

# FAMILY STRUCTURE AND EDUCATION

Understanding Society  
Policy Unit  
Data Note

## GROWING INEQUALITIES IN MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

In the early 1990s around 80 per cent of mothers that had A-levels or a degree were married or cohabited with the biological father of their child(ren). While high and middle educated mothers looked very similar in terms of their living arrangements, among those with lower levels of education only 70 per cent lived within such a traditional family setup. Twenty-five years ago, cohabitation was also rare among women with children regardless of their educational background.

Over the last 25 years differences in families' living arrangements have become much starker. This polarisation has been driven by changes among those with low and middle level qualifications; for mothers with degrees there has been virtually no shift in living arrangements with the majority continuing to marry and live with the father of their child(ren).

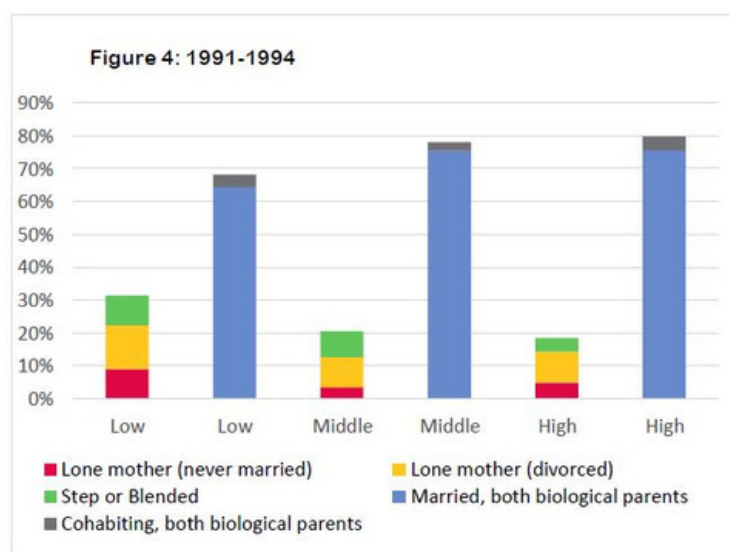
The family lives of those with low or middle levels of education have, on the other hand, radically changed. While the majority continue to live with their children as a couple, the share that are married has dropped substantially to just 42 per cent of mothers with GCSEs and 51 per cent of those with A-levels. Conversely, mothers are much more likely to be cohabitating with their child(ren)'s father, with 12 to 13 per cent of those with low or middle levels of education cohabiting in the mid-2010s, compared to three to four per cent in the early 1990s.

## FAMILY STRUCTURE IS DIVERGING BY EDUCATION

- There have been few changes in family life for mothers with degrees, three quarters of whom are married and living with the father of their children.
- Today just 43 per cent of those with low levels of education, and 52 per cent of those with intermediate levels, are married. This marks a substantial reduction since the early 1990s when two-thirds of the low educated and three-quarters of the middle educated were married.
- For those without degrees cohabitation has become much more common.
- Rates of lone parenthood have also grown substantially: 43 per cent of mothers with only GCSEs had experienced lone motherhood in 2015/16, and 35 per cent of those with A-levels.
- By 2015/16 the majority of lone mothers had never been married.

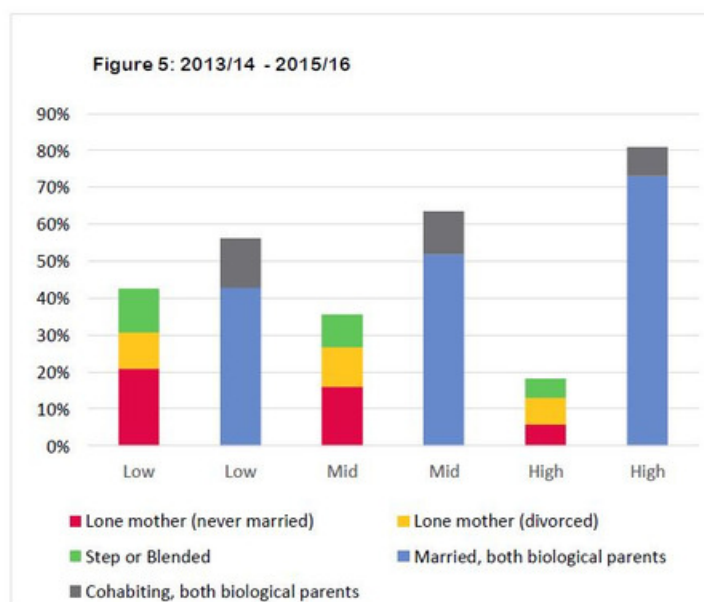
## THE RISE IN LONE MOTHER FAMILIES AND ROUTES INTO LONE MOTHERHOOD

In the early 1990s, around one-in-five middle and high educated mothers had experienced family breakdown compared to 31 per cent of those with only GCSEs or equivalent. Among those who had experienced lone motherhood, around half were divorced or separated (nine per cent of middle and high educated mothers, and 13 per cent with low levels of education).



For those with middle and higher levels of education being a never married lone mother was still rare, although almost one-on-ten of the less educated became lone parents without having previously married. A further 13 per cent of low educated, and nine per cent of middle educated, mothers lived in step or blended families although this family form remained rare among those with degrees.

In 2013/14-2015/16 divergences in family forms had widened. While there was virtually no change in the experience of lone motherhood for women with degrees among those with those with low or middle qualifications the experience of lone motherhood had become much more common: 45 per cent of low-educated mothers and one-third of those with middle-levels of education had at some point experienced lone parenthood.



Routes to lone motherhood had also changed substantially, with far more lone mothers never having married (21 per cent of mothers with low levels of education and 16 per cent of those with middle levels of qualifications) while the share that were divorced or separated either showed little change or fell (around ten per cent in both education groups).