

Stand Alone

The Prevalence of Family Estrangement



'Building knowledge and understanding about estranged adults and the impact of estrangement on the individual, families and society.'

Family estrangement is commonly explored in fiction, and tales of triumph often feature a family-deprived protagonist, bravely stepping out into the world, rejecting an upsetting and abusive past. We only have to look at the popularity of Harry Potter, who rejected his difficult foster family for the joys of a magical life at Hogwarts, to see that this sense of longing for a loving and functional family fosters our sympathies.

During my short time as Chief Executive of Stand Alone, I have met many people that have distanced themselves from a challenging past, who dearly wish they were as well received as their fictional representations. In reality, leading psychologists such as Dr Joshua Coleman, tell us that there is a huge stigma associated with family estrangement that prevents people from talking about it with others. And that the idea of leaving behind a difficult or dysfunctional family is not in adherence to notions that society possesses towards forgiving and healing with family relationships. Much as we may like to entertain the notion of leaving the past behind in a film or a book, when it comes to reality, our collective morality indicates that families are better off together, whatever the circumstances.

Societal awareness behind the reasons for family estrangement is currently low, and substantive quantitative and qualitative research into those that walk away from their families, the families they come from, and the situation they leave behind doesn't currently exist. Since its inception, the charity has been slowly building a picture from its own service users and why they have become estranged from their family or children. The most common theme is childhood abuse, alongside key differences in morals values and religious beliefs. We work with survivors of forced marriage and honour based violence as well as families that cannot sustain a dialogue around major incidents or betrayals of trust. But whatever the background of our beneficiaries, there is one phrase that has always re-occured when people get in touch:

'I thought I was the only one in this position...'

This preliminary stage in our research was made with the intention of giving a firmer understanding of the extent of family estrangement in the UK, and forms the first stage of exploration in this field. Not only do the following figures start to make clear the need for our work and further qualitative research, but they give a strong message for all those people who may feel they are living with this issue alone. These initial findings are a huge stepping stone in helping society to understand that people who are estranged from their family do exist, and need much greater acknowledgement and support.

Many thanks for reading,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Becca Bland', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Becca Bland
Chief Executive
Stand Alone
b.bland@standalone.org.uk

Stand Alone commissioned Ipsos MORI as part of their nationally representative omnibus survey, asking 2,082 GB adults if they know somebody that has become estranged from a family member. By estranged we indicated that they had ceased communication with that family member due to a breakdown in that relationship.

Three key findings:

8% of people surveyed referenced that they themselves had cut contact with a family member, implying at least 5 million people in the UK have made the choice to no-longer be in contact with a member of their family.

19% of people surveyed stated that either they themselves, or another family member were no-longer in contact. This indicates that around 1 in 5 UK families will be touched by family estrangement and its consequences. That implies that around 12 million family members may be affected by estrangement.

27% of people surveyed said they know a friend, a work colleague, or someone else in their family that has cut contact with their family.

This indicates that family estrangement is not uncommon: almost a third of the UK population are familiar with the concept of cutting contact with a family member, or know someone that has experienced it.

*The figures are representative of the GB population. However, the survey was conducted amongst households in Britain, but excluded more transient populations such as those that may live in hospitals, hostel accommodation or homeless shelters. Thus the figures may well be under-representative, as it is commonly thought there is a higher instance of estrangement within these populations.

The regional breakdown showed little significant variation, but with marginally higher figures in Northern England, the Midlands and Scotland in comparison to London and the South of England.

12% of people surveyed in Scotland referenced that they themselves were no-longer in contact with a family member due to a breakdown in that relationship

The North of England had higher percentage, with 16% of people indicating they know a family member who was no-longer in contact with another family member. Alongside this, a higher percentage of survey respondents indicated they knew a friend that had cut contact with a family member.

32% of respondents in the North of England indicated that either themselves or someone they know no-longer had a relationship with a family member. This is nearly 5% higher than the national average of 27%.

This preliminary research points to the fact that family estrangement permeates all types of families, including those who consider themselves highly educated and earning well above the national average wage.

35% of those earning £30,000 per annum or above are either themselves no-longer in touch with a family member or know someone that is no-longer in touch with a family member. This is 8% higher than the average of 27%.

The top income bracket also registered much higher statistics for those that knew a family member who had cut contact another family member, at 17%, this is 5% higher than the average of 12% and notably higher than those earning less per annum.

People aged 35-54 registered slightly higher figures in all areas, demonstrating that family estrangement may be more common for those people in this age bracket.

There was little variation in how people responded when looking at gender. Showing that family estrangement affects people of all ages and stages of life.

About Stand Alone

Stand Alone is a new charity supporting adults and young people that are estranged from their family or a key family member. We run support services to connect people that have cut contact, generate research and raise awareness within the general public and government bodies to help people live lives that are less isolated.

Stand Alone will be building on these facts with more comprehensive qualitative research around the impact of family estrangement on the individual, family and society. This will include hard to reach groups, such as those living in hospitals, hostels of homeless shelters as well as ethnic minority groups.

Notes:

For further information or for case study material contact b.bland@standalone.org.uk or phone 07531548636

About Capibus:

The survey was conducted on Capibus, Ipsos MORI's weekly face-to-face Omnibus survey. Interviews were conducted in-home using CAPI (computer-aided personal interviewing) method, among a sample of 2,082 adults aged 15+. Interviewing took place between 12th – 18th September 2014. Data were weighted to known population figures for age, region, social grade and working status within gender and non-inter-