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# COHABITATION: THE EFFECTS OF LEAVING THE KNOT UNTIED

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The idea that cohabitation is the same as marriage, but without the formal tying of the knot, has been discredited by the findings of recent research by the Jubilee Centre, a leading relationships charity.

The Jubilee Centre's report, *Cohabitation: An Alternative to Marriage?*, discloses a significant difference between the nature and effects of cohabitation, as distinct from marriage. In particular, the findings reveal:

- Cohabitation serves a range of purposes and masks a wide variety of commitment levels: it cannot be considered solely as an alternative to marriage, as is its popular perception
- Cohabiting parents are at greater risk of separation and divorce
- Marriage is still more popular than cohabitation
- Cohabiting couples tend to 'break up or make up' on anniversaries

### **Cohabitation serves a range of purposes**

Analysis shows that lengths of cohabitation have roughly doubled over 40 years. However, fewer than one in four couples cohabits for more than 6½ years and even fewer couples now cohabit for very long periods of time before they separate or get married.

Overall, the changing dynamic since the 1980s appears to be that more couples used to decide to marry and then moved in together, albeit before the wedding. Now, a greater proportion tends to postpone the decision to marry until after first living together. Cohabitation serves a range of purposes, as it always has done, but the expectations around cohabitation are shifting. The average age at which people first cohabit has increased by more than three years since 1980. The

average age of first cohabitation today is about the same as the average age of first marriage 30 years ago – 23 years for women, 25 for men.

Jubilee Centre researcher Dr Guy Brandon commented: ‘This raises questions of whether couples are dating for less time than they used to before moving in together, or whether they are dating for the same length of time but then cohabiting instead of marrying. Seeing cohabitation solely as a replacement for marriage appears to be too simplistic. Duration of a relationship alone is not a reliable indicator of commitment intentions. Other factors, such as joint bank accounts and home ownership, are needed to assess this – but the evidence in this regard suggests that the majority are not taking such steps of commitment.’

Dr Brandon suggests that factors such as busyness and distance apart may mean that, instead of dating, couples choose to cohabit sooner as a matter of convenience.

### **Cohabiting parents at greater risk of separation and divorce**

The Jubilee Centre’s report also shows that cohabitation offers children a significantly less stable form of family environment. The child’s earliest years are a time of disproportionate risk of separation. So, by the time the child is five years old the separation rate for couples who were cohabiting when their first child was born is more than six times the rate for couples who were married. By the time the child is 16, the separation rate for cohabiting couples is still over four times as high.

### **Marriage still more popular**

Since the early 1980s, cohabitation has been the most common form of first live-in relationship, with the incidence of cohabitation as a first live-in relationship now levelling out at around 85 per cent. However, around 55 per cent of cohabitations lead to marriage and marriage remains by far the most common family form of choice overall. Thus, there are almost 4½ times as many married couples in the UK as there are cohabiting couples.

Couples who live together before getting married are tending to do so for almost three times as long as similar couples in the early 1980s. However, although there appears to be less urgency around the decision to marry, those who use cohabitation as a ‘trial marriage’ to see whether they are suited to each other face a greater risk of later separation and divorce.

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Where one or both partners in a marriage have previously lived with a different partner, the likelihood of divorce soars even further. However, it is not possible to determine from the data alone whether these additional risks of divorce are a consequence of their former lifestyle choices, or simply another reflection of the factors that led the couple to choose initially to cohabit. In

other words, it's not clear whether cohabiting couples are prone to separation or whether couples prone to separation tend to cohabit. Other selection factors, such as religious beliefs or even income, may also account for this trend.

The Jubilee Centre's study concludes: 'We would expect marriage to stay the most popular form of couple and family relationship, since the majority of cohabitations still lead to marriage, and marriage – whether preceded by a period of cohabitation or not – remains the more stable form of relationship.'

### **Policy implications**

Cohabitation (and the marriages that follow) has therefore become a longer-lived but also more fragile state of relationship than ever before. This has significant policy implications, not least in terms of the future cost of family breakdown and care of the elderly for those not living in supportive family units.

Jubilee Centre Director Dr John Hayward, who headed up the research, observed: 'All the evidence suggests that families headed by married, biological parents who have not previously lived together provide the best environment for both the individuals involved and their children.'

Dr John Hayward  
Executive Director, Jubilee Centre, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ

The Jubilee Centre, established in 1983, is a Cambridge-based independent think tank providing a Christian perspective on current trends and social issues. The report *Cohabitation: An Alternative to Marriage?* is available to download from <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/>.

The research was based on the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study data set, *Understanding Society*, of 14,103 households and 22,265 adults conducted between 8 January 2009 and 7 March 2010, by the Institute for Social and Economic Research and National Centre for Social Research at the University of Essex.

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