

CHANGES IN FAMILY STRUCTURE

Understanding Society
Policy Unit
Data Note

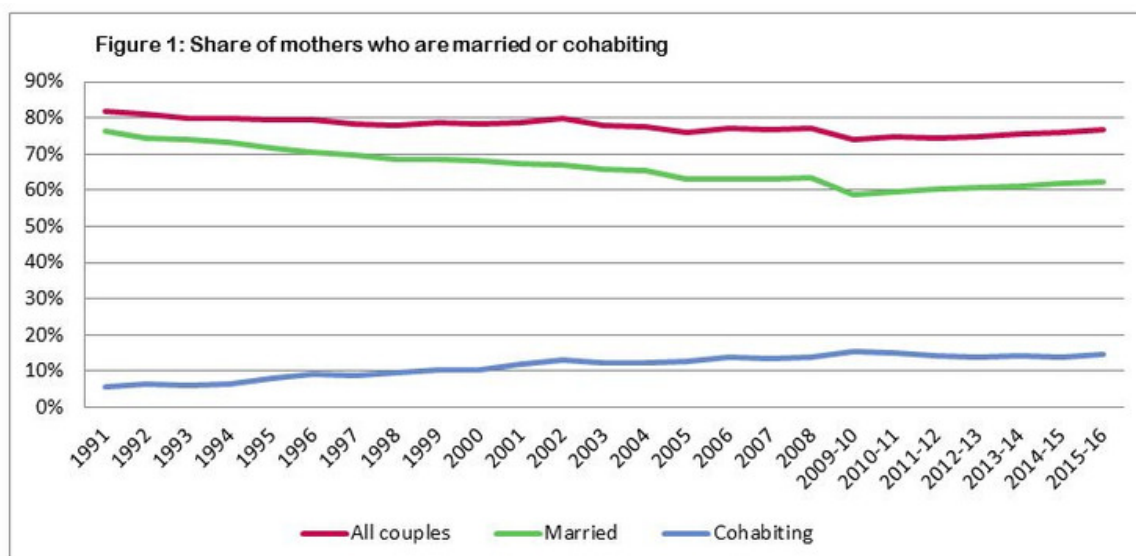
MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

In 1991, when the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) first started, family life in the UK had already experienced fundamental changes. The traditional family structure of the married, two parent family had been in decline since the 1970s and 1980s and children were increasingly being raised in lone parent and 'blended' families. In the quarter of the century that the Study has been following couples with children, family structure has continued to shift. Marriage, for example, is much less common, the proportion of married mothers fell by 15 percentage points over 25 years, to 62 per cent in 2015/16, while the share of cohabiting mothers almost trebled to 14 per cent.

THE GROWTH IN LONE MOTHER FAMILIES

When the first year of BHPS data was collected, lone mothers already accounted for almost one-in-five of mothers with children in the UK. Since then, this share risen steadily, growing by eight percentage points to peak at 26 per cent in the years just after the financial crisis at in 2009/10, before falling back again to 23 per cent in 2015/16 (Figure 1).

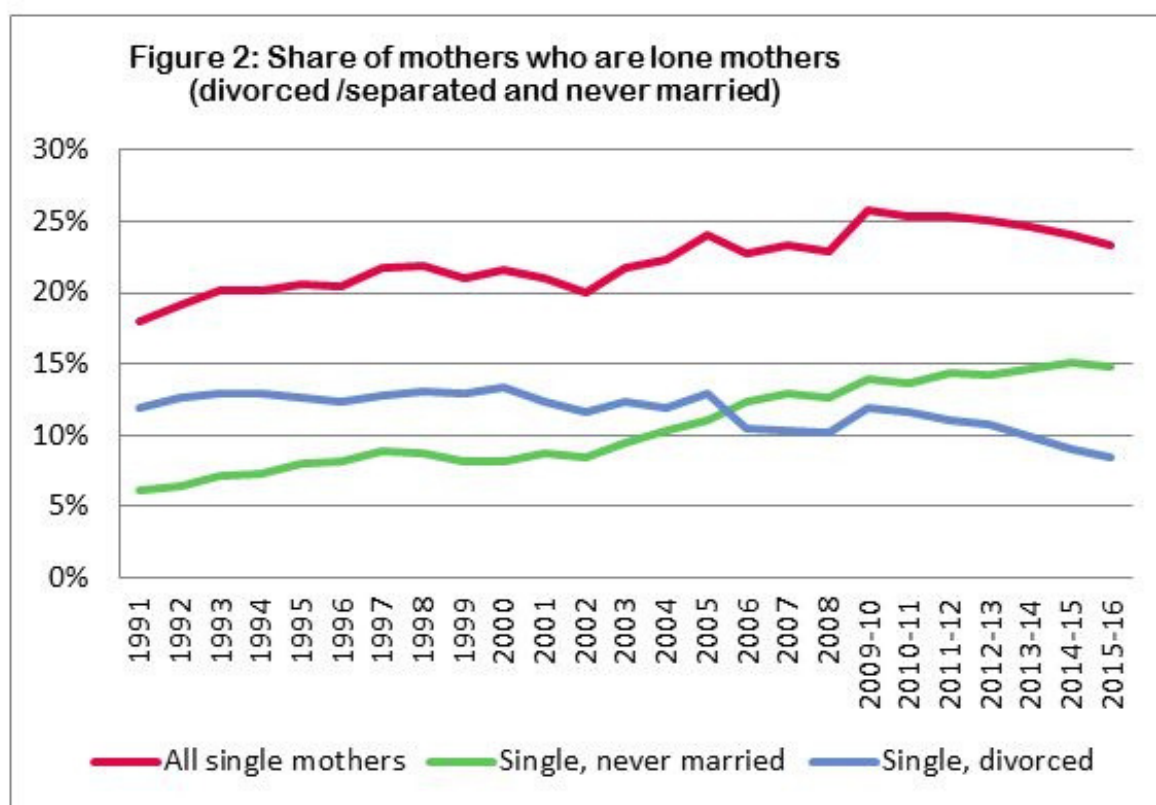
Changes in marriage patterns have influenced the composition of lone mother families. While lone mothers in the past were predominantly divorcees (accounting for two-thirds of lone mothers), today the majority of lone mothers have never been married.



FAMILY DYNAMICS: BIRTHS, SEPARATION AND RE-PARTNERING

Of course, changes in the share of lone mother families may not be a good indicator of overall levels of family stability. For example, there may be an increase in the number of families that have experienced disruption even if the share of lone mother families has not changed. This is because families are not static: the share of mothers who are lone parents depends on how many children are born to lone mothers, how many parents separate (and children remain living with the mother), and the rate at which lone mothers re-partner (see Figure 2). Understanding these transitions provides a powerful way of understanding how families are likely to evolve in the future.

We unpack some of these transitions in Tables 1 and 2, which show how the family circumstances of new mothers has changed over recent years, changes in the rate of separation over a one-year period, and the rate of re-partnering.






The share of married mothers dropped from 76 to 62 per cent between the early 1990s and 2015/16.

This change is mostly due to the growth in cohabitation, which increased by ten percentage points to 15 per cent.

The share of lone mother families also grew over the last 25 years, with one-in-four mothers living as lone parents in 2015/16.

CHANGES IN FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES AT BIRTHS

Table 1: Circumstances of new mothers at time of birth

	 Married	 Cohabiting	 Lone mothers
1991 - 1994	71.9%	13.0%	15.4%
1995 - 1999	68.6%	17.3%	15.0%
2000 - 2004	61.6%	24.2%	14.5%
2005 - 2008	53.1%	29.7%	18.3%
2010/11 - 2012/13	54.1%	29.0%	17.5%
2013/14 - 2015/6	55.0%	28.8%	16.7%

As expected, we see a sharp drop in the number of babies born to married mothers, from three-quarters of all births in the early 1990s compared to just over half by 2015/16. There was a corresponding rise in the share of cohabiting new mothers, which doubled over the period to just under 30 per cent in 2015/16. These changes indicate that, while we have already seen a rapid switch away from marriage among mothers with children, this decline looks set to carry on in the future.

There was also an increase in the share births to lone mothers, with 17 per cent of all new mothers also being lone parents. This rising share of births to lone mothers took place in spite of a substantial drop in the number of teenage parents from 2000, a group particularly likely to be lone mothers.

Table 2: Change in relationship status over one year





	 % Lone mothers who re-partner in one year	 % Separating (both married and cohabiting)	 % Separating (Married)	 % Separating (Cohabiting)
1991 - 1994	9.1%	3.5%	2.6%	12.8%
1995 - 1999	9.2%	3.6%	2.9%	9.1%
2000 - 2004	8.8%	3.6%	2.5%	9.4%
2005 - 2008	5.7%	3.7%	1.9%	11.5%
2010/11 - 2012/13	4.9%	2.5%	1.5%	6.4%
2013/14 - 2015/6	5.6%	2.3%	1.5%	5.3%

Table 2 shows the share of mothers in couples who separate over a one-year period. Rates of parental separation have fallen. This is contrary to expectations, as the share of cohabiting mothers grew rapidly over this period, and cohabittees are widely considered to be much more likely to separate. However, since the 1990s cohabitation appears to have become much more stable; the share of cohabiting couples who separate has halved, with one-in-20 couples separating over a one-year period between 2013/14 and 2015/16 compared to one-in-ten in the late-1990s.

RE-PARTNERING

Among lone mothers, rates of re-partnering have also fallen substantially, contributing to a growing number of lone mother families. While nine per cent of lone mothers re-partnered over a one-year period in the early 1990s this share fell to five per cent by the mid-2010s.

Our analysis of family dynamics suggests that the growing share of lone mother families over the last 25 years was driven by an increase in the number of children born to lone mothers and a fall in the rate at which lone mothers re-partnered. Falling rates of parental separation, particularly among cohabiting couples, have on the other hand, mitigated against further increases in lone motherhood.

FAMILY COMPLEXITY: THE GROWTH OF NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY FORMS

These changes have led to increasing family complexity. Figure 3 shows the share of lone-mother, step-father families, and 'blended' families (where the mother's partner is both a biological and step father). Together these three family types give an indication of the share of mothers who have at some point experienced family breakdown and lone motherhood.

As the graph illustrates, while the share of lone mother families peaked in the years following the financial crisis, at 26 per cent, this understates the experience of lone motherhood. Thirty-five per cent of all mothers lived in lone mother, step-father or blended families in 2010/11-2012/13. Indeed, while the share of lone mothers peaked in 2010/11-2012/13, the total share of mothers living in 'disrupted' families peaked slightly earlier, because the share of lone mothers who had re-partnered was higher.

Figure 3: Share of Lone Mother, Step-parent and blended Families

