

Strengthening the Family and Tackling Family Breakdown

Fatherlessness, dysfunction and
parental separation/divorce

A policy paper by the Centre for Social Justice

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THE CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

This summer's rioting exposed, over less than a week, the brokenness in many parts of our society which the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) has highlighted in all of its policy work since 2004. Although poverty is its most visible hallmark, this brokenness is not simply about lack of money. It is driven by five common factors: family breakdown, educational failure, intergenerational worklessness and welfare dependency, drug and alcohol addiction and severe personal debt.

These 'pathways to poverty' are interconnected; children who experience family breakdown are more likely to fail at school. Those failing at school, surrounded by a culture of worklessness, are more likely to end up unemployed and on benefits. Debt as well as drug and alcohol abuse also tend to emerge when an individual's life appears to have no purpose. Destructive and demoralising patterns of life tend to be passed from one generation to another.

The CSJ's policies are geared to helping people change their lives and giving them opportunities for a more hopeful, productive future. Our research has consistently shown that this has to begin with preventing family breakdown and the havoc it wreaks among adults and children. Through speaking with thousands of individuals and organisations tackling poverty at the coalface, we have found that this is often at the root of the other pathways.¹ Young people commenting on the riots, who did not themselves take part, emphasised the difference that coming from a supportive family made to their choices. Our polling shows that over 80 per cent of people would agree and think family breakdown is a serious problem.

This is not about finger-wagging or telling people how to live their lives; it is about encouraging strong and stable families: through early intervention with the most vulnerable of them, improving support for relationships, and removing the significant barriers to couple formation and marriage which stifle aspiration in the poorest areas.

Healthy families and stable childhoods should be the foundations on which we build a better Britain. And from strong families, other reforms are given room to take root. Yet over the last forty years our social trends have pushed in the opposition direction. High divorce rates have plateaued but the rise in unmarried parenthood has been accompanied by an escalation in family breakdown. Our research has shown that these trends have hit the poorest the hardest.

CSJ/YouGov Polling found that:

- 83 per cent think family breakdown is a serious problem; over a third think it is very serious;
- 75 per cent believe that stabilising Britain's most troubled families would help society as a whole;
- Over 70 per cent of those expressing an opinion support introducing an extra tax allowance for married couples; and
- 75 per cent think fatherlessness is a serious problem, almost a third think it is very serious.²

¹ For more details see Centre for Social Justice, *Green Paper on the Family*, London: Centre for Social Justice, January 2010 [http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/CSJ_Green_paper_on_the_family_WEB_2nd.pdf]

² Polling of 2084 adults, September 2011

Our work shows that:

Marriage is a social justice issue; aspirations to marry are similarly high across the social classes but further down the ladder it becomes harder to realise those aspirations for economic and cultural reasons.

- In our September 2011 polling at least two-thirds support the recognition of marriage in the taxation system.

Explicit commitment most effectively draws men into responsible fatherhood, and gives those who are lacking in purpose something to live and work for beyond themselves.

Breaking the link between parenthood and marriage has introduced massive instability into society in general, and into the poorest communities in particular, because informal partnering greatly increases the risk of single parenthood.

Fewer than one in ten married parents have split by the time a child is five³ compared with more than one in three who were not married. Where parents were not living together when a child is born, (and the couple penalty in the benefits system has discouraged couple formation) the break up rate (five years later) is a staggering 60 per cent.

- 97 per cent of all couples still intact by the time a child is 15 are married.⁴
- Half of all children born today, at current trends, will see the breakdown of their parents' relationship.⁵

Family breakdown is a key driver of poverty – especially for women – and as a result, the gap between rich and poor has widened. Upon a split their income drops, on average, by more than a tenth, and half of all single parents are in poverty.⁶

Single parenthood is a risk factor for poverty everywhere – Swedish statistics show parental separation is the biggest driver into child poverty by a large margin. Thus even in the most generous welfare regime in the world, the state does not and cannot prevent single parenthood's link with poverty.⁷

3 Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study corroborated by Goodman A. and Greaves E. (2010) Cohabitation, marriage and relationship stability, IFS Briefing Note BN107, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies

4 Analysis of Census data (on a subsample of 451,468 families with children, there were 13,676 intact married couples with 15 year olds and only 456 intact cohabiting couples with children)

5 Projections based on Census, British Household Panel Study and Millennium Cohort Study

6 Jenkins S, *Marital splits and income changes over the longer term*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 2008

7 Among children in single parent families the incidence of poverty is more than three times as high (24.7 per cent) than those in families with two parents (8.1 per cent). In comparison with households headed by couples, at least four times as many households headed by single parents are in poverty. Source: Save the Children Sweden, *Child Poverty in Sweden 8th Report 2010*, Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden, 2011

What should we do about family breakdown?

It is not just the policies Government sets, but also the messages it sends that influence people's behaviour. Strong families make for strong societies and ministers have a responsibility to articulate that. The following measures communicate support for a culture of marriage, commitment and two-parent families (without in any way criticising or penalising lone parents).

- Protecting investment in Universal Credit now and in the next spending review for addressing the couple penalty.
- Registering marriage on government forms and in government research, thus giving a lead to other sectors like health and insurance.
- Recognising marriage in the tax system (the CSJ's 2010 *Green Paper on the Family* gives 'order of magnitude' costings for different scenarios).
- *The Norgrove Interim Report* recommends that the process for divorce leaves the family courts and is dealt with wholly administratively unless disputed. Yet international experience of administrative divorces, such as in Japan, raises significant concerns. Although much of the present divorce process is entirely administrative, the declaration of the formal and legal ending of the marriage should be from an institution still commanding respect across much of society.
- Registrars should signpost engaged couples to face-to-face marriage preparation, where good courses are available locally.
- There is an absence of the family agenda in Government communication. For example, the Department for Education is already funding community-based programmes that combine antenatal education with information about relationships. Society needs to know that this is a priority.

As well as these important signalling measures the CSJ recommends that:

- Sure Start Children's Centres should be built upon and absorbed into Family Hubs: facilities in the heart of communities delivering joined-up, family-focused services, with a particular focus on early years provision, health visitors working out of them, and an emphasis on outreach. Family Hubs should have three key objectives achieved either through direct delivery of services or through proactive referral to other local services.
 1. Strengthen families: give families who need it help with family relationships and parenting, focusing particularly on the social and emotional side of a child's development and parent-child relationships.
 2. Help prevent family breakdown by:
 - a. Providing preventive relationship support at key points in a couple's relationship and
 - b. Supporting families in difficulty by working with them, where possible and appropriate, to resolve conflict and find solutions to challenges.
 3. Support separating families in achieving workable parenting arrangements which are in the best interests of the children without the need to resort to the courts.

- Children's Centres and Family Hubs should provide a range of services to help couples: relationship education (pointers that help prevent problems), counselling, mediation and classes to help them keep their children's interests as the top priority when they are separating.
- Restructuring at a local government level to mirror the Social Justice Cabinet Committee in central government which facilitates and drives cross-departmental working to tackle interlocking pathways to poverty.
- Intensive help for our most chaotic families that draws on key learning points from family intervention projects such as: the need to involve effective voluntary sector services, the merits of having a small team around the family with whom they form strong relationships (advocating for them and helping them access all other services they might need such as parenting programmes and mental health support), more time and freedom to work with families to build trust, and minimal bureaucracy.
- Include couple relationship support in intensive help for our most chaotic families. Adults in all types of families (including single parents) need tools to help them break intergenerational cycles of family breakdown.
- Family fostering programmes offering residential support to families with children at immediate risk of entering care for preventable reasons and intensive round the clock support to address the issues behind the need to take children into care (such as those run by Save the Family).
- Now that local councils have to develop their own strategies as part of the national Child Poverty Strategy, they should collect data on relationship status so they can demonstrate the effectiveness of their strategy to stabilise relationships in their area. This would drive the provision of a wide range of relationship support and other measures – in other words the Government should set the right outcomes for local authorities to deliver against.
- Given the aspiration to marry, the reality that many do not achieve that aspiration and the importance of parents' relationships to giving their children a good start in life, the prospective Early Intervention Foundation proposed in the recent Allen Reviews should research the most effective relationship stabilising and education programmes.

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