the form of two, related, initiatives. The first is a direct reduction of welfare dependency through removing automatic entitlement to benefits – a kind of “can work, must work” approach – laid down by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The second, more piecemeal, strategy lies in a series of family and fatherhood initiatives which vary from state to state but which generally centre on promoting marriage as the basis for committed parenting. In Oklahoma, for example, public sector staff in health, welfare and education are being trained to advise people about the importance of marriage in sustaining long-term relationships.¹⁰ Given the will, it is not beyond policy-makers to restore the significance of marriage. In Britain, however, politicians and opinion-formers remain wary of discussing the correlation between family breakdown and social disintegration. Nervous of appearing critical of lone parents, or of being labelled intolerant, they are inhibited from recognising the problem of family breakdown, let alone finding solutions.

New Labour, new families

It is a commonplace to point out that the Labour Government has an ambivalent attitude towards marriage. While Tony Blair clearly values marriage as the basis for his own family life, many of his colleagues seem to take a different view.

¹⁰ See Phillips, M., *America's Social Revolution* and Besharov, D. and others, *Ending Dependency; Lessons from Welfare Reform in the USA*; both published by Civitas 2001.

POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

Early in New Labour's first term, the auguries for the married family seemed more hopeful. In 1998 Blair expressed his determination to scrutinise every area of government policy for its effect on family life, and his Government issued a consultation paper which described marriage as "the surest foundation for raising children."¹¹ Even then, however, there was no hint that the Government might provide fiscal incentives to marriage, or even seek to remove the disincentives to marriage or stable cohabitation in the tax and benefits structure.

At the Home Office Jack Straw, charged with introducing "joined-up thinking" across government departments to support family life, dismissed any idea that such thinking might mean pro-marriage policies. Claiming "there never was a golden age of the family," Straw tried to play down public anxieties about divorce rates and lone parenthood. "Family life has changed" he said "and changed for good reasons as well as bad."¹² A year later, launching the National Family and Parenting Institute (the government-funded unit for promoting family life), he went further. In a speech to the Institute, he made the bold claim that many Victorian couples brought up families without bothering to marry.¹³ In his words:

If you read late 18th and 19th century documents, or take the easy way out and watch costume drama on the telly, you know that even in that romanticised setting family life was hardly an idyll. In the last century there were a large number of relationships outside marriage.

Couples would, Straw said, describe themselves as "over the broom" – that is, they had conducted some kind of informal ceremony (such as stepping over a broom) – rather than entering a legal union. But despite this claim, birth statistics show that the proportion of births outside marriage remained fairly settled at

¹¹ *Supporting Families* Green Paper 1998.

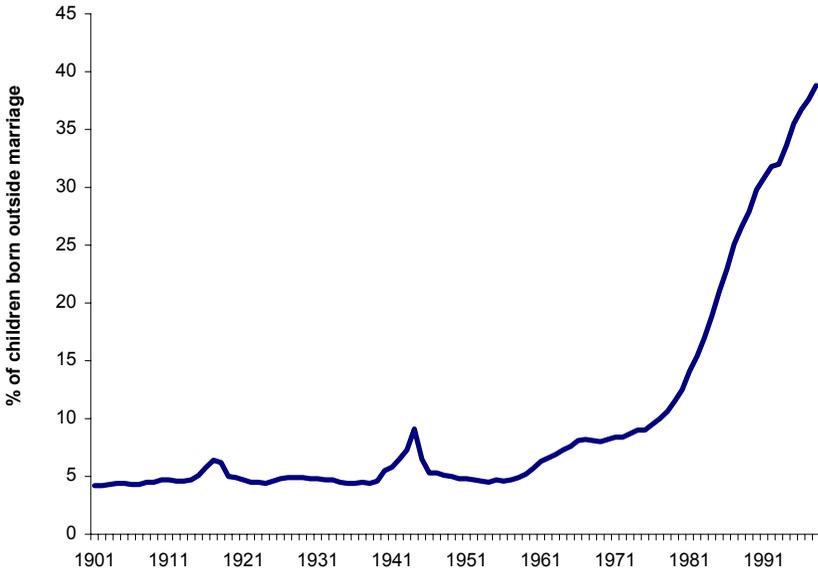
¹² Foreword to *Supporting Families*, November 1998.

¹³ As Home Secretary, addressing the launch of the National Family and Parenting Institute on 30 November 1999.

BROKEN HEARTS

around 5% from the time it was first calculated (1842) until the 1960s, when it began to climb steadily. Now it is nearly 40%.

More children born outside marriage



Source: *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

Ignoring the distinction between family breakdown and bereavement, Straw went on to liken widowed parents of Victorian times, and women who lost their husbands in war, to the lone parents of today.

Comforting though Straw's comparison might be to those who reject the traditional model of family life, this rewriting of history seeks to obscure the reality. Many thousands of children in the UK today – as never before in our history – are the helpless witnesses to the divorce or separation of their parents.¹⁴ Thousands more grow

¹⁴ Over 150,000 children under 16 experienced divorce of their parents in 1998. *Social Trends 2000*, ONS, 2000.

POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

up with no experience of a live-in father. But the Government prefers not to confront the unhappy consequences of this fragmentation for many children, because it fears that to do so would entail an explicit declaration of the importance of marriage.

At a family conference in September 2000 Home Office minister Paul Boateng, departing from a prepared script, firmly endorsed marriage as the framework most likely to inculcate family stability:

We know that cohabitation is less likely to inculcate stability in a family than marriage. But that is not making a moral judgment. It is just a fact... We need to make this argument on the basis of evidence. We are more likely to win on the argument for stability than by making moral statements.¹⁵

But the Government soon closed ranks again. By January 2001 it was widely reported that Tony Blair had lost a struggle within his Cabinet to recognise the desirability of marriage. The long-overdue White Paper on the family was shelved, allegedly because the Government could not agree on a formula about support for the marriage as the ideal family model.

A Conservative dilemma

Tension over family policy is not confined to the Labour benches; it has for many years presented problems for the Conservative party. From 1979 to 1997 the Conservatives presided over a significant decline in marriage and a steep rise in divorce and lone parenthood, and was at a loss to find solutions. In fiscal terms, the priority was to reduce personal taxation. Set against this was the problem of an escalating welfare bill. The agenda for personal freedom generally took precedence. This meant that the Government failed to observe any link between an “anti-family” tax and welfare system and the decline of family commitment.

¹⁵ Family in Crisis conference, 14 September 2000.

BROKEN HEARTS

In 1990 the Conservatives reformed personal taxation to provide independent assessment for husbands and wives. In the 1986 Green Paper outlining this reform, Chancellor Nigel Lawson expressed concern that independent assessment would have a downside for married couples, especially at the difficult time when one spouse lost his or her income through stopping work to care for children or the elderly. Lawson suggested that the reform should be accompanied by an option for transferability of personal allowances between married couples.¹⁶ However, that option was brushed aside, not simply on grounds of cost, but also because of opposition from women's groups who saw the proposals as "a back door way of saying that a woman's place is in the home".¹⁷

In the years that followed, the Married Couples Allowance – the only remaining recognition of family interdependence in the tax system – was severely reduced in value and finally frozen. It was Kenneth Clarke as Chancellor who observed, in the dying days of the Major Government, that this much-reduced allowance was an "anomaly" – a phrase readily taken up by Gordon Brown when he came to abolish it early in Labour's first term.

Faced with the soaring divorce rate, Conservatives made a couple of short-lived attempts to patch up the problem of family breakdown. One was John Major's brief foray into pro-marriage language during the ill-fated "Back to Basics" initiative, which collapsed in a welter of ministerial adultery. The second was the attempt, in the 1996 Family Law Act, to reduce bitterness in divorce proceedings by seeking to encourage mediation. But the Act also provided for easier and quicker no-fault divorce and therefore threatened to further undermine the marriage contract. This aroused strong feelings and the Cabinet was split on the issue, so that the Bill was put to a free vote and passed with the help of the Opposition. (The failure of mediation pilot schemes has since led the Labour Government to abandon the proposed reforms.)

¹⁶ 1986 Green Paper: *The Reform of Personal Taxation*, Cmnd 9756.

¹⁷ See "Impasse on wives' equality", *The Times*, 15 December 1986.

POVERTY AND THE FAMILY

In Opposition, Conservative tensions have remained. During the second half of his leadership, perhaps heartened by his own experience of married life, William Hague made a number of speeches stressing the importance of marriage.¹⁸ The 2001 Conservative election manifesto included a much-trailed “recognition of marriage in the tax system.” This took the form of reviving the proposed transferable allowance between married couples, although limiting its scope to families with a child under 12 or where one spouse is a registered carer.¹⁹ Yet even this allowance emerged very late in the day, having allegedly been the subject of much Shadow Cabinet dispute.

That dispute has run on, labelled as libertarian against authoritarian, caricatured as a battle between the modernisers and the die-hards. Neither side in this dispute has yet found the language which will enable them to talk about marriage in a way which resonates with our troubled society.

Reaping the whirlwind

Pessimists believe that such a language cannot be found, and that 30 years of a progressive social agenda, based on instant fulfilment and personal freedom, means that we are deaf to the arguments for more stoical attitudes based on children’s long-term needs.

Observers of pro-marriage policy experiments in the US fear that until we face levels of crime and social breakdown comparable to American rates in the 1980s and early 1990s, we shall lack the will to see change. But the evidence in this country alone shows that the continuing neglect of children’s needs and an opt-out, go-as-you-please approach to family life has already taken a huge toll in the welfare of both children and adults.

¹⁸ For example, “Stronger families for everyone”, National Marriage Week, 8 February 2001.

¹⁹ “Time for Common Sense”, May 2001.

BROKEN HEARTS

CHAPTER TWO

THE EVIDENCE

As the number of children born outside marriage rises, it becomes increasingly urgent that the potential outcomes for those children is discussed. Yet it seems we are still reluctant to do so. This is not for want of data. On the contrary, the link between marriage and child welfare is supported by steadily-accumulating statistics, beginning – chillingly enough – with rates of child mortality.

Life and death

In 1999, more British babies died in their first year of life than almost anywhere else in Europe.

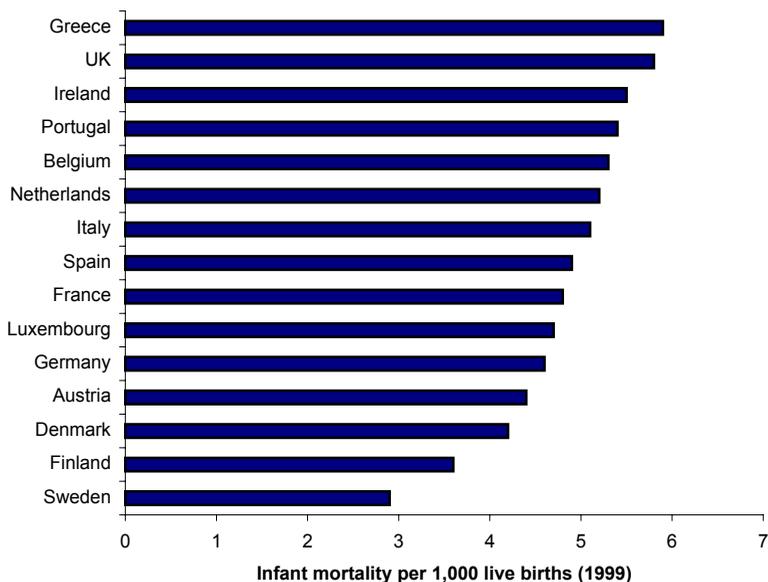
UK figures showed a death rate of 5.8 babies per thousand, surpassed only by Greece at 5.9. In Germany the rate is 4.6 per 1,000, in France 4.8; in Finland the figure stands at just 3.6. Analysis has shown that UK baby deaths are higher for children of lone or cohabiting parents than married parents: in 1997, there were 5.2 infant deaths per 1,000 births inside marriage, compared to 6.8 deaths per 1,000 for cohabiting couples and 7.3 deaths per 1,000 lone mothers.²⁰ And while cot deaths have fallen in recent years, babies born to single mothers are six times more likely to suffer cot death than those of married parents.²¹

²⁰ *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

²¹ *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

THE EVIDENCE

Dead British babies



Source: Eurostat Yearbook 2001, Eurostat, 2001.

One of the reasons for this dismal record is our rate of teenage lone motherhood. As *The Guardian* has noted:

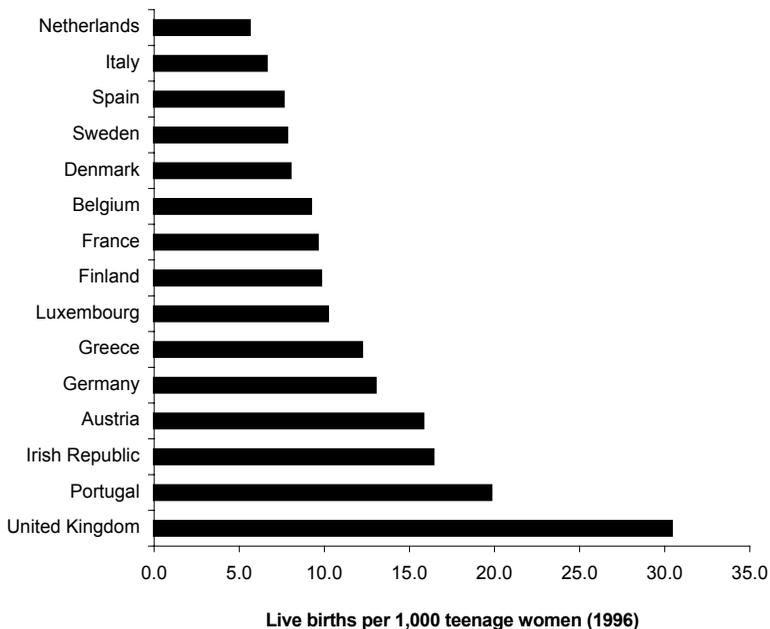
The government is to step up efforts to tackle teenage pregnancies amid evidence that babies born to teenage mothers are 60% more likely to die in their first year than those born to other parents. A new analysis by the Department of Health, commissioned by the public health minister Yvette Cooper, has revealed that halving the number of teenage pregnancies could result in at least 100 fewer deaths of babies a year. The extent of the link between teenage parenthood and high infant mortality has shocked ministers.²²

²² "High risk of baby deaths among teen mothers", *The Guardian*, 22 January 2002.

BROKEN HEARTS

Elsewhere in Europe, teenage pregnancies have fallen over the last 20 years. In the UK, they have remained stubbornly high. In 1996 we had the highest teenage birth rate in Europe, by a wide margin – 30 per 1,000 women under 20, the next contender being Portugal at just under 20 per 1,000. France had fewer than 10. And 90% of births to mothers under 20 are outside marriage.²³

More teenage mums



Source: *Social Trends*, ONS, 2001.

Marriage is no longer regarded as a serious option for girls in their teens, but motherhood is. Yet embarking on motherhood without the security of a committed partner is strongly associated with increased risks to the baby.

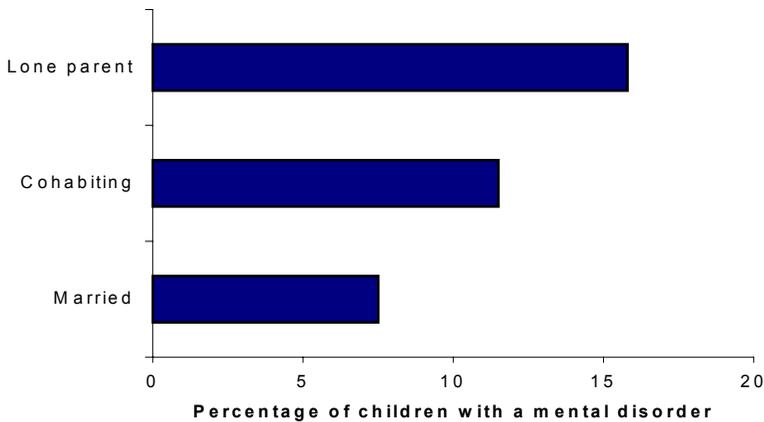
²³ *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

THE EVIDENCE

Damaged children

Children born to married parents tend to be healthier – both physically and mentally – and less accident-prone than other children, a condition which starts from birth. Babies born outside marriage are more likely to have very low birth-weights, thus putting them at a higher risk of childhood mortality and childhood morbidity.²⁴ Childhood accidents are more prevalent among the children of lone parents, particularly where the mother is young, often due to a lower level of parental supervision where mothers are having to cope alone.²⁵ In addition, the children of both lone parents and cohabiting parents are significantly likelier to have mental health problems than the children of married couples.

Family breakdown and mental breakdown



Source: *Mental health of children and adolescents in Great Britain*, ONS, 2000.

²⁴ See Johnson, J., *Poverty: The Outcomes for Children*, Economic & Social Research Council 2001. In 1989, 5.9% of children born within marriage had a birth-weight of less than 2,500 grams, compared to 8.2% of children born outside marriage.

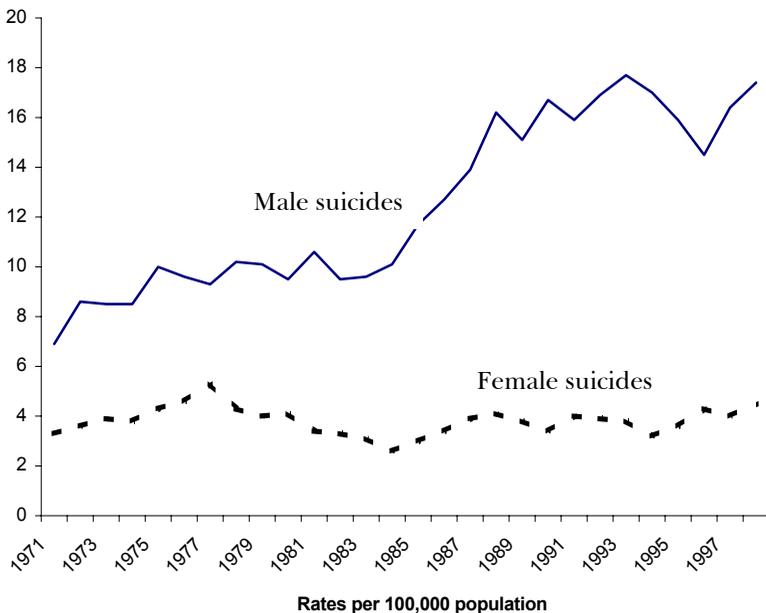
²⁵ For example, over a third of all children with burns come from lone-parent families. See Quilgars, D., in *Poverty: The Outcomes for Children*, Economic & Social Research Council 2001 citing Wadsworth, J., 1993 and Bradshaw & Lawton, 1995.

BROKEN HEARTS

The same report noted that the prevalence for self-harm is greater for children in lone-parent households.

Another worrying trend has been the marked increase in suicide rates amongst the young. The number of young people (aged 15 to 24) who have taken their own lives has more than doubled since the early 1970s.

More teenage suicides (15-24 years old)



Source: *Social Trends 2001*, ONS, 2001.

Growing up with abuse

The evidence also suggests that the risk of physical abuse during infancy and childhood is higher in households where children are brought up outside marriage. Those risks are not confined to young lone mothers, as they persist in households where partners cohabit, and they peak in households where a step-parent is present. The headline-catching cases of “Cinderella” situations are borne out by

THE EVIDENCE

the statistics. It was almost unbearable to read the newspaper reports last year of the cruelty inflicted on six-year-old Lauren Wright, who died at the hands of her stepmother, yet the case fits a trend. According to US data, children under two have a 100 times greater risk of being killed by step-parents than by genetic parents.²⁶

While fatal extremes of violence are mercifully rare, figures show that day-to-day rates of abuse and maltreatment are much higher in step-parent households. For example, children who are registered “at-risk” are much less likely to be living with both natural parents; they are extremely likely to be living with a natural mother and a step-father, particularly where the step-father is cohabiting with, rather than married to, the child’s mother.²⁷

A 1994 study found that children from cohabiting households were 33 times more likely to suffer serious abuse than where the child lives with married parents.²⁸

Human nature suggests that such abuse and maltreatment stem from the jealousies and insecurities which can sometimes underlie a new relationship between a parent and his or her new partner. The new partner will not only lack blood ties with the child of an earlier union but will also tend to associate that child with the previous partner. It may not be just the step-parent for whom relations are strained; sometimes the natural parent will develop an ambivalent attitude to his or her own child because the child’s other parent has now deserted or fallen out of favour.

²⁶ P. Morgan, *Marriage-Lite, the Rise of Cohabitation and its Consequences*, Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2000.

²⁷ See Creighton, S.J., *Child Abuse Trends in England and Wales 1988-90* NSPCC, 1992. In this analysis, children on the register were eight times more likely to be living with a natural mother and “father substitute” compared with the national distribution for similar social classes. 26% of the families on the register were lone mothers, only 3% were lone fathers. The analysis also records that mothers of registered children were five times more likely to have been teenage mothers than mothers (from similar social classes) nationally.

²⁸ Whelan, R. *Broken Homes & Battered Children*, Family Education Trust, 1994.

BROKEN HEARTS

Sometimes the child's suffering will not take physical or even verbal form but will consist of having to forge a new identity – taking on a new name to suit the new family circumstances. Writing in *The Observer* Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer graphically describes the “re-naming and shaming” which accompanies the “continuous re-partnering” which for some children is a fact of life. Hartley-Brewer talked to teachers about the children in their care whose surnames (and sometimes even first names) were changed at the whim of mothers moving on to the next boyfriend.²⁹

Many step-parents do succeed in forming happy and successful relationships with their step-children and step-families, but in praising those who achieve this, it is irresponsible to overlook the harsh reality for other, less fortunate children.

Turning to crime

It doesn't take a psychologist to observe that a child who has suffered neglect or abuse is more likely to turn to delinquency. Disentangling the causes of youth crime is complex. But it is clear that in many cases, petty crime and vandalism are closely associated with poverty and deprivation; separating the effect of such deprivation from the impact of family breakdown is no easy task, especially since UK crime statistics provide very little information about the background of offenders. However, a series of UK longitudinal studies show a steady connection between broken homes and delinquency, as well as an increased risk of offending among children of teenage mothers and those whose parents have suffered marital and/or relationship breakdown.³⁰

²⁹ “Naming Shames”, *The Observer*, 23 September 2001.

³⁰ See for example, Wadsworth, M., *National Survey of Health and Development 1946 cohort*, 1979; Kolvin et al., *Newcastle 1,000 Family Study* 1990; Farrington & West, *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* 1990; Farrington, *Understanding and Preventing Youth Crime*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1996.

THE EVIDENCE

According to a 1998 report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, children of separated families are more likely to have behavioural problems, perform less well in school, become sexually active at a younger age, suffer depression and turn to drugs, smoking and heavy drinking.

All these problems were linked not only with the separation itself but with the conflict leading up to separation and the poverty which ensued.³¹

The Rowntree report assessed the results of more than 200 (mainly UK) research studies on the impact of parental separation. It showed that children of divorced or separated parents are twice as likely to experience adverse outcomes as their peers in intact families, and that their disadvantages persist over many years. Dispelling a common myth, the report also concluded that the death of a parent, although traumatic in the short term, is less damaging to a child's long-term welfare than parental divorce or separation.

American evidence on the link between broken homes, fatherlessness and crime is unequivocal and has played an important part in the recent change in US perceptions about marriage and divorce. Despair at levels of violent crime scarring many American cities has inspired cross-party support for pro-marriage initiatives. While Britain has not (yet) experienced violent crime and social breakdown in its cities to the same degree, there are already echoes of such despair. A number of heavily-publicised violent deaths of children and young people at the hands of youth gangs have contributed to a growing sense of unease.

Violent youth crime continues on an upward curve and last year a young offenders institution was reported as the most violent jail in the UK.³² NACRO has found that the number of

³¹ Rodgers, B. & Prior, J., *Divorce and Separation: The Outcomes for Children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1998.

³² Castington Young Offender Institution was cited as England's most violent prison in *The Times*, 2 August 2001.

BROKEN HEARTS

children found guilty of “grave crimes” has increased by 78% over the last seven years.³³ Police chiefs and politicians express concern at the ever-decreasing age at which children become caught up in criminal behaviour, and the continuing increase in the child prison population.

The common thread running through the history of the children coming before the youth justice system is the lack of a father, according to youth court magistrate and Labour party member Jonathan Myerson.³⁴ In Myerson’s words:

Without the support of parents, we can never truly succeed. Until parents accept a lifetime’s responsibility – and until they make their children accept their own culpability – all the courts can do is referee an unending struggle.

In the absence of fathers, boys are turning to their peer group for male role models; if the peer group is a gang already caught up in violence and/or petty crime, then the path is predictable.

Going on the streets

According to a 2001 report from the Children’s Society, children living in step-families are three times more likely to run away from home than children living with both their natural parents; children of lone parents are twice as likely to do so. This latest report confirms several previous studies which showed the disproportionate number of children from broken homes, step-families and single parent homes in homeless statistics.³⁵

³³ “Grave crimes” are defined as including murder, manslaughter, wounding with intent and grievous bodily harm. “Serious crime by the young doubles in seven years”, *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 January 2002.

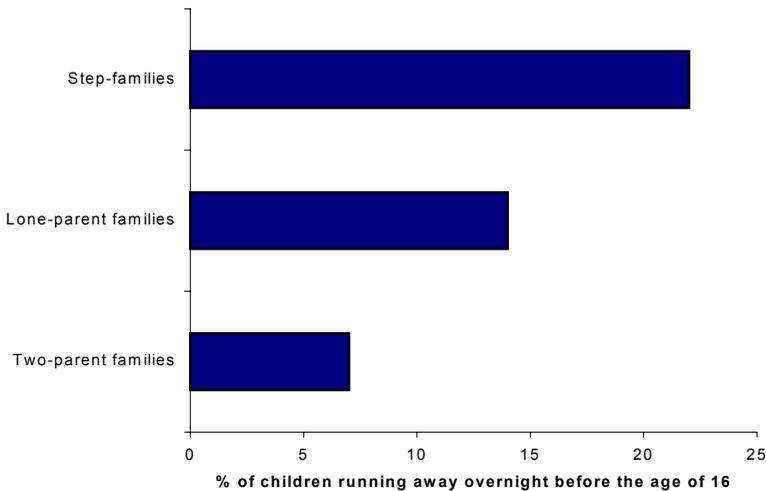
³⁴ “Are parents to blame?”, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 May 2001.

³⁵ See for example, Smith, Gilford, O’Sullivan, *The Family Backgrounds of Homeless Young People*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1997; also Quilgar, D., *Poverty: the Outcomes for Children*, op. cit.

THE EVIDENCE

The Children's Society report claims that 25% of all youngsters living in step-families run away before they are 16; many are younger than 11. Often the event which triggers the running away is a dispute with a new step-parent, or the incompatibility between child and step-parent which leads to rows not only with the step-parent but also with the birth parent – because of the child's reaction to the new partner.

Runaway children



Source: *Home Run: Families and Young Runaways*, Children's Society October 2001.

Children interviewed for the report explained that they found it difficult to cope with the breakdown of their parents' relationship and the additional responsibility this placed upon them. The introduction of a step-parent to the household then compounded the problem. Sometimes the child would be taken into care if the lone parent was not coping after the breakdown, or if there was too much conflict with the new step-parent.

BROKEN HEARTS

Although in most cases the child opted to run away, in others, the child was actually turned out by the parent and/or step-parent. While some of the children go to friends or to their birth parent, many end up on the streets, on drugs, turn to crime or to child prostitution. These children are the harsh reminder of the most brutal consequences of family breakdown.

Unhappy families

It is a natural human impulse to seek to assuage the anxiety of a divorcing or separating couple by reassuring them that it is all for the best, that separation is better than conflict and they can start all over again. But where dependent children are concerned, a clean slate is not an option, and it is wrong to assume that divorce will relieve those children of the burden of living in an unhappy family. For children, the fact of separation can be more traumatic than living with parents in conflict, because it requires them to openly acknowledge the division between the two people they love best and to choose where their loyalties lie. In many cases they will also have to accept a “replacement” parent.

A 1994 study based on interviews with children from broken, “re-ordered” and conflicting families showed that the children whose parents separated and chose new partners were more likely to experience social, educational and health problems than those whose families remained intact – even where the intact families suffered parental conflict.

The study was controlled by “matching” families across social, educational and financial divisions, and found that children had better outcomes where parents remained together in high-conflict situations than where they separated. It also found that the event of separation or divorce itself tends to increase the conflict and add to the burden on the children, who can no longer remain “on the sidelines”.

THE EVIDENCE

Children interviewed in a London University study released in January 2001 took a similar view. Seven out of ten children claimed that they would rather see parents stay together and try to resolve their differences than have one of them leave the family home.³⁶

Preoccupation with mitigating the impact of divorce and separation can blur the line between parental convenience and the interests of the child. If we were more honest with ourselves about the benefits to children, perhaps we would be more willing to persevere with marriage.

Completing the cycle

Because a growing proportion of children are missing out on the experience of growing up with two committed parents, they are losing the sense of what it means to be part of a family. They lack a model to build their own lives upon. So it is no surprise to learn that girls from divorced families are almost twice as likely as their contemporaries to become teenage lone mothers, or that children who experience parental divorce are also much more likely to have their own marriages or cohabiting relationships break up.³⁷

A recent survey³⁸ also established a correlation between family breakdown and under-age sex, showing that teenage sexual activity – and consequently the risk of teenage parenthood – is far more widespread among children from divorced, broken and single parent homes. Unless marriage and committed parenthood enjoy a revival in fashion, this cycle of unhappiness and isolation is unlikely to be broken.

³⁶ London University, Institute of Education survey, reported in the *Daily Mail*, 23 January 2001.

³⁷ See for example, Kiernan, K., *The Legacy of Parental Divorce* (based on National Child Development Study longitudinal data), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997; also Balbernie, R., *Child Psychotherapy Trust Review 22*, Summer 2001; and McAllister, F., *Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation, One plus One*, 1995.

³⁸ *Does Your mother Know?*, Family Matters Institute, 2001.

BROKEN HEARTS

Marriage is good news for adults too

Marriage is not just important for children's outcomes. It is also associated with a better quality of life for adults too, being linked to better health, work prospects and emotional well-being.

Marriage Works

Being married tends to mean being in work – and staying in work. Figures show that men who take on the responsibility of a wife and children work harder, earn more, keep in work longer and change jobs less.³⁹ In contrast, cohabiting couples have lower incomes, are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be receiving welfare benefits.⁴⁰

There are arguments about cause and effect here. Over the last 30 years there has been a decline in manufacturing industry, an important source of male full-time employment. Labour-market recessions in the 1980s and again in the 1990s caused job losses especially affecting young men. The recovery of the job market has been in large part due to expansion of the service sector, but this has tended to be a source of employment for women. Many of these service sector jobs are part-time, and/or with flexible hours or short-term contracts. So women are now less likely to find husbands who will be breadwinners, and more likely to be economically self-sufficient themselves, thereby reducing the attractions of marriage as a form of financial security for women.

As the figures on work-rich and work-poor households also show, however, the women participating in the labour market tend to be living in households where there is already one wage-earner. In very few cases have women become breadwinners for their dependent spouses or boyfriends: less than 2% of households have an unemployed male and employed female.⁴¹

³⁹ See, for example, Kiernan, K. and Mueller, G., *The Divorced and who Divorces?* Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, May 1998.

⁴⁰ See McRae, S., *Changing Britain: families and households in the 1990s*, Oxford University Press 1999.

⁴¹ *Families and the Labour Market*, op. cit.

THE EVIDENCE

Some commentators have argued that the *laissez-faire* approach to the British labour market over the last 20 years, with both Conservative and Labour Governments reluctant to prop up outmoded, labour-intensive industrial processes, has exacted too high a price in terms of family wage stability. Michael Gove, writing in the *Spectator*,⁴² links the much lower divorce rates in France with their more protectionist attitude to manufacturing industry, claiming that the job security of semi-skilled male workers there make these men “worth retaining” as husbands and breadwinners.

But it is also arguable that men have lost the will to work because they do not have dependents to support. Without the commitment of marriage and the knowledge that their breadwinning role is of key importance to the future security of their family, there is less incentive to seek and keep work.

In turn, marriage also seems to encourage female employment – in particular, mothers who are married are more likely to participate in the job market than lone mothers. This is partly because they can rely on their spouses to care for the children while they are working – surveys show that one of the most popular forms of childcare amongst working mothers is care by the child’s father.⁴³ It is presumably also because the presence of one worker in the family means that participation in the job market is viewed as the best way out of poverty, so there is more resistance to welfare dependency than among lone mothers.

Marriage is good for your health

Maybe divorce, like smoking, should carry a health warning. Figures released in 2001 show that men who divorce are 31% more likely to die within 10 years than those who stay married.⁴⁴ This report also showed very large differences in male suicide rates by marital status. In 1995 the suicide rate for widowed and divorced

⁴² 11 August 2001.

⁴³ 64% of all couples with children under five care for their children within the family. Institute of Fiscal Studies, *Briefing Notes on WFTC*, March 1999.

⁴⁴ *Social Focus on Men*, ONS, August 2001.

BROKEN HEARTS

men aged 15 to 44 was 35 per 100,000 population, more than double the rate for married men. The same report (based on a longitudinal survey of the progress of around 250,000 men over 30 years) also showed that men who live alone are significantly more prone to ill-health than married men.

Another recent study has found marriage makes you live longer – by an average of three years.⁴⁵ The researchers attributed the health and prosperity of married men to their healthier lifestyle, a “Darwinian” desire to impress their partners and, perhaps most interestingly, a physiological benefit that enhances physical and mental well-being. Professor Oswald, the author of the report, said:

We think that there is some change in the brain that stimulates the immune system to give you these extra years of life... The only explanation is that here is a physiological link between getting married and improved health and longevity. We don't fully understand how this protective mechanism works, but it is there. Marriage has some kind of profound effect on human beings, presumably because it reduces stress levels in some way and protects against illness.

Professor Oswald's study also found that it is first marriages – not cohabitation or remarriage – which has the greatest health and mental benefits.

Professor Steven Nock of the University of Virginia published similar findings based on analysis of a US longitudinal study in 1999.⁴⁶ Professor Nock's view was that marriage improves male self-image, discouraging risky behaviour, and encouraging job stability. All these studies are consistent with an established body of UK research demonstrating that divorced people are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness, and more likely to suffer premature death and to attempt suicide, than their married counterparts. They are also more likely to smoke and drink heavily.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Oswald, A., *The Extraordinary Effects of Marriage*, Warwick University, 2002.

⁴⁶ Nock, S., “The Problem with Marriage”, *Society*, 1999.

⁴⁷ McAllister, F., *Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation*, op. cit.

THE EVIDENCE

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Cohabitation v marriage

So should we ignore all this evidence and treat cohabitation as “the new marriage”? Many opinion formers would have us do so. Few journalists, will use the word “husband” or “wife” – we are all “partners” now. Accepting cohabitation as a stable relationship, with status equivalent to marriage, has long been a demonstration of liberal credentials; this acceptance has spread through the public services (“will your partner be at the birth of your baby?”) and has become part of our new language. Living out the cliché that marriage is “just a piece of paper”, who would now dare to suggest that the institution of marriage has any effect on the quality of a relationship? But in the rush to adopt this new model of family life we are in danger of overlooking the reality.

Impermanence

Cohabitation is a transient condition. A recent large-scale study of longitudinal data showed that the average length of a cohabitation is two years. Less than one-tenth of those couples who enter a “non-marital partnership” are still cohabiting ten years later. About a third split up, many cohabiting in due course with a new partner; the remainder get married – although figures show that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage means that couple is more likely to divorce than the couple who have not cohabited before marrying.⁴⁸

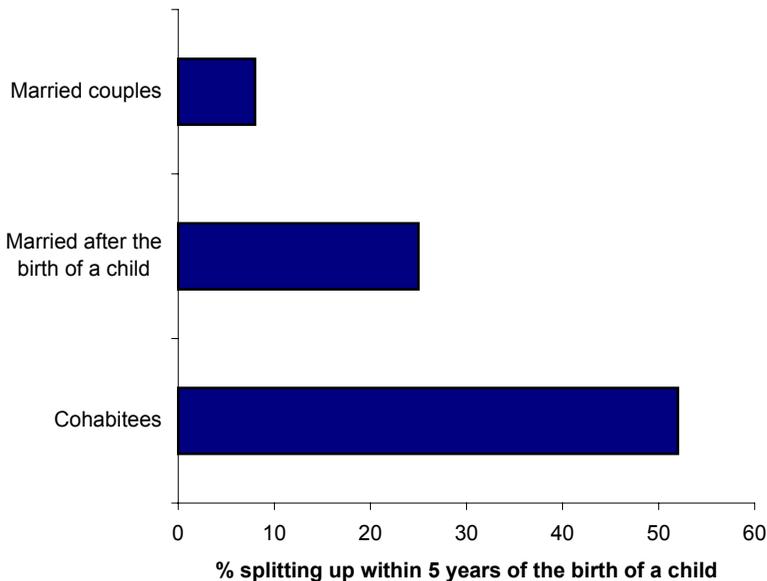
⁴⁸ Ermisch, J. & Francesconi, M., *Seven Years in the lives of British Families*, Policy Press, 2000; also Kiernan, K. & Estaugh, V., *Cohabitation: Extra-Marital childbearing and Social Policy*, Family Policy Studies Centre 1993.

BROKEN HEARTS

Once a cohabiting couple has had children, it is just as likely to split up as a childless couple and, strikingly, they are *less likely* to marry each other. So it is wishful thinking to suggest that the arrival of children will give permanence to a relationship, or that parents will secure the future of their children by going to the altar.

The most worrying statistic of all shows that children born to cohabiting parents are much more likely to see their parents split up than if they are born inside marriage. Within five years of the birth of a child, only 8% of married couples have split up compared to 52% of cohabitees and 25% of those who marry after birth.⁴⁹ This represents a huge disparity of outcomes for children.

Staying together for the children



Source: Ermisch, J. & Francesconi, M., *Seven Years in the lives of British Families*, Policy Press, 2000.

⁴⁹ Ermisch & Francesconi, op. cit.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Lack of protection for the weak

Compared with marriage, cohabitation is shown to be less effective in safeguarding both women and children from violence, poverty and neglect. Drawing on a range of US and UK surveys, crime figures and interviews with cohabitantes, Patricia Morgan's detailed comparison of marriage and cohabitation, *Marriage-Lite*, shows that cohabitation carries real risks for the vulnerable. Women are more likely to be physically abused by their live-in boyfriends than by husbands, to be assaulted during pregnancy, and to be at risk of serious injury.

Lacking the commitment and security traditionally associated with marriage, it seems that women who become mothers within cohabitation are particularly vulnerable at the time when they are most in need of protection. Why are we so reluctant to point out to young women that they should insist upon marriage as an indication of commitment before they render themselves more vulnerable and dependent by becoming mothers? How can a welfare policy which sends the wrong signals about marriage be justified?

Terms of disguise

The new terminology of cohabitation does not stop with the use of "partner". Counsellors, therapists, writers and academics in the field of family welfare now use a whole set of terms of disguise to mask the truth about the unhappiness caused by family breakdown, cohabitation and step-parenting. Instead of step-families, the professionals talk of "blended" families; instead of referring to a series of broken commitments and deserted children they allude to the "web of relationships." This new language threatens to make plausible a new set of social norms and to conceal the threat to the children caught up in this dangerous experiment.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BIGGER PICTURE – SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

Dependence

As the family declines, so dependence on the state increases. The most obvious form of dependence is that of the lone mother raising children on benefits. It is no surprise to find that a lone parent is far likelier to need social security benefits than couples.

Benefits for lone parents (1999-2000)

	Couples with children	Lone parents
% receiving family income/income support	11%	73%
% receiving housing benefit	8%	57%
% receiving council tax benefit	11%	62%

Source: *Social Trends 2002*, ONS, 2002.

Lone mothers

Reconciling the demands of work with caring for young children is difficult enough for married mothers; for lone mothers it is often totally impracticable. As journalist Melanie Phillips has pointed out, mothers are “naturally dependent” while they have young children to care for.⁵⁰ They depend either on a source of income – if they are rearing the children themselves – or a supplier of childcare – if they are going out to work. If the Government assumes responsibility for their children, by providing day-care, then the cost of care will soak up the gain from getting mothers into work – and that is to assume that mothers are content to go along with the plan.

⁵⁰ Melanie Phillips, *The Sex Change Society*, Social Market Foundation, 1999.

THE BIGGER PICTURE – SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

The quest for a solution to the “problem” of lone-parent dependency has been the driving force behind government-sponsored expansion of non-maternal care. Expenditure on a raft of subsidies for day-care and after-school care – through national, regional and European funding – is aimed at getting more mothers into work. Whether young children are better off in day-care than being reared by their mothers remains open to argument; that discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper. But evidence from Europe certainly indicates that where mothers are offered financial support to care for their children at home, such “homecare” allowances are extremely popular. Such allowances provide a recognition of the value to society of the caring role of a parent. It is far removed from the current assumptions of the British tax and benefit system and its arrangement of work incentives, which seek to minimise the impact of family responsibilities.

The elderly

Those responsibilities present a further challenge at the other end of the lifespan. Less obvious than the “dependent mother” but fast increasing demographically are the dependent elderly, especially the elderly infirm. Surveys show that the main providers of care for the elderly are family members – particularly spouses and children or children-in-law.⁵¹ In other words, husbands care for their elderly wives, wives nurse their sick husbands, their children – especially daughters and daughters-in-law – provide care and support to their ageing parents. As the decline in marriage and increase in single-person households work through the population in the years ahead, this source of family care will inevitably shrink. The result is not only an increase in the welfare bill but also the “nationalisation” of eldercare.⁵² Where the family fails, the state steps in.

⁵¹ See, for example, *Informal Carers*, 1998, cited in *Families and the Labour Market*, op cit.

⁵² See Katie Grant, “The elderly are our responsibility, not the State’s”, *The Times*, 3 February 2000.

BROKEN HEARTS

Lack of social capital

As the concept of family responsibility diminishes, the role of the state in our lives steadily increases. Consequential upon this is the loss of “social capital” – the unpaid work for family and community which flows from family ties. The quest for social capital is further constrained by the polarisation of work-rich and work-poor households – the dual-earner family is often too busy in the workforce to have time left over for serving the community, yet the workless family lacks the resources and stability to provide this social capital. Support is reduced to a financial transaction. In the words of Richard Berthoud:

Financial and other forms of support which used to be provided as a matter of course within the family, now have to be provided between families, mediated by the tax and social security systems. Reduced dependence of women on men has been replaced by increased dependence of the poor upon the state.⁵³

While Berthoud’s conclusion will meet with resistance from some quarters, his concern at the gap between the work-rich and work-poor is widely shared. Commentators from all points on the political compass have expressed concern at this widening gap and at the loss of social capital, which is the glue that binds the different strands of our society together. Most will agree that it is within the family that the social impulse is first nurtured and the sense of community first develops, that without strong families a strong society cannot exist. But the consensus breaks down when it becomes necessary to identify the means to strengthen the family.

Where the state intervenes to replace family support, it risks supplanting the family, as the history of the welfare state over the last 50 years has shown. Yet if the state ignores the family, and refuses to signal its support or approbation for the structures

⁵³ *Seven Years in the Lives of British Families: Dynamics of Household Incomes*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2000.

THE BIGGER PICTURE – SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

which are most successful in maintaining family stability, it is equally guilty of neglect.

The sick family of Europe

Why are British rates of teen pregnancy, lone parent households and, consequently, family poverty, all higher than our European counterparts? Cohabitation is not a phenomenon confined to Britain, and the trend against marriage is also visible elsewhere in Europe. But raising children outside the protection of two committed parents is uniquely popular in Britain, where some 25% of dependent children live in a household headed by one adult, compared to a European average of just 14%.⁵⁴

An overview of the tax and benefit systems operating in comparable European economies over the last 20 years suggests a strong connection. In Britain, the married family suffers a “double whammy”: taxation is based on individual assessment with no allowance for marriage, benefit entitlement is based on joint assessment and carries penalties for marriage or stable cohabitation. Remaining in an undeclared or informal partnership means that each partner can be assessed separately for welfare purposes; getting married or openly cohabiting reduces their welfare entitlement by as much as £70 per week. As Labour minister Ruth Kelly has pointed out, this approach to welfare is destructive of family life.⁵⁵

Most other European economies (with the exception of Sweden) have fiscal instruments of support for marriage, through joint taxation.

Joint assessment is implemented in different ways according to country, whether through income aggregation, income splitting or family quotients. In a few countries, such as France, joint taxation is mandatory; in the majority, couples have the option and will

⁵⁴ *Eurostat Yearbook 2001*, Eurostat, 2001.

⁵⁵ “Debate”, *The Guardian*, 13 March 2000.

BROKEN HEARTS

make the decision whether or not to pool their income according to their family circumstances.

In Germany, for example, married couples can opt to combine their two tax allowances to maximise the amount of income on which no tax is paid, a choice which is particularly favourable to couples where one spouse has given up work or reduced his or her working hours and income in order to look after children. Some countries, such as France and Belgium, extend joint assessment to children's income, thereby reducing the tax take on the family.

To the underlying principle of joint taxation is added a raft of family allowances in the form of deductions and reliefs and/or child benefit payments, the most substantial of which are linked either to marriage or proven, documented, long-term cohabitation. Varying widely across Europe, family reliefs or allowances can cover such items as long-term care costs for elderly parents, life insurance policies, tuition costs for children at school and/or universities, and childcare (or homecare) costs.

In Finland, for example, a homecare allowance (worth up to 40% of average female earnings) was introduced in the late 1980s as an alternative to using public day-care. From its introduction, two-thirds of all mothers with children under three years old opted for the allowance; by the mid-90s this had risen to three-quarters; the scheme is now so popular that it is most unlikely to be withdrawn. Norway followed suit in 1998 with a similar payment for parents of under-twos. In France, the *Allocation Parentale d'Education* is paid to stay-at-home mothers from the birth of their second child until their youngest child is three; again, it is very popular and is seen as an important expansion of choice for women and families.⁵⁶

In terms of taxation policy alone, successive British Governments over the last 20 years have gradually but inexorably established a system in which families are being taxed at a rate

⁵⁶ Hakim, C., *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, OUP 2000.

THE BIGGER PICTURE – SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

very close to that of a single person. Thus family commitments have become largely irrelevant to tax assessment; having children is regarded as a lifestyle choice. In most central European economies, by contrast, adults with families to support are paying tax at much lower rates than single earners.⁵⁷

The gainers in the British tax system are the lightly-taxed singletons, the losers are couple families, especially those on one income. The British system, now based almost entirely on independent taxation, has failed to give necessary signals about family commitment. In so doing, it stands accused of a significant role in the collapse of family stability, as European comparisons on divorce, teenage motherhood and child poverty all demonstrate.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Using OECD data, Dr Catherine Hakim of the LSE explains that in countries with strong fiscal support for the family, including all the major economies of central Europe, single earners pay on average twice as much income tax as one-earner couples with children. Hakim, C., *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, OUP, 2000.

⁵⁸ See O'Donoghue, C. and Sutherland, H., *Accounting for the Family: the treatment of marriage and children in European income tax systems*, Unicef, 1998.

BROKEN HEARTS

CHAPTER FIVE

BREAKING THE CYCLE

AS THE STATE HAS INTERVENED by financing alternatives to the married family, so the number and nature of non-intact families have proliferated and the demands on the state have increased. It has become a never-ending cycle, but the most disturbing aspect of this exercise is the impact on the children in our most impoverished communities.

The rates of birth outside marriage, lone parenting and teenage motherhood are all highest in inner city areas which suffer high unemployment, high rates of crime and social decay.⁵⁹ There can be no doubt that the children and young people living in these areas are the “socially excluded.” If we really do have any concern for their long-term future, we must now seek to promote family stability through policies which incentivise and support marriage and committed fatherhood.

At present, expenditure is geared almost entirely to dealing with the casualties of family breakdown; in other words, treating the symptoms, not the causes. As the evidence here shows, such an approach is fundamentally flawed, and will only continue to fuel the problem. It is time to break the cycle.

Government policy in other areas of life is based on the assumption that fiscal signals will have an impact on behaviour. High fuel taxes are ostensibly designed to reduce harmful emissions, and taxes on tobacco and alcohol are intended to

⁵⁹ ONS Survey reported in *The Daily Mail*, 7 May 2001. At the top of the table is Knowsley in Merseyside, where 64.1% of babies were born outside marriage in 1999.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

discourage their consumption. So why should we apply a different set of rules to marriage and the upbringing of children? Is it reasonable to expect two adults on low incomes to voluntarily make themselves poorer in order to demonstrate their commitment? If a mother loses benefits by marrying the father of her children, is it surprising if she (or the father) opts not to do so?

In the words of a cohabiting father, speaking of marriage:

It's not a thing I have ever considered seriously. I don't imagine it will ever be a significant factor for me unless perhaps much later in life there are good tax or social security reasons why I should get married.⁶⁰

Unless and until we are prepared to acknowledge the connection between family decline, poverty and social disintegration, then there is no prospect of change. But if we really have any concern for the poor and the vulnerable, and for the children we are so inadequately supporting, then we have to make that connection and make that change, by embarking on an urgent programme of legislation to restore family stability. We must:

- reverse the assumptions of the welfare structure by removing the disincentives to marriage and committed parenting;
- restore fiscal recognition of marriage, through optional joint taxation, combined with a system of family allowances;
- educate children and young people about the value of marriage, family commitment and enduring fatherhood.

The evidence is clear. Family stability is vital to the well-being of children. Children who grow up outside a family unit based on the enduring union of their own two parents do not have “equality of opportunity”. In some cases, this lack of opportunity amounts to a serious threat to their life chances, their mental or physical health, their prospects of work and of a family of their own.

There is nothing compassionate about our failure to act.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Smart, C. and Stevens, P., *Cohabitation Breakdown*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2000.

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