

Less children living with married parents, more living with parents cohabitating?

## Number of children in married families drops 1million in ten years

- **Number of cohabiting couples with children more than doubled since 1996**
- **Cohabitation is a less reliable platform for raising a family, study shows**

By Steve Doughty

The number of children being brought up by unmarried cohabiting couples has doubled since 1996 to more than 1.8million, official figures said yesterday.

And the number of youngsters in married families has dropped by a million in little more than a decade.

The rise of cohabitation and the continuing increase in single-parent families means two children are now growing up outside a married family for every three with traditionally married parents, according to the breakdown by the Office for National Statistics.

Family values: More children are being brought up by unmarried couples that live together

The report from the state statistics body yesterday underlined that cohabitation is a less reliable platform for raising a family than marriage. 'Research has indicated that marital partnerships are more stable than cohabiting partnerships,' it said.

According to the report, the number of cohabiting couples has risen from 1.5million in 1996 to 2.9million this year. Over the same period, married couples have dropped by nearly half a million to 12,185,000.

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There are 4.6million married families with children, down by more than 600,000 on numbers just 16 years ago. By contrast, the number of cohabiting couples with children has more than doubled, from 539,000 to 1,131,000, the report said.

Based on the highly regarded Labour Force Survey, which canvasses 60,000 homes every three months, it put the numbers of children in cohabiting families at 1.83million compared with 900,000 in 1996.



On the rise: The continuing increase in single-parent families means more children are growing up outside a married family

It said that there are 8.25million children living with married parents, down nearly a million on 2000 and nearly 1.5million on 1996 levels. A further 3.16million live with single parents, up from 2.75million in 1996.

The ONS said: 'A very similar percentage of married couples and cohabiting couples have dependent children living in the household.'

Its report, Families and Households 2012, compares current figures with 1996, a watershed year for marriage.

The following year saw the election of Tony Blair's government, which preached that all family forms are equally good, removed Married Couples Allowance, the last tax break for married people, and stripped the word marriage as far as possible out of state forms and documents.



David Cameron is yet to introduce a tax break that will encourage marriage

David Cameron promised to encourage marriage with a tax break in the 2010 Tory election manifesto, but has yet to say when he will produce it.

Cohabitations typically break up around three times more quickly than marriages, usually leaving children to be brought up by a single parent. Children of single parents are likely to do worse at school and suffer worse health than children of married couples, and are more likely to grow up to adult lives of unemployment or crime.

Supporters of the traditional family called on the Prime Minister to act to shore up marriage.

Author and researcher Jill Kirby said: 'We should be very worried to see so many children are now being brought up in cohabiting homes, given the very high rate of break-up of cohabiting relationships.

'Cohabitation is much less stable so the prospects of children continuing to grow up with both parents are much lower. David Cameron's Conservatives have often talked about supporting marriage, but we need to see clear policies and money behind them. Otherwise this is only going to get worse.'

Lawyers seized on the figures to press for a cohabitation law which would compel cohabitantes to pay maintenance or compensation when an informal relationship breaks up.

Beverley Darwent of the Pannone law firm said: 'We find ourselves handling an increasing number of cohabitation disputes.

'Couples seem less committed to the idea of marrying, in the first place, and trying to work through whatever difficulties arise early in a marriage.'