

Trends in Union Instability in the United States, 1980s-2010s

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September 26, 2014

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Abstract submitted for consideration for 2015 Meeting of the Population Association of America. The authors can be contacted at kenne503@umn.edu and ruggles@umn.edu.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Recent research has documented rising rates of formal divorce since 1980 among Baby Boomers, along with stable divorce rates among women in their 30s, and falling rates among women under age 25 in the United States (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014, Brown and Lin 2012). We argue that these trends cannot be fully understood without examining union dissolution more broadly. This paper does so, by examining trends in union dissolution more generally, and for cohabiting unions in particular. We use recent data from the U.S. National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). We find that marital separation and cohabiting separation risks have remained largely steady for women of reproductive-ages. Because of the rapid rise of cohabitation during this period, the overall likelihood of union dissolution has increased sharply and is now higher than at any time in the past.

The decline in divorce rates among women under age 25 may be attributable to increasing selectivity of marriage. Fewer young people are getting married (Wang and Parker 2014). Instead, as young adults are delaying or possibly forgoing marriage entirely, they are forming unions outside of marriage at unprecedented levels and at early ages (Smock and Manning 2004; Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014). As cohabitation has become more socially acceptable, Americans have become less likely to marry their cohabiting partners and more likely to enter into multiple cohabiting unions (Lichter, Turner, and Sassler 2010, Kennedy & Bumpass 2008). Many cohabitators still marry their partners and premarital cohabitation no longer increases the likelihood that a married couple will divorce (Manning and Cohen 2012). Nevertheless, it is likely that the couples at highest risk of union dissolution are forgoing marriage entirely. By the early 1990s, overall union instability rates had risen slightly as result of the rise in cohabitation (Raley and Bumpass 2003). Consequently, a full evaluation of trends in union instability should take into account unions that form and dissolve outside of legal marriage.

Data and results

To assess trends in overall union instability among younger adults, we use the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The survey focuses on persons in reproductive ages, so it is not useful for understanding longer-run trends in those age-groups showing increases in the incidence of divorce (women over age 45). But, it is valuable for studying those cohorts which have experienced the largest increases in cohabitation and for observing the ages at which cohabitation typically occurs.

The 1988 wave of the periodic National Survey of Family Growth was among the first nationally representative surveys to collect detailed cohabitation histories. The NSFG was repeated in 1995, 2002, and 2006-2010. Unfortunately, the 2002 data are compromised: routing errors in the 2002 female questionnaire produced substantial missing data and limited the usefulness of this wave for studying trends in union dissolution.¹ The 2011-2013 data will be released sometime this fall and will be added to our final paper.

¹ Specifically, marital dissolution data are missing entirely for currently separated respondents, resulting in very high rates of missing data for marriages that dissolved in periods close to the survey administration. In addition, marriages in which the male partner had children from a prior union were also skipped out of the marriage dissolution questions.

Because the NSFG has longest run of cohabitation histories currently available, it is the best source for investigating trends in union dissolution among younger women. We examine trends in union formation for first marriage and first union cohorts over three decades: 1980-1987, 1987-1994, and 1998-2009. These cohorts are selected to include unions formed during the 8 years before each survey allowing us to maximize sample size, while limiting recall error (Hayford and Morgan 2008, Raley and Bumpass 2003).² Our analysis is limited to women who first marry or enter a first union by age 35 because this is the oldest age at which women could form unions in the first year of each of these cohorts.

Using the NSFG, we estimate life table and multivariate hazard models examining cohort differences in marriage or union dissolution within five years. Dissolution is defined as the time when a couple stops coresiding, whether they are cohabiting or married. Table 1 presents cohort life table estimates of the proportion for first marriages and first unions dissolving within 5 years, for each cohort, for women who formed unions by age 35.³ We found little change in marital disruption over the past three decades. For the most recent marriage cohort, 18% separated within 5 years of marrying, compared to 21-22% of first marriages formed in the previous two cohorts.

Among first unions that began with cohabitation, however, about half ended in disruption in all three cohorts, even as their share of first unions increased from half to three-quarters. When we combine marriages and cohabitations to look at disruption of all first unions, during these periods, we find evidence that union instability is on the rise even among the young. Currently, for the 1998-2009 first union cohort, we estimate that almost 45% disrupted within 5 years. This represents a substantial increase, about 10 percentage points, over women forming unions in the 1980s, with most of the growth in instability occurring since the 1990s.

To control for age at union formation as well as marriage duration, we turned to Cox proportional hazards models. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on age at marriage and union formation for our first marriage and first union cohorts. This shows that as marriage formation has been delayed, cohabitation and union formation in the U.S. still occurs at very young ages: 35% of women enter first unions (marriage or cohabitation) in their teens, and this percentage has not shifted greatly in three decades. (See Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014 for a discussion of the stability of the age of cohabitation entry in the U.S.).

Table 3 presents results from Cox proportional hazard models predicting the dissolution of first marriages and first unions. Our models include an indicator of marriage cohorts: 1980-87, 1987-94, and 1998-2009 (the reference category). We also include controls for age at marriage or

² Because the most recent NSFG includes interviews conducted during the years 2006-2010, this restriction results in a 12-year marriage cohort. In addition, although there is a one-year overlap between the two earliest surveys, the impact is minimal as women entering unions in 1987 in the earliest cohort contribute at most one person-year of exposure to our analysis.

³ Note that the proportion of first unions that began with cohabitation rather than direct marriage increased from 53% in the earliest cohort, to 75% in the most recent cohort, while percentage of first marriages preceded by cohabitation increased from 43% to 64%.

union start—these variables are designed to control for compositional change due to shifts in age at union formation.⁴

As shown on the left of Table 3, we find no significant change in the disruption of first marriages across cohorts, even controlling for increased marriage age. The next model focuses on first unions that began with cohabitation. Just as with marriage, the likelihood that a cohabiting couple would dissolve their union did not change significantly across the three cohorts in the first five years. Finally, on the right of Table 3 we present results for all first unions, including both marriages and cohabitations. The pattern is clear: when we consider cohabitation as well as marriage, union instability has risen significantly over time.

Discussion and next steps

To a growing extent, cohabitation is now substituting for formal marriage. Dissolution of cohabiting unions has always been far more common than marital dissolution. We see no systematic change in the stability of cohabiting unions. Because cohabitation makes up a rapidly growing percentage of all unions, however, they have an increasing impact on overall union instability. When we merge cohabiting unions and marital unions together, it is apparent that overall union instability grew rapidly before stabilizing in recent years.

The debate over whether or not there has been increase in the risk of marital dissolution over the past several decades misses the profound rise of union dissolution. Overall, unions have become less stable, although the pace of change may be abating. At the same time, the percentage of the population in unions is declining. Marriage is becoming increasingly selective. Over 40% of the population in 2008 had not married by their 30th birthday, a four-fold increase since 1980. Today, many of the people who would have been at the highest risk of divorce in the past are either already divorced or never married in the first place. The two extraordinary changes in union formation--the decline of marriage and the rise of cohabitation--are rendering conventional measures of marital dissolution increasingly irrelevant.

Our final paper will expand on this abstract in two ways. First, we will add in data from the latest round of the NSFG bringing our analysis current through 2013. Second, we will examine changes in dissolution risks by educational attainment and other demographic factors. Past research has found that trends in divorce in the US vary significantly by educational attainment, with increases concentrated among women without a college-degree (see for instance Raley and Bumpass 2003, Martin 2006).

⁴ In fact, the controls for age at union formation did not significantly change the cohort coefficients. We also ran models with controls for additional demographic variables that could explain differences between cohorts: educational attainment, race and ethnicity, and nativity. These also did not affect our results and are not shown.

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Table 1. Life table estimates of first marriage and union dissolution within 5 years

| | First marriages | First cohabiting unions | All first unions |
|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Marriage/union cohort | | | |
| 1980-1987 | 0.21 | 0.49 | 0.34 |
| 1987-1994 | 0.22 | 0.49 | 0.36 |
| 1998-2009 | 0.19 | 0.50 | 0.43 |

Source: National Survey of Family Growth 1988, 1995, and 2006-10. National Center for Health Statistics 1990, 1997b, 2011b.

Notes: includes only marriages and unions formed by age 35. Marital disruption is measured at the time of separation, not divorce.

Table 2. Distribution of age at marriage or formation of cohabiting unions, 1980-2009

| | First marriages | | | First cohabiting unions | | | All first unions | | |
|-------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1980-1987 | 1987-1994 | 1998-2009 | 1980-1987 | 1987-1994 | 1998-2009 | 1980-1987 | 1987-1994 | 1998-2009 |
| < 20 | 0.24 | 0.19 | 0.11 | 0.39 | 0.38 | 0.40 | 0.35 | 0.32 | 0.35 |
| 20-22 | 0.32 | 0.28 | 0.23 | 0.28 | 0.31 | 0.26 | 0.31 | 0.30 | 0.27 |
| 23-25 | 0.23 | 0.22 | 0.27 | 0.17 | 0.16 | 0.18 | 0.19 | 0.18 | 0.20 |
| 26-29 | 0.14 | 0.20 | 0.24 | 0.11 | 0.11 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.13 | 0.12 |
| 30+ | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0.15 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.06 |
| N | 1682 | 2106 | 2152 | 1129 | 1514 | 2551 | 1987 | 2463 | 3270 |

Source: National Survey of Family Growth 1988, 1995, and 2006-10. National Center for Health Statistics 1990, 1997b, 2011b.

Note: Includes only marriages and unions formed by age 35.

Proportional hazards models predicting rate of first marriage and union dissolution within five years

| | First Marriages | | | First cohabiting unions | | | All first unions | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|------|------|-------------------------|------|------|------------------|------|------|
| | B | SE B | eB | B | SE B | eB | B | SE B | eB |
| Marriage/union cohort | | | | | | | | | |
| 1980-1987 | -0.06 | 0.11 | 0.94 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 1.08 | -0.20** | 0.07 | 0.82 |
| 1987-1997 | 0.01 | 0.10 | 1.01 | 0.03 | 0.06 | 1.03 | -0.17** | 0.06 | 0.84 |
| 1998-2009 | | | | | | | | | |
| Age at marriage /union start | | | | | | | | | |
| < 20 | | | | | | | | | |
| 20-22 | -0.53** | 0.16 | 0.59 | -0.14 | 0.13 | 0.87 | -0.45*** | 0.12 | 0.64 |
| 23-26 | -1.05*** | 0.20 | 0.35 | -0.47** | 0.16 | 0.63 | -0.83*** | 0.15 | 0.44 |
| 26-29 | -1.03*** | 0.23 | 0.36 | -0.45* | 0.19 | 0.64 | -0.69*** | 0.18 | 0.50 |
| 30+ | -0.78* | 0.31 | 0.46 | -0.50 | 0.28 | 0.61 | -0.55 | 0.24 | 0.58 |

Source: National Survey of Family Growth 1988, 1995, and 2006-10. National Center for Health Statistics 1990, 1997b, 2011b.

Notes: includes only marriages and unions formed by age 35. Marital disruption is measured at the time of separation, not divorce.