

Unmarried, With Children

British Study Suggests New Family Arrangements Don't Work

by Celeste McGovern

LONDON — Unmarried couples with young children are five times more likely to break up than married couple families. Nearly one in two cohabiting couples will have split before their child's fifth birthday, compared to one in 12 married parents. Three quarters of all family breakdown affecting young children is caused by unmarried breakups rather than divorce. Those startling findings concerning the status of families in the United Kingdom, were presented in February by Harry Benson, director of the Bristol Community Family Trust, to a national conference of relationship educators in London.

In 2003, those figures, based on data from the Office for National Statistics, translated into: an estimated 88,000 children under 5 years old who were affected by the split of their unmarried parents, compared to about 31,000 children who experienced their married parents' divorce. "It is hardly surprising that couples are steering clear of marriage when all we hear about is divorce," said Benson. "But it's a huge mistake." The real numbers, he said, establish incontrovertibly that "it is a myth that one type of family is as good as another." In other words, marriage has a clear advantage. Benson's research argues for government social policy makers to encourage marriage and preserve marriages in trouble. But British family policy specialists still resist the idea that marriage itself has anything to do with married couples sticking together.

Kathleen Kiernan, professor of social policy and demography at the University of York, said Benson's data fits with her own research findings from the study of children born in the United Kingdom in the year 2000. But she dismissed their significance, based on what is known in the field as the "selection effect": Couples who marry are generally better educated, better off economically, come from intact homes, and are more open to long-term commitment — the marrying kind. People who cohabit are more frequently lower educated, lower income, and come from broken homes — hence, less likely to marry. "Is there any inherent value to marriage? I don't think that question has been answered. There isn't any evidence that suggests that marriage per se actually confers a benefit to relationships," said Kiernan. "Transferring people from cohabitation to marriage isn't going to change the people."

Penny Mansfield, director of One Plus One, the leading British research organization created to help struggling couples, agreed. "We can't easily assume that if these cohabiting couples got married, they would stick together," she said. "We can't get away from the fact that some people are not the strongest marriage material." However, David Popenoe, professor of sociology at Rutgers University and co-author of the National Marriage Project's 2004 report on marriage in America called "The State of Our Unions," said marriage needs to be restored to its former status. "If one thinks of a single cohabiting couple suddenly forced to marry, probably not much would change. But what is important is reestablishing the social institution of marriage, especially when children are involved.

"The whole idea of social institutions is hard for modern individualists to fathom," Popenoe added. "But think about what happens when a person becomes, for example, a citizen of a country. [Is it] Just a piece of paper? No, it has all sorts of implications for the behavior of that person, a new set of rights and obligations, and he or she is treated differently. It is the same with marriage."

Higher Plane

The Church of course, sets marriage on an even higher plane. As part of God's plan, it as an indissoluble covenant between a man and woman ordered both towards their good, as well as the generation and education of their children. As a sacrament, it is an infinite wellspring of sanctifying grace to perfect them in the kind of love that Christ showed the Church. But as an institution, marriage has been greatly weakened over the years, said Popenoe, but there's no reason to eliminate it. "Throwing out the institution because of its past faults — as many now want to do — would be highly detrimental to children, and a perfect example of what we are calling a major loss of child-centeredness in modern societies."

Virtually all social scholars now agree — though it was hotly disputed little more than a decade ago — that family breakdown leads to increased risks of poverty, crime, and relationship failure for the children involved. "What is absolutely clear now is that a child benefits most when there is a strong relationship between both parents of the child," said Mansfield.

But modern British families are often created in a way that makes stability difficult, she said. In the past, couples used to court, marry and have children, in that order. Today, more couples are having children somewhere in the middle. Many studies have shown that the arrival of a first child can seriously strain a relationship. "Trying to decide whether or not you have a viable relationship when you're dealing with a new baby is kind of a double whammy," said Mansfield. "Perhaps it would be better for people to establish their relationship before they have children." Britons increasingly view marriage and child-rearing as separate endeavors, however. In 1960, about 5% of births in the United Kingdom were to unmarried mothers. In 1980, the number increased to 12% and today it is a whopping 41%. One quarter of all children in the United Kingdom are in families with unmarried couples.

U.S. Trends Similar

Though slightly lower in America, the same trends hold in the United States: Between 1960 and 2002, the number of unmarried couples living together increased by more than 1100%. And nearly half of cohabiting couples between ages 25 and 34 have children. The 2004 "State of Our Unions" report found that views are changing: 56% of both male and female high school seniors polled agreed that "having a child without being married is experimenting with a worthwhile lifestyle and not affecting anyone else." "This is a dramatic trend," said Popenoe. "It is commitment that is retreating in the modern world — commitment to each other and commitment, especially, to children. It means that more and more kids are not living with their natural parents. "Largely because of the much greater importance that America places on organized religion, we in America are talking seriously about the plight of marriage," he said. "Britain for the most part, and certainly the rest of Europe, is not."

President Bush has proposed federal funding of \$240 million per year over five years to support healthy marriages through research, demonstration projects and technical assistance on family formation. Benson agreed that politicians in the United Kingdom have a blind spot when it comes to marriage. "They wonder why they are not making progress with crime and poverty and drug abuse. Until they get to grips with family — and the value of marriage — they never will," he said. But Benson is optimistic that British politics may change soon. Certainly there is financial incentive. The government spends a whopping \$28.6 billion annually in direct costs of family breakdown, compared to just \$38.2 million helping families in crisis.

A married father of six, Benson said the majority of relationships on the brink are salvageable. His own marriage was saved by intervention, and he said that government should encourage couple-to-couple counseling for married couples in trouble, marriage preparation, as well as give tax breaks for married couples. "It is not clear whether marriage can be revived," said Popenoe. "But the stakes are high and we won't know unless we try. The overriding public interest is in helping two natural parents to stay together and successfully raise their children. All other childrearing structures have proven to be markedly inferior."

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