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Marriage is integral to tackling family breakdown says CSJ in response to IFS study

Response to the IFS study 'Cohabitation, marriage, relationship stability and child outcomes'

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) notes research published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) on 19 July 2011 about the impact of marriage on childhood outcomes. Broadly, the headline claim of the paper that 'Marriage does not improve children's development' is questionable given the many caveats and nuances contained within the body of research, as well as the fact it takes a very narrow measurement of marriage's impact on children.

In large part, this research clearly substantiates CSJ research on the societal benefits of marriage, in comparison to the overall outcomes of other relationship structures. Whilst the CSJ has always been clear that marriage is no magic bullet, and that its strengthening must be only one part of a policy package to reduce family breakdown, we are pleased that the IFS and the Nuffield Foundation are unequivocal in their verdict that *'children born to married parents achieve better cognitive and social outcomes, on average, than children born into other family forms, including cohabiting unions'*. We also welcome its calls *'to increase the educational attainment of today's children (tomorrow's parents) as a means of improving the outcomes of future generations of children'*.

But we question the paper's conclusion that once certain factors are controlled for, there is no evidence that marriage itself has a statistically significant impact on childhood outcomes. Although the research has a specific focus about the value of introducing recognition of marriage in the tax system, rather than making an overall assessment of marriage, there are some ongoing weaknesses and complexities in the methodology of the research, which undermine its conclusions.

Furthermore, the study acknowledges that some of its data is 'far from a representative sample of children', for a number of important reasons. In addition, some of its core data is limited to children aged 7 and under, whereas an assessment of childhood outcomes, such as in terms of truancy, anti-social behaviour or the impact of family structures, will only become apparent as they become older.

As well as the difficulties in the data used, the research concentrates on only one of the social benefits of marriage, yet its impact on such things as adult wellbeing, happiness and health are well established. Most crucially, marriage is statistically far more stable than cohabitation, and in this sense – given the destructive impact of family breakdown on children and the resulting increased likelihood of poverty – its outcomes are on average more positive for children and society than cohabitation or other family structures. In its analysis, the IFS study acknowledges that in taking judgements about the causes of instability it could not observe such factors as love and commitment within a relationship – clear determinant factors as to the likelihood of relationship stability and in the case of commitment, stronger by the nature of the decision to marry.

Crucially in this, given that three quarters of under-35s in a cohabiting relationship want to get married, it is not accurate to assert that these are two separate groups of people with differing ideals, values and socio-economic backgrounds. Instead, as the CSJ has consistently argued, there are significant barriers and disincentives to couple formation and marriage for people in the poorest areas, even though there is a high desire for marriage. Therefore, public policy should focus on removing these barriers – such as by ending the ‘couple penalty’ in the benefit system and through introducing recognition of marriage in the tax system. This is not about telling people how to live their lives, but about creating a level playing field for those who aspire to marriage, rather than creating disincentives to such positive behaviour.

Whilst arguments about cause and effect within marriage matter and will continue, they must not be allowed to detract from the bigger debate about tackling the high levels of family breakdown which so damage society.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The Centre for Social Justice is an independent think tank established, by Rt. Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP in 2004, to seek effective solutions to the poverty that blights parts of Britain.

In July 2007 the group published *Breakthrough Britain. Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown*. The paper presented over 190 policy proposals aimed at ending the growing social divide in Britain.

Subsequent reports have put forward proposals for reform of the police, prisons, social housing, the asylum system and family law. Other reports have dealt with street gangs and early intervention to help families with young children.

The Rt. Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP stood down as Chairman of the Centre on his appointment as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in May 2010 and is now the Founder and Patron.