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Increase in families mainly cohabiting couples

Focus on Families

The number of cohabiting couple families in the UK increased by 65 per cent between 1996 and 2006, from 1.4 million to 2.3 million, according to a report* published today by the Office for National Statistics. Married couple families fell by 4 per cent over the same time period, to 12.1 million.

There were 17.1 million families of all types in the UK in 2006 compared with 16.5 million in 1996.

Lone parent families (including those with non-dependent children only) increased by 8 per cent to 2.6 million.

Focus on Families contains a comprehensive description of today's families, illustrating changes over time and the demographic forces driving these trends. The report also looks at the family and education and health; the provision of unpaid care; and the geographical distribution of families. For the purpose of this report, a family is defined as a married or cohabiting couple with or without children in the household, or a lone parent and children.

Key findings include:

In 2001 half of cohabiting couple families were headed by a person under 35

Family types vary considerably according to age. Generally, cohabiting couple families are much younger than married couple families. In 2001, half of cohabiting couple families in the UK were headed by a person aged under 35, compared with one in every ten married couples.

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www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/families

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Lone mother families tend to be younger than lone father families by approximately ten years. One in three lone mothers in the UK were aged under 35, whereas less than one in ten lone fathers were under 35.

Younger generations more likely to cohabit

Between 2001 and 2003, the proportion of women aged 25 to 29 who had cohabited before the age of 25 was 21 per cent. For their counterparts thirty years earlier, the proportion was just 1 per cent. Increasing cohabitation does not fully account for the decline in marriage, as a smaller proportion of women aged 25 to 29 had formed any union, either married or cohabiting, before the age of 25. This suggests a delay in partnership formation for younger generations of women.

A greater proportion of cohabiting couple families are step families

The 2001 Census shows there were over 876,000 stepfamilies in the UK, 5.3 per cent of all families. Stepfamilies comprised just over 4 per cent of married couple families but 17 per cent of cohabiting couple families.

Stepfamilies containing dependent children are even more likely to be cohabiting couple families. Over 38 per cent of all cohabiting couple families containing dependent children are stepfamilies, compared with 8 per cent for married couple families with dependent children.

17-year-olds most likely to be in education if in married couple non-stepfamilies

The 2001 Census shows that married couple non-stepfamilies had the highest percentage of 17-year-olds in education (69 per cent for males and 78 per cent for females). Those in female lone parent families had the next highest proportion (59 per cent for males and 69 per cent for females).



Those with no qualifications marry early but appear least likely to marry

Men and women in 2001 with no qualifications are likely to marry relatively early (by age 25) but unlikely to cohabit early. However, men and women aged 35 with no qualifications are less likely to have ever married than those with qualifications. At age 45, the individuals who are least likely to have ever married are men with no qualifications and women with high qualifications.

Partnership continues to be the healthiest state

Partnership continues to be the healthiest state in general. There are health benefits associated with partnership, especially marriage, but there are variations by sex. In particular, older single women have better health than married women on many indicators of health status.

The majority of unpaid care is family care

At least 70 per cent of all informal carers provide care to close relatives (parents and parents-in-law, spouses and children). The remaining 30 per cent provide care to other family members, friends or neighbours. The association between unpaid care and family care is even greater for longer hours of care. Over 90 per cent of care provided for 20 hours a week or more is provided to relatives, particularly partners and parents.

London has the highest proportion of lone parents

Lone parent families made up 22 per cent of all families in London, the largest proportion for any region. The smallest proportions of lone parent families were in the East, South East and South West, each with around 13 per cent.

Low proportions of stepfamilies in London and Northern Ireland

London and Northern Ireland had the lowest proportions of stepfamilies (4.3 and 3.2 per cent respectively). Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest proportion of stepfamilies (6.0 per cent). For cohabiting stepfamilies, all regions were around the average proportion for the UK, 2.3 per cent, except Northern Ireland with only 1.1 per cent (reflecting the low levels of cohabitation in Northern Ireland).

Largest families in Northern Ireland

Comparing the four constituent countries of the UK, families in Northern Ireland were the largest and were more likely to contain dependent children. In 2001, 25 per cent of families with dependent children in Northern Ireland had three or more dependent children compared with 18 per cent for the UK as a whole.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. *Focus on Families* updates and extends the on-line overview first published in July 2005 and is the seventh in the series to be published as a full report.
2. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the press office.
3. **National Statistics** are produced to high professional standards set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference. © Crown copyright 2007.