

How partnerships have changed in the UK over the last 30 years

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POLICY BRIEFING

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Since the 1980s, partnerships where people live together have changed dramatically in the UK. While official registrations of marriages and divorces provide a precise data picture, we don't know as much about the rising numbers of informal cohabiting partnerships. In particular, we don't know when these relationships happen or for how long they last.

To explore this, we have used survey data from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey. As separation and living in a partnership without marriage (also known as cohabitation) have become more common, this policy briefing examines recent partnership trends.

Key Points:

- *Living together as a couple has become more popular, with 77% of partnerships now starting with cohabitation, and only about 65% of 40-year olds reporting being married in the mid-2000s.*
- *We are entering into committed couple relationships later in life. People starting their first cohabiting partnership in 2009 were about two years older than those starting cohabitation in 1980. People have been getting married around six years later.*
- *Relationships where people are living together for the first time have become less stable, with over 40% separating within 10 years.*
- *The majority of separations involving children are now between cohabiting couples, rather than married couples. However, the chance of cohabiting parents splitting-up has been relatively stable over the decades.*

Introduction

Families are far more complex today than in the past. More couples are living together without being married (cohabiting). Separation, re-partnering, and having children outside marriage have all increased. Intimate relationships form the basis of our society. Understanding when people are forming partnerships, how long for, whether they have children and when they break up is fundamental to designing effective social policies that address inequalities.

The study

Our research uses rich longitudinal data gathered from a panel of over 30,000 households in the Understanding Society survey. The survey is one of the few sources of information about dates of entry and exit from cohabitation, providing insights into the changing nature of families. In 2009/10, wave 1 of the survey asked 50,994 individuals to report the dates they began and ended all co-residential partnerships and their children's dates of birth. Then, with each subsequent wave of the survey (currently until 2018), additional partnership and childbearing information was collected.

Main findings

Declining numbers of married forty-somethings

By the time they get to their forties, most adults have already formed partnerships. Some may have already experienced relationship break-ups, and most childbearing has already occurred. Our analysis shows that the proportion of people married in their forties declined from about 85% in 1980 to 66% in 2010, but remained mostly stable afterwards (Figure 1). About 8% of those married in 2018 had been divorced before, and about 18% had previously separated from cohabiting relationships

Numbers living together in mid-life continue to rise

The amount of people living together without being married in mid-life has risen significantly in the last 40 years. It grew from 2% in 1980 to 13% in 2018, an increase of more than 400%. By 2018, 16% of those cohabiting had been divorced before, and 37% had previously separated from a cohabiting relationship.

Single living has increased

Not living in a partnership has also become more common, rising from 13% in 1980 to 20% in 2018. Of those not living in a partnership, the share of previously married singles increased slightly.

However, the amount of people who previously cohabited has dramatically increased since the '80s. The percentage of single people who have never lived with a partner has been mostly stable over time, at about 6%.

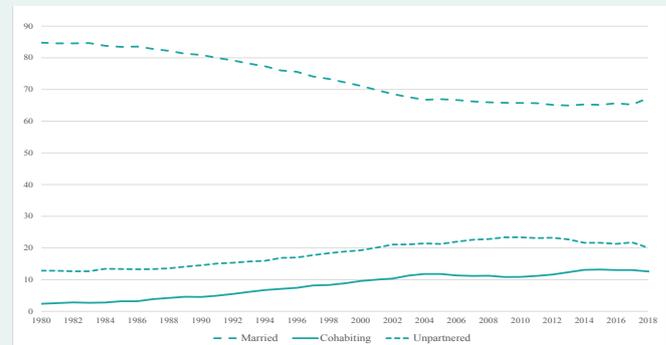


Figure 1: Partnership status 1980-2018, age 40-49

No change in median age at first partnership, but marriage is later

Figure 2 shows how the timing of first marriage and forming a first cohabiting partnership have changed. Most people continue to move in with their first partner in their early 20s. The median age when people start a cohabiting partnership had only risen by a year or two between 1980 and 2009, from 21 to 22 for women and from 23 to 25 for men¹. The median age of first marriage for men rose by six years from 24 in 1980 to 30 in 2009. Similarly, women's median age of first marriage rose by six years, from 22 in 1980 to 28 in 2009. This suggests that starting to live together and marrying have become increasingly distinct decisions, with more people choosing to live together before marriage, and for a longer time.

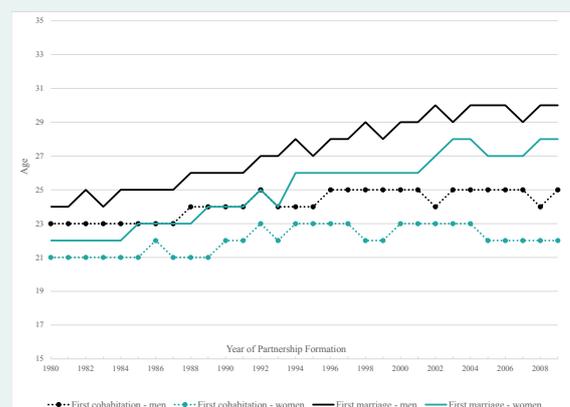


Figure 2: Median age of forming the first partnership 1980-2009

¹ We were unable to estimate the median age of partnership formation after 2009 due to data inconsistencies.

Living together less likely to lead to marriage

Table 1 shows whether cohabiting couples are more likely to marry, separate, or keep living together, and how this has changed over time. The chance of a cohabiting couple marrying within five years was 53% for partnerships formed in the 1980s. It was only 36% for those starting in the 2000s. The chance of marrying within 10 years was 61% in the 1980s but only 44% in the 2000s.

Period of forming the first cohabitation			
	1980 - 1989	1990 - 1999	2000 - 2009
5 years			
Marriage	53%	44%	36%
Separation	19%	27%	35%
Continuing cohabitation	27%	30%	29%
10 years			
Marriage	61%	55%	44%
Separation	25%	33%	42%
Continuing cohabitation	14%	13%	14%

Note: The estimates for 2000-09 are followed up through the last wave in 2017/18, but may be underestimated due to attrition from the survey.

Table 1. The probability of the first cohabiting partnership transitioning to marriage or separation in 5 and 10 years

This decline in marriage is primarily because more cohabiting couples are breaking up. Of the partnerships formed in the 1980s, 19% separated within five years, which increased to 35% of partnerships formed in the 2000s. After 10 years these numbers increased to 25% and 42% respectively. The percentage of those still cohabiting at five and 10 years has changed remarkably little, indicating that cohabitation has increasingly become a way to test the relationship, rather than a pathway to marriage.

Increase in separations among cohabiting couples with children

The circumstances of relationship break-ups have changed dramatically over time. Figure 3 shows all partnership dissolutions between 1980 and 2009² and breaks them down by whether the couple was cohabiting or married, and whether they had children. Of those separating, the proportion who were married declined over time to be overtaken by those who were in cohabiting partnerships (dark area). The majority of separations now occur amongst unmarried couples.

² Data limitations prevent us from calculating these figures beyond 2009.

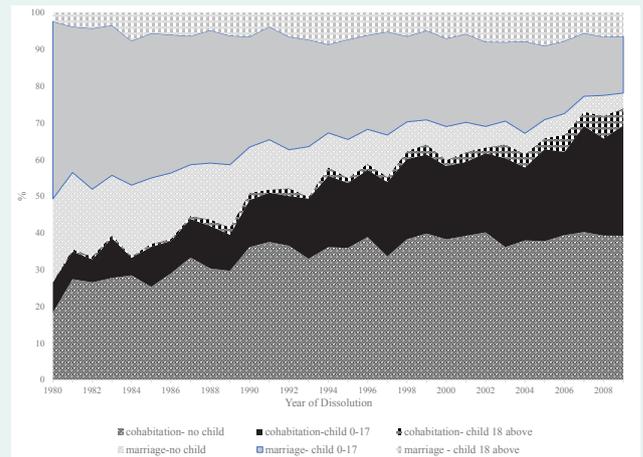


Figure 3. Partnership dissolution by partnership type and age of youngest child, 1980-2009

The proportion of cohabiting couples separating increased dramatically, from 27% in 1980 to 74% in 2009.

There has been an even more dramatic rise in separations amongst those who are cohabiting with kids. In 1980, only 8% of dissolutions were among cohabiting couples with a child under 18, but this surged to 30% in 2009. Meanwhile, the proportion of divorces for married couples with children under 18 declined to 15% in 2009. So we can see that, in recent years, the majority of partnership break-ups involving children are among cohabitators rather than married couples.

Cohabiting couples have a higher chance of separation after having a first child

To better understand partnership break-ups among parents, we investigated whether the risk of partnership dissolution after having a first child has changed over time (Table 2).

Period of having the first child in partnership			
	1980 - 1989	1990 - 1999	2000 - 2009
% of cohabitations dissolved			
5 years	19%	20%	21%
10 years	30%	33%	31%
% of marriages dissolved			
5 years	6%	5%	3%
10 years	13%	12%	7%

Note: Estimates for those cohabiting at time of birth, regardless of whether they marry afterwards.

Table 2. The risk of separation after having the first child in 1980-1989, 1990-1999, and 2000-2009

The chance of separation differs considerably by whether the child was born within cohabitation or marriage. About 1 in 5 cohabitators dissolved their partnerships within five years of the child's birth, while nearly one-third separated within 10 years. These proportions have changed relatively little across time.

In contrast, only about 6% of marriages had dissolved within five years in the 1980s. This had declined to about 3% by the 2000s. The proportion who broke off their partnership up to 10 years after the birth also declined from 13% to 7%. These figures indicate that married couples with children seem to have become more stable recently. However, note that the later estimates may be slightly biased due to attrition from the sample after 2009.

Policy implications

Over the past three decades, cohabitation has become more common among British couples. People increasingly postpone marriage or do not marry at all.

In the past, cohabiting couples were more likely to marry; now, they are more likely to separate. In fact, cohabiting couples are becoming a larger and larger share of those who separate, even when the couple has children.

Yet cohabitation in England and Wales is rarely recognised in law or through the court system, particularly when a couple separates. This lack of legal protection can put an extra strain on separating couples. Given that separating families are a priority in the UK, policy-makers should recognise that cohabiting couples can be more vulnerable.

Research has also indicated that living together, having children in cohabiting relationships, and partnership break-ups are related to disadvantage, poor child well-being, and other negative outcomes. This puts cohabiting couples and their children at higher risk, particularly at the time of separation. Policy-makers should pay closer attention to these vulnerable populations, and how policies may have a differential impact on people depending on whether they are married or not.

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