

Twenty years of having babies across different countries of the UK: How has parents' partnership status changed?

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POLICY BRIEFING

AUG 2020

In the past 20 years in the UK, the partnerships that people are in when they have a baby have changed dramatically. In all four constituent countries of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) the proportion of live births that occur within marriage has decreased. It has become much more common for unmarried women to have babies (nonmarital births). However, not all nonmarital births are the same. Births outside of marriage might be to a couple who are living together but not married (cohabiting), or to single women (who may or may not register the birth jointly with their partner).

The composition of nonmarital births has changed over time and in different ways between the UK's countries. To explore this, we have used birth registration data to examine live births in different types of partnerships from 1998 to 2017. As having children outside of marriage has become the norm across the UK, this policy briefing unpacks the nature of these partnerships.

Key Points:

- *Childbearing outside of marriage has become more common across all four countries in the UK.*
- *In 2017, around half of all live births in England, Wales and Scotland, and 44% in Northern Ireland, were to non-married couples.*
- *In England, Wales and Scotland the decline in births to married couples has been offset by a comparable increase in births to cohabiters.*
- *Northern Ireland shows a markedly different pattern in its nonmarital births compared with England, Wales and Scotland. Fewer births are registered to unmarried couples living at the same address (cohabiters).*
- *Since 2009, births registered to parents living apart at different addresses have been the most common type of nonmarital birth in Northern Ireland.*

Introduction

The partnership context of childbearing in the UK has seen a marked shift away from marital childbearing. Examining trends in birth registration type provides further insight into how family structures are changing and whether there are differences between the UK's countries. From 1998 onwards, all four of the UK's countries have published information on live births, not just by whether they are marital or nonmarital, but also by four registration types – married, joint registration same address, joint registration different address, and sole registrant. In this briefing, we refer to joint registrants at the same address as cohabiters, and joint registrants at different addresses as “JRDA”.

The study

The birth registration process

Our research uses birth registration data from the four UK constituent countries between 1998 and 2017 (England and Wales are combined in these statistics). Registering a birth is mandatory in the UK and is completed in person at the local register office. If parents are married (or in a civil partnership), either parent may register a birth. If parents are unmarried and wish to register a birth jointly, both parents must be present to sign the register. A declaration of parentage must be provided if only the mother is present at registration. For parents who are unmarried or not in a civil partnership, the mother may also register the birth on her own as the sole registrant. If parents cannot register a birth, a member of staff at the hospital where the birth took place may do so, or someone who is responsible for the child. Birth registration policies, processes and documentation are very similar in all countries of the UK.

Sole registrants and married couples automatically have parental responsibilities and rights, unless a court removes them. Since 2003 (2002 in Northern Ireland), unmarried fathers also have parental responsibilities and rights if they are named on the birth registration form. Since 2007, there has been a push by the UK government to encourage joint registration, with the objective of promoting parental engagement.

Main findings

In 1998, about six in every ten births in England and Wales and Scotland were to married couples (Figure 1). By 2017, it was about five in ten. This decline has been offset by a comparable increase in births to cohabiters (Figure 2). At the same time, the percentage of sole registrations and joint registrants at different addresses (JRDA) has shown little change (Figure 3 and Figure 4), suggesting most births still occur to couples who are living together, if not necessarily married.

In contrast, Northern Ireland stands out among constituent countries for consistently having a lower proportion of live births to cohabiters and a much higher percentage of births to JRDA. As of 2017, the proportion of births to JRDA in Northern Ireland was twice the proportion in England and Wales and Scotland. In the same year, the proportion of births to cohabiters in Northern Ireland was approximately half that in England and Wales and Scotland. Although it is unclear whether JRDA are in an intimate relationship, analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) reflects the patterns we found in the birth registration data: there are a higher proportion of lone parent households and fewer cohabiting families with children in Northern Ireland than England and Wales and Scotland¹.

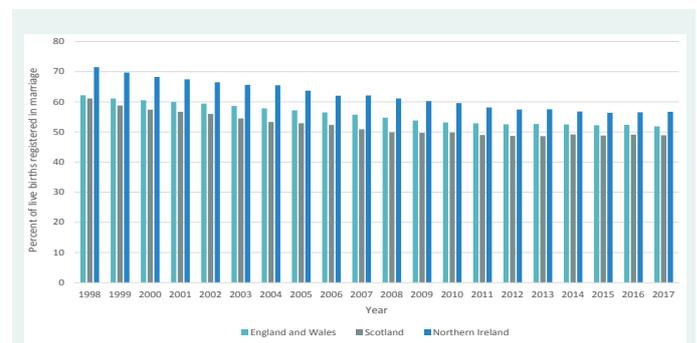


Figure 1: Percent of live births registered in marriage, 1998-2017

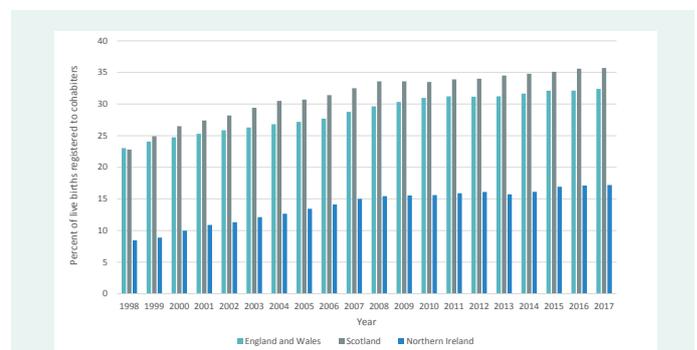


Figure 2: Percent of live births registered to cohabiters, 1998-2017

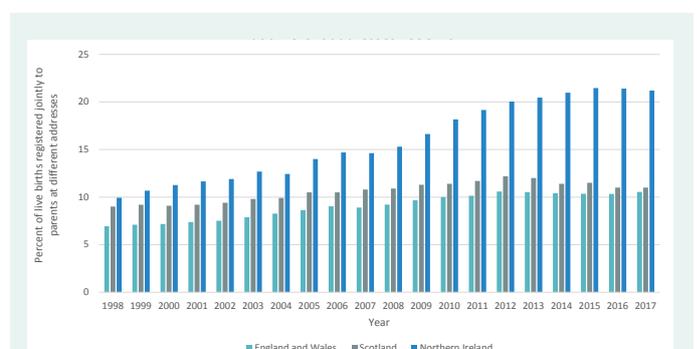


Figure 3: Percent of JRDA live birth, 1998-2017

¹ Families and Households in the UK: 2019, Office for National Statistics

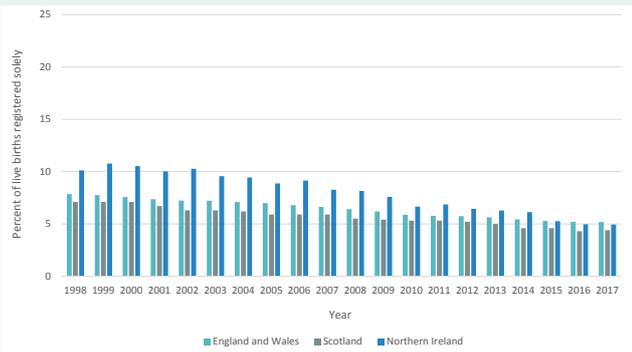


Figure 4: Percent of live births registered to sole registrants, 1998–2017

Trends in Northern Ireland

Marital births and births to sole registrants have declined in Northern Ireland, while births to JRDA and cohabiters have increased (Figure 5). Since 2009, there have been more births to JRDA than to cohabiting parents.

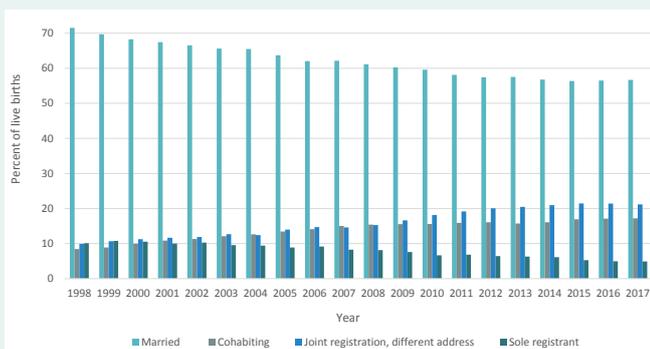


Figure 5: Distribution of live births by registration type, Northern Ireland, 1998–2017

Mothers of babies jointly registered by parents living at different addresses (JRDA) are increasingly older (Figure 6).

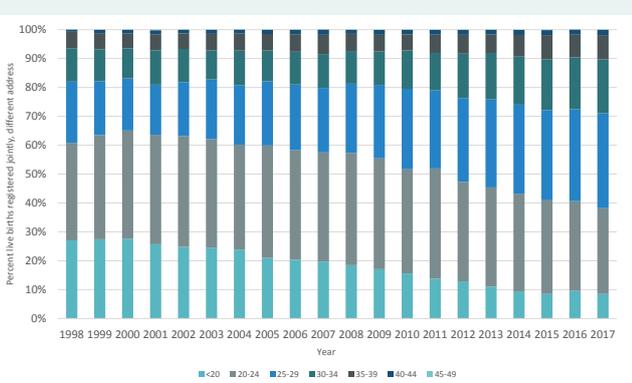


Figure 6: Distribution of JRDA live births by mother's age, Northern Ireland, 1998–2017

Currently, women over 30 account for more than 30% of JRDA birth registrations, whereas teenagers account for less than 10%.

The teen fertility rate has declined substantially over this time period from 27.8 per 1,000 teens to 12.4², and births to teenagers now account for less than 3% of overall fertility. So while teens who become mothers are most likely to jointly register the birth with a partner living at a different address, our study shows the growth in JRDA births cannot be attributed to teenagers.

Policy implications

Although cohabiting parents have become common in England and Wales and Scotland, birth registration data suggest they are markedly less common in Northern Ireland. At time of birth, parents in Northern Ireland are more likely to be either married or living at different addresses, compared with parents in England and Wales and Scotland.

One explanation for this difference is that cohabitation may be less culturally acceptable in Northern Ireland than in the other countries of the UK. The lack of legal abortion in Northern Ireland over the period our data covers may also be important in explaining the large percentage of births registered to JRDA. In England and Wales and Scotland, women who became pregnant but were not in a relationship could seek an abortion, whereas women in similar situations in Northern Ireland faced greater barriers to accessing abortion. Without the option of legal abortion, pregnant women who are not already in a cohabiting relationship may prefer to give birth while continuing to live separately from the other parent.

The changing partnership context of childbearing has implications for policy makers. Sole registrants and non-cohabiting registrants tend to be younger than married and cohabiting parents, which is important to know because younger parents may require more support and have different health needs than older parents³. Earlier research has also found sole registrants to be more disadvantaged and have worse health outcomes than married and joint registrants⁴.

This study indicates the continued growth of unmarried parents, particularly JRDA in Northern Ireland, highlighting the importance of understanding the different needs of all family types, as unmarried families become more diverse. More research is needed to investigate the characteristics of non-cohabiting parents in Northern Ireland, who may face challenges of co-parenting from two different homes. This growing subgroup of parents should be properly acknowledged by public policy so their needs can be supported through public services and benefits.

2 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Registrar General Annual Reports 1998–2017

3 Childbearing by Registration Status in England and Wales, Using Birth Registration Data for 2012 and 2013, Office for National Statistics

4 Joint birth registration: promoting parental responsibility, 2007, Department for Work and Pensions

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Acknowledgements

We thank Elaine Longden at the Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency and Paula Guy at the Office of National Statistics for their assistance with data extraction. All analyses and interpretation are the responsibility of the authors.

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