Fractured Families
Key messages on why stability matters

December 2013
Summary

This paper draws attention to the profound and devastating effect the high and rising tide of family breakdown has on the social fabric of Britain, particularly for the most disadvantaged. In June 2013, the Centre for Social Justice published a major report *Fractured Families: Why stability matters*, which shone a light on the scale and effects of family breakdown. We found that about a million children are growing up without any meaningful contact with their fathers, and in the worst affected areas the majority of families with children are headed by single parents who have to manage by themselves. This report, which received widespread and sustained media attention, detailed the miserable cost family breakdown can have for children, families, and society — in economic, but also human terms. Family instability and breakdown is not just an emotional tragedy for children and families involved; it can also be a driver and root cause of disadvantage and social exclusion. Social justice therefore demands strengthening and supporting families.

Stable families are at the core of a strong society. It is within the family environment that an individual’s physical, emotional, and mental development occurs; where we learn to love; understand right from wrong; and acquire fundamental social skills such as sharing, empathising, self-control and communication. The qualities we learn as children enable us to develop and flourish at school, engage positively in work, fulfil our potential, and grow into adults who are fully integrated into society. A secure, nurturing, loving, stable family environment is therefore crucial and its absence has a profoundly damaging effect on children, families and wider society.

Yet for decades now there has been an escalation in family breakdown across Britain and a hollowing out of family stability. Because parental relationships lay the foundations for children’s social and emotional development, it is extremely concerning that by the time children are 15, almost half will no longer be living with both their mother and father.¹

Government action to support and strengthen families and address family breakdown has been weak. On the eve of the 2010 General Election, David Cameron, then Leader of the Opposition, gave a speech acknowledging that UK governments had failed to address family breakdown and pledged to place the agenda at the heart of his future administration, saying:

‘I want the next Government to be the most family-friendly Government we’ve ever had in this country and that is about everything we do to support families and it’s about supporting every sort of family.’²

² Speech by Rt. Hon David Cameron, *Mending our broken society*, 22 January 2010
Yet the Coalition Government he leads has paid little attention to the family stability agenda, and comprehensive action to tackle family breakdown has been almost entirely absent.

If the Government has side-lined this priority, the public has not. Polling shows that people believe in the importance of stable families.³

- 89 per cent of people agree (52 per cent strongly agree) that ‘if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start’;
- 81 per cent of people think that it is important for children to grow up living with both parents;
- 60 per cent believe marriage has become less important and this is a bad thing;
- 95 per cent believe that fathers are important to a child’s wellbeing;
- But 50 per cent believe that this and the previous government’s policies treat fathers as not important.

It is high time politicians acknowledged family breakdown is an issue which matters to the majority of people in this country and took action to reverse the trend where possible, and where family breakdown cannot be prevented, mitigate its worst effects. The Department for Work and Pensions has recently said:

> ‘The family is the first and most important building block in a child’s life and any government serious about delivering Social Justice must seek to strengthen families.’⁴

This is a fine sentiment. But principles need to be realised in practice, and, overall, the Government’s actions so far have not borne this out. Concerted and comprehensive action to support and strengthen families’ stability is long overdue.

This paper holds governments to account for what they have been doing (or have failed to do) to strengthen the family in the UK. We explain the scale of family breakdown today in Britain, what its effects are, and why we should all be troubled by the hollowing out of the family. This paper is a call to action for politicians of all parties to acknowledge the scale and significance of family breakdown and dysfunction in Britain today and its pernicious effects and to then act to reverse this trend which is so damaging to children and adults.

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³ CSJ/YouGov polling of 1,722 British adults, November 2012
Family Breakdown in Britain today

Family breakdown and family dysfunction have increasingly become part of the British social landscape. Today in Britain about 300,000 families separate each year. Over 4 million children currently do not live with both their parents. At nearly a third of under-15-year-olds, this is almost double the OECD average. One in five new-borns in the UK do not live with both parents, and by the time they are approaching adulthood, this has increased dramatically:

By the age of 15, nearly half (45 per cent) of all children aged 15 are not living with both their parents.

As a result, many children are missing out on any meaningful relationship with their natural fathers.

Today there are an estimated one million children growing up without the positive influence of a father:

By the end of childhood, a youngster is considerably more likely to have a television in their bedroom than a father living at home.

The number of lone parents has increased by 25 per cent between 1996 and 2012, and looking at the last ten years, each year has seen almost 21,000 additional lone-parent families forming. Today the number of lone-parent families currently stands at almost two million.

Over one-quarter of all families with dependent children are headed by lone parents.

This is not simply an inevitable trend across the Western world: this high proportion of lone-parent households in the UK is much higher than the European average. The UK has the fifth highest percentage of lone parents in the OECD, and we have numbers of children under 15 not living with both their parents which are twice the OECD average. Taking an international perspective thus gives the lie to any assumption that family breakdown is the inevitable consequence of life in the 21st Century; in Finland – which has the highest rate of family stability in the OECD – over 95 per cent of children under 15 live with both of their parents; the OECD average is 84 per cent.
While the national picture is concerning enough, it is particularly dramatic in the most affected local communities, where lone parenthood is the norm. In the most affected areas, two-thirds to three-quarters of all families with dependent children are headed by a single parent having to cope alone.

The UK continues to have unacceptably high rates of teenage pregnancy – despite an overall fall in since 1998. In 2013, UNICEF found the UK to be the third highest out of the 29 most developed countries in terms of teenage pregnancy rates (30 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19) and it was one of only three of these countries which saw an increase since 2003. Some parts of the UK – often seaside and rural as well as deprived urban local authority areas – still experience particularly high levels of teenage pregnancy, though it remains an issue across nearly all areas.

Under-recognised for its role in family breakdown is the rise in unmarried cohabitating parenthood. Cohabitation has increased dramatically (the number cohabiting has doubled since 1996 to almost 6 million today) and has become socially acceptable and living together before marriage is now the norm. But while about half of all cohabitees go on to marry, cohabiting parenthood is less stable than marriage. Parents who cohabit instead of marrying are three times more likely to have separated by the time their child is aged five, and even after accounting for socio-economic status and education, cohabiting parents are between two and two-and-a-half times more likely to break up than equivalent married couples. Long-term cohabitations which do not lead to marriage but endure are rare: amongst parents who remain together by the time their child is 16, 93 per cent are married.
However, while aspirations to marriage are similarly high across all social classes, further down the ladder there are cultural and financial barriers which mean that this aspiration is less attainable. There is a social gradient to marriage, with poorer parents less likely to be married.

**Figure 2: Proportion of new parents who are married (by income)**

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**Why this matters: the effects of family breakdown**

Whilst family breakdown has become increasingly familiar, its effects have become no less pernicious. Family breakdown matters because of the effects it can have on children’s life chances and the role it can play in entrenching cycles of social disadvantage.

The financial cost of family breakdown to UK society is staggeringly high and rising. This year alone it has been estimated to have reached £46 billion – over £10 billion more than the Government’s defence budget. This is equivalent of every single tax payer in the UK paying £1,541 each year to pick up the pieces. In 2015 it will reach £50 billion.

Yet more worrying still is the human cost. The evidence is clear that the stability of the family environment contributes significantly to children’s future life outcomes. A child of separated parents is more likely to:

- Grow up in poorer housing;
- Experience behavioural problems;
- Perform less well in school and gain fewer educational qualifications;
- Need more medical treatment;
- Leave school and home early;
- Become sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an early age;
- Be more depressed;
- And have higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence and adulthood.\(^5\)

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Education

‘I’ve got one Year 9 boy in my class; he’s a good kid and actually quite articulate when he speaks. But he can hardly write [...] But then you hear about how many times he’s moved school and how many times he’s moved home and it starts to make sense, how he got to this point. He doesn’t know his dad at all. His social worker told me that literally every single time she’s been to visit his mum; she’s got a new boyfriend living there. He’s got absolutely no stability.’

Anonymous teacher

- Studies have suggested a strong correlation between unstable families and educational failure. Children of divorced mothers and children in stepfamilies are almost twice as likely to fail in school and repeat a grade when compared with children raised by both biological parents in an intact family, while children raised by a never-married mother are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade when compared with children raised in intact marriages.

- Children from divorced families are almost twice as likely to be expelled from school as children from intact families, and children of single, never-married parents are more than four times more likely to be expelled.

Mental health

‘Many lone parents we work with have poor mental health, low confidence and self-esteem, and ‘baggage’ from the past. This then leads them into inappropriate relationships. Many don’t feel deserved of a better relationship and have low expectations for themselves.’

Lorraine Barrett, Centre Manager, The Family Haven

- Children’s social, emotional, and behavioural competency and mental health are closely related to the quality of their relationship with their parents and to family breakdown. Supportive family relationships improve children’s mental and physical health and the positive effects of this continue to be felt well into adulthood.

- One study showed that 60-year olds still suffer the long-term effects of childhood stress brought on by the psychological trauma of having parents split up.
Lone parents tend to have worse mental health, including depression and low self-esteem, which make it much harder for them to meet their children’s emotional and other needs and can result in poorer parenting. Research shows that the highest levels of conflict between children and mothers are reported by children of lone parents, particularly those who either entered lone parenthood from cohabitation or remained in lone parenthood from birth to three years.

Financial poverty

Single-parent families are most likely to be living in financial poverty. Lone parents are two-and-a-half times more likely to be living below the relative income poverty line (60 percent of median income) than couple parents. In 2011, 41 per cent of children from lone-parent families were in households living on less than 60 per cent of median income after housing costs, against 23 per cent of children from two-parent families.

Not only are lone-parent families more likely to be facing financial hardship due to lower income, fewer opportunities to increase earnings due to childcare constraints, etc., but in addition, children in lower-income households are also less likely than higher-income households to live in intact families:

65 per cent of children aged 12–16 in low-income households (the bottom 20 per cent) do not live with both birth parents – 26 percentage points higher than the figure for better-off households.

Thus, while family breakdown afflicts people from all backgrounds, it disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged – where its effects are also most pronounced.

Fatherlessness

‘Where father and mother are separated, continued contact with fathers is mostly non-existent. A lot of kids have never met their fathers. They lack male role models to give them a rounded view of what it is to be male and suffer from a lack of self-esteem; when asked, their anger about this loss comes out in descriptions of their fathers as a “waste of space”, and in describing themselves as “rubbish”.’

Anne McLaren, Project Manager at Fun in Action

Children who live with their fathers are more likely to have good physical and emotional health, to achieve academically, and to avoid drugs, violence, and delinquent behaviour.
Growing up without a ‘father or father figure’ makes the transition to adulthood more complicated; and the positive involvement of a father in a child’s life can act as a protective factor against issues like educational failure and anti-social behaviour.

Without a positive paternal influence, there can be particularly severe consequences; one study suggested that boys who grew up apart from their biological fathers were at least two to three times more likely to end up in prison than those who had grown up with both parents.

Having a father involved in their lives boosts children’s self-esteem and confidence. School-aged children with good relationships with their fathers are less likely to be depressed, have disruptive behaviour, or to lie than children without good father-child relationships. Similarly, girls who have fathers involved in their lives often have stronger self-esteem than girls who do not. Children with absent fathers are also at an increased risk of mental health problems.

Children from lone-parent households are more likely to have become sexually active before the age of 16, both boys and girls from lone-parent families are more likely to either become pregnant or a parent at a young age. This means that children of absent fathers are more likely to repeat cycles of family breakdown.

Our research found that in the worst-affected neighbourhoods, two-thirds of families with children did not have a father at home.

**Multiple transitions and children’s outcomes**

Where family structures change again and again, such as with the introduction of new partners to the family home after previous relationships have broken down, this has a particularly negative effect on children. Studies have found that children living in unstable families had lower mental development than in stable families and behavioural problems are known to intensify with each additional change in family structure a child experiences.

In one study, 10 per cent of single mothers were found to have a child by a new partner by the time their child born at the beginning of the study was five, compared to 2.4 per cent of cohabiting unmarried mothers and only 0.5 per cent of mothers married at the birth.
Research also shows that children who experienced two or more transitions in family structure are more likely to show disruptive behaviour; to have poorer emotional adjustment and to be lower achievers at school, and school students who have experienced more than one transition in family structure have a higher likelihood of dropping out of school.

**Teenage parenthood**

- Family breakdown is closely associated with teenage pregnancy. Mothers in fragile families are disproportionately young and more likely to have been in their teens at the time of their first birth. Young parenthood is often associated with highly unstable relationships, and teenage mothers are more likely to become lone parents.

- Tragically, teenage parenthood often threatens to repeat cycles of family breakdown. Children from separated families are more likely to become parents at a young age: one study found that 25 per cent of women whose parents had separated became teenage mothers, compared with 14 per cent of those whose parents stayed together. Girls from divorced families between the ages of seven and 16 are almost twice as likely to go on to become teenage mothers as those whose parents remained married. Recent studies have also shown that the likelihood of having a teenage birth in Britain is consistently up to two-and-a-half times higher for a daughter of a teenage mother.

- There is also a strong correlation between educational failure and teenage pregnancy: over a third of girls with between one and four GCSEs at grades D to G had been pregnant at least once, against just six per cent of those with eight or more GCSEs grade A* to C.

- There is also a particularly clear association between low income and teenage pregnancy. Rates of teenage pregnancy in the most deprived ten per cent of wards are four times higher than those in the ten per cent least deprived. The socio-economic association is starker for teenage motherhood: the rate of births to under-18 year olds in the ten per cent most deprived wards is nine times higher than the ten per cent least deprived wards.

- The association between family breakdown and teenage parenthood matters because children of teenage mothers are more likely to spend time in a lone-parent family, and they are also at increased risk of poverty, inadequate housing and poor nutrition. An influential evidence review found it is associated with a wide range of subsequent adverse health and social outcomes, and that young parents reported a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, and high anxiety levels.
A call to action

Given the bleak consequences of failing to address rising family breakdown, the case for action is clear. Family relationships are crucial to wellbeing, and a society in which this essential foundation is inadequately supported and left to crumble does an injustice to those who are left to face its effects. Politicians of all political colours need to sit up and pay attention to this looming problem. It is crucial that we attempt to prevent further family breakdown, and where this is not possible, mitigate its worst effects.

The CSJ Working Group on family breakdown will publish a full report in summer 2014, with policy recommendations to address family breakdown to ensure that the Government is not allowed to simply make hollow statements and sit complacently. The destructive reality of family breakdown must be confronted.