

# Families, children and inequality

Explore a review of trends in UK families

## A review

A hallmark of British families is their greater fragility and complexity when compared with families in many other western European countries. Relatively more children are being born into lone-mother families and Britain also has high and increasing rates of parental separation. These patterns have serious implications for inequality. These are the conclusions of Kathleen Kiernan and her colleagues (2024) in their extensive recent review of trends in families and inequality for *Oxford Open Economics*.

## Births and marriage

As every good sociologist knows, families are central to the nurturing and raising of children, yet not every family is able to provide the same level of resources, support and opportunities for them. In 1971 in England and Wales, just 8% of births were recorded outside of marriage. By 1991, this figure had more than tripled to 30%, and it stood at 48% in 2019, the latest year for which there are available data. Figure 1 shows increasing numbers of children being born outside of marriage.

## Parental education and resources

The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) shows that first-time mothers with low levels of education (GCSE or equivalent and no qualifications) are the most likely to have a child on their own and are the least likely to have a marital birth. More highly educated women are increasingly more likely to marry their partner before having a child, whereas for less-educated women cohabitation tends to be a longer-term stage in the childbearing process (see Table 1). This suggests that it is couples with more resources who are in a better position to marry before becoming a parent.

This general pattern of inequality by first birth and living arrangement tends to be confirmed by the data we have on the *financial circumstances* of people by family type. As Kiernan et al. (2024) point out, having savings and investments to draw on is particularly important in times of crisis. Figure 2 shows that it is *lone parents* who are by far the most likely to report having less than £1,500 or no savings (84%), but also that large proportions of cohabiting and married parents also report having low levels of savings and investments. In fact, very few British families have high levels of savings at all.

## Conclusions

Kiernan et al. (2024) conclude that these sorts of findings tend to underscore the extent to which parents' partnership status at birth is an important marker of differences in life chances, in children's access to parental resources, and in different sorts of parental behaviour. But they also make the wider sociological point that families are not static: children can experience a variety of family settings through childhood that may reduce, or increase, their access to parental inputs.

**Table 1** Partnership context of first birth, by educational attainment of mother and time period

|                         | 1991–95 | 2006–12 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|
| <b>Low education</b>    |         |         |
| Non-partnered           | 28%     | 29%     |
| Cohabiting              | 28%     | 54%     |
| Married                 | 44%     | 17%     |
| <b>Medium education</b> |         |         |
| Non-partnered           | 12%     | 16%     |
| Cohabiting              | 21%     | 43%     |
| Married                 | 67%     | 41%     |
| <b>High education</b>   |         |         |
| Non-partnered           | 7%      | 6%      |
| Cohabiting              | 7%      | 26%     |
| Married                 | 87%     | 68%     |

Source: BHPS (1995–2009)

## REFERENCES

For more about the British Household Panel Survey, see:

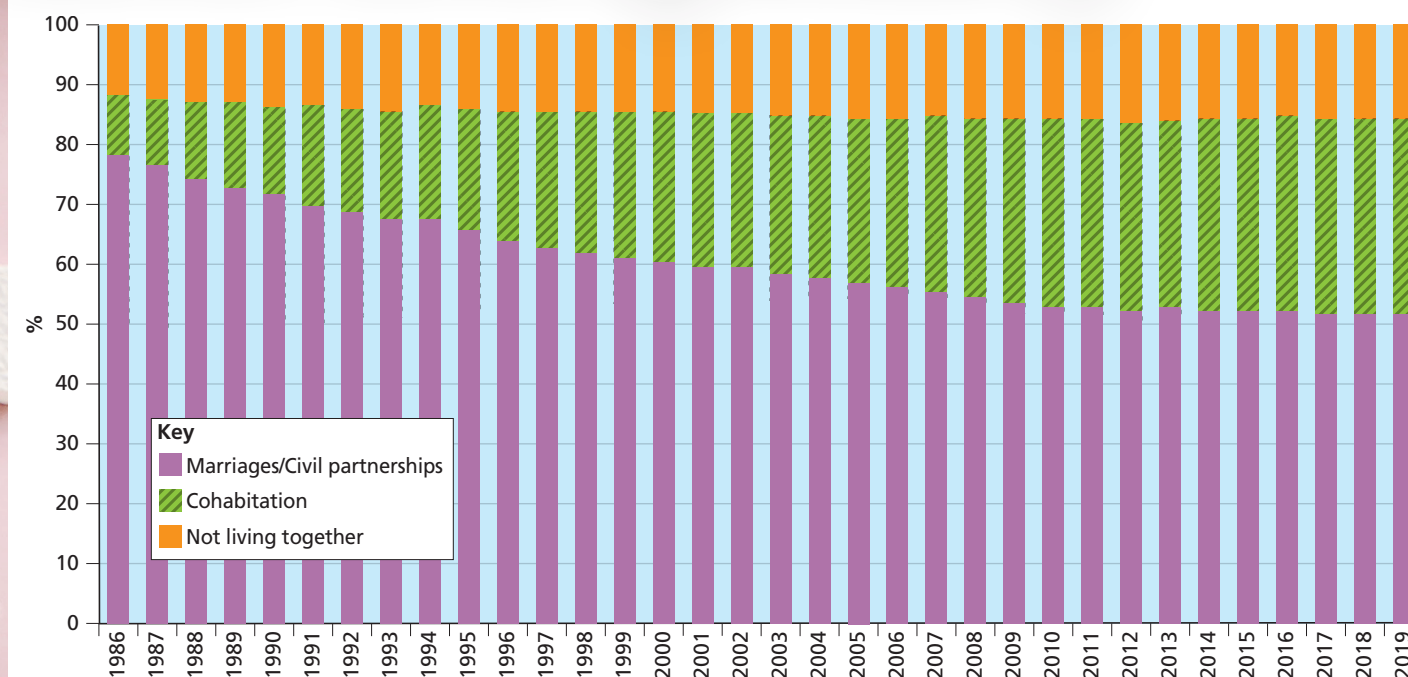
[www.tinyurl.com/9b9aetn6](http://www.tinyurl.com/9b9aetn6).

Kiernan, K., Crossman, S. and Phimister, A. (2024) 'Families and inequalities', *Oxford Open Economics*, Vol. 3, pp. i645–77. Available at: [www.tinyurl.com/p4kxbm23](http://www.tinyurl.com/p4kxbm23)

SociologyReviewExtras

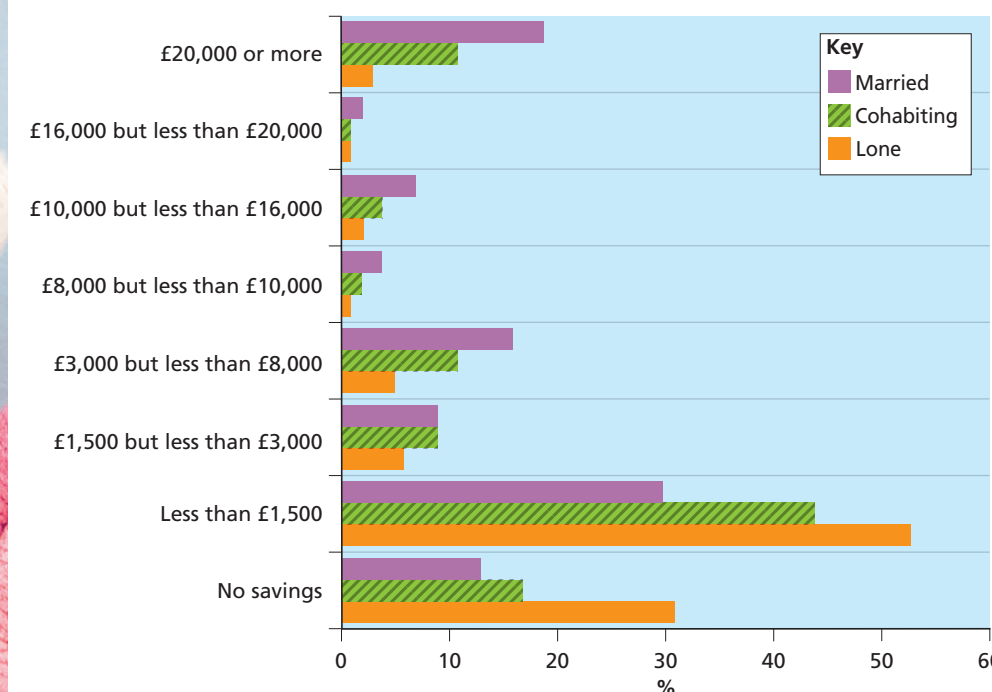


Go online for a printable pdf of this centrespread  
[www.hachettelearning.com/sociologyreviewextras](http://www.hachettelearning.com/sociologyreviewextras)



Source: Office for National Statistics

**Figure 1** Percentage of live births by registration type, England and Wales, 1986–2019



Source: Selected series from Department for Work and Pensions (2021b)

**Figure 2** Value of savings and investment by family type, 2019–20

John Williams is a managing editor of SOCIOLOGY REVIEW.