

Families and children

Part 1 of the Children's Commissioner's *Independent Family Review* has been published. Examine some key findings

Family structure

The review claims that, outside good schools and teachers, 'the family is the only other factor that can have that same or even more of a transformative effect' on the lives of children. It reports that in 2021, there were around 8.2 million families with children in the UK. Of these, 63% were married couples with children, 14% were cohabiting couples, and 23% were headed by a lone parent. The rate of lone parent households in the UK is much higher than in most European countries, where the average figure is 13%. Around 90% of lone parents are women.

In 2021, equal proportions of families with children had one or two children (42% each) and 15% have three or more children. Cohabiting families and lone parent families tend to be smaller than married families. Figure 1 shows a breakdown in family type by ethnicity in 2020. What are the interesting patterns here?

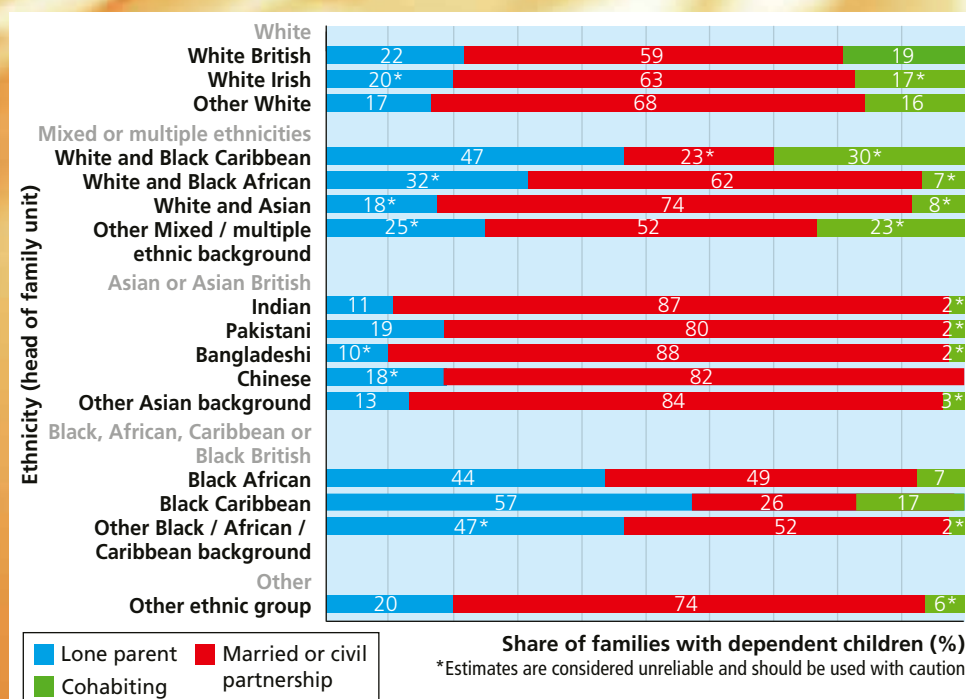


Figure 1 Family structure in England and Wales by ethnicity (2020)
Data source: Annual Population Survey (2020)

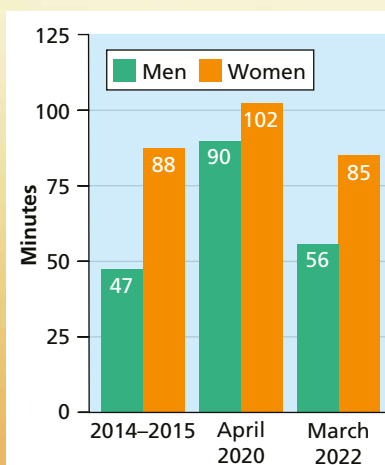


Figure 2 Average daily minutes spent on childcare for parents living with children

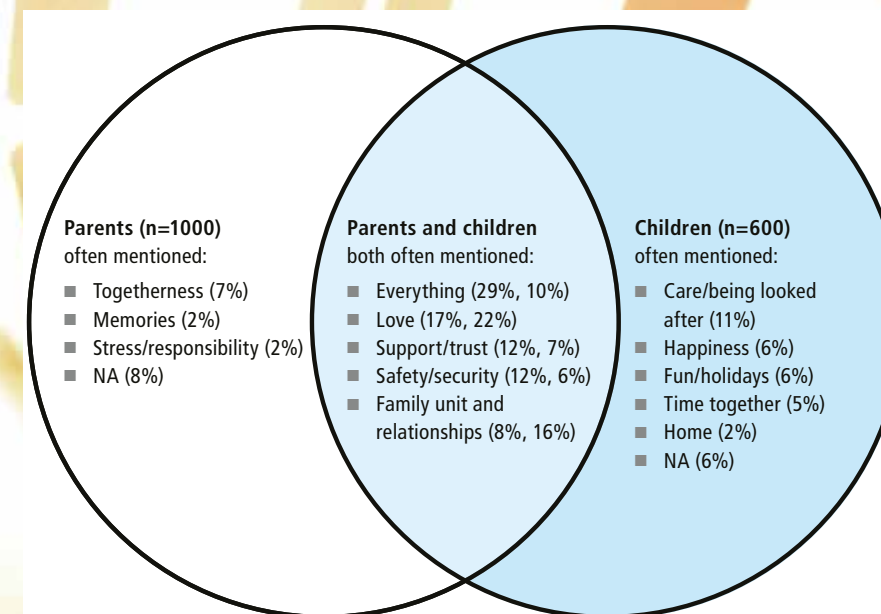


Figure 3 What family means to parents and children — themes

Family time

The Covid-19 related lockdown period in 2020 had large impacts on how families spent their time. Figure 2 shows that the amount of time fathers spent on unpaid childcare, for example, almost doubled from 47 minutes a day in 2014–2015 to 90 minutes a day during lockdown. But it fell back again to 56 minutes in 2022.

One key change in family life over the past two decades has been an increase in the employment rate for mothers, by almost 10 percentage points over that period, from 67% in 2002 to 76% in 2021. The data also suggest that families are spending more time in the same location, but doing things alone ('alone-together' time). Of total family time per day (6.4 hours) in 2015, some 2.4 hours were spent on mobile devices.

The meaning of family

The 'Family Life Survey' completed for the report revealed views from both parents and children on what the family means (see Figure 3). As a result, the review concluded that family life in the UK has 'absolute primacy'. It matters to everyone, across geographic, ethnic and socio-economic lines and that 'there is little that correlates more with a child's happiness than how happy they are within their family'. Think now about how these data are collected and interpreted — and who might be missed out in research of this kind.

REFERENCE

Children's Commissioner (2022) 'Family and its protective effect: part 1 of the Independent Family Review'. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/tzaxjn.

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