

# Cohabitation in Great Britain: past, present and future trends - and attitudes

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As an introduction to the historical trends in cohabitation over the last quarter century, the article assesses the available evidence on changing attitudes – relating them to the changing patterns in the proportions cohabiting and pre-maritally cohabiting. Using data primarily from the General Household Survey (GHS) the article then traces the growth in cohabitation and pre-marital cohabitation, and examines the differentials in cohabitation by age, marital status and sex. The proportions of women who cohabited pre-maritally before their first and second marriages are found to have grown substantially since the late 1960s, to around 75 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively for marriages in the mid-1990s. Amongst those cohabiting at the time of interview, the length of time cohabiting has increased over the last 15 years, especially for single men and women. The duration of time women have been pre-maritally cohabiting before their first marriage has also increased over the same period – and their ages at the start of pre-marital cohabitation have become consistently older since the mid-1960s. The possible future growth in the proportions and numbers cohabiting is also considered – and some of the implications discussed.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is widely accepted that the stigma associated with living together outside marriage, that is, cohabitation, has diminished considerably over the past three or four decades. Indeed, for a growing majority, it has now all but disappeared. It was certainly more difficult to ask questions on cohabitation during the 1960s and 1970s than now, the issue being a much more delicate one to broach – even in voluntary surveys. Nevertheless, with appropriate introduction, explanation of the reasons for asking the questions, sensitivity in asking them, and most especially with the interviewer building up a rapport with the respondent, every effort was made – and continues to be made – to ensure that the information collected is as accurate and complete as possible. As a measure, both of its increased prevalence and of acceptability of asking a question on the subject, the 1991 Census was the first to provide “living together as a couple” as a possible answer to the question on the relationship of each person to the first person entered on the census form. The real significance, of course, is that answering census questions is a *statutory obligation*, in contrast to the voluntary nature of participating in surveys.

The principal source of intercensal information on cohabitation – its current prevalence and the demographic characteristics of cohabiting couples – from official, National Statistics, surveys is the General Household Survey<sup>1</sup>, GHS. Within the GHS, there is a special Family Information Section which is devoted to marital history and cohabitation, childbearing, and family structure and composition, including the presence of step, adopted and foster children. The coverage of topics has been developed and extended over the years: initially in 1971 a few questions were addressed to women aged between 18 and 44; additional subjects – including cohabitation – were introduced in 1979; and the age range was extended, firstly going up to

age 49, and then from 16 to 59 in 1986, when men were first asked questions on cohabitation<sup>2</sup>. The development of the questions asked on cohabitation in the GHS are documented in the Appendix; it is noteworthy that the actual word “cohabitation” has never been used in any of these questions.

During the 1970s, the prevalence of cohabitation was low, but growing. Indeed, the 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point in the pace of change and level in almost every demographic series, most particularly those on fertility – especially extra-marital childbearing – marriage, divorce and family structure. These considerable changes, amounting to a structural shift in individuals’ demographic behaviour and societal norms, occurred throughout many countries of Europe, and have been termed the “Second Demographic Transition”<sup>3</sup>.

It was largely for this reason that the importance of surveys on demographic topics and related issues grew; the traditional vital statistics of births and marriages no longer told the whole story of childbearing. Not only were couples beginning to live together before marriage, many were living together without marrying – and some were having children outside marriage.

Indeed, questions on the subject of cohabitation were first asked of women primarily from the viewpoint of obtaining a complete picture on *childbearing* – not only from the aspect of actual births outside marriage, but also the *potential* for having children outside marriage.

One particular survey, the Family Formation Survey<sup>4</sup>, was designed and fielded in 1976 specifically to try to understand and interpret the prevailing patterns of fertility and family formation; subjects such as marriage, cohabitation, birth control, expectations, as well as economic, social and normative factors were studied as actual and potential influences upon women’s reproductive behaviour.

Fertility and childbearing was perhaps the principal demographic subject of research during the 1970s<sup>5</sup>, so it is particularly understandable that the main motivator for better information on cohabitation should have been to facilitate the better understanding of patterns of family formation.

In contrast, present-day interest in cohabitation is a subject of study in its own right, rather than for completing the picture on fertility; the reason is partly because cohabitation has grown considerably in prevalence over the years – with one in 8 couples in England and Wales currently cohabiting<sup>6</sup> – and partly because of the repercussions of this trend; the changing profiles of couples and families, and of household structures.

Also, it is known that, age for age, cohabiting couples have fewer children than married couples, but the increased risk of union breakdown amongst cohabiting couples compared with married couples<sup>7,8</sup> means that children in cohabiting couple families are more likely to experience family breakdown and new parental partnerships. Recent research has shown that children born to cohabiting couples are twice as likely to see their parents separate as children born within marriage<sup>9</sup>. Hence children born to cohabiting couples rather than to married parents are likely to be at relatively greater risk of subsequently living in a lone parent family or in a stepfamily.

This, then, is the basis for the current emphasis on studying cohabitation – the implications for both children and adults of subsequent transitions to different family forms and living arrangements. The other main area of interest is the effect of cohabitation upon the partners’ and children’s life chances, well-being and welfare – from demographic, epidemiological and socio-legal perspectives. Cohabitation is also studied within a comparative framework – comparing cohabiting couples and families with their married counterparts. One important such differential – union breakdown between cohabiting and married couples – has already been

mentioned; there are many others in the fields of demography, health, social policy and law. Comparisons are also being made between cohabiting men and women and their counterparts who are living *outside* a partnership; it is increasingly being recognised that, in some circumstances, this is a more appropriate comparison than with married men and women.

Of course, individuals as they reach adulthood do not fall neatly into two groups; those who will follow a “marriage career”, and those who will follow a “cohabiting career”. In practice, the life course of individuals can include both a marriage (or marriages) – perhaps preceded by pre-marital cohabitation – and, in addition, one (or more) spells of living in a partnership outside marriage. (And the different possible *sequences* of marriages and cohabitations result in a number of distinct relationship histories<sup>7</sup>.)

Yet others may go through life never marrying and never living in a cohabiting relationship. Although this latter pattern is relatively rare, what has become more frequent is for men and women to be living outside a partnership *at the time of interview*<sup>10</sup>. This phenomenon is likely largely to reflect the temporary state of being in between relationships – for example, after separation or divorce, and before cohabiting. For if more relationships are breaking up than formerly, it might be expected that at any one time proportionately more individuals will be partnerless, even if only for a short time.

Hence the study of cohabitation ideally includes its relationship *order* within a combined marital and cohabitation history, and, related to that consideration, its timing in terms of the dynamics of moving into and out of the state of cohabiting: certainly the dynamics are important as it has been shown that the majority of cohabiting unions either break down or are translated into marriage<sup>11</sup>.

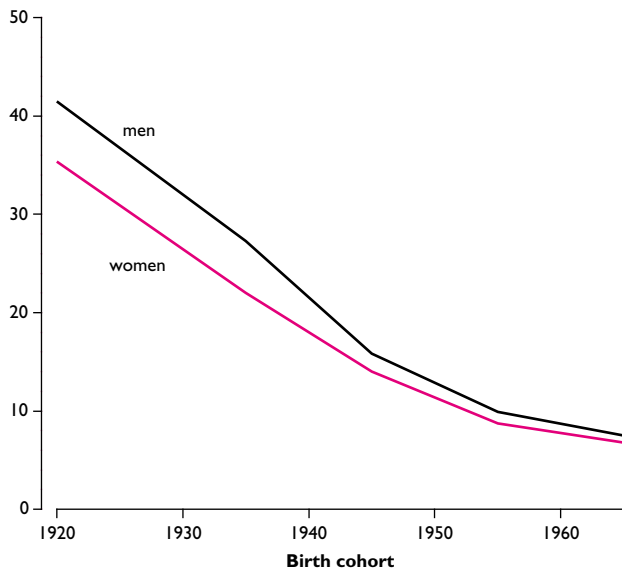
These dynamic details – the “flows” – can perhaps best be captured by means of panel surveys which follow individuals over time as they begin and finish their relationships; examples of these surveys are: the British Household Panel Survey, BHPS, and the National Child Development Study, NCDS. Cross-sectional surveys can also obtain details of changes by asking retrospective questions, although their main strength is their ability to obtain “snapshots” of the prevailing prevalence of cohabitation. The GHS includes both retrospective and current questions on cohabitation – see the Appendix – and results from them will be presented and discussed. However, the main purpose of this article is to present the basic, cross-sectional, demographic information on cohabitation, primarily in terms of recent and historical trends, together with up to date estimates, and some projections.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS COHABITATION

Undoubtedly, with regard to cohabitation, as with many issues of personal decision and morality, attitudes and behaviour are inextricably linked. Whether changes in attitude lead to shifts in behaviour patterns, or whether substantial changes in demographic behaviour lead to changing attitudes, is difficult to distinguish; possibly both mechanisms operate simultaneously. It is also quite possible for individuals to adhere to certain tenets in the abstract, but yet, when faced with personal problems in real-life situations, to act contrary to those beliefs.

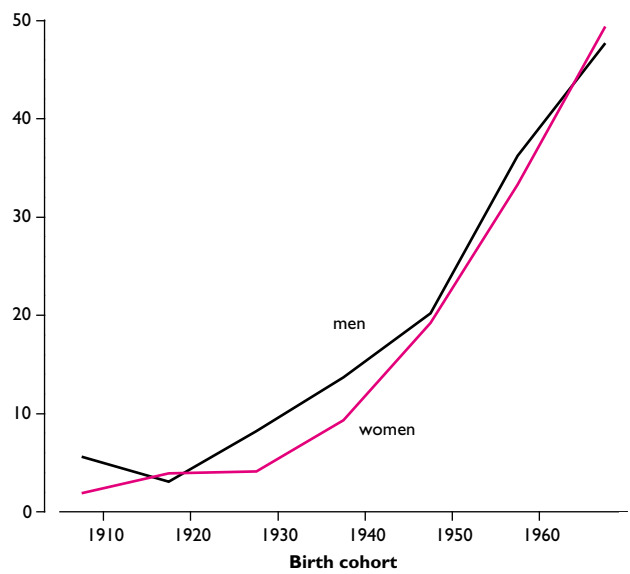
A question was asked in the BHPS<sup>12</sup> if respondents agreed or disagreed that living together outside marriage is always wrong; Figure 1 shows that the proportion agreeing was very low for those aged under 30, but comparatively high for those aged 60 or over. This pattern is consistent with the corresponding proportions of men and women who reported that they had ever cohabited; very low for those born in the 1900s and 1910s, and comparability high for those born in the 1960s. Hence, belief and practice – considering it wrong, and not cohabiting; or disagreeing that it is wrong, and cohabiting – coincide to a considerable degree. However, this coincidence may reflect the strong influence of social mores on *both* attitudes *and* behaviour.

**Figure 1a** Percentage agreeing that living together outside marriage is always wrong, 1990/92, Great Britain



Source: BHPS<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1b** Percentage of birth cohort who have ever cohabited, 1990/92, Great Britain



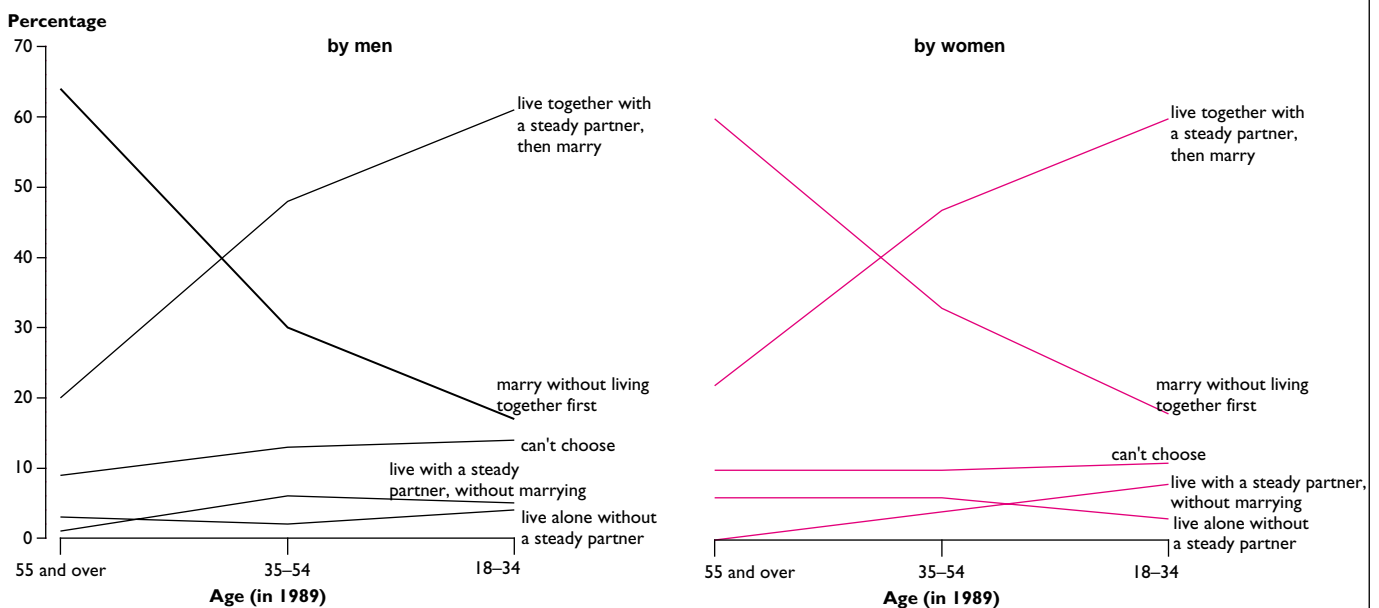
More generally, information on attitudes on a wide range of topics – including sex, marriage and cohabitation – has been collected over many years in the British Social Attitudes Surveys, BSAs, since the early 1980s. The proportion of respondents saying that pre-marital relations are always or mostly wrong<sup>13</sup> has slowly declined from 28 per cent in 1983 to 15 per cent in 1998<sup>14,15</sup>. (In contrast, the corresponding proportion saying that extra-marital relations – that is, adultery – is always or mostly wrong<sup>13</sup>, has maintained a consistently high level – between 80 and 88 per cent – over the same period<sup>14,15</sup>.) So, while there has been a considerable shift in attitudes towards cohabitation *before* marriage, there has been no wavering in support of faithfulness *within* marriage.

There are also considerable variations by age in attitudes to the advisability of marrying directly – that is, without pre-maritally

cohabiting. In the BSA 1993/94 edition<sup>16</sup>, over 60 per cent of British men and women born before 1930 – roughly aged 60 and over – would advise a young person to marry without living together first<sup>17</sup>, but the proportion was only about 40 per cent amongst those aged 40 to 59, and less than 20 per cent amongst those aged from 20 to 39<sup>16</sup>. It is perhaps not surprising that the older the respondent the more traditional the views held, and this is a common feature amongst respondents in other countries such as the USA, the former Federal Republic of Germany, and the Irish Republic<sup>16</sup>.

Attitudes on most issues concerning relationships vary considerably with age. When faced with various alternatives of living with a partner outside, or inside, marriage – or living alone – as listed in Figure 2 – the advice<sup>17</sup> which would be given to a young woman depends heavily

**Figure 2** Advice which would be given to a young woman on cohabitation and marriage, Great Britain, 1989



Source: British Social Attitudes<sup>17</sup>

on the respondent's age, as was found in the BSA 1990 edition<sup>14</sup> – see Figure 2. Whilst the proportion advising marrying directly was decisively lower the younger the respondent, the corresponding proportion recommending living together first before marrying rose decisively to 60 per cent amongst those aged under 35. Relatively few respondents advised any of the alternatives, irrespective of the age of the respondent. Noteworthy was the small proportion advising living with a steady partner without marrying – that is, recommending long-term cohabitation – although, importantly, 8 per cent, one in 12, of women aged under 35 would have given this advice to a woman of about her own age.

More recently, in the BSA 1998/99 edition<sup>18</sup>, 64 per cent, almost 2 in every 3 respondents agreed<sup>19</sup>, that “it is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married?”<sup>18</sup>. The differences between this proportion and the corresponding ones in Figure 2 are enormous; undoubtedly some change in attitudes took place during the 1990s, but most of the difference is undoubtedly due to the difference between positively advising a course of action to a given person – perhaps visualised by the respondent as someone they know; say a daughter or sister – and agreeing it is “all right” for others.

In addition, amongst respondents in the BSA 1999/2000 edition<sup>15</sup>, 61 per cent agreed<sup>19</sup> that “it is a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first?”. It seems certain that there has been a steady increase in support for the idea that it is sensible to live together first; indeed, during the last decade there have been a number of celebrities who have publicly expressed this opinion. Interestingly, the proportion not disapproving<sup>20</sup> of living together first has coincided almost exactly with the proportion of women who have pre-maritally cohabited before their second marriage (see Figure 8). Possibly women whose first marriages have ended in divorce and who subsequently cohabit are in the vanguard of those influencing changing attitudes. Furthermore, new demographic evidence now suggests that pre-marital cohabitation is *not* associated with an increased risk of subsequent divorce<sup>7,21</sup>; formerly the available evidence – not only for this country, but for many others, too – was that it was<sup>22</sup>.

The reasons men and women cohabit undoubtedly vary according to age, partnership history and the wish to retain a degree of independence. For young single men and women, living together may be a “trial marriage”, a “trial relationship”, a definite alternative to marriage – or none of these. For separated and divorced people, cohabitation can represent the same options, but with the added perspective of having the companionship, but avoiding the potential emotional and financial cost of divorce<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, cohabiting couples are very similar to married couples in the extent to which they agree with the statement that: “a relationship is about making a long-term commitment to each other” – the proportions in recent research were 92 and 96 per cent, respectively<sup>24</sup>. The smallest proportion, but still quite large at 89 per cent, was recorded for cohabiting couples without any children and where both partners were single, that is, never-married<sup>24</sup>. If this does reflect a slightly lower commitment, it is perhaps consistent with the partners either testing their relationship – or not thinking particularly about their life together in the future.

The attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage of a very similar group of cohabitants – never-married, without children aged under 35 – were recently analysed using BHPS data<sup>25</sup>. The cohabitants were asked: “Do you think there are any *advantages* in living as a couple, rather than being married?” 40 per cent of men and 47 per cent of women agreed that there were. Of these cohabitants who did perceive there to be advantages in cohabiting<sup>26</sup>, 51 per cent of men and 43 per cent of women mentioned first the idea of a “trial marriage”; and about 30 per cent of both men and women mentioned first the advantage of no legal ties. Somewhat surprisingly, only a small proportion – 4 per cent of men, and 8 per cent of women – cited the benefit of personal independence. Respondents may have thought it a somewhat

unacceptable answer if they were in a relationship, even if they did value their independence. Nevertheless, the reasons given of a trial marriage and no legal ties do suggest the idea of retaining a degree of flexibility, if not freedom, in the relationship.

The above has been a sketch of the public's changing and current, views on cohabitation – and also of the changing priority and type of interest accorded by demographers and population analysts generally. Undoubtedly cohabitation is now a subject of study in its own right, although often from a comparative perspective with married couples, or analysed within a broader context of the range of family circumstances and living arrangements. Indeed the phrase “living arrangements” has become common currency to recognise, and include, the state of living in an informal union with other family, and non-family, forms.

## DATA CONSIDERATIONS

The following sections on trends in cohabitation use data primarily from the GHS. Other surveys provide alternative series of estimates – which differ slightly – but, overall, the trends are highly consistent, given the different methods of collecting data<sup>27</sup>. A recent comprehensive analysis<sup>27</sup> had compared various features of cohabitation using these different data sources – and evaluated their internal consistencies. One conclusion is that the estimates of the level of cohabitation depend upon the particular survey and type of question asked, and that such estimates are valid only in that context. Details of the precise questions asked in the GHS on cohabitation are given in the Appendix.

As with other surveys, the estimates of the proportions of men and women who report that they are cohabiting are not consistent within the GHS – particularly if considered separately over all the different age and legal marital status categories. No adjustments to correct for this inconsistency have been made to the results presented in this article, although the matter was addressed when recent population estimates and projections of the numbers cohabiting were made<sup>6</sup> (whose results appear later in this article).

It should be added that during the 1970s – and indeed up to the present-day – the regular questions on cohabitation, in the GHS – and also in the 1991 Census – always refer to cohabitation with a *co-residential* partner – that is, with both members of the couple usually living in the same household. Also, in all the questions asked, the word “cohabitation” has never been used, though as discussed elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, and implied in the Appendix, the evolving wording of the question reflects the changing attitudes to cohabitation away from considering it a “marriage-like” state. Currently, “living together as a couple” is the standard phrase used in censuses and surveys. When asking this question, either by the context or through an introductory sentence, it is clear that *heterosexual* cohabitation is the subject of interest.

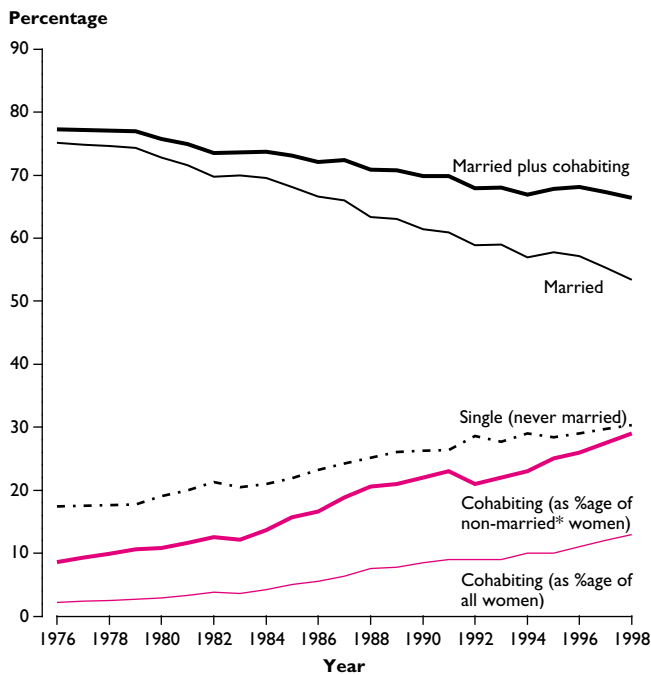
## TRENDS IN THE PROPORTION COHABITING

The proportion of women who are cohabiting has climbed steadily over the last quarter century; Figure 3 depicts the trend amongst women aged under 50 who were currently not living as married – that is, those who were single, divorced, widowed and separated. Between 1976 and 1998, the proportion more than trebled, from 9 per cent to 29 per cent. The former estimate has been derived from the 1976 Family Formation Survey<sup>4</sup>, and added to the series of GHS estimates in Figure 3. The 1976 estimate is entirely consistent with this latter series – as indeed is the other 1976 estimate – of cohabiting women as a proportion of all women – with the corresponding GHS series also plotted in Figure 3.

The Family Formation Survey report recognised the difficulties the interviewers faced in obtaining information on cohabitation, stating: “It is commonly assumed that those women who cohabit with a man to whom they are not legally married usually describe themselves as married”<sup>4</sup>. The survey, however, used two distinct strategies to detect

Figure 3

Percentage of women aged 18–49 who were: cohabiting; married; single, 1976–98, Great Britain



\* Single + separated + divorced + widowed

Source: General Household Survey and 1976 Family Formation Survey

cohabitation. Firstly, women who stated they were married were asked whether they had been married, or lived with someone once only or more than once, so giving them the opportunity of mentioning informal unions, and secondly, single, separated, divorced and widowed women were asked whether they were having a sexual relationship and, if so, whether they were living together. Two per cent of women who initially described themselves as married took the opportunity of saying that they were in fact cohabiting. The report adds: "This latter proportion must be regarded as an underestimate since its validity depended upon women more or less spontaneously reporting a situation that many may prefer not to admit"<sup>4</sup>.

In contrast, the GHS employed a more direct approach when a question on cohabitation was introduced in 1979: "Are you currently living with someone as man and wife?" It was largely through the pioneering work of the Family Formation Survey – which showed that a question could be asked on cohabitation – that the GHS decided to include one – and a direct question at that. Because of the consistency of the responses between the Family Formation Survey and the GHS, the degree of underestimation may not have been as large as was originally suspected.

### TRENDS IN THE PROPORTIONS MARRIED AND LIVING IN COUPLES

In contrast to the rising trend for cohabitation, the proportion of women aged under 50 who are married has slipped downwards at a steady pace – from 75 per cent in 1976, to just above one half – 53 per cent – in 1998. Furthermore, the pace of decline appears to have quickened between 1996 and 1998, when the proportion cohabiting (amongst all women) appeared to increase at a faster rate.

To some extent this combination of rising and falling trends might be expected, since if the proportion of women who live in couples –

whether married or cohabiting – remains roughly constant, an increase in the proportion cohabiting would be accompanied by a decline in the proportion married.

This feature, the proportion of all women who are either married or cohabiting, that is, the proportion of all women who are living in couples, is depicted in Figure 3. As may be seen, the trend is a moderately declining one, indicating that relatively fewer women have been living in a partnership in each successive year. Part of the explanation lies in the decline in the proportions of young men and women marrying – and amongst those who do marry, the postponement to older ages. Figure 3 indicates that the proportion of women aged under 50 who are single has grown from 17 per cent in 1976 to 30 per cent in 1998, a near doubling. However, amongst single women, a proportion will have been cohabiting, so that never having married does not necessarily mean that the person is not currently living in a partnership – a subject which will now be addressed.

### COHABITATION BY MARITAL STATUS

Whether men and women are single, divorced or widowed makes a considerable difference to the proportions cohabiting – with single and divorced women and divorced men, cohabiting in the relatively largest numbers (Figures 4a and 4b). One in 13, 8 per cent, of single women were cohabiting in 1979, whilst the proportion was almost one in 3, 31 per cent, by 1998, that is, a quadrupling. It seems likely that, over the last two decades of the last century, young never-married women increasingly started living in informal unions instead of marrying; certainly evidence shows that of all first unions from those starting in the early 1960s to those beginning in the early 1990s, an increasing proportion were cohabitations, and a decreasing proportion were marriages<sup>7</sup>.

Divorced women currently cohabit in the same proportion as single women, at 31 per cent (Figure 4a). This similar level contrasts with the pattern seen over the last 20 years, when divorced women have cohabited in relatively larger numbers – and in the early 1980s, when the proportion of divorced women who were cohabiting was twice that of single women. Divorced women may well wish to delay or avoid a subsequent marriage, but yet want the companionship which marriage would provide, but which an informal union can now offer. Financial considerations, such as loss of pension, or personal reasons, such as sacrificing independence or a home may also influence the decision to cohabit, rather than to marry. A partial explanation why the proportion cohabiting has risen at a faster rate amongst single women than divorced women lies with age; as will be seen the proportion cohabiting has grown fastest amongst the young; and single women are, in general, younger than divorced women.

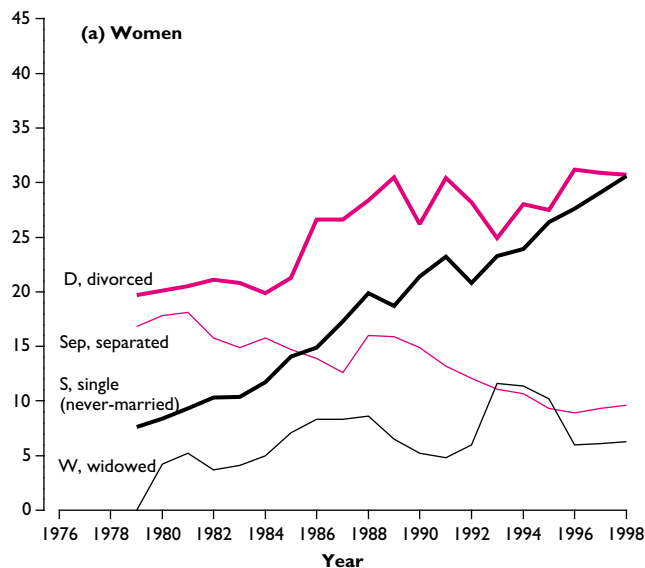
A somewhat similar picture also applies to men in that the proportion of single men cohabiting has increased most, from almost one in 8, 12 per cent, in 1986 (when questions were first asked of men in the GHS) to one in 4, 25 per cent, in 1998, a doubling in 12 years (Figure 4b). Single men and women have increasingly lived in an informal union as their first union – whether as a pre-marital cohabitation or as a cohabiting union not subsequently resulting in marriage. Indeed, for those born after the mid-1960s, more started their first union as a cohabitation than as a direct marriage<sup>7</sup>.

Also, even though the proportion of divorced men who were cohabiting has been high throughout the period – remaining relatively stable at around the 40 per cent level – it has been consistently higher than that of divorced women. Judging by the patterns of remarriage after divorce, divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women of the same age; possibly, after divorce, men are also more likely than women to repartner in an informal union.

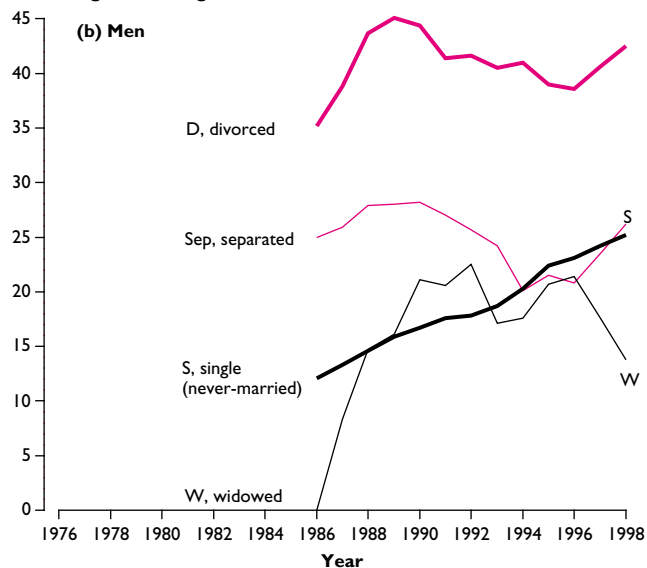
**Figure 4**

**Percentage of those aged 18–49 who were cohabiting, by legal marital status, 1979–98, Great Britain**

**Percentage cohabiting**



**Percentage cohabiting**



Source: General Household Survey

**AGE**

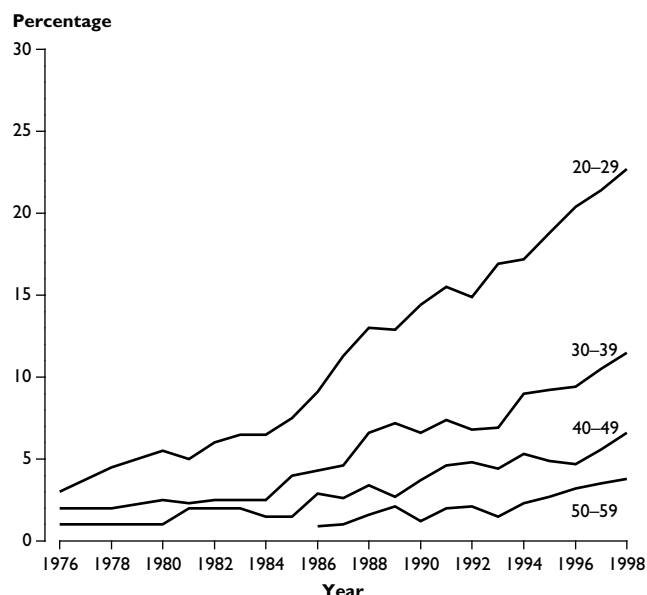
Cohabiting men and women are predominantly young – with the peak age group for the number – and the *proportion* – cohabiting being the mid to late 20s<sup>28</sup>. With cohabiting unions having grown at the expense of marriage, almost four in 10 non-married women aged between 25 and 29 were cohabiting in 1998, and over one third of those aged 30 to 34<sup>1</sup>. The proportion was still over one quarter for women in their early 40s. The picture is broadly similar for men, although, age for age, the proportions are generally slightly higher.

The above proportions have been expressed as numbers cohabiting out of all those *not currently married* – that is, the single, separated, divorced and widowed. Strictly speaking, of course, the separated are legally married, but as the separated can – and do – cohabit, they have been included in the group who are “eligible” to cohabit.

In order to consider long-term trends in cohabitation by age, it is easier to consider the numbers cohabiting out of the total number in the age-group concerned – that is, including those who are currently married and living with their spouse. Proportions calculated on this alternative

**Figure 5a**

**Percentage of all women\* who were cohabiting in each age-group, 1976–98, Great Britain**

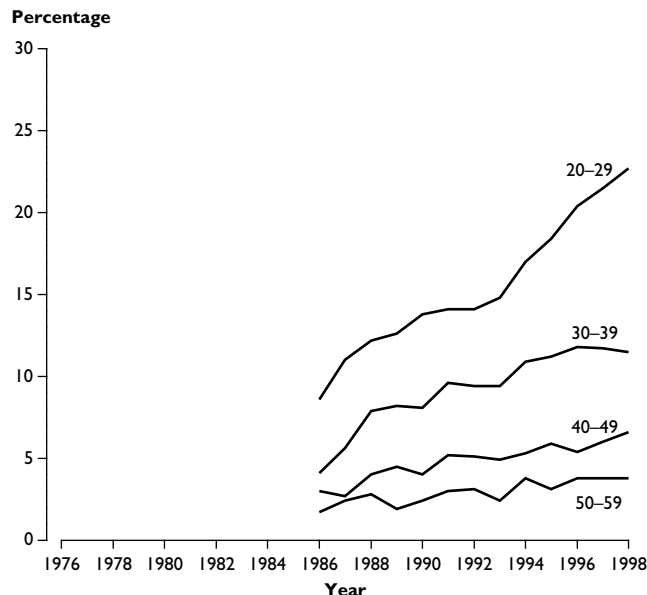


\* all marital statuses, including married

Source: General Household Survey

**Figure 5b**

**Percentage of all men\* who were cohabiting in each age-group, 1986–98, Great Britain**



\* all marital statuses, including married

basis are inevitably lower, but with earlier estimates derived exclusively this way, comparisons are possible over a longer timespan.

Figures 5a and 5b depict the trends in these proportions (including estimates from the 1976 Family Formation Survey<sup>4</sup>) – from which it may be seen that, in each age-group, for both men and women, there has been a consistent increase over the last quarter of a century. Furthermore, the *rate* of increase has in general been faster the younger the age-group, with the proportions cohabiting quintupling for women in their twenties. Just under one quarter – 23 per cent – of all women aged 20 to 24 were cohabiting in 1998, compared with 9 per cent in 1986. In addition, there is some evidence of a quickening of the rate of increase around 1993, although it is difficult to detect any changes at about that time in the proportions cohabiting by marital status (Figure 4a and 4b).

One important factor which will have influenced these trends – particularly at the youngest ages – is the decline in the proportions of men and women who are married<sup>10</sup>. Because, in the earlier years, relatively more in each age-group were married, the effect will be a greater “dilution” of the numbers cohabiting in those years. This, in turn, will give the impression of a larger increase over the period in the proportion cohabiting than would be the case were the number cohabiting to be related to the number not currently married. Nevertheless, over the last 12 years, even on this latter basis, the proportion cohabiting has increased faster the younger the age-group – albeit not as fast as depicted in Figure 5.

## DURATION OF COHABITATION

The results presented so far all refer to “snapshots” of the proportions cohabiting – whether by marital status or age – in the individual survey years. That is, a cross-sectional picture has been provided, without any indication of the length of time the union has already lasted, earlier marital history or whether the current cohabiting union was the first, or subsequent one, for either partner. The GHS has asked questions on current cohabitation, and the date of the start of that union for both men and women since 1986, so that the *duration* of cohabitation can be calculated – at least up to the time of the GHS interview.

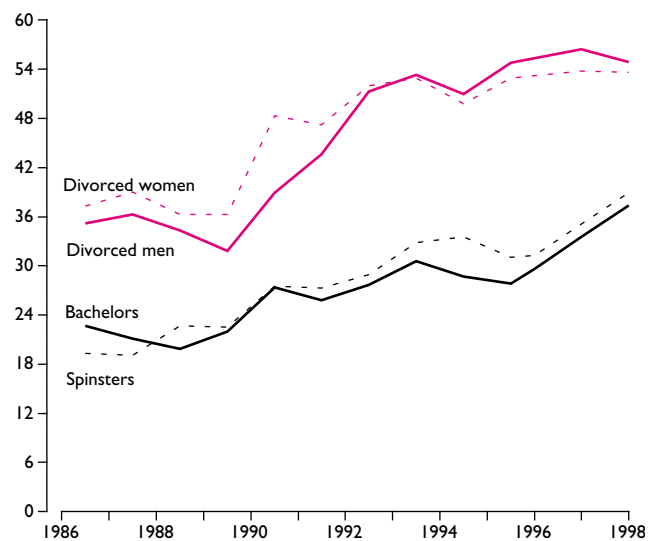
Of course, such durations, as calculated, are incomplete, since it is not known at the time of interview how much longer the union will last – or if it will in the future be translated into marriage. Nevertheless, the calculated durations do give an indication of the trends in the length of these unions. In contrast to the situation for married couples, whose marriages have lasted up to 50 years and more, most cohabiting couples have been living together for only a few years<sup>28</sup>.

Figure 6 shows the trends in the median duration since 1986 for single and divorced men and women. For all four groups the median duration has lengthened over the 12 year period, indicating a greater time spent in informal unions. The median duration cohabiting amongst single cohabiting men increased by over one half from just under 2 years to just over 3 years, whilst amongst single cohabiting women the median duration doubled from roughly 1½ years to over 3 years. A similar story also applies to divorced men and women, although the median durations are at least one third longer than those of single men and women, respectively.

It is understandable that divorced men and women should have been cohabiting longer than single men and women, since on average they will tend to be older, and possibly more reluctant to marry. Living in a cohabiting union may also be a longer-term living arrangement for the divorced than the single – whose informal unions tend either to be translated fairly quickly into marriage or to end in separation<sup>11</sup>. Also, since the age profile of cohabiting single men and women has consistently become younger, one would expect there to be reduced scope for informal unions to have been in existence as long as those of divorced men and women.

Figure 6

Trends in median duration of cohabitation\* for single and divorced\*\* men and women, 1986–98, Great Britain



\* For those who were cohabiting at the time of interview; duration measured up to date of interview in the different years

\*\* Two-year averages (apart from 1986 and 1998)

Source: General Household Survey

It has been proposed, in the field of family law, that cohabitants should be given certain rights, for example concerning property, if they have been living together for a certain minimum period; two years has been mentioned. This issue is discussed in another article in this volume<sup>28</sup>.

## DURATION OF PRE-MARITAL COHABITATION

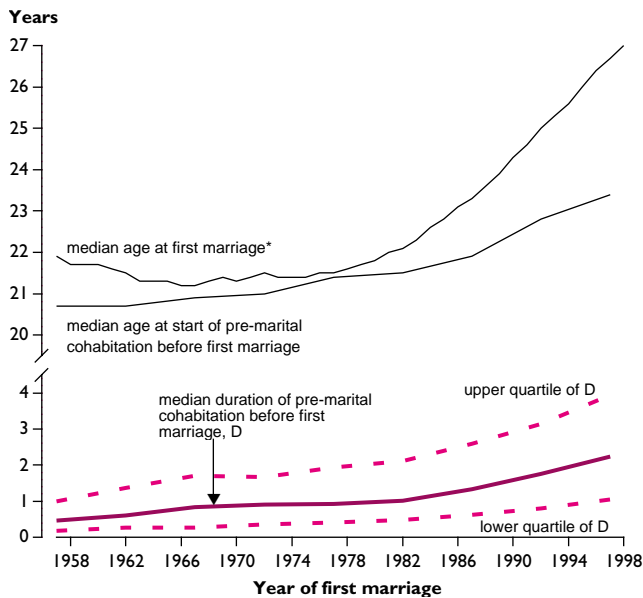
Amongst those recorded as cohabiting in the GHS, a proportion will subsequently marry their partners. (Evidence<sup>7,11</sup> suggests that, amongst those cohabiting in their first union, a majority will marry their partners, although the proportion has been declining slowly the more recent the year of starting this first cohabiting union<sup>7</sup>.) For obvious reasons, those who are cohabiting at the time of interview cannot be divided into those who will marry their partners, and those who will not.

What is possible and practical, of course, is to ask *retrospectively* about pre-marital cohabitation, and this the GHS has done since 1979, asking respondents who have ever been married whether they cohabited pre-maritally – and when they started so living together. From 1979 to 1988, the questions were only asked for the current or most recent marriage, whereas since 1989 the questions have been asked for *every* marriage – both previous and current – so that, for example, information on pre-marital cohabitation before the respondent's *first* marriage can be studied. In addition, because the question is retrospective and the end date of the pre-marital cohabitation – that is, that of the marriage – is known as well as the start date, the *complete* duration can be computed.

As with the increase in the duration of *current* cohabitation, the duration of time couples have *pre-maritally* cohabited has lengthened the more recent the marriage. Figure 7 shows the median duration of pre-marital cohabitation reported by women for their first marriage. The median duration increased between first marriages in the early and late 1960s, remained fairly level during the 1970s, but, since the early 1980s, has lengthened consistently. Overall, the median duration of pre-marital cohabitation has quintupled in length over 40 years of first

**Figure 7**

**Trends in median age at start of pre-marital cohabitation before first marriage, duration of such pre-marital cohabitation, and age at first marriage,\* for women, by year of first marriage, 1957–98, Great Britain**



\* for England and Wales  
Source: General Household Survey and marriage registration

marriages, from under 6 months to 27 months. Figure 7 also indicates that amongst the couples taking the longest time to marry – the slowest quarter of couples, to be precise – the duration of pre-marital cohabitation has lengthened from at least one to at least four years.

Increasingly, couples who have started living together do not place a high priority on marrying, though they intend to do so; many view the cost of a “proper wedding” as very expensive, particularly in the early days of a partnership when setting up home, and housing costs, can be demanding, even on two incomes. There perhaps has been a tendency for couples to defer considering when to marry until they feel they can afford it, when domestic arrangements have been settled and when they are ready for the large social occasion they wish it to be.

The growth in pre-marital cohabitation has been accompanied by an increase in secular marriage; the proportion of marriages being solemnised with a civil ceremony has grown considerably over the last decade – from 48 per cent to 61 per cent in 1998<sup>29</sup>. Civil marriages – whether those solemnised in Register Offices or those in approved premises<sup>30</sup> – are more likely to have been preceded by pre-marital cohabitation than religious marriages<sup>29</sup>.

Certainly couples have always wished to celebrate their marriage in due style and with a maximum sense of occasion and setting. What has changed in recent years has been the range of opportunities to do so – particularly with the advent of marriage in approved premises<sup>30</sup>.

Accompanying this increased choice has been the difficulty in arranging weddings on one of a number of preferred days – most popularly Saturdays in certain months of the year – which has meant that marriages are probably arranged further in advance than formerly. In fact, the marriage regulations were changed a few years ago so that a notice of marriage is now valid for one year, instead of 3 months, as had been the case previously.

All these factors are likely to have contributed to the lengthening of pre-marital cohabitation, as well as the growing acceptance – indeed,

general support for the advisability – of couples testing out their relationship by living together first before marrying. Hence, evidence from both attitudes and behaviour suggests that pre-marital cohabitation has become a distinct stage – perhaps becoming the modern-day equivalent of the courtship period or of “going steady”.

Figure 7 also shows the estimated median age of women at the beginning of their pre-marital cohabitation with their future first husbands, according to the year of their first marriage. It may be seen that there has been a continued trend, since first marriages in the early 1970s, towards starting to live together at older ages. The profile of ages at first marriage became younger and younger up to the early 1970s, but thereafter the pattern of ages became older and older, as may also be seen in Figure 7 which shows the median age of spinsters marrying. This increasing age of women at first marriage can therefore be attributed not only to a slight trend towards being older at the start of pre-marital cohabitation, but also to the lengthening of the duration of such pre-marital cohabitation before first marriage.

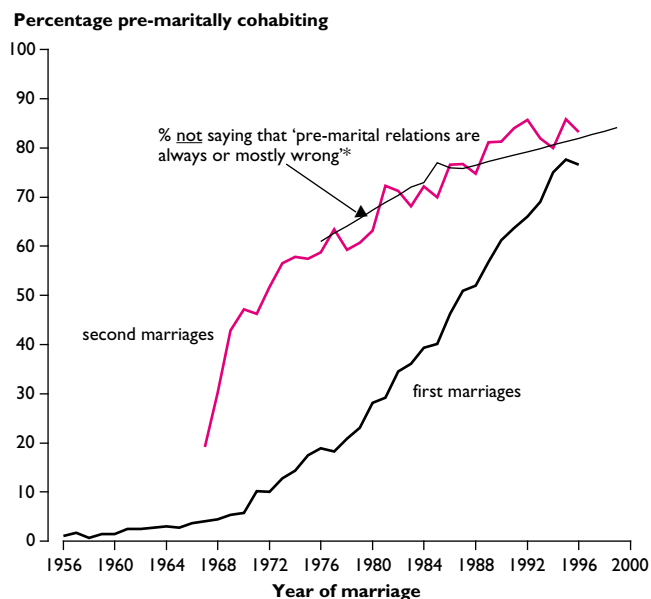
### THE PROPORTION OF COUPLES WHO PRE-MARITALLY COHABIT

Another factor has also contributed towards later age at marriage: the growing proportion of couples who have lived together before marriage, as shown in Figure 8. Figure 8 provides estimates of the proportions of first and second marriages in the different years in which the couple lived together before marriage – as reported by the women (whose first or second marriage it was). The proportion was negligibly small – under one in 50 – for first marriages up to the end of the 1950s, but rose during the 1960s to one in 20 and increased at an accelerated pace from about 1970 until the mid-1990s, when around three quarters of women reported that they had lived together with their first husband before marrying (77 per cent in 1996).

This sustained and dramatic increase throughout the past three decades in the proportion pre-maritally cohabiting may be viewed as

**Figure 8**

**Percentage of women who reported that they had pre-maritally cohabited with their future husband for (a) all first marriages and (b) all second marriages by year of marriage, Great Britain**



\* in 1976, % refers to those who did not disapprove of pre-marital sexual relations  
Source: General Household Survey

having a “multiplier effect” – both upon the trend towards starting pre-marital cohabitation before first marriage at an increasingly older age, and also upon the lengthening of the duration of pre-marital cohabitation – resulting in an even stronger trend towards an older age at first marriage.

Furthermore, as Figure 8 indicates, there has been an increasing trend with second marriages, too, so that for second marriages in the early 1990s more than four in five women cohabited pre-maritally (86 per cent in 1992). Also, women who are marrying for the second, rather than the first, time are more likely to live with their future husband before marriage. The differential in the proportions pre-maritally cohabiting between women’s first and second marriages has narrowed considerably; as might be expected, the pattern matches that of the trends in the proportions of single and divorced women who were currently cohabiting at the time of interview, as portrayed in Figure 4a. Of course, a proportion – probably over one half – of these latter single and divorced women would have gone on to marry their partner, so that the similarity of trends and differentials is not surprising, there being a large number in common in both groups.

The question of why divorced women cohabit – and pre-maritally cohabit – in relatively larger numbers than single women has not been thoroughly addressed. Possibly the very experience and process of divorce has caused the divorced to view marriage more negatively or to seek a subsequent union which is perceived as allowing an easier exit, if necessary. Certainly, evidence from the BSA 1987 report<sup>31</sup> tentatively concluded that those who have been divorced or separated are more liberal in their attitudes towards marriage and divorce than are the married<sup>31</sup>.

The same report also tentatively (because of small sample numbers) concluded that *cohabitees* are the group with the most distinctively liberal views towards marriage and divorce and are “emphatically against making divorce more difficult to obtain and markedly less sympathetic to the notion that society ought to do more to protect marriage”<sup>31</sup>. This seems to suggest that cohabitees, one third of whom are divorced<sup>28</sup>, are more likely to regard divorce as a safety mechanism compared with those who are married – most of whom would be in their first marriage.

Whether the observed patterns of cohabitation of the single and divorced may be explained by a theory of disillusionment with the institution of marriage, or the relative fear of a subsequent divorce, is difficult to determine; undoubtedly a range of attitudes on the part of *both* partners play a role. Nevertheless, recent research shows that nearly three quarters of cohabiting couple partners expect to marry each other – and seven out of every eight cohabitants expect to marry sometime<sup>25</sup>.

### **CURRENT PATTERNS OF COHABITATION: INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS**

The past trends in cohabitation as well as those in marriage, divorce and fertility, will have culminated in the present-day patterns of marital, partnership and family circumstances, and, in particular, in the current profiles of families and households.

At a basic level, we now ask respondents the number of previous spells of cohabitation they have had which ended in the past and which did not lead to marriage. This aspect was an important omission in the set of questions on cohabitation in the GHS until recently: up to 1996 the GHS included questions on current cohabitation, and on pre-marital cohabitation before each marriage, but not on any earlier cohabiting union which ended without the partners marrying.

A recent article<sup>7</sup>, based on a specially tailored set of Omnibus Survey questions on respondents’ cohabitational histories, showed not only that questions could be asked on the subject, but also that they provided crucial information which allowed a number of topical issues to be analysed properly – such as the relative stability of cohabiting unions compared with marriages. The article argued for extra information on cohabitational history to be included in the GHS and a question was subsequently introduced in 1998<sup>1</sup> on the number of past informal unions which did not lead to marriage (see Appendix – Section 3). (Further developments on asking questions on this particular subject are reported in another article<sup>28</sup> in this issue).

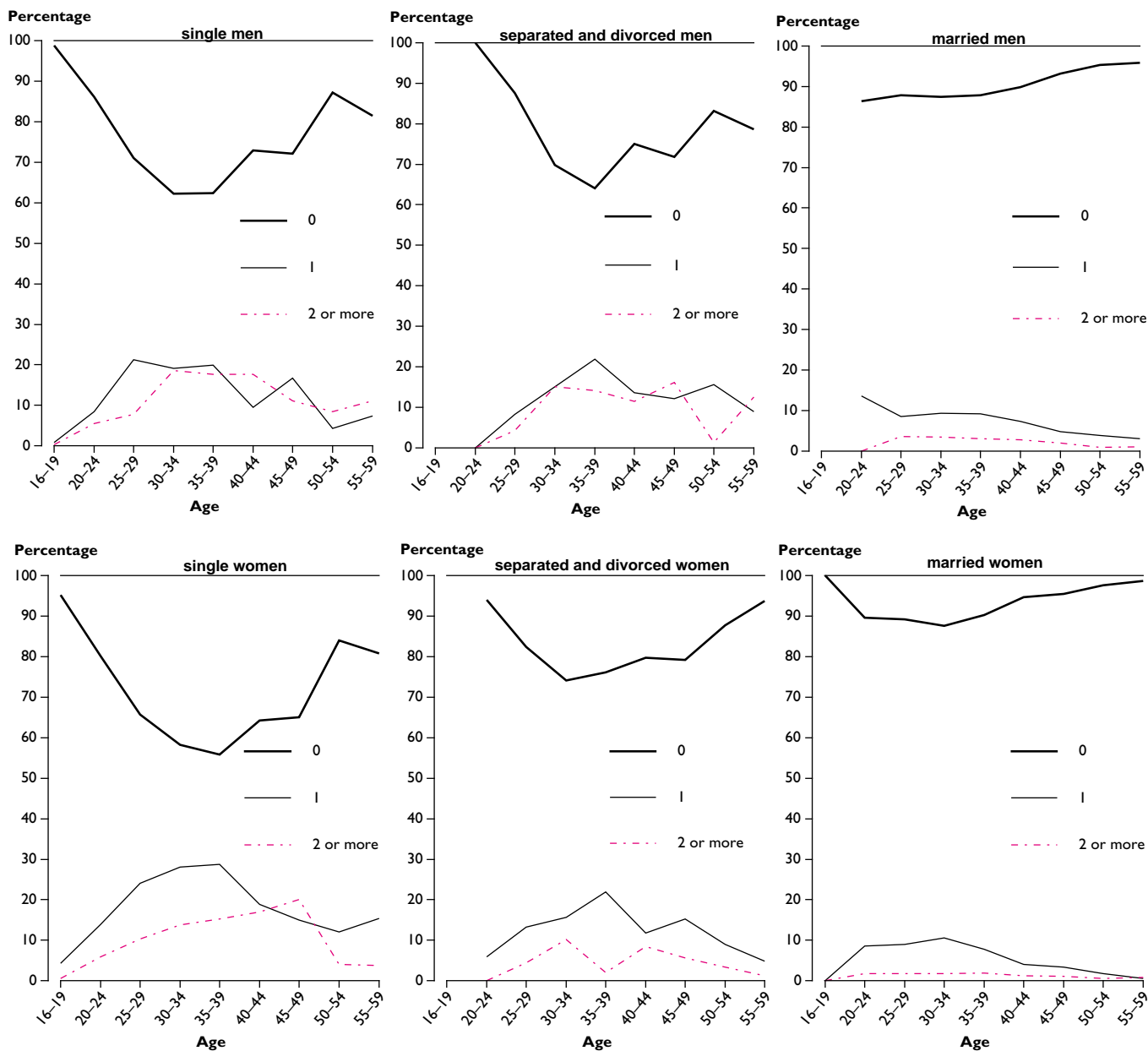
Analysing the answers to this new question reveals some contrasting patterns – differentials not only by age and sex, but also by marital status, as is apparent from Figure 9. For every marital status, virtually all men and women in the youngest age-group reported that they had *not* had a cohabiting union which ended in the past – an understandable result, given their age. However, this proportion falls for successively older age groups up to those in their thirties, when the proportion having had no past cohabitations is lowest – and, of course, the relative numbers having had one, or two or more, such unions, is highest. Those in their thirties obviously will have had the time to have formed – and finished – cohabiting relationships, but this age-group would have been born during the 1960s when attitudes and demographic behaviour were changing rapidly. As was seen in Figure 1b, those born in successively earlier years than the 1960s were decreasingly likely to have ever cohabited.

In general, larger proportions of single women report having had one past cohabiting union than single men, but roughly similar proportions said that they had had two or more past cohabiting unions. In contrast, separated and divorced men report having had slightly more cohabiting partnerships than their female counterparts. Overall, 22 per cent of separated and divorced men stated they had had one or more past cohabiting relationships, whereas the corresponding proportion for women was 17 per cent. Mention has been made of the fact that divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women, and that possibly divorced men are more likely to repartner in an informal union than divorced women. These results may reflect the cumulative effect of this possible differential.

On average, married men and women report having had the fewest past cohabiting unions which did not lead to marriage, compared with men and women of the other marital statuses, and of similar age. Furthermore, the older the married man or woman, the smaller the proportion having had a cohabiting partnership. This result is consistent with the results from the study<sup>7</sup> mentioned earlier which examined the combined marital and cohabitational histories of respondents; those in the earlier birth cohorts were the most likely of all to have either married directly, or married after having pre-maritally cohabited, without having lived in any previous cohabitations.

Figure 9

Percentages of men and women who had no, one, and two or more, cohabiting unions which had ended in the past without leading to marriage, by age and marital status, 1998, Great Britain



Source: General Household Survey

### PROFILE OF FAMILY TYPES AND FAMILIES WITHIN HOUSEHOLDS

Not surprisingly, the trends in the proportions of men and women who have been cohabiting are also reflected in the changing composition of families – taken here to be either married or cohabiting couples (with or without children) or lone parent families. Overall, amongst all families where the head was aged under 60, cohabiting couple families formed 5 per cent of all families in 1986, but 14 per cent in 1998 (Table 1).

Cohabiting couples with no children and cohabiting couples with dependent children were relatively almost three times as numerous in 1998 as in 1986, but the proportion of cohabiting couples with non-dependent children stayed roughly constant. It is of particular note that the growth in the relative numbers of *cohabiting* couples with dependent children has been accompanied by a corresponding sharp

decline in the numbers of *married* couples with dependent children. In addition, the relative number of lone parent families with dependent children has increased considerably – from 9 to 16 per cent of all families between 1986 and 1998. A part of this increase is likely to be due to the separation of cohabiting partners with children.

Table 1 also indicates that, amongst married couples, there are about twice as many with dependent children as those having no children. In contrast, amongst cohabiting couples, there are more without children than with dependent children. Part of the explanation lies in the ages of the married and cohabiting partners; the former are, on average, older than the latter<sup>28</sup>. However, age for age, cohabiting couple families have fewer dependent children than married couple families – though this difference is undoubtedly partly the result of some cohabiting couples marrying before they have children, or separating before they have any.

**Table 1** Trends in family composition, 1986–98, Great Britain

Type of family with head aged under 60	Percentages				
	Year				
	1986	1990	1994	1998	
<b>Cohabiting couple families</b>					
with no children	3	5	6	8	
with dependent children	2	3	4	5	
with non-dependent children only	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.3	
All cohabiting couple families	5	8	11	14	
<b>Married couple families</b>					
with no children	22	22	21	20	
with dependent children	49	43	42	39	
with non-dependent children only	11	11	8	7	
All married couple families	83	76	71	66	
<b>Lone parent families</b>					
with dependent children	9	12	15	16	
with non-dependent children only	3	4	3	4	
All lone parent families	12	16	18	20	
All families with or without children	% sample no	100 5,003	100 4,740	100 4,621	100 4,637

Source: General Household Survey

The results in Table 1 may be viewed in another way. About 60 per cent of all families in both 1986 and 1998 contained dependent children. However, of all families with dependent children, cohabiting couple families formed one in 30 in 1986, but one in 12 in 1998, a considerable increase. So, although cohabiting couple families with dependent children form only 5 per cent of all families, there has been a sustained and significant growth in their relative numbers *amongst all families with dependent children*.

This kind of analysis is extended in Table 2 which estimates the relative number of cohabiting couple families with a given characteristic amongst all families with that characteristic. Hence, in 1986, cohabiting couple families formed 6 per cent of all families where the youngest child was aged under 1, but the corresponding proportion rose to 18 per cent in 1998. This trend is consistent with the growth in births outside marriage during the period – the majority of which are believed to have been to cohabiting couples living together.

**Table 2** Cohabiting and married couple families\* as a percentage of all families\*, by particular family characteristics, 1986–98, Great Britain

Couple families* (cohabiting or married) with given characteristic as a percentage of all families*† with the same characteristic	Percentages						
	Year						
	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
<b>Cohabiting couple families</b>							
with a child aged under 1	6	8	11	12	16	20	18
with a child aged under 5	5	7	7	8	9	13	13
with a child aged from 5 to 10	2	4	5	3	6	6	8
with one dependent child	4	7	7	7	8	10	11
with two dependent children	3	4	4	4	6	6	8
<b>Married couple families</b>							
with a child aged under 1	84	74	72	67	61	61	64
with a child aged under 5	82	76	72	69	67	64	63
with a child aged from 5 to 10	81	78	74	74	67	67	61
with one dependent child	75	70	66	64	60	60	54
with two dependent children	85	83	80	77	74	72	69

\* where head of family is aged from 16 to 59

† all families = married couple families + cohabiting couple families + lone parent families

Source: General Household Survey

The results in Table 2 also indicate that the younger the youngest child in a family, the more likely is that family to be a cohabiting couple one. Similarly, there are relatively more cohabiting couple families amongst all families with one dependent child, than there are cohabiting couples amongst all those with two. Some 11 per cent of all families with one dependent child were cohabiting couple families in 1998, a trebling since 1986.

Table 2 also shows the proportions of the different kinds of family represented by married couple families. Without exception, the relative numbers of married couple families with the different family characteristics were each considerably smaller in 1998 than in 1986.

The above results may be viewed from a broader perspective of the profile of households – rather than of families. Such a perspective

**Table 3** Families within households, 1986, 1991 and 1998, Great Britain

Number of families in household and their type	Percentages		
	Year		
	1986*	1991	1998
No family households	28	30	31
<b>One-family households</b>			
<b>Cohabiting couple families</b>			
with no children	2	3	4
with dependent children	1	2	3
with non-dependent children only	0.2	0.2	0.3
<b>Married couple families</b>			
with no children	25	24	26
with dependent children	26	22	20
with non-dependent children only	8	9	5
<b>Lone parent families</b>			
with dependent children	4	5	7
with non-dependent children only	3	4	3
<b>Two or more family households</b>	0.7	0.9	0.8
All households - percentage	100	100	100
-number /sample no	10,204	21.9 million	8,633

\* estimated using a different cohabitation question

Source: 1991 Census, 1986 &amp; 1998 GHSs

serves as a reminder that a substantial minority of adults do not live in families at all – they either live alone or else live as a group of unrelated adults together. About three in 10 households come under this category – which has grown slightly (Table 3). Also, although most families have a household to themselves, a very few share; under one in 100 households consist of two or more families sharing. Analysis of 1991 Census results has shown that cohabiting couple families form at least one in 12 of such multi-family households. As may be seen from Table 2, 4 per cent of households consist of a single-family household of a cohabiting couple with no children, and a further 3 per cent of a cohabiting couple with dependent children.

## POSSIBLE FUTURE GROWTH IN COHABITATION – RESULTS FROM PROJECTIONS FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

As has been noted earlier, there have been steady trends over the last quarter century, both in the increasing proportion cohabiting, and the decline in the relative numbers married – and these trends seem set to continue (Figure 3). A recent set of official projections of the population of England and Wales has been made by *de facto* marital status<sup>6</sup> – that is, by both legal marital status and by whether or not cohabiting. The projections have a base year of 1996 and provide projected populations up to 2021.

Naturally, the projections will be only as accurate as the assumptions on which they are based, although the assumptions have been formulated using all the available evidence on past and recent trends. In fact, the projections have been derived using assumptions on the future proportions cohabiting in the different age/sex/legal marital status categories – and applying them to the relevant projected numbers from a parallel set of legal marital status projections<sup>6</sup>. In these projections, the total numbers of cohabiting men and women were constrained to be equal. As has been mentioned earlier, the GHS proportions of men and women who are cohabiting are not consistent – and, as mentioned earlier, results in this article based on GHS data have not been adjusted to correct for this inconsistency.

Besides providing a likely future scenario, the projection results can reveal other interesting implications of the assumed future trends; examples are the proportion of *couples* who are cohabiting, and the changing age profiles of those who are cohabiting – as well as of those who are not cohabiting.

The results suggest that, amongst those not currently married, the prevalence of cohabitation will increase in every age group, with the increase being proportionately larger the *older* the age group (Figures 10a and 10b). At the younger ages, however, the proportions of non-married men and women who are cohabiting are projected to rise by only a relatively small amount, so that the overall effect will be a slight ageing of the population cohabiting. These results may be seen in the context of the proportions cohabiting already being large at the younger ages and relatively low at the older ages (see Figure 5). The younger age groups have been projected to continue cohabiting in relatively large numbers as they become older – relative, that is, to the numbers cohabiting amongst their present-day older counterparts. However, it is projected that those in their thirties will continue to be the most likely group to cohabit.

The projection results can also be examined in terms of the proportion of men and women living in *couples* who are cohabiting – and these proportions are portrayed in Figures 10c and 10d. A similar picture emerges, in that, in general, the *older* the men and women living in

couples, the larger the increase in the proportion cohabiting. However, what is also shown is that, the younger the couples, the larger the proportion of them who are cohabiting, rather than married. In particular, it is amongst men and women in their twenties and *living in couples* where the largest proportions cohabiting are seen.

The younger age groups consist mostly of those who are single, never-married, whilst the divorced form an increasing proportion of those aged 30 and older. Overall, the proportions of single men and women who are cohabiting are projected to continue rising, whilst those of the divorced are projected to decline, as may be seen from Figures 10e and 10f. However, the proportion of the divorced who are cohabiting is projected to remain level *within each age group*; the ageing of the divorced population causes the *overall* proportion to decline. These trends are in line with those observed in recent years – as depicted in Figure 4. Because of the decline in marriage, proportionately more men and women in their late twenties and thirties are projected to be single, rather than divorced.

The above results can be brought together by considering the projected proportions of men and women in the different “living arrangements”: cohabiting; married; single and not cohabiting; and divorced or widowed and not cohabiting, for the adult population – those aged 16 and over – see Figures 11a and 11b. These show a projected increase in the proportions cohabiting and a continuing decline in the proportion married, accompanied by a slight increase in the proportion who are single and not cohabiting. In contrast, the proportion of those previously married who are not cohabiting is projected to remain virtually unchanged.

Another important implication of the projection results is the changing age profiles of those cohabiting, married, etc. Those who are cohabiting are projected to have an older profile – though the peak age group remains at 25 to 34 – as also are those who are married (Figures 11c and 11d, and Figures 11e and 11f). In addition, the single who are not cohabiting are projected to become older, too. Of course, these results reflect the fact that the entire population is projected to age – what is of note is that the ageing applies to every group, no matter what their living arrangements.

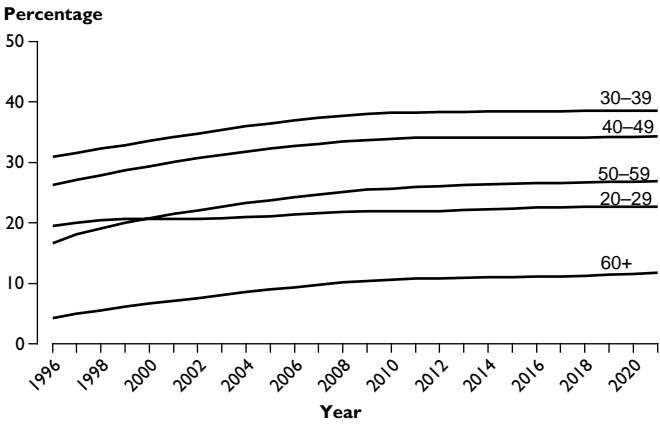
## POSSIBLE FUTURE NUMBERS OF COHABITING COUPLES

The overall effect of the assumptions made is that the number of cohabiting couples, 1.56 million in 1996, is projected to rise to 2.93 million in 2021, an increase of almost 90 per cent<sup>6</sup>. The best estimates of the numbers cohabiting in 1996 implied that 12 per cent, one in 8, of all couples were cohabiting, and the projection for 2021 implies that 22 per cent – more than one in 5 – of all couples will be cohabiting.

In 1996, it was estimated that of the 1.56 million cohabiting couples, just over one million of both the cohabiting men and the cohabiting women were single; 66 per cent of the men and 69 per cent of the women. Of the projected 2.93 million cohabiting couples in 2021, about 2.4 million of both the cohabiting men and women are projected to be single – 80 per cent of the men and 84 per cent of the women, larger proportions than in 1996.

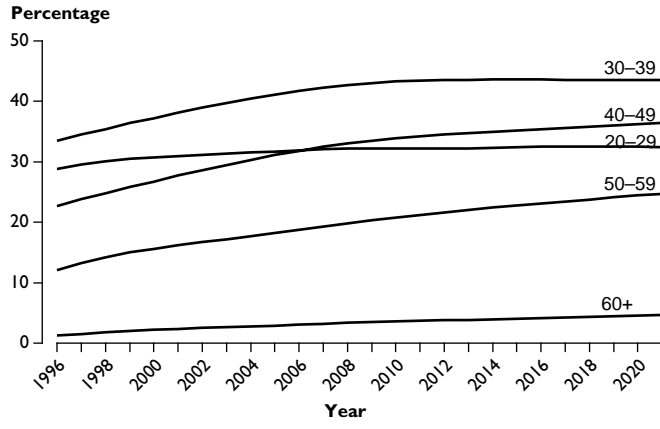
More particularly, the number of cohabiting men and women who are *single* are projected to increase by 130 per cent between 1996 and 2021 – a relatively much larger growth than the 90 per cent increase in the overall number cohabiting.

**Figure 10a** Percentage of all non-married\* men projected to be cohabiting, by age, England and Wales, 1996–2021



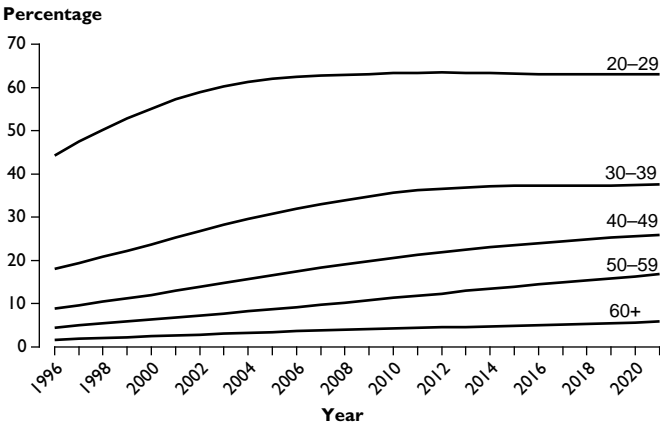
\* single, separated, divorced and widowed

**Figure 10b** Percentage of all non-married\* women projected to be cohabiting, by age, England and Wales, 1996–2021



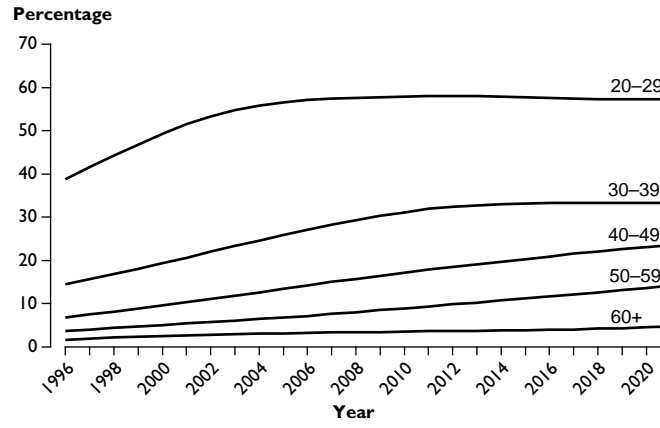
\* single, separated, divorced and widowed

**Figure 10c** Percentage of all men in couples\* who are projected to be cohabiting, by age, England and Wales, 1996–2021



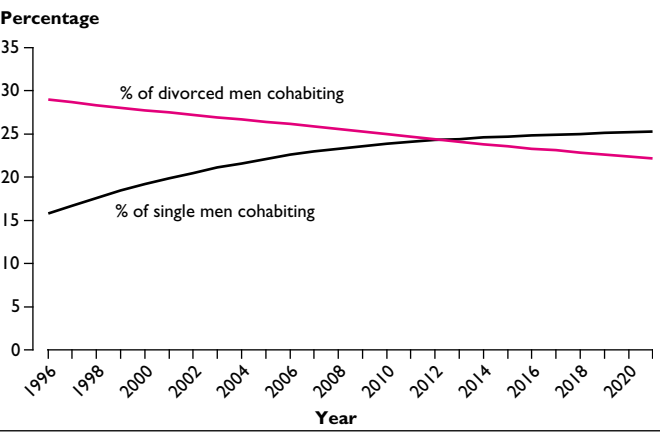
\* married plus cohabiting

**Figure 10d** Percentage of all women in couples\* who are projected to be cohabiting, by age, England and Wales, 1996–2021

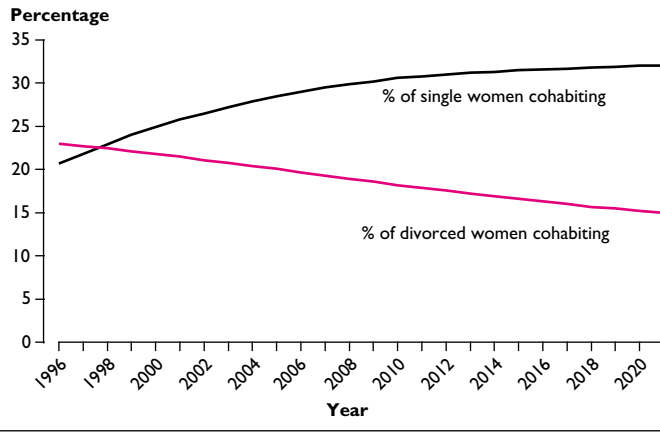


\* married plus cohabiting

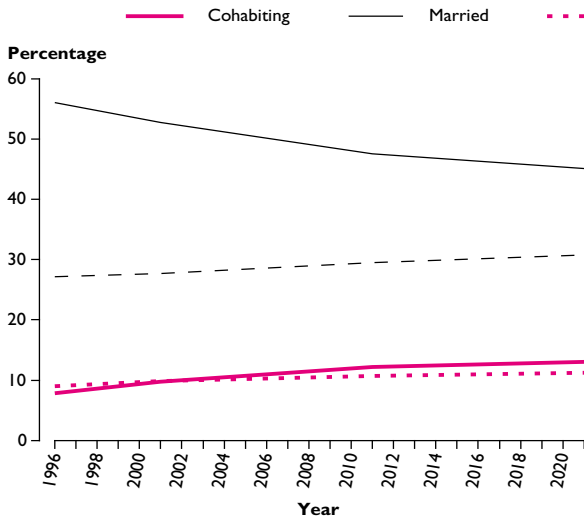
**Figure 10e** Percentages of single and divorced men projected to be cohabiting as a percentage of all single and divorced men, respectively, England and Wales, 1996–2021



**Figure 10f** Percentages of single and divorced women projected to be cohabiting as a percentage of all single and divorced women, respectively, England and Wales, 1996–2021

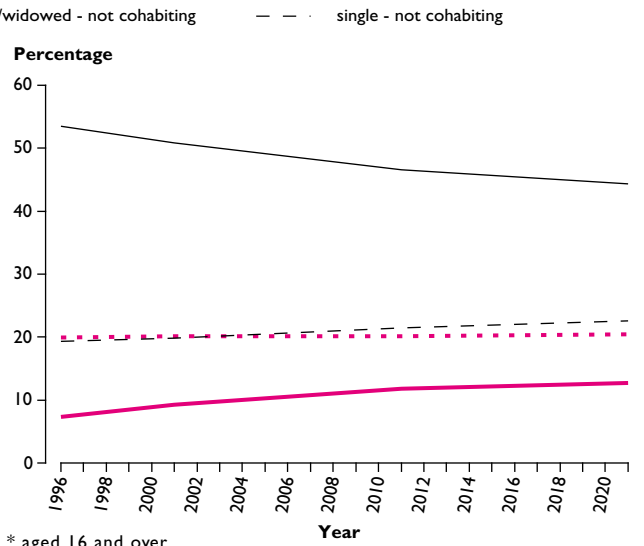


**Figure 11a** Change in the profile of men's\* living arrangements, 1996–2021, England and Wales



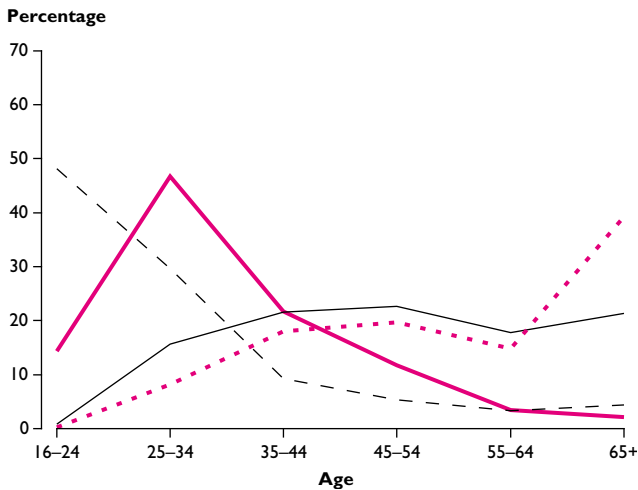
\* aged 16 and over

**Figure 11b** Change in the profile of women's\* living arrangements, 1996–2021, England and Wales

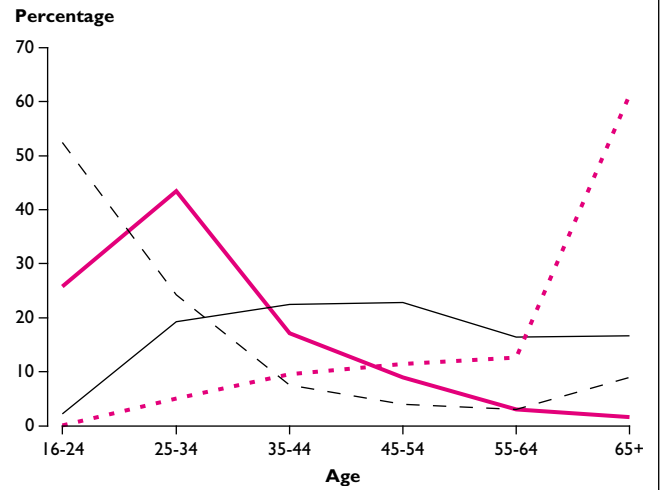


\* aged 16 and over

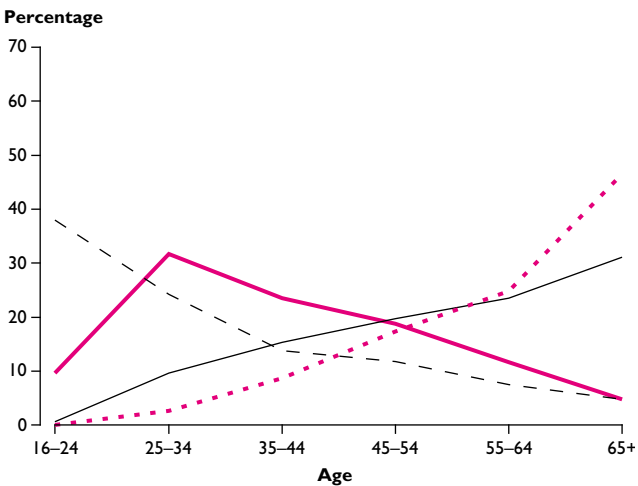
**Figure 11c** Age profiles of men in each of the different living arrangements, 1996, England and Wales



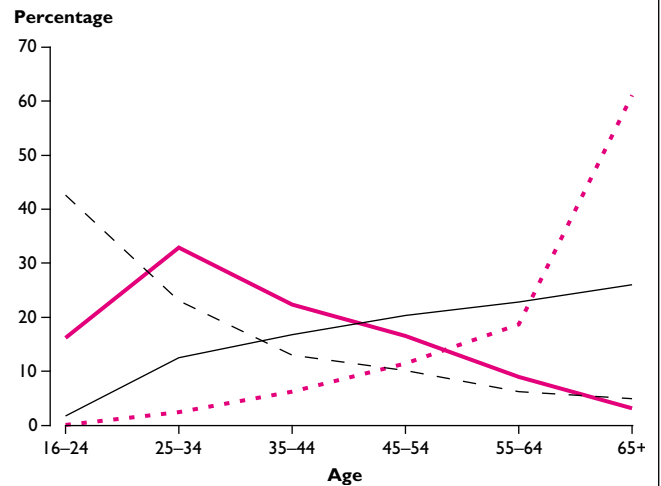
**Figure 11d** Age profiles of women in each of the different living arrangements, 1996, England and Wales



**Figure 11e** Projected age profiles of men in each of the different living arrangements, 2021, England and Wales



**Figure 11f** Projected age profiles of women in each of the different living arrangements, 2021, England and Wales



## THE IMPLICATIONS OF A GROWING NUMBER OF COHABITING COUPLES AND THEIR AGEING

Until recently, we have become accustomed to thinking of cohabiting couples primarily as young couples without children, most of whom will either part company, or subsequently marry. Another group are those who have divorced and are living with a new partner, in an informal union. Many of these couples will not have any children at all, though some may have stepchildren either living with them or with a former spouse of one of the partners. Others will have children who are living with a former spouse or former partner.

The projections suggest that in the childbearing ages – those up to age 45 – the proportions of cohabiting men and women who are single will increase substantially, particularly amongst those in their thirties and early forties – and commensurately the proportion who are either separated or divorced will diminish. Such a trend may herald an increase in childbearing amongst cohabiting couples – resulting at least in a continuation of the trend towards relatively more families with dependent children being cohabiting couple families, and fewer being married couple families; possibly this trend could accelerate.

If this is so, issues such as the parental responsibility of unmarried fathers, contact by absent unmarried fathers with their children, and child support by unmarried fathers from cohabiting couples who have split up could become more important because of the increased numbers involved. In addition, there could be a trend towards relatively more stepfamilies being *cohabiting* couple stepfamilies, rather than married couple ones.

In addition, the projection results suggest that in the future, the proportion of all couples who are *cohabiting* couples will rise especially at the older ages – those over 50, and of pensionable age, for example. Issues such as pension entitlement, either on the death of one partner, or else at the time of the breakdown of the relationship could pose problems of equity, just as the corresponding issue of pension-splitting for divorced wives was one during the 1990s. Another current issue involving equity concerns the division of assets – and particularly property<sup>28</sup> – in the event of relationship breakdown; the number of cohabiting couples with appreciable financial assets could increase as more reach the ages when mortgages have been paid off and capital accumulated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The prevalence of cohabitation has grown steadily over the past 25 years, and looks set to continue over the next. However, what has changed, and will continue to change, is the composition of the cohabiting population by marital status – the relative numbers who are single will increase whilst those who have been married will decrease. (This is the result of the proportion who are married continuing to decline as the proportion cohabiting continues to increase.)

Whilst it is fairly easy to predict the changes accompanying overall increased numbers of cohabiting couples, it is less straightforward to foresee the implications regarding an increased proportion of them being single (never married). Undoubtedly one repercussion will concern childbearing; more children being born to never-married cohabiting couples, but one other repercussion could be that never-married men and women will, on average, live in more cohabiting unions – without ever marrying – than their counterparts did a couple of decades ago when marriage formed the most important – if only – union in most individuals' partnership history<sup>7</sup>.

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Note: an electronic version of the GHS and other ONS data plotted in Figures 3 onwards is available on request – although recipients are requested to acknowledge, and reference, this article as the source, should they wish to republish any of the material contained in it.

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17. "If you were advising a young man/young woman, which of the following ways of life would you recommend?" (tick *one* box only; alternatives offered were those appearing in Figure 2; the percentage here is based on those recommending: "to marry without living together first"). (the sets of percentages for advice to a young *man* closely matched those for advice to a young *woman*).
18. *British – and European – Social Attitudes: the 15th Report – How Britain differs 1998/99 Edition* (editors: Jowell, R *et al.*) Social and Community Planning Research. Ashgate Publishing Ltd. (Aldershot, 1998). (Contains results from the questionnaires fielded in Britain in 1994).
19. The question was: do you agree or disagree...(then the quoted question) (tick *one* box only; the alternatives offered were: "strongly agree"; "agree"; "neither agree nor disagree"; "disagree"; "strongly disagree"; and "can't choose". The percentage cited is based on the proportion either strongly agreeing or agreeing.)
20. This proportion – each from a different BSA – is the *complement* of the proportion saying that pre-marital cohabitation is "always" or "mostly" wrong – see reference 13 for the precise question. The 1976 proportion has been derived from the Family Formation Survey 1976<sup>4</sup>.
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## APPENDIX

## QUESTIONS ASKED ON COHABITATION AND PRE-MARITAL COHABITATION IN THE GENERAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY

The questions asked on cohabitation can be divided into four groups, those on:

1. current cohabitation (i.e. at the time of interview):
  - (a) asked within the Family Information Section in the Individual interview questionnaire;
  - (b) asked at the beginning of the Household interview questionnaire;
2. pre-marital cohabitation;
3. cohabitation(s) which ended in the past (other than in marriage);
4. same-sex cohabitation.

Questions on current cohabitation and pre-marital cohabitation have been asked in the GHS since 1979, and on cohabitations which ended in the past since 1998. There were no GHSs in 1997 or 1999.

**I(a) Current cohabitation (asked in the Family Information Section)**

This is the most basic question on cohabitation – and has been asked for the longest period. From 1979 to 1985, questions on current cohabitation were asked only in the Family Information Section. From 1986 to 1995, some information was additionally collected in the Household interview questionnaire – see next section – but those in the Family Information Section remained the definitive ones. (In the Family Information Section, questions are asked only of respondents themselves – that is, not of proxies. However, in the “Household Box” of the Household interview, proxies are asked questions about any other household members who are not present at the time of interview - see section 1b, below.)

From 1996, a specific question asking whether each household member is currently cohabiting or not, was introduced into the Household interview questionnaire – and has since become the definitive question. However, since 1996, the Family Information Section questions on current cohabitation have continued with two of their main purposes – of checking whether those who report they are married really *are* married or cohabiting, and whether those with at least one unrelated adult of the opposite sex in the household are, in fact, cohabiting.

Hence the role of the questions on current cohabitation in the Family Information Section has changed somewhat in recent years. Certainly, the questions on current cohabitation in the Family Information Section and the Household interview questionnaire should be considered together. Also, they are inter-connected in that the answers to the marital status question in the Household interview questionnaire have always been used as a filter for the questions on current cohabitation in the Family Information Section. This is indicated in the Table below in the “Marital statuses asked” column.

Those who report they are currently cohabiting, are subsequently asked, in the Family Information Section, the date [month/year] they and their partner started living together – using the same key phrase as used to ask whether currently cohabiting. This date, together with the date of interview, is used to calculate the duration of current cohabitation.

Years in which question asked	Exact question asked	Introduction to question, or previous question	Marital statuses asked <sup>®</sup>	Asked of:		Age group asked
				men	women	
1979– 1985	Are (were) you just living together as man and wife? (note: “simply” substituted for “just” from 1980–1985)	Thinking of your present/most recent marriage: 1. did you get married in a church of some kind 2. or at a registry office 3. or (question in previous column)	M, W, D, and Sep	X	✓	16–49
	(If this answer is given, or if either of the two questions immediately below is answered affirmatively, the subsequent question is the start date [month/year] of living together as man and wife.)					
	Are you currently living together with someone as man and wife?	to those living in household containing male unrelated adult(s)	W, D, and Sep	X	✓	16–49
	Are you yourself currently living with someone as man and wife?	to those living in household containing male unrelated adult(s): As you know some couples live together as man and wife without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. (then question in previous column)	S	X	✓	18–49

Years in which question asked	Exact question asked	Introduction to question, or previous question	Marital statuses asked <sup>6</sup>	Asked of:		Age group asked
				men	women	
1986–87	Are (were) you simply living together as husband and wife?  (note: “simply” omitted in 1987)  (no question asked – but those whose reply to the question above or below was “(currently) living together as husband and wife”, were filtered – together with those whose [ <i>de facto</i> ] marital status was given as cohabiting in the household questionnaire – to being asked the subsequent question on the start [month/year] of living together as husband and wife, etc.)	Thinking of your present/most recent marriage: 1. did you get married in a church of some kind 2. or at a registry office 3. or (question in previous column)	M, W, D, and	✓	✓	16–59
	Are you currently living together with someone as husband and wife?	those with adult(s) of opposite sex in household, unrelated to and informant	C	✓	✓	16–59
	Are you yourself currently living with someone as husband and wife?	to those with adult(s) of opposite sex in household unrelated to informant:  As you know, some couples live together as husband and wife without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. (then question in previous column.)	W, D, and Sep  S	✓	✓	16–59
1988	Are (were) you living together as husband and wife?  (no question asked – but those whose reply to the question above or below was “(currently) living together as husband and wife”, were filtered – together with those whose [ <i>de facto</i> ] marital status was given as cohabiting in the household questionnaire – to being asked the subsequent question on the start [month/year] of living together as husband and wife, etc.)	Thinking of your present/most recent marriage: 1. did you get married in a church of some kind 2. or at a registry office 3. or (question in previous column)	M, W, D, and Sep	✓	✓	16–59
	Are you yourself currently living with someone as husband and wife?	to those with adult(s) of opposite sex in household, unrelated to informant:  As you know, some couples live together as husband and wife without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. (then question in previous column.)	C  W, D, Sep, and S	✓	✓	16–59
1989–90	Living together as a couple?  (no question asked – but those whose reply to the question above or below was “(currently) living together as a couple”, were filtered – together with those whose [ <i>de facto</i> ] marital status was given as cohabiting in the household questionnaire – to being asked the subsequent question on the start [month/year] of living together as a couple, etc.)	As you know, some couples live together without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. Thinking of your present/most recent marriage, did you get married in a church of some kind, or at a register office, or are/were you simply living together as a couple? (four options then given, including a new (third) one: church and register office, then, last, the option in previous column.)	M, W, D, and Sep	✓	✓	16–59
			C	✓	✓	16–59

(continued)

Years in which question asked	Exact question asked	Introduction to question, or previous question	Marital statuses asked <sup>®</sup>	Asked of:		Age group asked
				men	women	
1989–90 (continued)	Are you yourself currently living with someone as a couple?	to those with adult(s) of opposite sex in household, unrelated to informant: As you know, some couples live together without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. (then question in previous column.)	W, D, Sep, and S	✓	✓	16–59
1991–92	Living together as a couple?	As you know, some couples live together without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. Thinking of your present/most recent marriage, did you get married with a religious ceremony of some kind, or at a register office, or are you simply living together as a couple? (four options given including a new third one: religious ceremony and register office? Then, last, the option given in the previous column.)	M, W, D, and Sep	✓	✓	16–59
	(no question asked – but those whose reply to the question above or below was “(currently) living together as a couple”, were filtered – together with those whose [ <i>de facto</i> ] marital status was given as cohabiting in the household questionnaire – to being asked the subsequent question on the start [month/year] of living together as a couple, etc.)		C	✓	✓	16–59
	Are you yourself currently living with someone as a couple?	to those with adult(s) of opposite sex in household, unrelated to informant:  As you know, some couples live together without actually getting married, either because they cannot get married for some reason, or because they prefer not to get married. (then question in previous column.)	W, D, Sep, and S	✓	✓	16–59
1993–96, and 1998	Living together as a couple?	(previous first introductory question dropped) Thinking of your (present)/most recent marriage, did you get married with a religious ceremony of some kind, or at a register office, or (are)/were you simply living together as a couple? (four options then given, as before, with the last being the one in the previous column.)	(M), W, D, and Sep	✓	✓	16–59
	(Note: this question was <b>not</b> asked in 1996 and 1998 of those currently married)					
	(no question asked – but those whose reply to the question above or below was “(currently) living together as a couple”, were filtered – together with those whose [ <i>de facto</i> ] marital status was given as cohabiting in the household questionnaire (or whose answer to the Cohabit/LiveWith question in 1996/1998 was cohabiting) – to being asked the subsequent questions on the start [month/year] of living together as a couple, etc.)		C	✓	✓	16–59
	Are you yourself currently living with someone as a couple?	to those with adult(s) of opposite sex in the household, unrelated to informant: (additionally in 1994 – who is not married or cohabiting) As you know, some couples live together without actually getting married, either because they cannot (get married) for some reason, or because they prefer not to (get married). (then question in previous column.)	W, D, Sep, and S	✓	✓	16–59
	(Note: in 1994 to 1998, “yourself” was omitted)					
2000	Living together as a couple?  (the subsequent question is on the start date [month/year] of living together as a couple).	Thinking of your present/most recent marriage, did you get married with a religious ceremony of some kind, or at a register office, or approved premises, or are you simply living together as a couple? (four options then given – not exactly the same as given in the introductory sentence – with the last being the one in the previous column).	M, W, D, and Sep	✓	✓	16–59

<sup>®</sup> M = married; S = single (never-married); W = widowed; D = divorced; Sep = separated.

Unless otherwise stated, these marital statuses are those identified within the “Household Box” of the Household questionnaire – see following section 1b.

## I(b) Current cohabitation – as asked in Household Interview questionnaire

The Household interview questionnaire starts by collecting some basic information on each member of the household, really as an enumeration of the usually resident members, also recording their family groupings. One item of information collected on each person is their marital status – or, in effect, their *de facto* marital status, as it effectively became in 1986 when an extra category of cohabiting was first introduced. This question is often referred to as being in the “Household Box” – because it appeared as a box in the questionnaire; one row per household member, and a different item of information in each column. (The *de facto* marital status question helped to identify couples who were not married, so that they could be identified as couples and therefore families, rather than two unrelated persons. Consequently, “cohabiting” had priority as an answer over the legal marital status of, say, divorced.) Questions in the Household Box are asked about every usually resident household member; collecting information from proxies, if necessary.

Years in which recorded	Marital status options (code for appropriate option to be circled) (C = cohabiting)	Notes
1986	M S W D Sep C 1 2 3 4 5 6	Asked about every usual resident adult in household – aged 16 or over – and recorded against that person’s “person number”
1987–93	M C S W D Sep 1 2 3 4 5 6	Asked about every usual resident adult in household – aged 16 or over – and recorded against that person’s “person number”
1994–95	code Married 1 Cohabiting (living together) 2 Single/never been married 3 Widowed 4 Divorced 5 Separated 6 Same-sex cohabiter 7	Asked about every usual resident adult in household – aged 16 or over – and recorded against that person’s “person number”
1996	Are you/is XXXX: (code first that applies) code  single, that is never-married? 1 married and living with husband/wife? 2 married and separated from husband/wife? 3 divorced? 4 widowed 5 (variable called Mstat)  (May I just check) are you/is XXXX living with someone in this household as a couple?  Yes - opposite sex partner 1 No 2 Yes - same sex partner 3 (variable called Cohabit)	The two questions below are asked about every usual resident adult in household – aged 16 or over – and recorded against that person’s “person number”  Note that this is a pure legal marital status question whose answer is independent of whether the person is cohabiting or not – which is determined by the next question.  Note that this question establishes whether the person concerned (aged 16 or over) is cohabiting or not – quite irrespective of that person’s legal marital status. (The question is asked of every legal marital status except for those who were married and living with their husband/wife – i.e. code 2 of previous question.) (Note: the question on the start date of current cohabitation continued to be asked within the Family Information Section.)
1998, 2000	Same legal marital status question and options as in 1996 (but variable called MarStat in 1998 and 2000)  May I just check, are you living with someone in the household as a couple? Yes 1 No 2 SPONTANEOUS ONLY- Same-sex couple 3 (variable called LiveWith)	Same considerations/comments as for corresponding question in 1996  Same considerations/comments as for corresponding question in 1996 (except question only asked if there are two or more adults in household)

### Footnote

It should also be mentioned that a “Relationship matrix” was introduced in the Household interview questionnaire in 1993. The interviewer records the relationship of every usually resident household member to every other one in this matrix - using a set of codes which identify 18 different kinds of relationship (including no relationship). (The number was 17 in 1993.)

In 1993, a single code, 01, covered “spouse/partner/cohabitee (including same sex couples)”, whereas in 1994 and subsequent years, a cohabiting relationship, code 02, has been distinguished from a married one, code 01. The phrases used in the matrix were: “cohabiter” (1994 and 1995) and “cohabitee” (1996, 1998 and 2000), although the interviewer would have completed the matrix using information from the Household Box, without asking any further questions of the respondent.

## 2. Pre-marital cohabitation

This question has always – since 1979 – been asked within the Family Information Section, and has used, in a pre-marital cohabitation context, the same key phrase – such as: live together as man and wife – as used in the question to establish whether a respondent is currently cohabiting. Those who report that they pre-maritally cohabited are then asked the duration [in months and years] of that pre-marital cohabitation, again using the same key phrase. (Since 1989, the date [month/year] of the start of the pre-marital cohabitation has been asked, instead of its duration. Knowing the date of marriage allows the duration to be calculated.)

Years in which question asked	Exact question asked	Asked of which marriage (s)	Introduction to question	Asked of:		Age group asked
				men	women	
1979–85 (not asked in 1980)	Before you and your husband actually got married, did you live together as man and wife, or not?	Current one – or most recent one, if not currently married	(Thinking just of your present/most recent marriage.....) (then question in 2 <sup>nd</sup> column.)	X	✓	16–49
1986–88	Before you and your husband/wife actually got married, did you live together as husband and wife, or not?	Current one – or most recent one, if not currently married	(Thinking just of your present/most recent marriage.....) (then question in 2 <sup>nd</sup> column.)	✓	✓	16–59
1989–93	Before getting married, did you and your husband/wife live together as a couple?	Each marriage	The next questions concern your marriage history (starting with your first marriage). First question: what month and year were you married? Then question in 2 <sup>nd</sup> column.)	✓	✓	16–59
1994–95	What month and year did you start living together? (with possible answer: not applicable)	Each marriage	Asked after asking previous question: “what month and year were you married?”	✓	✓	16–59
1996, 1998 2000	Before getting married, did you and your husband/wife live together as a couple?	Each marriage	(to interviewer: the next screen consists of a table of marriages.... please enter details....starting with the earliest and ending with the current or most recent [the interviewer instructions were omitted in 1998]). For each marriage: (question in the 1st column was the 2nd question - after asking the month and year of marriage).	✓	✓	16–59

### 3. Cohabitations which ended in the past (other than in marriage)

Questions on this aspect of cohabitation – really cohabitation history – were first introduced in the Family Information Section in 1998, and have been extended in the 2000 GHS. (See references 7 and 29.)

Years in which question asked	Exact question asked	Marital statuses asked	Asked of		Age group asked
			men	women	
1998, 2000	(Apart from your present relationship), have you ever lived with someone of the opposite sex as a couple, and it did not lead to marriage?	All	✓	✓	16–59
	How many such relationships have you had?	All	✓	✓	16–59
	(Thinking of your last relationship) how did it end? (death or separation)	All	✓	✓	16–59
	Was this cohabiting relationship before or after your last marriage?	S, W, D & Sep and who had so cohabited in the past	✓	✓	16–59
2000	additional questions to determine the duration, and the start and stop dates of the first three cohabiting relationships which did not lead to marriage (see also other article <sup>29</sup> in this issue)	All	✓	✓	16–59

### 4. Same-sex cohabitation

There has never been a question in the GHS which has specifically asked about same-sex relationships. If the informant/respondent *spontaneously* reports that the person concerned is /they themselves are/living as a same-sex couple in response to the marital status question in the Household Box, this information has been separately recorded since 1996 – see Section 1b above. Note that partners in same-sex couples so identified are **not** asked any subsequent questions on cohabitation which appear in the Family Information Section – so results from this latter section refer only to partners in *opposite* sex cohabiting couples.

Note: the developments in asking questions about cohabitation and marital status in the GHS up to 1986 were reviewed in the following article:

Irene Rauta and Amanda Wilmot. Methodological developments in the Family Information Section of the General Household Survey. *Survey Methodological Bulletin* No. 24, January 1989. Social Survey Division. Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (London, 1989).