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## Personal relationships and marriage expectations: evidence from the 1998 British Household Panel Study

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**Personal Relationships and Marriage Expectations:  
Evidence from the 1998 British Household Panel Study**

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*Abstract*

The paper analyzes data on marriage expectations collected in the 1998 wave of the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) to shed light on the extent to which cohabiting unions and partnerships in which the two people live in separate residences are stable alternatives to marriage. The percentage of today's young people who will never marry appears to be around 20%. After a relatively short period, most cohabiting couples either marry or split-up and try again. Nearly three-fourths of people currently in cohabiting unions expect to marry each other and 7 out of 8 people in cohabiting unions expect to marry sometime.

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### **Non-technical Summary**

The data on marriage expectations collected in the 1998 BHPS suggest, at first consideration, that the percentage of recent cohorts of young people who will never marry is much lower than the 30% implicit in the present marital status projections. It would appear to be more in the region of 20%. But people who expect to marry may be disappointed. For example, the evidence shows that two-thirds of cohabiting childless couples (in which the woman was aged under 35 and never married) agree in expecting to marry each other (they 'plan to' or 'will probably' marry), but presently only three-fifths of cohabiting childless couples actually do convert their unions into marriage. The analysis has also shown that a much larger proportion of never married parents than childless people, be they in a cohabiting union or not, expect to remain unmarried. As nearly two-fifths of births are now outside marriage, a large proportion of people fall into this category of never married parents. Of course, those who expect to remain unmarried may also change their minds.

The role of cohabiting unions as an alternative to marriage has been much discussed. Neither the objective evidence on the outcomes of cohabiting unions nor the expectations' data indicate that cohabitation is a stable alternative to marriage. About three-fourths of people now cohabit in their first partnership. After a relatively short period, most couples either marry or split-up and try again. The data from the 1998 BHPS indicate that nearly three-fourths of people in cohabiting unions expect to marry each other and 7 out of 8 people in cohabiting unions expect to marry sometime. Thus, for most people, cohabitation is part of the process of getting married, not a substitute for marriage.

The 1998 BHPS has also shed light on non-resident relationships for the first time. Even if we disregard those of relatively short duration (less than 6 months),

one-third of never married childless women aged under 35 are in such relationships, and about 30% of these women do not plan to live together or get married to their present non-resident partner. Two-fifths of these relationships have been going on for two years or more.

## **1. Introduction**

It is well known that first marriage rates of women aged under 30 have fallen dramatically in the last two decades (Haskey, 1995). For instance, nine out of ten women born in 1935 had married by their 30th birthday; this proportion was two-thirds for those born 30 years later. This trend certainly indicates that more recent cohorts of people are marrying later in their lives, but it is less clear what proportion will never marry. Recent projections of the marital status of the British population suggest that one-third of men and 29% of women in recent birth cohorts will never marry (Shaw, 1999, Table 3, based on period rates projected for 2011-12 onwards in the principal projection). The main purpose of this paper is to shed light on the likelihood of this outcome through the analysis of data on marriage expectations collected in the 1998 wave of the British Household Panel Study (BHPS). The analysis also suggests the extent to which cohabiting unions and partnerships in which the two people live in separate residences are stable alternatives to marriage.

Analysis by Ermisch and Francesconi (2000) shows that the shift to cohabitation (without legal marriage) as the most common mode of first partnership played an important role in the delay of first marriage. First partnership also appears to be occurring at later ages among cohorts born since the mid-1960s. The BHPS data (see Appendix) indicate that, during the 1990s, about three-fourths of first partnerships were cohabiting unions, and that the median age at first partnership increased relative to the 1980s, being about 25 for men and 23 for women. The reasons that the rise in cohabiting unions as the main type of first partnership delays marriage are the time spent cohabiting, the relatively high risk that cohabiting unions dissolve, and the time it takes to cohabit again. All of these contribute to a longer time before any marriage takes place and increase the chances that a person never

marries. The large proportion who never marry in the marital status projections cited above suggests that cohabiting unions and partnerships in which the two people live in separate residences will replace marriage for a large minority of persons.

The paper focuses on never married people aged under 35 because of the primary interest in the proportion of today's young people who will eventually marry. It first studies cohabiting couples in 1998, examining why they may cohabit rather than marry and their marriage expectations. It then considers whether those neither cohabiting nor married in 1998 were in a 'steady relationship' with someone whom they think of as their 'partner', and if so, how long they have been in this relationship and how they expect it to develop. The marriage expectations of all never married persons not in a cohabiting union are also examined. All of the analyses contrast parents and childless people. Finally, the paper investigates the age pattern of the three types of partnership relationships, non-resident partnership, cohabitation and marriage.

## **2. Never married cohabiting couples**

Cohabiting unions in Britain are usually very short (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000). For instance, the BHPS indicates that, during 1991-98, about 29% of cohabiting unions involving never-married women aged under 35 ended each year. Of the cohabiting unions that ended, 53% were converted into marriage and the others dissolved. If the estimated transition rates were constant over time, they suggest a median duration of about 2 years and less than 5% of unions lasting 10 years or more. The BHPS data also suggest, however, that the rate at which cohabiting unions convert into marriage fell over the 1990s while the union dissolution rate rose, with the net effect being a slight increase in average duration. This is the background against which the responses of the cohabiting couples in 1998 should be considered.

The 1998 BHPS asked individuals in all current cohabiting couples the following question: ‘We are interested in why you and your partner have chosen to live together rather than being married. Do you think there are any advantages in living as a couple, rather than being married?’ If they answered yes, then they were asked the question ‘What do you think are the advantages of living as a couple?’ Analogous questions elicited the perceived disadvantages of living as a couple rather than being married. Tables 1-4 show the weighted distributions of responses to these questions for never married, childless men and women aged under 35.

About two-fifths of these people perceive advantages to living in a cohabiting union rather than marrying, with more women than men thinking that there is an advantage. Among those who do, about one-half mention the idea of ‘trial marriage’, and another 30% mention ‘no legal ties’ as an advantage of this type of union (Table 2). Only about one-quarter of individuals in cohabiting couples perceive any disadvantage, and women are more likely to see a disadvantage. (Table 3). The disadvantage mentioned most is ‘financial insecurity’ (Table 4). ‘Lack of commitment is mentioned by about one in seven people, and a similar proportion of women mention ‘no legal status’ as a disadvantage. Interestingly, around one in eight mention ‘social stigma’ as a problem with cohabiting unions. Logit regressions containing age, parent status and sex (not shown) suggest that the perception of a disadvantage increases with a person’s age, but the perception of an advantage is not associated with age.

**Table 1: Percentage perceiving advantage to cohabiting union, never married childless persons aged under 35 in a cohabiting union**

Perceives advantage	Men	Women
Yes	40%	47%
No	58%	53%
Refused/don't know	2%	0%
Weighted N*	141	153
Unweighted N	208	240

\*Weighted to reflect sampling design, including over-sampling of low income households, and differential attrition (see Appendix).

**Table 2: First mentioned advantage to cohabiting union, never married childless persons aged under 35 in a cohabiting union who perceived advantage**

Advantages	Men	Women
Trial marriage	51%	43%
No legal ties	28%	30%
Improves relationship	2%	2%
Personal independence	4%	8%
Financial advantages	12%	11%
Other*	4%	6%
Weighted N	57	72
Unweighted N	84	120

\*Responses include 'previous bad marriage', 'companionship', 'prefer cohabitation' and 'other'.

**Table 3: Percentage perceiving disadvantage to cohabiting union, never married childless persons aged under 35 in a cohabiting union**

Perceives disadvantage	Men	Women
Yes	23%	31%
No	76%	68%
Refused/don't know	1%	1%
Weighted N	141	153
Unweighted N	208	240



**Table 4: First mentioned disadvantage to cohabiting union, never married childless persons aged under 35 in a cohabiting union who perceived disadvantage**

Disadvantages	Men	Women
Financial insecurity	52%	45%
No legal status	8%	18%
Affects children	6%	2%
Lack of commitment	13%	16%
Social stigma	14%	10%
Other	8%	9%
Weighted N	32	48
Unweighted N	45	74

It is possible to compare the answers of the two people living together. Table 5A shows that it is not uncommon for people within a union to view the presence of advantages differently. In nearly two out of five couples, one partner perceives an advantage while the other does not. Agreement on there being an advantage is more likely if both partners are present at the interview (65% compared with 54%), but the difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p=0.115$ ).

There is more agreement on whether there is a disadvantage or not, but just over one-fourth of couples disagree on this (Table 5B). Agreement on the perception of a disadvantage is more likely if both partners are present at the interview (79% compared with 67%,  $p=0.066$ ).

**Table 5A: Comparisons of advantage perception between people in cohabiting couples containing never married childless women aged under 35 (unweighted percentages of couples in each cell , N=214 couples)**

	Woman: an advantage	Woman: no advantage	Woman doesn't know/refused
Man: an advantage	26%	15%	0
Man: no advantage	24%	33%	1%
Man doesn't know/refused	1%	2%	0

**Table 5B: Comparisons of disadvantage perception between people in cohabiting couples containing never married childless women aged under 35 (unweighted percentages of couples in each cell , N=214 couples)**

	Woman: a dis-advantage	Woman: no dis-advantage	Woman doesn't know/refused
Man: a dis-advantage	13%	9%	0
Man: no dis-advantage	17%	59%	1%
Man doesn't know/refused	1%	0	1%

The marriage expectations of people in cohabiting unions are of particular relevance for the future proportions of people who will ever marry. Each person in a cohabiting couple was asked which of the statements in Table 6 'you feel applies most closely to your current relationship?'

**Table 6: Marriage expectations of never married childless persons aged under 35 in a cohabiting union**

Statement	Men	Women
‘Planning to marry’	30%	25%
‘Probably get married at some point’	46%	46%
‘Probably just keep living together without marrying’	14%	18%
‘Have not really thought about the future’	8%	8%
Other/Don’t know/refused*	3%	4%
Weighted N	141	153
Unweighted N	208	240

\*One woman refused

It appears that about 73% of people in cohabiting couples expect to marry each other, although only about one-third of this group appear to have relatively firm plans to marry. During 1991-98, about three-fifths of cohabiting childless unions converted to marriage. Thus, people’s expectations are somewhat optimistic relative to the average outcome.

We can look more closely at those who neither plan to marry nor think they will probably marry their present partner. Table 7 shows this group of people’s responses to ‘how likely it is that you will ever get married (or remarried) to anyone in the future?’ About 45% of this group think it unlikely or very unlikely to marry anyone in the future. Putting the tabulations in Tables 6 and 7 together, about one in eight people living in cohabiting unions never expect to marry. Thus, for most people, cohabitation is part of the process of getting married, not a substitute for marriage.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of American data by Brien, Lillard and Waite (1999) indicates that young women who are most likely to marry are also most likely to cohabit. This result also strongly suggests that cohabitation is not a substitute for marriage, but part of the marriage process.

A logit regression indicates that the percentage of people in cohabiting unions who think it unlikely or very unlikely to marry anyone in the future increases with age (by about one percentage point per year of age). This could reflect a selection effect; that is, those never married and cohabiting at older ages are less favourably disposed toward marriage. It could also reflect a perception of fewer marriage opportunities for older persons, because of a diminishing pool of potential partners.

**Table 7: Marriage expectations of never married childless persons aged under 35 in a cohabiting union who neither plan to marry nor think they will probably marry their present partner**

Statement	Men	Women
‘Very likely’	10%	8%
‘Likely’	31%	37%
‘Unlikely’	18%	32%
‘Very unlikely’	29%	13%
Don’t know/refused*	12%	10%
Weighted N	35	46
Unweighted N	52	66

\*One woman refused

**Table 8: Comparisons of marriage expectations between people in cohabiting couples containing never married childless women aged under 35 (unweighted percentages of couples in each cell, N=214 couples)**

	Woman: plans to or will probably marry	Woman: keep living together/ other	Woman doesn’t know/refused
Man: plans to or will probably marry	67% [91] <sup>c</sup> {88} <sup>r</sup>	7% [31] {9}	2% [71] {3}
Man: keep living together/ other	7% [9] {33}	14% [63] {65}	1 [14] {2}
Man doesn’t know/refused	0	1% [6] {75}	1% [14] {25}

<sup>c</sup>column percentage in [ ]

<sup>r</sup>row percentage in { }

Table 8 compares the expectations of the two partners within each cohabiting couple. In two-thirds of the couples, the partners agree in either planning to marry or thinking they probably will, and another 14% agree in having no marriage plans. Agreement is not affected by the presence of the partner at the interview ( $p=0.56$ ). Put somewhat differently, about 90% of men (women) who plan to or will probably marry their present partner live with a woman (man) who thinks the same. Partners in 18% of cohabiting couples have divergent opinions on the likelihood of marriage. Among men (women) who do not think that they are likely to marrying their partner, about 30% are living with a woman (man) who thinks that the couple is likely to marry each other.

So far we have only examined childless couples. Being a parent may alter a person's views about the pros and cons of cohabiting unions, or couples who become parents in cohabiting unions may be different in their views. The discussion focuses on women, but the results are usually similar for men. Table 9 shows that mothers are less likely to perceive an advantage to living in a cohabiting union relative to marrying (and this is born out by the logit regression), but the percentage perceiving a disadvantage is identical for mothers and childless women (31%). The patterns for fathers relative to childless men in cohabiting couples are similar. Fathers are less likely to perceive an advantage (29%) than childless men (41%), and there is almost no difference in the percentage perceiving a disadvantage between the two groups.

**Table 9: Percentage perceiving advantage to cohabiting union, never married women aged under 35 in a cohabiting union**

Perceives advantage	Childless	Mother
Yes	47%	40%
No	53%	61%
Weighted N*	153	67
Unweighted N*	239	102

\* Table omits one refusal

**Table 10: First mentioned advantage to cohabiting union, never married women aged under 35 in a cohabiting union who perceived advantage**

Advantages	Childless	Mother
Trial marriage	43%	4%
No legal ties	30%	41%
Improves relationship	2%	13%
Personal independence	8%	8%
Financial advantages	11%	17%
Other*	6%	16%
Weighted N	72	26
Unweighted N	120	39

\*Responses include 'previous bad marriage', 'companionship', 'don't know', 'other' and one refusal.

Table 10 indicates that, in contrast to childless women, mothers do not often mention 'trial marriage' as an advantage of cohabiting rather than marrying. The lack of legal ties is the modal advantage given by mothers, followed by 'financial advantages'. The results are similar for fathers relative to childless men. Among women perceiving a disadvantage, 'social stigma' is mentioned as a disadvantage much more often by mothers than by childless women (Table 11). Fathers are also more likely to mention 'social stigma' (34%) than childless men (14%) among cohabiting men perceiving a disadvantage. 'Financial insecurity' is a more common

disadvantage for childless women than it is for mothers, while ‘lack of commitment’ is mentioned by 13% of childless men, but by no fathers.

**Table 11: First mentioned disadvantage to cohabiting union, never married women aged under 35 in a cohabiting union who perceived disadvantage**

Disadvantages	Childless	Mother
Financial insecurity	45%	23%
No legal status	18%	14%
Effects on children	2%	8%
Lack of commitment	16%	24%
Social stigma	10%	26%
Other	9%	3%
Weighted N	48	22
Unweighted N	74	31

**Table 12: Marriage expectations of never married women aged under 35 in a cohabiting union**

Statement	Childless	Mother
‘Planning to marry’	25%	15%
‘Probably get married at some point’	46%	43%
‘Probably just keep living together without marrying’	18%	26%
‘Have not really thought about the future’	8%	8%
Other/Don’t know/refused*	4%	7%
Weighted N	153	66
Unweighted N	240	101

\*One childless woman refused

The marriage expectations of mothers and childless women in cohabiting unions are contrasted in Tables 12 and 13. Only 59% of mothers plan to marry, or think they will probably marry their partner, compared to 70% of childless women (Table 12). Mothers are more likely to say that they plan to continue cohabiting

without marrying (26%) than childless women (18%).<sup>2</sup> These expectations are consistent with the analysis of the actual outcomes of cohabiting unions by Ermisch and Francesconi (2000), who find that being a mother is associated with a much lower probability of converting the union into marriage. As a consequence, those who become parents cohabit for longer, but 65% of these unions dissolve, compared with 40% of childless unions. They are also consistent with Lelièvre's (1993) results (in her Figure 7.7, p.120), using data from the 1989 General Household Survey.

We may be observing a selection mechanism in which couples who are not sure whether or not to marry each other have a child in a cohabiting union, while cohabiting couples who plan to marry, marry first and then have children. Table 13 further suggests that a larger proportion of mothers than childless women in cohabiting unions never wish to marry (60% compared with 45%), and the results are similar for men (66% compared with 47%).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 13: Marriage expectations of never married women aged under 35 in a cohabiting union who neither plan to marry nor think they will probably marry their present partner**

Expectation	Childless	Mother
'Very likely'	8%	2%
'Likely'	37%	29%
'Unlikely'	32%	42%
'Very unlikely'	13%	18%
Don't know/refused*	10%	9%
Weighted N	46	27
Unweighted N	66	42

\*One childless woman refused

<sup>2</sup> The results are similar when comparing fathers and childless men; 23% of fathers say they plan to continue cohabiting, compared with 14% of childless men in cohabiting unions.

<sup>3</sup> A logit regression pooling men and women (and controlling for age and sex) indicates that the percentage of parents in cohabiting unions who think it unlikely or very unlikely to marry anyone in the future is 6 percentage points higher than that of childless persons.



Using information from the 1997 wave of the BHPS, it is possible to examine whether these marriage expectation responses differ between who were also cohabiting in 1997 and those who were not.<sup>4</sup> They do not. It is, however, the case that those who were cohabiting in both years were *less* likely to perceive an advantage to cohabitation relative to marrying than those who were not in a cohabiting union in 1997 (37% compared with 50%), and they were *more* likely to perceive a disadvantage (31% compared with 21%). There was not a significant difference between either the advantages or disadvantages mentioned by these two groups. It is, however, interesting that, among those perceiving a disadvantage, those who were cohabiting in both years were more likely to mention ‘financial insecurity’ and ‘no legal ties’ as disadvantages, and less likely to mention ‘lack of commitment’ and ‘social stigma’.

### **3. Never married people not in a cohabiting union**

All persons who were neither cohabiting nor married were asked, in the 1998 BHPS, ‘Do you have a steady relationship with a male or female friend whom you think of as your “partner”, even though you are not living together?’ As above, the analysis focuses on never married, childless persons aged under 35. Among them, 34% of men and 42% of women answered in the affirmative. A logit regression suggests that the proportion of never married, childless persons aged under 35 and not cohabiting who are in such a non-resident relationship increases until the age of 25, and at any age it tends to be about 10 percentage points higher for women. Table 14 shows that the median duration to-date of the non-resident relationships *in progress in 1998* is about

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<sup>4</sup> About three-fifths of never married panel members aged under 35 who were cohabiting in 1998, and who were also in the 1997 BHPS, were also in a cohabiting union in 1997. For two people cohabiting in both years, the partner has changed between the two years.

one year. There is, however, a substantial proportion of persons who have been in such a relationship 2-5 years.

**Table 14: Length of relationship for never married childless persons aged under 35 who had a non-resident ‘partner’**

Duration	Men	Women
Less than 6 months	25%	21%
6-11 months	21%	25%
1-2 years	23%	20%
2-5 years	26%	29%
Longer than 5 years	6%	6%
Weighted N	292	259
Unweighted N	279	286

Persons in these non-resident relationships were then asked about where they saw these relationships going. They were asked which of the responses in Table 15 ‘applies most closely to this relationship?’ Women were slightly more likely than men to expect to move in together in the future, either in marriage or a cohabiting union, and the percentage expecting to get married increased with age. Among those expecting to move in together, about one-third expected they would marry directly, which is above, but not greatly out of line with, the proportion of first partnerships which are marriage (about 25%).

**Table 15: Expectations about relationship for never married childless persons aged under 35 in a non-resident relationship**

Expectation	Men	Women
‘I expect we shall get married.’	19%	21%
‘I expect we shall live together.’	38%	42%
‘I have no plans to live together or to get married.’	44%	37%
Weighted N	294	260
Unweighted N	281	287

All persons who were neither cohabiting nor married were also asked to ‘tell me how likely it is that you will ever get married or remarried to anyone in the future?’ Again focussing on never married, childless persons aged under 35, Table 16 shows that about 18% thought it unlikely or very unlikely that they would ever marry, and this percentage increases with the person’s age. Combining these responses with those from never married, childless cohabiting couples, it appears that around 15-20% of never married, childless persons aged under 35 in 1998 never expect to marry.

**Table 16: Marriage expectations of never married, childless persons aged under 35 who are not in a cohabiting union**

Expectation	Men	Women
‘Very likely’	25%	24%
‘Likely’	50%	51%
‘Unlikely’	13%	14%
‘Very unlikely’	5%	4%
Don’t know	8%	7%
Weighted N	803	556
Unweighted N	792	594

Among never married women aged under 35 who are not cohabiting, there is little difference between mothers and childless women in the percentage who have a steady relationship with someone they think of as their ‘partner’. About 42% have such a non-resident partnership. Table 17 indicates, however, that mothers tend to have been in these relationships for a longer time. For instance, 35% have lengths longer than 5 years compared with 6% of childless women. A smaller proportion of mothers than childless women expect that they will marry their present non-resident partner (Table 18), and a larger proportion of mothers have no plans to live together or get married.

**Table 17: Length of relationship for never married women aged under 35 who had a non-resident ‘partner’**

Duration	Childless	Mother
Less than 6 months	21%	7%
6-11 months	25%	20
1-2 years	20%	23
2-5 years	29%	15%
Longer than 5 years	6%	35%
Weighted N	259	34
Unweighted N	286	42

**Table 18: Expectations about relationship for never married women aged under 35 in a non-resident relationship**

Expectation	Childless	Mother
‘I expect we shall get married.’	21	15
‘I expect we shall live together.’	42%	43%
‘I have no plans to live together or to get married.’	37%	42%
Weighted N	260	34
Unweighted N	287	42

Among all never married women aged under 35 who are not cohabiting (i.e. including those not in a non-resident partnership), a much larger proportion of mothers than childless women think it unlikely or very unlikely that they will ever marry. Indeed, Table 19 shows that a majority of mothers (57%) are in that category compared with 18% of childless women. The logit regression, which controls for age, confirms that, among those not cohabiting, a much higher percentage of mothers than childless women expect to remain unmarried.

**Table 19: Marriage expectations of never married women aged under 35 who are not in a cohabiting union**

Expectation	Childless	Mother
‘Very likely’	24%	8%
‘Likely’	51%	30%
‘Unlikely’	14%	28%
‘Very unlikely’	4%	30%
Don’t know	7%	4%
Weighted N	556	80
Unweighted N	594	92

As expected, the importance of non-resident partnerships is strongly related to a person’s age. Figure 1 plots the 1998 cross-section of partnership statuses by age of the woman, confining non-resident partnerships to those of 6 months or longer to date (i.e. treating shorter ones as ‘no partnership’). While only a cross-section, it is suggestive of life cycle patterns. It shows that nearly half of women are in some sort of partnership by the age of 19. Non-resident partnerships are most common until the age of 21, when cohabitation takes over as the modal type of partnership. It remains so until the age of 26, when marriage becomes the modal partnership, and one-half of women aged 28 are married. The patterns are very similar when we include all non-resident partnerships.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The marriage expectations data collected in the 1998 BHPS suggest, at first consideration, that the percentage of recent cohorts of young people who will never marry is much lower than the 30% implicit in the present marital status projections (Shaw, 1999). It would appear to be more in the region of 20%. But people who expect to marry may be disappointed. For example, the evidence shows that two-thirds of cohabiting childless couples (in which the woman was aged under 35 and

never married) agree in expecting to marry each other (they ‘plan to’ or ‘will probably’ marry; see Table 8), but presently only three-fifths of cohabiting childless couples actually do convert their unions into marriage. The analysis has also shown that a much larger proportion of never married parents than childless people, be they in a cohabiting union or not, expect to remain unmarried. As nearly two-fifths of births are now outside marriage, a large proportion of people fall into this category of never married parents. Of course, those who expect to remain unmarried may also change their minds. Further analysis of this issue is clearly required, but the marriage expectations data discussed here are enlightening.

The role of cohabiting unions as an alternative to marriage has been much discussed. Neither the objective evidence on the outcomes of cohabiting unions nor the expectations’ data indicate that cohabitation is a stable alternative to marriage. About three-fourths of people now cohabit in their first partnership. After a relatively short period, most couples either marry or split-up and try again. The data from the 1998 BHPS analyzed in this paper indicate that nearly three-fourths of people in cohabiting unions expect to marry each other and 7 out of 8 people in cohabiting unions expect to marry sometime. Thus, for most people, cohabitation is part of the process of getting married, not a substitute for marriage.

The 1998 BHPS has also shed light on non-resident relationships for the first time. Even if we disregard those of relatively short duration (less than 6 months), one-third of never married childless women aged under 35 are in such relationships, and about 30% of these women do not plan to live together or get married to their present non-resident partner. Two-fifths of these relationships have been going on for two years or more.

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## APPENDIX

### **The British Household Panel Study**

The first wave of the BHPS, collected in Autumn 1991, was designed as a nationally representative sample of the population of Great Britain living in private households in 1991. The achieved wave 1 sample covers 5,500 households and corresponds to a response rate of about 74% of the effective sample size. At wave 1, about 92% of eligible adults, that is, almost 10,000 persons, provided full interviews. The same individuals are re-interviewed each successive year, and if they split off from their original households to form new households, all adult members of these households are also interviewed. Similarly, children in original households are interviewed when they reach the age of 16. Thus, the sample remains broadly representative of the population of Britain as it changes through the 1990s. Of those interviewed in the first wave, 88% were successfully re-interviewed at wave 2 (Autumn 1992), and subsequent wave-on-wave response rates have consistently been around 95% (Taylor *et al*, 1997, Chapter IV.6, Tables 18-21). In 1997 and 1998, the BHPS incorporated data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) low income and Northern Ireland samples. In the analyses reported in the paper, the Northern Ireland sample (N=222) was excluded, thereby giving a purely Great Britain sample, and the analyses use weights that adjust for the higher selection probabilities of temporary sample members and low income persons, as well as for differential attrition.

The core questionnaire elicits information about income, labour market behaviour, housing conditions, household composition, education and health at each yearly interview. Further information can be obtained at

<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps/doc/index.html>.





