

## **BRITAIN BECOMING INCREASINGLY LIBERAL**

Britain is becoming increasingly liberal in its views about how people choose to live their lives. This is partly because younger generations, who have more tolerant views, are replacing older, less tolerant, ones. But, according to the latest NatCen British Social Attitudes report, people's views are also shaped by their own experiences. Even the most traditional generations are becoming more accepting of cohabitation and homosexuality.

Attitudes towards homosexuality have changed dramatically over the last 25 years, although over a third still think it is wrong:

- Over a third (36%) of people think that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are 'always' or 'mostly' wrong, down from nearly two thirds a quarter of a century ago (62%) in 1983. Around the same proportion (39%) think it is 'not wrong at all'.
- These changes are mainly because younger generations are more liberal than older ones (which are gradually dying out).
- Society as a whole is becoming more liberal about homosexuality. The only barrier to this trend continuing would be an unforeseen event that affects people's views. For example, in 1987, during the height of concerns about AIDS, the proportion of people who thought homosexuality was wrong rose to three quarters (75%), the highest level since the survey began.

Britain has also become more accepting of cohabitation:

- 45% agree that it 'makes no difference to children whether their parents are married to each other or just living together', up from 38% in 1998. A quarter (27%) disagree, down from a third (33%) in 1998.
- This change partly reflects younger, more tolerant, generations replacing older, less tolerant, ones. But it also reflects increased acceptance among *all* age groups. Data on the same people interviewed at different points in time show that there has been a notable increase in tolerance among people aged 60 and older, possibly because of their children and grandchildren's own experiences.

Although attitudes to divorce have changed little over recent decades, people's own views on this issue do change significantly as they get older. Acceptance of divorce increases once people reach their 30s and 40s, the time of life at which they or their friends are most likely to experience it.

Andy Ross, author, comments:

'Changing attitudes reflect a complex combination of factors. In general, we are becoming more liberal and tolerant. But our attitudes are also strongly shaped by what we see in our daily lives.'

'This is why people in their 60s and older have become more tolerant than we might expect about issues like cohabitation. Perhaps the personal experience of becoming a grandparent of a child born outside marriage might be leading older people to take a more liberal view on this issue.'

ENDS

This summarises 'Understanding the dynamics of attitude change' by Andy Ross and Amanda Sacker, in British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report, published by Sage for NatCen.

## Notes to Editors

- 1 **British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report** is published on Tuesday 26th January, 2010 by SAGE, price £50.00. It is edited by Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Miranda Phillips, Elizabeth Clery and Sarah Butt. SAGE is at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book234304&series=Series30&>.
- 2 The report includes two additional chapters not covered by this press release. Findings from these chapters, on religion, were released earlier in the year.
- 3 British findings are from the British Social Attitudes survey, with the exception of the chapter by Andy Ross and Amanda Sacker, which also uses data from the British Household Panel Study, and the chapter by Rossy Bailey, Elizabeth Fuller and Rachel Ormston, which also uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey and the Health Survey for England. Findings that compare Britain with other countries are taken from the European Social Survey ([www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)) or the International Social Survey Programme ([www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)).
- 4 The British Social Attitudes survey series has been conducted annually since 1983. The 2008 survey consisted of 4,486 interviews with a representative, random sample of people in Britain.
- 5 The survey is funded by charitable and government sources. The questions in the 2008 survey were funded by the following government Departments: Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (now Business, Innovation and Skills); Children, Schools and Families; Health; Transport; and Work and Pensions. Other funders came from: the Economic and Social Research Council; the Food Standards Agency; the Gatsby Charitable Foundation; the Hera Trust; the John Templeton Foundation; the Leverhulme Trust; and NORFACE.
- 6 NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research ([www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk)).

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