



The UK  
Marriage  
Index 2009



**JUBILEE  
CENTRE**  
A SPIRITUAL VISION FOR SOCIETY

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*'Relationships are the missing piece of the political puzzle. As we struggle to adapt to the domination of the bottom line, the factor invariably omitted from the equation is human relationships.'*

*Lindsay Tanner,  
Minister of Finance & Deregulation, Australia<sup>1</sup>*

*'If our country can create private sector and public policies that support working families, we will not only advance the well-being of children and families, but will also — in the long-run — build a more productive workforce and a stronger economy.'*

*Ann Bookman,  
Executive Director, MIT Workplace Center<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Crowded Lives*, Lindsay Tanner, Pluto Press Australia, 2003, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> *Work and Family: Balancing demands requires community support and involvement*, Dorene Dzuiba, Spectrum, MIT, Spring 2005

## Background

### The GDP Problem

In September 2009, Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz urged world leaders to drop their obsession with examining gross domestic product and to focus more on broader measures of prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

That this issue is particularly pressing in the UK is evidenced by UNICEF's child poverty report<sup>4</sup>, in which the UK was rated the lowest out of 21 OECD countries for child well-being. This verdict was based on an assessment of six dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective well-being.

The problem with GDP is it fails to measure progress and tells us nothing about our overall wellbeing. Thus, if you pay someone to do your washing up and they pay you to do theirs, GDP goes up with no real benefit to either of you. Worse, GDP includes unsustainable spending habits; take the car to work instead of walking and you increase the country's GDP in the cost of fuel and maintenance, but at the expense of increased pollution and poorer health.

As a New York Times columnist has concluded, 'We're in an economic hole, and as we climb out, what we need is not simply a measurement of how much money passes through our hands

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<sup>3</sup> *Stiglitz Urges End to GDP 'Fetish' in Favor of Broader Measures*, Bloomberg.com, 13 September 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, UNICEF, February 2007

each quarter, but an indicator that will tell us if we are really and truly gaining ground in the perennial struggle to improve the material conditions of our lives.’<sup>5</sup>

## Alternatives to GDP

For some years, the Jubilee Centre has suggested the emphasis of development should be on the quality of social, political, and economic relationships – something we have summarised as ‘relational well-being’ (RWB). We have previously proposed that a number of possible indicators could be used to measure RWB, including the marriage rate, the percentage of people who feel lonely, and the extent of pay differentials within organisations.<sup>6</sup>

The problem, as Joseph Stiglitz acknowledged, is how to quantify this: ‘So many things that are important to individuals are not included in GDP. There needs to be an array of numbers but we need to understand the role of each number. We may not be able to aggregate everything together.’

All the evidence indicates that there is a genuine protection effect for society from marriage<sup>7</sup>:

- Marriage makes people far less likely to suffer psychological illness
- Marriage makes people live much longer
- Marriage makes people healthier and happier

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<sup>5</sup> *G.D.P. R.I.P.*, Eric Zencey, The New York Times, 9 August 2009

<sup>6</sup> *What Charter for Humanity? Defining the destination of development*, Michael Schluter, Cambridge Papers, September 2006

<sup>7</sup> *How does marriage affect physiological and psychological health? Evidence for longitudinal studies*, Chris Wilson and Andrew Oswald, The Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), May 2005

- Both men and women benefit, though some investigators have found that men gain more in the above ways
- Marriage quality and prior beliefs about marriage can influence the size of the gains.

It is therefore significant that a group of scholars from six major universities and four leading research institutes in the USA, has now launched a major new measure that combines a number of indicators into a single number: the Marriage Index. As the authors of *The Marriage Index* suggest, this is an important development because 'for any society that cares about its future, leading marriage indicators are as important as leading economic indicators.'<sup>8</sup>

## A Government of Change

As Britain approaches a much anticipated general election, both the main political parties in Westminster have promised to deliver change for the nation. It is encouraging that politicians across the political spectrum have indicated an understanding that placing a greater priority on marriage would bring benefits for the whole country.

*'I think marriage is best for kids. It's not wrong that the tax system should recognise commitment and marriage. I think it's better when children are in a home where their parents are married and I think children do notice if their parents are married or not.'* (Andy Burnham, Secretary of State for Health)

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<sup>8</sup> *The Marriage Index: A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators*, Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, October 2009

*'In our modern world, in these times of stress and anxiety the family is the best welfare system there is. That's why we will also back marriage in the tax system – I believe in commitment and many of us, me included, will always remember that moment when you say, up there in front of others, "it's not just me anymore, it's us, together," and that helps to take you through the tough times and that's something we should cherish as a society.'* (David Cameron, Conservative Party Leader)

*'Strong families with two parents are critical in the battle against crime and disorder. There needs to be a major review of the tax and benefit system.'* (David Laws, Liberal Democrat Children, Schools and Families spokesman)

In this paper, the Jubilee Centre uses the Marriage Index, published by the Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, to assess the condition of marriage in the UK and offers some specific proposals as to how the figure might be improved.

## Methodology

Launched by the Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages, the Marriage Index combines five key indicators:

- the percentage of adults married,
- happiness in marriage,
- the percentage of first marriages intact,
- the percentage of births to married parents, and
- the percentage of children living with their own married parents.

Exact comparisons with the US Index have not been possible owing to the different ways and kinds of data collected nationally. The main sources of data used were: (i) the percentage of adults married: Office for National Statistics, 2007; (ii) satisfaction in marriage: *Families in Britain*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; (iii) the percentage of first marriages intact: *Focus on People and Migration: The changing age structure of the UK population*, table 4.5, ONS, 2005; (iv) the percentage of births to married parents: ONS, 2004; (v) the percentage of children living with their own married parents: *Focus on Families*, table 1.5, ONS, 2007.

Exact data for 1970 was only available for the percentage of adults married and the percentage of births to married parents (*Live births: 1838-2004, occurrence within/outside marriage and sex*). Other figures are estimates based on ONS data, including again *The changing age structure of the UK population (2005)*.



Satisfaction in marriage was simply extrapolated back from recent trends.

## **Percentage of adults married**

Although the authors of *The Marriage Index* make a case for including adults in their low twenties, on the basis that many in this age range are already choosing to cohabit, we have chosen instead to measure from age 24. This was mainly a pragmatic decision on the basis that, at present, it is not always easy to split statistics for the 16-24 age category. In any case, ultimately the important thing is to discern a trend over time, not to be able to make a strict comparison with trends across the Atlantic.

## **Happiness in marriage**

As far as we are aware, there is no UK survey that poses a question similar to that on the General Social Survey, a nationwide survey conducted every other year in America: ‘Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?’ Instead, the closest comparison is figures from the DSCF 2008 evidence paper *Families in Britain* to the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit for the question ‘How satisfied are you with your partner?’

## **Percentage of first marriages intact**

For consistency with the percentage of adults married, and for the same reason that at present it is not always easy to split statistics for the 16-24 age category, the slightly narrower age range of 24-54 has been adopted for the UK Index (rather than the range of 20-59 used for the US Marriage Index).

## Percentage of births to married parents

We believe it is right to devote 2/5 of the Index to children as these last two indicators concern more than just children. To quote *The Marriage Index*:

*‘fundamentally, they reflect the link between adults and children that marriage is designed to create and secure. At its essence, marriage is a social institution that, when it’s working, meets social needs—and perhaps the greatest of these needs is supporting the helpless offspring that result from the sexual union of two people. Yes, one of the goods of marriage is an intimate relationship—but we would be shortchanging the essential definition of marriage by reducing it to that. So if marriage fundamentally is about creating a link between adults and children, any index that purports to measure the health of marriage must capture the strength or weakness of this link. Our last two indicators attempt to accomplish just that.’*

## Percentage of children living with their own married parents

Again, to quote the US authors of *The Marriage Index*:

*‘Marriage not only ensures that children are born into a stable family—it also intends that children are raised with their own biological or adoptive mother and father. That’s what happens when marriage works—it maintains and strengthens the link between parents and children, and creates a context for children to flourish. While we can certainly point to examples of how high-conflict marriages can hurt children, on average*

*marriage does a good job of helping children flourish. As longtime family scholar David Popenoe, summing up the scholarly evidence, put it, "Few propositions have more empirical support in the social sciences than this one: Compared to all other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents are best for children."*

## Results

Overall our analysis gives a value for the UK Marriage Index of 61.3 per cent.

This suggests that the health of marriage in the UK is at a similar level to that found in the US, where the Index is 60.3 per cent.

Although figures for previous decades were not readily available for the UK, estimates from incomplete data unsurprisingly show that, as in America, there has been a significant downward trend for some decades, from a figure of at least at least 85% in 1970 (notably, before the 1969 Divorce Reform Act came into force in 1971).

	<b>2009</b>	<b>1970</b>
Percentage of Adults Married (ages 24-54)	54.2%	85.0%
Percentage of Married Persons Satisfied with their Marriage	61.5%	63.5%†
Percentage of First Marriages Intact (ages 24-54)	68.0%	93.0%
Percentage of Births to Married Parents	57.8%	91.7%
Percentage of Children Living with Own Married Parents	65.0%	92.0%
<b>Combined UK score</b>	<b>61.3%</b>	<b>85.0%</b>

† As explained in the methodology, this figure in particular is simply an estimate based on recent trends. On the basis of trends in the USA, this is very likely to be an underestimate.

## Conclusions

The purpose of having an index is not to lament how the institution of marriage has deteriorated over the years, but rather, in the words of Ann Bookman, Executive Director of MIT's Workplace Center, to help 'build a more productive workforce and a stronger economy.' As with all areas of public policy, this presents a challenge for all of us, not just for our elected local and national representatives in government.

Below, as a discussion starter, we offer a small number of specific proposals for how we all might get involved in improving the Marriage Index. The ideas fall into three broad categories: monitoring and reporting, national government, and local communities.

### Monitoring and Reporting

- The Office for National Statistics should begin to monitor those components of the Index that are presently poorly or inadequately monitored (most notably, the percentage of first marriages intact)
- The ONS should add the UK Marriage Index to the list of Population Trends on which it regularly reports

### National Government

- Recognise marriage in the tax and benefits system
- Reverse the trend towards easy no-fault divorce laws

- Ensure all parents have time to spend with their children, for instance through a shared weekend day off
- Introduce opportunities into the curriculum for schoolchildren to learn about the nature of marriage, family and relationships and for sex education to be taught in the broader context of relationship education

### **Local Communities**

- Get involved in – or, if they don't already exist in your area, start – a relationship and parenting education programme or marriage education workshop in your community
- Parents and teachers – encourage young people to see dating within the context of courtship, where courtship is defined as 'finding and winning the right person for marriage'
- Parents – be intentional about talking to your children about marriage