

Scale of cohabitation

In 2006 one in six couples in the UK were cohabiting (2.3 million couples). More than a third (36%) of the public in England and Wales had been in a cohabiting relationship at some time.

Sources: Focus on Families 2007, Office for National Statistics; British Social Attitudes Report 2007/2008, National Centre for Social Research

Growth in cohabitation

The 2001 Census recorded just over 2 million cohabiting couples in England and Wales (a 67% increase from 1991).

Between 1996 and 2006, the number of cohabiting couples in the UK increased by over 60% to 2.3 million.

Cohabiting is the fastest growing family type in the UK (with the proportion of cohabiting couple families increasing from 9% to 14% between 1996 and 2006).

The number of cohabiting couples in England and Wales is projected to almost double to 3.8 million by 2031 (which will be over one in four couples on this projection).

Sources: Cohabitation: The Financial Consequences of Relationship Breakdown, Law Commission No307; Focus on Families 2007; National Statistics Online February 2009 - Focus on Families - Overview of Families; National Statistics Population Trends No121 Autumn 2005

Nature of cohabitation

The 2001 Census recorded that over 740,000 cohabiting couples in England and Wales had dependent children between them supporting 1.27 million children. The number of cohabiting couple households with dependent children more than doubled between 1991 and 2001 and by 2006 1.49 million dependent children in the UK, almost 12% of the total number of dependent children, lived in cohabiting couple families.

The average length of cohabitation relationships in 2006 was 6.9 years compared with 6.5 years in 2000. And for cohabitants with children the average was 8.5 years.

For an increasing number of people, cohabitation may be an end in itself i.e. an alternative to marriage. In 2006, 56% of cohabiting relationships ended in marriage, down from 59% in 2000.

Between 1976 and 2004, the proportion of women aged 18 to 49 who were not married and cohabiting trebled, from 9% to 28%.

In 2005 39% of single individuals aged 25 to 34 were cohabiting. For those aged 35 to 49, the proportion was 30%.

Sources: Cohabitation: The Financial Consequences of Relationship Breakdown, Law Commission No307; Focus on Families 2007; British Social Attitudes Report 2007/2008

Public acceptance of cohabitation

Only one in four people (28%) think married couples make better parents than unmarried ones.

Two thirds of people (66%) think there is little difference socially between being married and living together and almost half (48%) that living with a partner shows just as much commitment as getting married.

Source: British Social Attitudes Report 2007/2008

Public support for reform

Almost nine out of ten people think that a cohabiting partner should have a right to financial provision if their relationship is a long term one, has involved prioritising one partner's career or includes children.

Source: British Social Attitudes Report 2007/2008

Lack of legal protection for cohabiting couples

More than 70% of family lawyers surveyed stated that, in their experience, the law badly fails to protect the interests of cohabiting couples when they separate. The lack of any legal remedy, as well as costs and uncertainty of outcome were cited as the main reasons for this failure.

The number of respondents who reported issues around cohabitation as a factor in their caseload rose from 49% in 2004 to 59% in 2006/7.

Few cohabitants take steps to safeguard their position. In 2006 one in seven (15%) had a written agreement about their share in the ownership of accommodation where one or both partners owned that property; one in ten (12%) had changed a will as a result of their cohabiting relationship; one in five (19%) had sought advice about their legal position.

Source: Resolution survey of members July 2007; British Social Attitudes Report 2007/2008

Common Law Marriage myth

Half of people (51%) still falsely believe that cohabiting couples have rights as "common law" spouses. Cohabiting couples are no more knowledgeable, with 53% believing that common law marriage exists.

Only 38% know that common law marriage does not exist. Despite a government sponsored awareness raising campaign, this result showed almost no improvement from the 37% responding correctly in 2000.

Source: British Social Attitudes Report 2007/2008

Decline in marriage

The number of married couples in the UK fell by over 4% (0.5 million) between 1996 and 2006 to just over 12 million.

Marriage rates in England and Wales have fallen to their lowest level since records began in 1862. The number of marriages registered in England and Wales in 2007 was the lowest number since 1895 and fell by 3.3% compared to 2006.

Across England and Wales the proportion of children born outside of marriage had increased to 43.5% by 2006.

There has also been a decline in marriage rates over the long term in many other European countries.

Sources: Focus on Families 2007; National Statistics Online February 2009 – Society – Marriages; Birth Statistics FM1 No35-2006, Office for National Statistics; Families in Britain: an evidence paper December 2008, Cabinet Office and DCSF

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