

Chapter 3

The impact of change

1. Marriage, separation and health

Decades of research have clearly established links between health and well-being and marriage, separation and divorce. Professor William Doherty notes that 'for adults, a stable, happy marriage is the best protector against illness and premature death, and for children, such a marriage is the best source of emotional stability and good physical health.'¹ A considerable body of research evidence indicates that adults and children are at increased risk for mental and physical problems due to marital distress.² 'There is both conclusive evidence to show that marriage is a 'healthy environment' associated with lower mortality and morbidity and strong evidence that the process of divorce leaves men, women and children vulnerable to ill-health. Any initiative which aims to prevent ill-health and promote good health must take account of this reality.'³

In a recent review of the literature, Professor Linda Waite, past-President of the American Population Association observed:

In a variety of ways and along a number of dimensions, married men and women lead healthier lives than the unmarried. This includes more drinking, substance abuse, drinking and driving and generally living dangerously among single men. Married women more often have access to health insurance. Divorced and widowed men and women are more likely to get into arguments and fights, do dangerous things, take chances that could cause accidents. The married lead more ordered lives, with healthier eating and sleeping habits. Marriage improves both men's and women's psychological well-being. Perhaps as a result, married men and women generally live longer than single men and women.⁴

1 William J Doherty (1997) 'The scientific case for marriage and couples education in health care' paper University of Minnesota.

2 AJ Cherlin & F Furstenberg Jr (1994) 'Step families in the United States: A reconsideration' *Annual Review of Sociology* 20: 359–381; J Coie et al. (1993) 'The science of prevention: A conceptual framework and some directions for a national research program' *American Psychologist* 48: 1013–1022; JC Coyle, J Kahn & IH Gotlib (1987) *Depression. Family interaction and psychopathology: Theories, methods and findings* New York: Plenum Press; CP Cowan & PA Cowan (1992) *When partners become parents: The big life change for couples* New York: Harper Collins; F Fincham, J Grych & L Osborne (1993) 'Interparental conflict and child adjustment: A longitudinal analysis' paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development New Orleans.

3 F McAllister (ed) (1995) *Marital breakdown and the Health of the Nation* London: One plus One.

4 LJ Waite (1997) 'Why marriage matters' *Threshold* 57: 4–8.

These conclusions are not confined to the United States or Britain. Curtin University Professor Denis Ladbrook notes that the conclusions drawn from the overseas data are broadly replicable in Australia.⁵

Mortality

Virtually every study which has analysed mortality rates by marital status shows that the unmarried have higher death rates, a finding confirmed since the 1930s in every country for which accurate health data exists.⁶ In a comparative study of 16 developed countries, Hu and Goldman found that not only is being married associated with increased longevity, but that the excess mortality of the unmarried relative to the married has been increasing over the past two or three decades; and divorced and widowed people in their twenties and thirties have particularly high risks of premature deaths.⁷ Morowitz re-examined earlier data which had documented the health risk of smoking and found that non-smokers who were divorced had only a slightly lower risk of dying from cancer than married men who smoked a pack or more of cigarettes a day.⁸ In another study, Larson found that the age specific death rate for divorced people in the United States is 84 per cent higher than for married people. This translates to a loss of ten years life per divorced man, the equivalent in health terms of smoking a pack of cigarettes a day for the rest of one's life.⁹

In a study of professional women in Wisconsin, Ladbrook found that the usual pattern of mortality in the US whereby males usually die six years earlier than females was reversed. The main factor accounting for this reversal was the higher ratio of women who were never married, widowed, separated or divorced compared with the married than was the case with men. A considerably higher percentage of

5 D Ladbrook (1997) 'Why marriage matters: An Australian perspective' *Threshold* 57: 9–10.

6 RH Coombs (1991) 'Marital status and personal well-being: A literature review' *Family Relations* 40: 97; JJ Lynch (1979) *The broken heart* Sydney: Harper & Row; and H Carter & P Glick (1970) *Marriage and divorce: A social and economic study* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).

7 Y Hu & N Goldman (1990) 'Mortality differentials by marital status: An international comparison' *Demography* 27(2): 233. See also BD Cox, FA Huppert & MJ Whichelow (1993) *The health and lifestyles survey: Seven years on* London: Dartmouth Press; B Burman & G Margolin (1992) 'Analysis of the association between marital relationships and health problems: An international perspective' *Psychological Bulletin* 112: 39–63; and LM Verbrugge (1979) 'Marital status and health' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 41: 267–285.

8 HJ Morowitz (1975) 'Hiding in the Hammond report' *Hospital Practice* August.

9 DB Larson, JP Swyers & SS Larson (1995) *The costly consequences of divorce: Assessing the clinical, economic and public health impact of marital disruption in the United States* Rockville MD: National Center for Healthcare Research 46.

men than women in this category were married and they were living longer than the women in the category.¹⁰

Marriage seems to protect from contracting cancer and offers better chance of survival after diagnosis. Lilienfield found that nearly every type of terminal cancer inflicted divorced persons of both sexes more frequently than it did the married. Divorced males had double the rate of respiratory cancer, and four-fold increase in buccal cavity and pharynx (throat) cancer, and more than a fifty per cent increase in cancer of the digestive system and peritoneum and urinary tract.¹¹ In a subsequent study, Goodwin found that married cancer patients did better medically than unmarried cancer patients.¹²

In addition to cancer, researchers have found a number of other diseases that have contributed to increased mortality among the divorced and separated. Lynch reviewed the mortality data from the National Center for Health Statistics on all deaths over a two year period and found that the premature death rate from cardiovascular disease, for both white and non-white divorced men, was double that of married men; the premature death rate due to pneumonia for white divorced men was more than seven times that of their married counterparts; and the premature death rate due to hypertension and cardiovascular diseases was double for divorced men compared to their married counterparts.¹³ As McAllister notes in her survey of the literature, 'marital status has long been identified as one of the social characteristics associated with heart disease and stroke.'¹⁴ She also notes that 'as in the case with cancer, there is also evidence of superior survival rates following myocardial infarction among the married, in comparison to other marital status groups.'

Australian studies support these conclusions. In *Health Differentials Among Working Age Australians*, Lee and colleagues identify the health risks of the never married and the divorced and widowed:

There are very large differences in mortality between married/separated men on the one hand, and never married and divorced/widowed men on the other. The latter groups have standardised rates over twice the former's . . . Separated/divorced/widowed men have more acute symptoms and mental health problems and smoke and drink more, although only the smoking and

10 D Ladbroke (1990) 'Sex differentials in premature death among professionals' *Journal of the Australian Population Association* 7: 1-26; 89-115.

11 AM Lilienfield, ML Levin & MJ Kessler (1972) *Cancer in the United States* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

12 JS Goodwin et al (1987) 'The effect of marital status on stage, treatment, and survival of cancer patients' *Journal of the American Medical Association* 258: 3125-3130. See also the series of studies cited in F McAllister (ed) *Marital Breakdown* supra.

13 JJ Lynch (1977) *The lonely heart, broken heart, and sudden death* New York: Basic Books.

14 F McAllister (1995) *Marital Breakdown* supra 19.

mental health differences are of comparable magnitude to the mortality differences.

The differences between women in different marital status groups are not quite as extreme as those for men, but the mortality of never married women is still 80 per cent higher than that of married women, and that of divorced/widowed women over 60 per cent higher. The separated/divorced/widowed women in the surveys also report mental health problems, and smoke, at levels 80 per cent above married women, and they report 20 per cent more acute and chronic symptoms, the latter in contrast to men in the same group who show no excess.¹⁵

The subsequent 1992 report of the National Health Strategy *Enough to make you sick* confirmed the strong correlations between marital status and health outcomes:

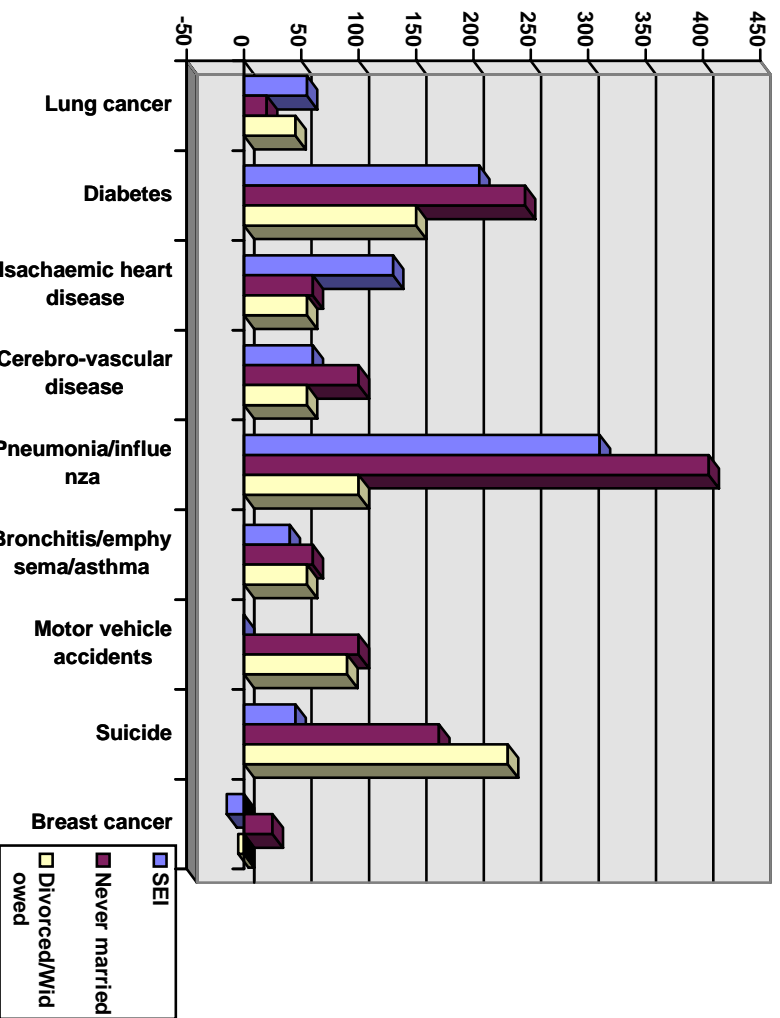
With the exception of stomach cancer, brain cancer, pancreatic cancer (in women) and prostate cancer (in men), married individuals aged 25–64 are at less risk of dying from all selected causes of death than never married individuals, widowed/divorced individuals or both (of the same age).¹⁶

Although the National Health Strategy concentrates on inequalities related to low socioeconomic status, Dr Moira Eastman has analysed the data to show a striking correlation between marital status and mortality rates.

15 SH Lee et al (1987) *Health Differentials Among Working Age Australians* Canberra: Australian Institute of Health.

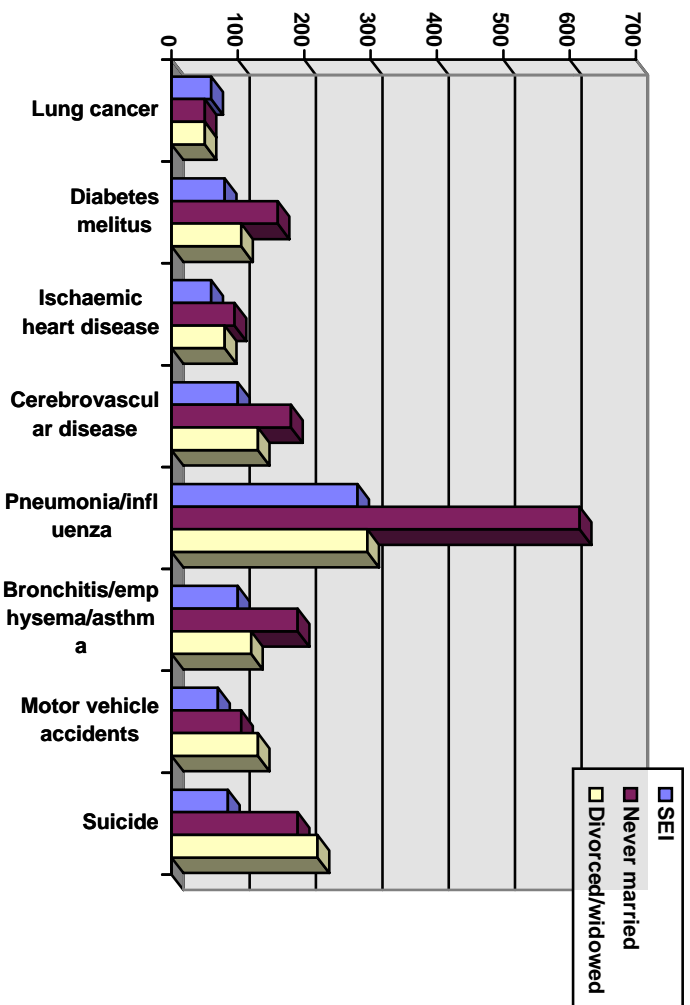
16 National Health Strategy (1992) *Enough to make you sick: How income and environment affect health*. Melbourne.

Mortality rates by SEI and marital status for women



Source: M Eastman (1997) 'Family variables, health outcomes and national health strategies' Threshold 56: 17

Mortality rates by SEI and marital status for men



Source: M Eastman (1997) 'Family variables, health outcomes and national health strategies' Threshold 56: 18

Eastman concludes:

Enough to make you sick gives the eight causes of death for which correlations are strongest between low socio-economic status and cause of death. For seven of these causes of death, correlations are even stronger with marital status. That is, the never married, widowed and divorced have higher death rates on seven of these eight causes of death compared with the married than do the lowest socio-economic bracket compared with the highest socio-economic bracket.¹⁷

Indeed, the mortality rates of individuals with poor social relationships are higher than those who smoke cigarettes for many years.¹⁸

Suicides and accidents

‘Relationship breakdown is one of the major causes of suicide worldwide, and the differential in mortality rates by marital status is huge,’ notes the One plus One Marriage and Partnership Research foundation. ‘This reflects the experience of loss and depression often associated with divorce and separation.’¹⁹ As the following table illustrates, the divorced have a three to four fold higher risk of suicide than the married.

	Period of study	Married		Divorced		Relative risk Div'd/Marr'd	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
England & Wales	1950-82	84	57	528	227	6.3	4.0
Scotland	1973-83	130	74	546	275	4.2	3.7
USA#	1979-81		119		349		2.9
Finland	1969-71	401	112	1538	349	3.8	3.1

Data for both men and women

Source: F. McAllister (ed) (1995) *Marital Breakdown* London: One plus One

Eastman notes that ‘for men and women the divorced/widowed have suicide rates over three times that of the married and the never married rates are almost three times the rate of the married.’²⁰ UK research reports that those who are separated but not divorced have suicide rates 20 times that of the married.²¹ A recent Australian

17 M Eastman (1997) ‘Family variables, health outcomes and national health strategies’ *Threshold* 56: 14–25.

18 JS House, KR Landis & D Umberson (1988) ‘Social relationships and health’ *Science* 241: 540–544.

19 F McAllister supra 21.

20 Eastman (1997) supra 20.

21 J Dominion (1991) *Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation* London: One plus One.

study at Griffith University of 4000 suicides found that 70 per cent were caused by relationship breakups. Men were nine times more likely to commit suicide than women.²²

As Ladbrook notes, 'marriage, parenting and other social relationships and the obligations that these ties entail actually give a protective solidarity that is less easily available to and accessible by people who live in isolated circumstances.'²³

Morbidity

Both perceived physical and mental health have been found to be related to marital status in a way similar to mortality.²⁴ Cox and colleagues suggest a beneficial effect of marriage on psycho-social health (measured by malaise score 'symptoms' including worrying, feeling lonely and having difficulty sleeping) after examining health data on the British population.²⁵ Those who married between the two surveys were more likely to either declare lower malaise scores at both times or to move into a lower category, that is, higher psycho-social well-being, in the follow-up. Of the married women who reported average or high malaise at the first survey, 32 per cent dropped to the low category, as compared with only 10 per cent of those who remained single. Similarly, analysis of the US data indicates that married men and women in all age groups are less likely to be limited in activity (a general health indice) due to illness than single, separated, divorced, or widowed people.²⁶ As Professor Ladbrook observes: 'Clearly having someone at home who cares, supervises and calls for help is an enormous advantage over being alone or in an unnoticing or caring social environment when one is ill.'²⁷

These trends extend to other behaviours. Alcohol consumption for example, has been found to be very much higher in the divorced,²⁸ and that twice as many marriages complicated by alcoholism end in divorce compared to marriages where alcohol problems are absent.²⁹

22 Professor Pierre Baume cited in L Slattery (1998) 'The descent of men' *Weekend Australian* 13-14 June.

23 D Ladbrook (1997) *supra* 10. See also, E Durkheim (1951) *Suicide* Glencoe IL: The Free Press.

24 F McAllister *supra* 7.

25 Cox et al *supra*.

26 National Center for Health Statistics (1997) *Health and selected socioeconomic characteristics of the family: United States 1988-90* Washington DC: General Printing Office.

27 D Ladbrook *supra* 10.

28 RT Squares (1985) 'Marital status and psychiatric morbidity in new clinical concepts' in OJWE Bjovksten (ed) *Marital Therapy* Washington DC: American Psychiatric Press; and McAllister (1995) *supra* 18.

29 EH Oppenheimer (1984) 'Marital stress and alcoholism' in *Marriage and Health* London: Marriage Research Centre.

Marital distress

Marital distress is an important health hazard for adults and children, concludes Professor Doherty.³⁰ Marital distress leads to depression and reduces immune system functioning in adults. In addition, chronic marital conflict harms the emotional and physical well-being of children.³¹ As Stanley and Markman note in their review of the literature: 'adults and children are at increased risk for mental and physical problems due to marital distress.'³²

30 W Doherty (1997) *supra*.

31 RE Emery (1982) *Marriage, divorce and children's adjustment* Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications; JM Gottman and LF Katz (1989) 'Effects of marital discord on young children's peer interruption and health' *Developmental Psychology* 25: 373-381; and JF Kiecolt-Glaser et al (1993) 'Negative behavior during marital conflict is associated with immunological down-regulation' *Psychosomatic Medicine* 55: 395-409.

32 SM Stanley & HJ Markman (1997) *Facts about marital distress and divorce* Denver: University of Denver, and the studies cited therein.

2. Children

These findings relate also to children. A large number of studies have shown that divorce has both a short term and a long term impact on children. Research also demonstrates that this impact often extends into adult life with consequences for health, family life, educational performance and occupational status.³³

In the short term, the age of children affected by divorce can relate to changes in behaviour. In their 1982 study, Richards and Dyson noted:

The most common reactions in children are anger, directed at one or both parents, sadness and depression. In younger children, clinging to parents and 'regressive' reactions like bedwetting are frequently seen while older children may withdraw somewhat from the home and seek relationships elsewhere.³⁴

In a subsequent study, Hetherington and Clingempeel found that while older children can disengage from the family situation by going out with friends or establishing supportive relationships with older relatives or family friends, younger children without these opportunities may behave differently. Conversely, the absence of monitoring by parents and 'overinvestment' in peer relationships can lead to behaviour problems in older children. The researchers found in their three-wave study that adolescent children in divorced lone mother families and in stepfamilies formed through remarriage, consistently scored less well on indices of behaviour, competence and education than comparable children whose parents were stably married. Over the two year study period, they noted a decline in the positive relationship between adolescents and stepfathers, and short-term increases in withdrawal and antisocial behaviour towards mothers.³⁵

These findings are of significance, as many young children are affected by divorce in Australia. In 1996, of the 28, 138 divorces involving children, 22, 495 involved pre-school and primary school aged children.³⁶

It is clear that divorce can also have a long term impact on children. In Britain, the 1946, 1958 and 1970 cohort studies have provided longitudinal evidence of the impact of divorce. McAllister writes that the follow-ups at 21, 26, 31 and 36 years of the 1946 cohort 'has provided us with robust evidence of a disturbing fact: the

33 See, McAllister (1995) supra 24.

34 MPM Richards & M Dyson (1982) *Separation, divorce & the development of children: A review* London: Department of Health and Social Security. See also NR Butling & J Golding (1986) *From birth to five: A study of the health and behaviour of Britain's five year olds* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

35 ME Hetherington & WG Clingempeel (1992) 'Coping with marital transitions' *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* Series 227 Vol 57 No 2-3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

36 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Divorces* Cat 3307.0 and *Marriages and Divorces* Cat 3310.0.

experience of divorce as a child can have adverse effects in terms of health, behaviour and economic status thirty years later.³⁷ There is evidence that the children of parents who divorce when they are less than five years of age are particularly vulnerable.³⁸ The follow-up studies of the 1958 cohort revealed similar findings, particularly in terms of educational achievement and behaviour.³⁹ A series of other studies indicate:

- children of divorced parents seem much more susceptible to psychiatric illness;⁴⁰
- alcohol consumption by women whose parents' divorced is far higher than women from intact families;⁴¹
- the incidence of stomach ulcers and colitis is four times higher for men aged 26 whose parents had divorced before the child was five compared to those who had reached 16 years when their parents divorced;⁴²
- children of divorce living with formerly married mothers have a 50 per cent greater risk of developing asthma, and a 20–30 per cent greater risk of injury;⁴³ and
- parental divorce can be a factor in longevity.⁴⁴

Behavioural problems

There is also widespread evidence of increased behavioural problems and delinquency among both boys and girls whose parents have divorced. 'Unlike many of their parents, children do not usually experience an immediate sense of relief when their families break-up,' observes Dr David Larson from the National Institute for Healthcare Research. 'Rather, most undergo a great amount of emotional distress immediately after the divorce as they try to adjust to their new living

37 McAlister (1995) *supra* 25.

38 MEJ Wadsworth (1984) 'Early stress and associations with adult health behaviour and parenting' in NR Butler & BD Corner (eds) *Stress and disability in childhood* Bristol: John Wright & Sons 100–104.

39 BJ Elliott & MPM Richards (1991) 'Children and divorce: Educational performance and behaviour before and after parental separation' *International Journal of Law and the Family* 5: 258. See also Hetherington & Clingempeel (1992) *supra*.

40 MEJ Wadsworth (1984) *supra*; and D Kuh & M Maclean (1990) 'Women's childhood experience of parental separation and their subsequent health & socio-economic status in adulthood' *Journal of Biosocial Science* 22: 121.

41 D Kuh & M Maclean (1990) *supra*. See also, RH Needle, SS Su & WJ Doherty (1990) 'Divorce, remarriage and adolescent substance use: A prospective longitudinal study' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52: 157–169.

42 Wadsworth (1984) *supra*.

43 DA Dawson (1991) 'Family structure and children's health and well-being: data from the 1988 National Survey of Child Health' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53: 573–584.

44 HS Friedman et al (1995) 'Psychological and behavioral predictors of longevity: The ageing and death of the "Termites"' *American Psychologist* 50(2): 69–78.

arrangements.⁴⁵ Analysis of data from the National Health Interview Survey on Child Health by Deborah Dawson has shown that children who experienced separation and divorce were two to three times more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school, and three times as likely to be in need of treatment for emotional or behavioural problems. These children also scored higher on measures of antisocial behaviour, anxiety or depression, inattention, hyperactivity, dependency and fearfulness.⁴⁶ Although girls are less likely to become delinquent than boys, both boys and girls whose parents have divorced have elevated rates.⁴⁷ A number of researchers have also linked some violent and aggressive behaviour in school-age children to marital and family disruption.⁴⁸

Youth depression and suicide

Marital disruption has also been implicated in youth depression and suicide,⁴⁹ and early sexual activity.⁵⁰ A recent study by Whitbeck found that mother's post-divorce

45 DB Larson (1995) *supra* 121.

46 DA Dawson (1991) *supra*. See also, J Guidubaldi, J Perry & BK Nastasi (1987) 'Assessment and intervention for children of divorce' in JP Vincent (ed) *Advances in family intervention, assessment and theory* V4 Greenwich CT: JAI Press, 33–69; J Guidubaldi (1987) 'Growing up in a divorced family' in S Oskamp (ed) *Annual review of applied social psychology* Beverley Hills CA: Sage Publications 202–237; and J Guidubaldi (1988) 'Differences in children's divorce adjustment across grade level and gender' in S Wochick & P Karoly (eds) *Children of divorce* Lexington MA: Lexington Books 185–231.

47 DH Demo & AC Acock (1991) 'The impact of divorce on children' in A Booth (ed) *Contemporary families, looking forward, looking back* Minneapolis MN: National Council on Family Relations. See also, MEJ Wadsworth (1984) *supra*; BJ Elliott and MPM Richards (1991) *supra*; SM Dornbusch, JM Carlsmith & SJ Bushwall (1985) 'Single parents, extended households and the control of adolescents' *Child Development* 56: 326–342; LD Steinberg (1987) 'Single parents, stepparents, and the susceptibility of adolescents to antisocial peer pressure' *Child Development* 58: 269–275; and DP Farrington (1978) 'The family backgrounds of aggressive youths' in LA Hersov, M Berger and D Shaffer (eds) *Aggressive and antisocial behaviour in childhood and adolescence* Oxford: Pergamon Press 73–93.

48 JL Sheline, BJ Skipper and WE Broadhead (1994) 'Risk factors for violent behavior in elementary school boys: Have you hugged your child today?' *American Journal of Public Health* 84: 661–663; and P Cohen and J Brook (1987) 'Family factors related to persistence of psychopathology in childhood and adolescence' *Psychiatry* 50: 332–345.

49 PL McCall & KC Land (1994) 'Trends in white male adolescent, young-adult, and elderly suicide: Are there common underlying structural factors?' *Social Science Research* 23: 57–81; and JF Robertson & RL Simons (1989) 'Family factors, self-esteem and adolescent depression' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51: 125–138.

50 DP Hogan & EM Kitagawa (1985) 'The impact of social status, family structure, and neighbourhood on the fertility of black adolescents' *American Journal of Sociology* 90: 825–855; BC Miller et al (1987) 'Family configuration and adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior' *Population and Environment* 9(2): 111–123; F Mott (1984) 'The patterning of female teenage sexual behavior and its relationship to early fertility' paper presented to the American Public Health Association; and S Newcomer & JR Urdry (1987) 'Parental marital status effects on adolescent sexual behavior' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 49: 235–240.

dating behaviours had a strong bearing on the sexual behaviour of adolescent boys, and indirectly influenced the adolescent girl's sexuality by affecting their sexual attitudes. The mothers' attitudes about the acceptability of sexual permissiveness influenced the daughters' sexual permissiveness and sexual practices.⁵¹ Researchers in another US study concluded that 'not living with both parents when 14 years old compared to living with both is positively associated with multiple recent partners among white women.'⁵²

Educational performance

A series of studies which have examined the impact of parental divorce on children have found the educational performance of children is adversely affected.⁵³ These studies reveal that:

- the adverse educational effects of divorce can occur in children at any age;⁵⁴
- the chances of attending university decrease for children of divorce;⁵⁵and
- unemployment and employment in low paying jobs is more prevalent for children of divorced parents.⁵⁶

Other studies reveal that children whose parents divorce are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to go onto tertiary studies.⁵⁷

WA Child Health Survey

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- 51 LB Whitbeck, RL Simons & M Kao (1994) 'The effects of divorced mothers' dating behaviors and sexual attitudes on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of their adolescent children' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56: 615–621.
- 52 SN Seidman, WD Mosher & SO Aral (1994) 'Predictors of high risk behavior in unmarried American women: Adolescent environment as a risk factor' *Journal of Adolescent Health* 15: 126–132.
- 53 M MacLean & MEJ Wadsworth (1988) 'The interests of children after parental divorce: A long term perspective' *International Journal of Law and the Family* 2:155; J Guidubaldi (1987) supra; FF Furstenberg, SP Morgan & PD Allison (1987) 'Parental participation and children's well being after marital dissolution' *American Sociological Review* 52: 695; PD Alison & FF Furstenberg (1989) 'How marital dissolution affects children' *Developmental Psychology* 25: 540; and D Dawson (1991) supra.
- 54 PD Allison & FF Furstenberg (1989) supra.
- 55 M MacLean & MEJ Wadsworth (1988) supra.
- 56 M MacLean & MEJ Wadsworth (1988) supra; and BJ Elliott & MPM Richards (1991) supra; and HM Aro & UK Palosaari (1992) 'Parental divorce, adolescence and the transition to young adulthood: a follow-up study' *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 62(3): 412–428.
- 57 RA Wojkiewicz (1993) 'Simplicity and complexity in the effects of parental structure on high school graduation' *Demography* 30(4): 701–717; and N Zill, DR Morrison & MJ Coiro (1993) 'Long term effects of parental divorce on parent-child relationships, adjustment, and achievement in young adulthood' *Journal of Family Psychology* 7(1): 91–103.

The Western Australian Child Health Survey was the largest of its kind in the nation, involving in-depth interviews with 2,790 children aged between 4 and 16.⁵⁸

The survey focuses on the three primary spheres of influence which shape children's development: the family, the school, and the community. An object was the establish 'at a population level the nature and extent of various protective factors and risk factors that may be operating in the lives of children and just what it is that tips the balance towards moving along a pathway of resiliency or a path of increased vulnerability.'⁵⁹

The researchers found that three major risk factors were predominant: discipline style; family type, whether it be an original, step/blended or one-parent family; and the level of family discipline present in the household. The following table indicates the risk factors found in the study.

Risks for mental health problems

	P value	Risk (odds ratio)	Confidence interval
Discipline style			
<i>Coercive</i>	<0.0001	3.3	1.9 - 5.6
<i>Detached</i>	0.0004	2.2	1.3 - 3.7
<i>Inconsistent</i>	<0.0001	2.2	1.7 - 3.0
Family type			
<i>Step/blended</i>	<0.0001	2.4	1.6 - 3.6
<i>One parent</i>	<0.0001	2.5	1.8 - 3.5
Level of discord			
<i>High</i>	0.0004	1.7	1.2 - 2.4

Source: WA Child Health Survey

One of the researchers, Mr Sven Silburn, explained the significance of the findings:

With the knowledge of just these three factors, one can correctly predict close to 80 per cent of those children with mental health problems. What you see here is the level of risk associated with each style. For example, if you are looking at a child living in a family with a coercive style of parenting, the children are 3.3 times more likely to have a mental health problem than are children living in a family where there is an encouraging style of parenting. Similarly, whether one is living in a step/blended or a one-parent family, there is a very similar level of risk associated with developing a mental health problem in contrast to those

58 Professor Stephen Zubrick and Mr Sven Silburn, *Transcript*, pp. 705–727.

59 *ibid.* 707.

children who are living in an original family. In a household where there is a high level of discord, they are 1.7 times more likely.

Because they are adjusted odds ratios, the odds are multiplicative. If you are a child living in a family with a coercive parenting style, for example, in a step/blended household and there is a high level of family discord, the risks of a mental health problem are 3.3 times 2.4 times 1.7.⁶⁰

Although the survey is not a study of divorce, it does provide a 'snap shot' of 'the average mental health status of children who are living in different family living arrangements at a particular point in time.'⁶¹

Some conclusions

Reflecting on the research, McAllister et al write:

these finding are of great importance, because those sceptical or unaware of the studies of the effects of divorce on children claim that observed differences are the result of economic factors. Accordingly, they argue that children suffer because the standard of their living falls. While it is undoubtedly true that the fall of economic standards has attendant short comings, for example, change of housing or moving school, it must be recognised that the evidence from research suggests that other factors are in play. Emotional disturbance and stress are particularly notable in the critical early years of childhood.⁶²

3. Intergenerational effects

Beginning with Judith Wallerstein's examination of the effects of divorce on children in California,⁶³ a series of studies have confirmed the intergenerational impact of divorce. Twenty-five years after their parents divorce, children continue to suffer the emotional repercussions, claims Wallerstein, the California researcher and author of one of the longest-running studies on the subject. She claims that the results of the 25 year follow-up of a group of 131 children whose parents were divorcing in northern California in the 1970s provides more evidence that the impact of divorce upon children is both long-lasting and cumulative. While the study does not quantify the effect of divorce by comparing children of broken marriages with those from intact

60 Mr Sven Silburn, *Transcript*, p. 711.

61 SR Silburn and SR Zubrick (1996) *The WA Child Health Survey: Methodology and Policy Implications* Melbourne: AIFS.

62 F McAllister (1995) *supra* 27.

63 J Wallerstein (1989) 'Daughters of divorce' *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 59: 593; J Wallerstein & S Blakeslee (1989) *Second chances: Men, women and children a decade after divorce* New York: Ticknor and Fields; and J Wallerstein 'The long-term effects of divorce upon children: a review' *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry* 30(3): 349-360.

families, it offers descriptive details of their lives based on hundreds of hours of interviews that Wallerstein conducted over 25 years. 'Unlike the adult experience, the child's suffering does not reach its peak at the breakup and then level off. The effect of the parents' divorce is played and replayed throughout the first three decades of the children's lives.' While this does not necessarily cause them to fail as adults, she says, it does make the normal challenges of growing up even more difficult.⁶⁴ The earlier ten year report by Wallerstein found that many of the children appeared to be troubled, drifting and underachieving. Almost all confronted issues of love, commitment and marriage with anxiety. Often there was a great deal of concern about betrayal, abandonment and feeling unloved. About half of the young men and women in the study involved themselves in short-lived relationships and impulsive marriages which ended in divorce. Wallerstein found that ten years after their parents had divorced, 34 per cent were depressed, could not concentrate at school, had trouble making friends and suffered a wide range of behavioural problems. The remaining children were doing well in some areas but faltering in others. In a magazine article drawn from the book, Wallerstein noted that 'it would be hard to find any other group of children - except perhaps the victims of a natural disaster - who suffered such a rate of serious psychological problems.'⁶⁵

While Wallerstein's findings attract criticism about methodology because of the unmatched group, her conclusions are supported by other studies. British studies by Kiernan indicated that women whose parents' divorced were more likely to marry younger and more likely to divorce.⁶⁶ Kuh and MacLean found that at age 36, 16.3 per cent of children from intact homes had divorced, compared to 23 per cent from backgrounds of parental divorce and separation.⁶⁷ More recent studies have linked parental divorce to elevated risks of teenage child bearing,⁶⁸ and to distant relationships with their own children.⁶⁹

Professor Paul Amato has analysed a series of studies of parental divorce and adult well-being. In one study, he concluded that parental divorce increased the risk of being a single parent more for men than for women; while women had a higher risk of divorce than men.⁷⁰ In a subsequent longitudinal study, Professor Amato concluded that parental divorce elevates the risk of offspring divorce by increasing

64 B Vobejda (1997) 'Children of divorce heal slowly study finds' *The Washington Post* 3 June E1.

65 J Wallerstein 1989 'Children after divorce: Wounds that don't heal' *New York Times Magazine* 22 January 20.

66 KE Kiernan (1986) 'Teenage marriage and marital breakdown: A longitudinal study' *Population Studies* 40: 35.

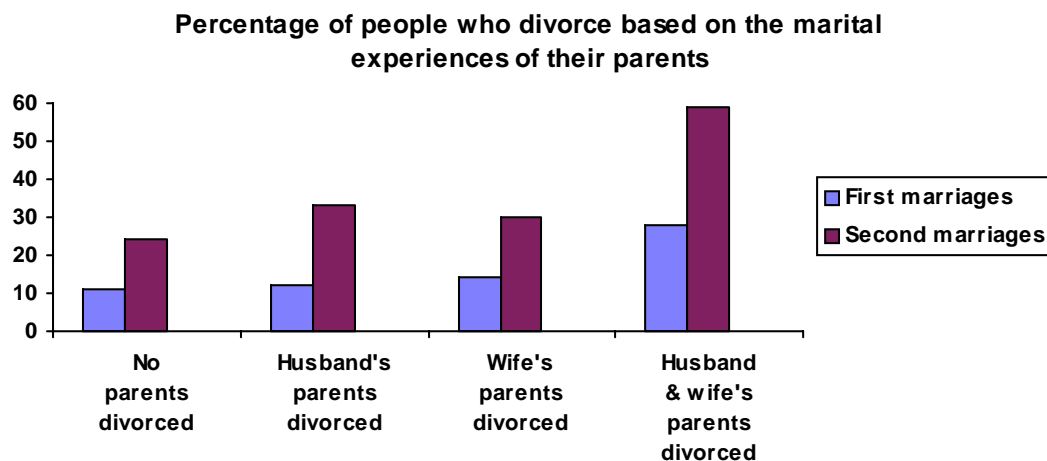
67 D Kuh & M MacLean (1990) *supra*.

68 MN Brohlchain, R Chappell & I Diamond (1994) 'Educational and socio-demographic outcomes among children of disrupted and intact marriages' *Population* 49(6): 1585-1612.

69 MEJ Wadsworth (1994) *supra*.

70 PR Amato & B Keith (1991) 'Parental divorce and adult well-being: A meta-analysis' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53: 43.

the likelihood that offspring exhibit behaviours that interfere with the maintenance of mutually rewarding intimate relationships.⁷¹ Professor Amato's findings are reproduced in graph form below:



Source: P Amato *Courier Mail* 28 November 1996

The possibility of intergenerational effects of divorce were also revealed in a longitudinal study in the UK. Using data from a cohort of the population that has been followed from birth to age 33, researchers were able to trace the effects of parental divorce on indicators of mental health over the entire sweep of the British study – from age 7 when behavioural information was first collected, through assessments at ages 11, 16, 23 and 33.⁷²

A previous study found that much of the apparent affect of a parental divorce on children's emotional problems between ages 7 and 11 could be attributed to characteristics of the child and family prior to the divorce.⁷³

The present study suggests that these earlier findings should be modified. To be sure, we found evidence that part of the difference in emotional problems between the divorce and no-divorce groups at age 33 can be attributed to predivorce characteristics at age 7. . . But as the two groups aged, the difference between the two groups widened. . .

This widening suggests that the divorce and its aftermath may have effects that persist into adulthood (although some time-varying predisruption characteristics

71 P Amato (1996) 'Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58: 628–640; and (1997) *Threshold* 54: 15–27.

72 AJ Cherlin, PL Chase-Lansdale & C McRae (1998) 'Effects of parental divorce on mental health throughout the life course' *American Sociological Review* 63: 239–249.

73 AJ Cherlin et al (1991) 'Longitudinal studies of the effects of divorce on children in Great Britain and the United States' *Science* 252: 1386–1389.

that weren't fully measured may have widened the gap after age 7). If the continuing effect were a result of the divorce rather than unmeasured factors, it would suggest that this childhood event can set in motion a train of circumstances that affects individual's lives even after they have left home, married, and entered the labor force. . . . The absence of a strong post-disruption effect at age 11 suggests that the long-term effect may emerge only in adolescence or young adulthood. Parental divorce could trigger events such as early child bearing or curtailed education that, in turn, affect adult outcomes.⁷⁴

4. The role of conflict

This does not mean that the consequences are uniform for all people. As Demo and Acock note:

It is simplistic and inaccurate to think of divorce as having uniform consequences for children. The consequences of divorce vary along different dimensions of well-being, characteristics of children (eg. pre-divorce adjustment, age at time of disruption) and characteristics of families (eg. socioeconomic history, pre- and post-divorce levels of conflict, parent-child relationships and maternal employment). Most of the evidence reviewed . . . suggests that some sociodemographic characteristics of children such as race and gender are not as important as characteristics of families in mediating effects of divorce.⁷⁵

One characteristic that appears important is conflict between parents. As the One plus One Research team notes, the existence of conflict has been cited as a reason in favour of divorce: better to separate than to inflict a conflictual relationship on children.⁷⁶ More recent research has raised serious questions about this presumption.

The 1994 Exeter study in Britain compared children in intact families and children whose parents had divorced.⁷⁷ The children of divorce were grouped according to their current situation: single parent families, step families and 're-disrupted families' – meaning families where the custodial parent had experienced at least one further relationship breakdown after the original divorce. The intact families were further divided into 'high conflict and 'low conflict' groups. The researchers, Monica Crockett and John Tripp, concluded:

74 Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae supra 247.

75 DH Demo & AC Acock (1991) supra.

76 F McAllister et al (1995) supra 29.

77 M Crockett & J Tripp (1994) *The Exeter family study: Family breakdown and its impact on children* Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Previous studies have strongly suggested that it is parental conflict rather than actual separation that is associated with poor outcomes for children following divorce. This has led some commentators to suggest that it is better to resolve a high conflict situation by ending the parental relationships than by allowing it to continue. This view, while not being widely promoted, has gained some credence as 'accepted wisdom', and indeed, many of the Exeter families who had divorced believed that their decision was in the best interests of their children as well as themselves. Data from this study provides some evidence that such a 'justification' for divorce may be misunderstanding of the reality. It suggests moreover, that parental separation itself is one of the major associations with difficulties for children. What the data does not show however, and we did not set out to demonstrate, is whether the outcomes would have been better if parents in unhappy marriages had stayed together 'for the sake of the children' instead of separating.

The findings from this pilot study indicate that although *most* children do not exhibit acute difficulties beyond the initial stage of family breakdown a significant minority of children encountered long term problems. Compared to their matched pairs in intact families, children who had experienced their parents' divorce were more likely to report problems in key areas of their lives, including psychosomatic disorders, difficulties with school work and a low sense of self-esteem. They were more likely to feel confused and uninvolved in arrangements about their future and to have lasting feelings of concern about both their resident and non-resident parents. Parental conflict and financial difficulties are clearly important features of family reorganisation that are associated with adverse outcomes for children. However, in this study it appeared that a more important adverse factor was the loss of a parent and the consequences, which included the risk that history would repeat itself with the breakdown of subsequent parental relationships.

These findings are consistent with studies that have found that adults who have been divorced more than once have poorer physical and mental health than those who have been through one divorce.⁷⁸

Longitudinal studies have been conducted in both the UK and the US in recent times. In the UK, the effects of parental divorce during childhood and adolescence on the mental health of young adults (aged 23) were examined using the National Child Development Study. Children born in 1958 were assessed at both birth and subsequently followed up at ages 7, 11, 16 and 23 by means of maternal and child

78 LA Kurdek (1991) 'The relationship between reported well-being and divorce history, availability of proximate adult and gender' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53: 71. See also, LA Kurdek (1993) 'Issues in proposing a general model of effects of divorce on children' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55(1): 39; S Gable, K Crnic & J Belsky (1994) 'Co-parenting within the family system: Influences on children's development' *Family Relations* 43(4): 380; and JH Grych & FD Fincham (1990) 'Marital conflict and children's adjustment: A cognitive contextual framework' *Psychological Bulletin* 108: 215-230.

interviews, and by psychological, school and medical assessments.⁷⁹ The study found that the long-term effects of divorce in childhood on adult emotional adjustment had negative consequences for both men and women. Although the researchers found that in the vast majority of cases, there is substantial recovery following divorce, they noted:

Our analysis of the clinical cut-off scores showed that in relative terms, divorce was associated with a substantial 39% increase in the risk of psychopathology. An effect of this magnitude in the number of young adults who may need clinical assistance due to parental divorce seems important and worrying.

Interestingly, they found that parental divorce was linked to greater changes in Malaise Inventory scores for better-adjusted children, but these children ultimately showed lower levels of mental health problems in young adulthood than did those from divorced homes who had higher behaviour problems at age 7.

A more recent 15 year intergenerational study by Professors Paul Amato and Alan Booth found that, while children often benefit from divorce when their parents are constantly quarrelsome, they do not from the majority of divorces where parents get along fairly well. The study involved interviews with parents in 1980, 1983, 1988 and 1992; and interviews with their adult children in 1992 and 1995. According to the researchers:

On the one hand, divorce appears to be a necessary 'Safety valve' for children (and Parents) in high conflict households. On the other hand, as divorce becomes increasingly normative, people may be leaving marriages that are only moderately unhappy. If the threshold for unhappiness at which parents abandon marriage is declining, then divorce is removing a growing number of children from two-parent homes that still provide many benefits. Although children in these latter situations gain little, they are likely to be exposed to many stresses that frequently follow divorce, such as moving, changing schools, conflict between parents over post divorce arrangements, and declines in household income. According to this latter scenario, most divorces in the past (when marital dissolution was uncommon and occurred only under the most troubling circumstances) freed children from home environments that were especially aversive. In contrast, many divorces today (when marital dissolution is common) subject children to a range of stressful experiences with few compensating advantages.⁸⁰

78 PL Chase-Lansdale, AJ Cherlin & KE Kiernan (1995) 'The long-term effect of parental divorce on the mental health of young adults: A developmental perspective' *Child Development* 66: 1614-1634.

80 PR Amato and A Booth (1997) *A generation at risk: Growing up in an era of family disheaval* Cambridge MASS: Harvard University Press.

In these low conflict marriages, 'parents do not hate each other,' says Professor Amato. 'Many are bored, and their marriages could be salvaged.' The researchers found that after divorces in low-conflict marriages, the children grow into adults who tend to have increased psychological distress, reduced happiness, fewer ties with kin and friends, and reduced marital quality.⁸¹

The findings led Amato and Booth to ask an important question: What proportion of divorces are preceded by a long period of overt interpersonal conflict, and hence, are beneficial to children?

From our own data we estimate that less than a third of parental divorces involve highly conflicted marriages. Only 28% of parents who divorced during the study reported any sort of spousal physical abuse prior to divorce, 30% reported more than two serious quarrels in the last month, and 23% reported they disagreed 'often' or 'very often' with their spouses. Thus it would appear that only a minority of divorces between 1980 and 1992 involve high-conflict marriage.⁸²

Professors Amato and Booth concluded:

If divorce today were limited only to high conflict marriages, then divorce would generally be in children's best interest. But the fact that one-half of all marriages today end in divorce suggests that this is not the case. Instead, with marital dissolution becoming increasingly socially acceptable, it is likely that people are leaving marriages at lower thresholds of unhappiness now than in the past. Unfortunately, these are the very divorces that are most likely to be stressful for children. Consequently, we conclude that the rise in marital disruption, although beneficial to some children, has, in balance, been detrimental to children. Furthermore, if the threshold of marital unhappiness required to trigger a divorce continues to decline, then outcomes for children of divorced parents may be more problematic in the future.⁸³

Professors Amato and Booth suggest that 'unless marriage becomes a more satisfying and secure arrangement in the future, the outlook for future generations of youth may be even more pessimistic.'⁸⁴

As McAllister and her co-researchers concluded:

No matter how the associations between marital breakdown, divorce and children's welfare are assessed, it is becoming increasingly clear that the parents' behaviour in their relationship with one another has a vital influence

81 PR Amato cited in K Peterson (1998) *USA Today* 19 February.

82 PR Amato and A Booth *supra* 220.

83 *id.*

84 *ibid.* 221.

on childrens' current and future well-being. Elements of particular salience for children include: levels of conflict between parents; father absence; changing family structures; economic factors. Marital breakdown and divorce can involve all of these factors in the short and long term.⁸⁵

5. Some manifestations of relationship dysfunction

Family violence

Family violence by definition involves relationship stress. Although it is impossible to accurately measure family violence, various studies and statistics reveal a considerable problem.⁸⁶ An ABS survey, *Crime and Safety in Australia*, indicated that 0.7 per cent of adult women had been victims of assault or threatened at their home. According to a community law reform paper, 3.5 per cent of all police call-outs in the ACT related to domestic incidents, of which one in five involved an assault. Victorian police statistics for 1994–95 revealed that there were 13,485 calls to family incidents, of which 13.7 per cent definitely involved violence against a person. Western Australian police records suggest an annual incidence of 109 assaults per 100,000 be males on females and 13 per 100,000 be females on males.

Another ABS survey of 6,300 women aged 18 and over across Australia found that 7 per cent of women had experienced violence in the previous 12 months. When applied to the nation, the survey *Women's Safety*, suggested that 490,000 women (7.1 per cent) had experienced an incident of violence. It indicated that 429,000 women (6.2 per cent) had experienced violence by a man and 110,700 by a woman (1.6 per cent), and 33 per cent of women who experienced violence in the previous 12 months reported incidents by more than one perpetrator. Violence was defined in the survey as any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault.

The National Committee on Violence claims that domestic violence is the most common form of abuse in Australia. According to the National Homicide Monitoring Program, 'just under one-half of all female victims of homicide were killed whether directly or indirectly as a result of a dispute between intimate partners.' Twenty-two per cent of all Queensland homicides between 1982 and 1987 were spousal murders. In New South Wales, 43 per cent of all homicides between 1968 and 1981 were within the family; and 23 per cent of these occurred between spouses. In 1992, 7,492 violent crimes were reported to South Australian police by females, of which 18.2 per cent have been classified as domestic violence. This

85 Fiona McAllister et al (1995) *supra* 30.

86 K Hegarty & G Roberts (1998) 'How common is domestic violence against women? The definition of partner abuse in prevalence studies' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 22(1): 49–54.

represents a rate of 3.4 per 1,000 married, separated and divorced women. Other studies also reveal unacceptably high levels of family violence.

There is also some evidence that the incidence of conflict is higher in cohabiting relationships. Dr Sotirios Sarantakas in his study *Living Together in Australia* found that 'there are more cohabitants reporting conflicts (29 per cent) than married, of whom 18 per cent admitted having conflicts of some kind. Furthermore, the study shows that cohabitants, especially women, seem to tolerate in their partner types of behaviour which marriers consider unacceptable.'⁸⁷

Child abuse

The incidence of child abuse and neglect also seems related to relationship dysfunction. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare concluded 30,615 substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect, involving 26,544 children, were reported in 1994–95. Step children were involved in 21 per cent of cases, although less than 4 per cent of children lived in step families. Although 81 per cent of children lived with biological parents, they accounted for only 30 per cent of cases. Dr Neville Turner of the National Children's Bureau of Australia estimates that a child whose mother lives in a de facto relationship with a man other than the child's father, or with a husband that is not the child's father, is at least five times more likely to be abused than one who lives with both married parents.

Of 86 homicide victims aged under 15 years from 1989–92, 60 were likely to be killed by parents or de facto parents; three by other family members; 12 by acquaintances; and only three by strangers. A NSW study found that a high proportion of child killers are either step fathers or the mother's de facto or boyfriend. Dr Ania Wilczynski found that non-biological parents present 'a disproportionate risk for children, particularly in the early stages of their relationship with the child.' The proportion of suspected killers in de facto relationships was 6.5 times higher than for the general population. The study found that 28 per cent of the child killers had become parents when aged 20 years or younger.

Youth homelessness

According to the National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness, family conflict, including violence and abuse, is one of the major factors leading to youth homelessness in Australia.⁸⁸ That inquiry found that 'at least 20–25,000 youth were homeless'. It has been suggested that there are up to 250,000 young people not living with their families, and that approximately 30 per cent of 15–20 year olds are living

87 S Sarantakos (1984) *Living Together in Australia* Melbourne: Longman Cheshire 138.

88 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) *National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness*.

independently from their families and are vulnerable to drifting in and out of homelessness. According to a Victorian study, there are about 11 in every 1,000 school children who are homeless.

Children aged between five and 18 made more than four million calls to the Kids Help Line between 1991 and 1995. There were 120,744 calls classified as serious, of which 44,554 (36.5 per cent) concerned relationship problems. Half of that number were about family relationships. Most of the callers were under 16, and three-quarters of them girls.

6. Some conclusions

These studies indicate that marriage benefits the health and well-being of individuals, and, conversely, that separation and divorce bring with them elevated risks for both former husbands and wives and their children. The extent to which these findings are accepted by social scientists is reflected in the work of a number of leading researchers. Sara McLanahan, herself a single parent, and professor of sociology at Princeton University, concluded her detailed analysis of four major national studies of families – three of them longitudinal:

Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parent's race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries.⁸⁹

McLanahan did not claim that single parenthood was the only reason that some children do poorly: income, parenting patterns, neighbourhood resources, educational level are all factors, but they are boosted by the absence of a parent.

The non-partisan Council on Families in America, comprising leading scholars of both conservative and liberal inclinations, concluded in their report on marriage:

The evidence continues to mount, and it points to one striking conclusion: the weakening of marriage has had devastating consequences for the well-being of children. To be sure, television, the movies, and popular music contribute to declining child well-being. So do poor teaching, the loss of skilled jobs, inefficient government bureaucracies, meagre or demeaning welfare programs, and the availability of guns and drugs. But by far the most important causal

89 S McLanahan & G Sandefurs (1994) *Growing up with a single parent; What hurts, What helps* Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.

factor is the remarkable collapse of marriage, leading to growing family instability and decreasing parental investment in children.⁹⁰

The renowned family scholar, Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner told an AIFS seminar in 1994: 'There has been a progressive disarray at an accelerating rate of the disorganisation of the family in the western world.'⁹¹ A series of other official reports and academic studies have reached the same conclusion.⁹²

In his recent book, *Men, Mateship, Marriage*, Dr Don Edgar, the former director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, concludes:

There is now agreement in all studies on the key divorce effects, though the methodologies vary and there are still many contradictions. Divorce is, above all, disrupting to the lives of children, the continuity of their schooling, friendships and neighbourhood supports. Poverty is a widespread outcome which is, in itself, a huge disadvantage compared with children in a home with one or two steady incomes. Children are better off economically, psychologically, emotionally with both parents. And fathers (despite their bad press) are an important resource for their children's well-being. Step-families are a high risk, even though, financially, children are better off if the custodial parent re-marries.⁹³

In noting the research, the Committee acknowledges the admirable efforts of many single and step-parents, who raise their children in difficult circumstances. One loving parent is better than two parents in chronic high conflict. But this should not deter us from advocating programs that seek to strengthen relationships and prevent family breakdown.

As the National Council for the Single Mother and her Child informed the Committee:

When couples have a chance to explore fully the implications and commitments involved in the steps they are planning they may approach such commitments with more resources to enable them to cope with the demands they will face. The challenge is to encourage the community to see relationship

90 Council on Families in America (1995) *Marriage in America: A report to the nation* New York: Institute for American Values 6-7.

91 U Bronfenbrenner (1994) address to Australian Institute of Family Studies seminar Melbourne University: July.

92 For example, National Commission on Children (1991) *Beyond Rhetoric: A new American agenda for children and families* Washington DC; National Commission on America's Urban Families (1993) *Families First* Washington DC; D Popenoe (1988) *Disturbing the Nest* New York Walter de Gruyter.

93 D Edgar (1997) *Men, Mateship, Marriage* Sydney: Harper Collins 313.

education and counselling as a positive means of enhancing their relationship, rather than somewhere to go when things begin to go wrong.⁹⁴

Given some surveys reveal that 37 per cent of people regret their divorce five years later, and up to 40 per cent believe that it could have been avoided,⁹⁵ there is a substantial case for renewed strategies to strengthen marriages and relationships.

The cost of marriage breakdown

Marriage breakdown exacts a substantial cost on the nation. The cost is both direct and indirect.

Direct costs

Marriage and relationship breakdown is a direct cost to the Commonwealth budget in the form of social security payments, family court costs, legal aid, the child support scheme, and taxation rebates, as the following calculations indicate:

- the Department of Social Security spent \$3,134 million on the Sole Parent Pension, the Child Support Scheme and Jobs Education and Training (JET) in 1996-97. About 70 per cent of Sole Parent Pensioners were people who had been married or de facto married but had separated or divorced. Approximately \$2,200 million of the expenditure is referable to marriage and relationship breakdown.⁹⁶
- the Family Court of Australia costs \$112 million to operate in 1996-97.⁹⁷
- Legal Aid spent approximately \$40 million on Family Court cases in 1994-95.⁹⁸
- the Child Support Scheme cost \$169 million to run in 1996-97.⁹⁹
- the Sole Parent Tax Rebate cost Commonwealth revenue \$250 million in 1994-95.¹⁰⁰

These items total \$2,771 million per annum. The figure is necessarily conservative. Other costs could be rightfully included in the cost of marriage and relationship breakdown, but it is difficult to separate the components. For example, expenditure on emergency accommodation and the homeless allowance partly arises from marriage breakdown, but it has not been possible to determine the size of this part. Similarly, it has not been possible to separate out the expenditure on family payments for children of sole parent pensioners. Then there is a range of expenditure

94 National Council for the Single Mother and her Child, *Submissions*, p. S257.

95 Cited by Relationships Australia (Western Australia) at < www.relationships.com.au >

96 Department of Social Security *Annual Report 1996/97* and Commonwealth *Portfolio Budget Statements 1997-98*.

97 Family Court of Australia *Annual Report 1996-97*.

98 Attorney-General's Department *Legal Aid in Australia: 1994-95 Statistical Yearbook* tables 12 and 13.

99 Commonwealth Treasury *Portfolio Budget Statements 1997-98*.

100 Australian Taxation Office Statistics 1994-95.

by State and Territory Governments, municipal councils and charitable organisations which is also difficult to estimate.

Indirect costs

A review of the literature indicates that poor health is partially a consequence of marriage and relationship breakdown. The extent of this cost to the nation is immeasurable. It extends not only to physical and mental health, but to the social pathologies such as child and family abuse. Similarly, absenteeism and low productivity have been linked to relationship problems. Professor John Gottman estimates that for the US, approximately 30 per cent of sick time is due to family conflict.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Marriage and family breakdown costs the Australian nation at least \$3 billion each year. When all the indirect costs are included, the figure is possibly double. When the personal and emotional trauma involved is added to these figures, the cost to the nation is enormous.

In comparison, the Commonwealth Government spends just \$3.5 million per annum on preventive marriage and relationship education programs, and \$2.05 million on parenting skills training. This is a 1000 fold difference. The imbalance is manifest. It requires correction.

101 J Gottman (1998) 'Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education' *Web newsletter* 13 March.