CHANGING PATTERNS OF MARITAL FORMATION AND DISSOLUTION IN THE UNITED STATES: DEMOGRAPHIC IMPLICATIONS

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SUMMARY

The family is a key institution for understanding human behavior and well-being. As one of the central institutions organizing the activities of society, the family has important implications for economic well-being and demographic behavior. Important changes in family patterns would have significant ramifications for demographic behaviors and attitudes.

This paper summarizes shifts in the marriage formation system in the United States during the past three decades. Marriage rates have fallen, age at marriage has increased, premarital sex has become more common, nonmarital cohabitation has become frequent, and divorce rates have increased. These behavioral changes have been accompanied by a substantial weakening of the norms to marry, to stay married, and to refrain from sexual relations before marriage.

We identify a number of important demographic consequences of marriage and divorce. Both delayed marriage and divorce increase the years spent unmarried, which is likely to lead to smaller families and higher ages at childbirth. Physical and mental health are also associated with marriage, and increases in the number of divorced individuals could lead to poorer health. Both out-of-wedlock childbearing and marital dissolution have increased the prevalence of single-parent families, with their lower levels of economic well-being. New patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage also have important implications for household composition and geographical mobility. The recent high levels of divorce may also have led to questioning of the institution of marriage and a decline in willingness to invest in marriage as a way of life. This, in turn, may have contributed to the decline in marriage, the increase in cohabitation, the increased commitment of women to careers, and reduced fertility in marriage.
INTRODUCTION

This paper proceeds from the observation that the family is a key institution for understanding the behavior and well being of human beings. For most people of the world the basic activities of their lives have been organized by family and kinship relationships. From time to time scholars have constructed lists of the basic activities of societies, including such things as production, distribution, consumption, reproduction, socialization, education, recreation, coresidence, protection, and transmission of property. Scholars describing societies of the past--Europe and North America before the 19th century and the rest of the world before the 20th century--consistently report that in virtually all societies these activities were primarily conducted by family groups (Ogburn and Tibbetts, 1933; Thornton and Fricke, 1987). While the development of nonfamilial institutions such as factories, schools, medical and public health organizations, police, and commercialized leisure have resulted in many important activities being done outside the family, the family remains a central institution organizing many key activities of society today.

Although the list of social activities conducted primarily by families in the past is not organized along demographic lines, the list should be of interest to students of population because the central concerns of demographic analysis are represented there. Reproduction, of course, refers directly to population renewal and is of central concern to demographic study. The protection activity refers to the efforts of mankind to defend their property, health, and ultimately their lives from harm. The success or failure of these protective efforts ultimately determine the force of mortality, the second central population parameter. And, since coresidence refers to the sharing of living quarters and geographic space, shifts of individuals among households involve a third central demographic process, migration. Thus, demographic and family behavior are linked
together in the most fundamental way. In fact, at some levels, family and demographic behavior are inseparable because they are the same thing.

Family structure and process have been altered dramatically in many societies during the last two centuries, with important ramifications for many dimensions of life. This paper focuses attention on one aspect of family life in the United States—union formation and dissolution. We discuss changes in marriage and divorce and outline some of the important demographic consequences emanating from those changes. We note that the changes in patterns of marital formation and dissolution have important implications for a broad range of demographic attitudes and behavior, including the marriage system itself, childbearing, household composition and living arrangements, economic well being, migration and geographical mobility, and physical and mental health. Because of space limitations we can only indicate the general nature of some of the consequences involved and cannot provide detailed discussions of causal mechanisms. In addition, each of the areas discussed as consequences involves a wide range of potential determinants, of which marriage behavior is only one of the possible causes. Discussion of the full range of determinants of these behaviors is also beyond the scope of this paper.

TRENDS IN MARITAL FORMATION AND DISSOLUTION

Behavior

First marriage rates were generally quite steady in the United States before World War II, but immediately after World War II the country experienced a dramatic marriage boom. Marriage rates increased, age at marriage fell, and the fraction of the population never marrying declined. For example, median age at marriage for women declined from approximately 23 for white women born during the last few decades of the nineteenth century to just over 20 for those born in the late 1930s. Although marriage rates declined somewhat during the 1950s and
1960s, they remained high until the early 1970s when they decreased dramatically. This decline continued into the 1980s, but at a slower pace than during the 1970s (Rodgers and Thornton, 1985; Thornton, 1988a). During the early 1980s marriage rates and age at marriage were fairly similar to those observed during the decades prior to World War II.

Divorce has been on a long-term upward trajectory in the United States for well over a century (Preston and McDonald, 1979). However, during the early 1960s the pace of this increase quickened, and the rate more than doubled by the end of the 1970s (Cherlin, 1981; Thornton and Freedman, 1983). The rate, however, has remained fairly steady during the 1980s, with more than two percent of the existing marriages being disrupted by divorce each year (National Center for Health Statistics, 1987). Several researchers have estimated that the high levels of divorce observed in the late 1970s imply that about fifty percent of all marriages will end in divorce (Preston and McDonald, 1979; Weed, 1980). More recently, it has been argued that this well-known figure of one-half may be an underestimate of the incidence of marital dissolution, and the actual figure may be closer to two-thirds (Castro and Bumpass, 1987).

Marriages, of course, are also terminated by death. And between 1860 and 1960 declining mortality generally offset the increase in divorce so that the rate of marital dissolution from the two sources combined remained steady or even declined somewhat during that period. However, with the dramatic increases in divorce during the 1960s, the total marital dissolution rate increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s (Thornton and Freedman, 1983).

Substantial evidence suggests that most Americans remarry fairly rapidly following marital dissolution. However, there have also been important trends in remarriage, with the remarriage rate generally paralleling the first marriage rate. Remarriage rates increased dramatically following World War II, remained
fairly steady through the 1960s, and then fell sharply during the 1970s. Small declines in remarriage rates continued through the 1980s. In 1983 only 54 percent of all new marriages were first marriages for both partners (National Center for Health Statistics, 1987).

An important new development of the last two decades has been the rapid rise in nonmarital cohabitation. The number of unmarried couples living together more than tripled between 1970 and 1977, doubled again in the five years from 1977 to 1982, and rose by 19 percent from 1982 to 1986 (Thornton, 1988a). One recent study of a birth cohort of young people born in the Detroit Metropolitan Area estimates that fully one half of all women and two thirds of all men entering a first union by age 23 did so through cohabitation rather than marriage. In addition, at least one-third of the young people who had married by age 23 had previously cohabited (Thornton, 1988a). Clearly unmarried cohabitation has become an important part of the life course of young Americans today. In addition, there is evidence suggesting that the prevalence of cohabitation is higher among the previously married than among the never married (Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986; Bumpass and Sweet, 1988).

Since the 1960s the rates of entrance into marriage have been declining at the same time the rates of entrance into nonmarital cohabitation have been rising in both the United States and Canada. In Canada these cohabitation rates have compensated entirely for the declining marriage rates to keep the total union formation rate steady across recent cohorts of young adults (Burch and Madan, 1986), while in the United States cohabitation rates have compensated substantially for declining marriage rates (Bumpass and Sweet, 1988). Thus, for many of those contemplating entering a union for the first time, nonmarital cohabitation may be acting as a substitute for marriage.

There have also been important increases in premarital sex among teenagers.
Premarital sex was already fairly common by the early 1970s and increased steadily during that decade (Thornton and Freedman, 1983; Hayes, 1987). By 1979, 46 percent of the never married women aged 15-19 had experienced sexual intercourse (Zelnik and Kantner, 1980). However, data for the early 1980s suggest that this trend may have leveled off (Hofferth et al., 1987). Out-of-wedlock childbearing increased dramatically among teenagers across the entire period from 1940 through 1986 (Thornton and Freedman, 1983; National Center for Health Statistics, 1988). For older unmarried women fertility also increased from 1940 through the early 1960s and then turned downward. This downward trend for older women continued until the middle-to-late 1970s when it was reversed by a sharp upward trend which continued through 1986 (Thornton and Freedman, 1983; National Center for Health Statistics, 1988).

Norms, Attitudes, and Values

The changes in union formation and dissolution have been accompanied by dramatic shifts in norms, values, and attitudes concerning marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and sexual relations outside of marriage. During the 1960s and 1970s there was a substantial weakening of norms to marry, to stay married, and to refrain from sex before marriage. During these two decades it became increasingly acceptable to choose not to marry, to choose to terminate a marriage, and to be sexually intimate before marriage. In fact, marriage may have become generally less important as a sanctioning institution for sex and cohabitation. In addition, there were substantial increases in the acceptance of childlessness (Thornton, 1988b).

While there have been important increases in the acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, and remaining single, these trends should not be interpreted as representing an endorsement of divorce or remaining single. The data clearly suggest that the vast majority of Americans still value marriage and
family life. Most Americans still plan to marry and to have children, and optimism for achieving success in marriage remains quite high. Further, there is little evidence for growth in preferences for remaining single or for not having children. There has, however, been an increase in desired age at marriage (Thornton, 1988b). Thus, these data suggest that there has been an increased tolerance for behavior not previously accepted, but not an increase in an active embracement of such behavior. Americans clearly remain positive towards family life, marriage, and parenthood, but are substantially more tolerant towards those who choose alternative life courses.

While the weakening of the rules requiring marriage and parenthood are not equivalent to an endorsement of remaining single and childless, this trend still has important implications for behavior. Although young people continue to report that they want to marry and have children, the weakening of the normative imperative to do so, along with increases in desired age at marriage, may result in fewer marriages and more childlessness. As young people postpone marriage and having children, the decreased social pressure to do so may increase the likelihood that neither happens. Thus, both remaining single and not having children are likely to increase in the United States even though there are still only a small minority who actively desire and expect such outcomes (Thornton, 1988b).

**DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF CHANGED MARITAL BEHAVIOR**

**Feedback Loops Within the Marriage System**

The rapid rise in divorce during the 1960s and 1970s was accompanied by extensive publicity, and knowledge of this family trend became widespread. A particularly important aspect of the publicity was information about the negative psychological, social, and economic consequences that can be associated with divorce. It is likely that these developments led to some questioning of the
institution of marriage and decreased confidence in marriage as a way of life (Weitzman, 1985; Thornton, 1988c).

An extensive body of research is showing that children of divorced parents have more positive attitudes toward premarital sex and are more sexually experienced (Thornton and Camburn, 1987). Given this empirical relationship and plausible theoretical reasons for expecting an effect of divorce on children's premarital sex, it also seems likely that the historical trend in divorce would have contributed to the trend towards more approving attitudes toward premarital sex.

It seems very likely that the growing concerns about the viability of marriage and the increased acceptability of premarital sex played a major role in the rapid increase in unmarried cohabitation. With concerns about success in marriage young people may have become attracted to the idea that they could live together without being married in order to obtain additional information about their compatibility. If they found that they were incompatible, they could break-up the relationship without the trauma of divorce. This orientation may have been a major contributor to a rapid substitution of marriage with cohabitation by many young Americans. This hypothesis is buttressed by micro-level data showing that children of divorced parents have substantially higher cohabitation rates and lower marriage rates than children from continuously-married families, indicating that growing up in a family with divorced parents could be leading to a substitution of marriage with cohabitation (Thornton, 1988c).

This adjustment to concern about success in marriage may actually be leading to higher rates of dissolution. A rapidly growing body of empirical data suggests that cohabitation may increase rather than decrease the rate of union dissolution. Cohabiting unions have been shown to have high rates of
dissolution, and the divorce rate among married couples who had previously cohabited is substantially higher than the rate among couples who had not cohabited prior to marriage (Bumpass and Sweet, 1988). Of course, the correlation between cohabitation and divorce may also be the result of differential selectivity into cohabiting and marital unions. At this point in time there has been insufficient research to establish the causal mechanisms producing the high correlation.

**Childbearing**

Marital status is an important determinant of childbearing levels. Since married people continue to have substantially higher rates of fertility than the unmarried—both those who are cohabiting and those who are not—delays in first marriage, increases in divorce, decreases in remarriage, and longer periods in the unmarried state would tend to decrease family size. However, in a low fertility population such as the United States, this tendency can be counteracted at least partially by remarried couples making up for lost time by having higher fertility in their new marriage, a pattern documented among white couples (Thornton, 1978). However, both increasing age at marriage and more remarried couples would increase age at childbirth. In addition, increased age at marriage, along with postponed childbearing within marriage, could result in childbearing being delayed to the less fecund part of the life course. This pattern, along with increased acceptance of childlessness, could result in increased levels of childlessness.

Just as the trend in cohabitation is likely to lead to a decline in overall fertility, it probably increases out-of-wedlock childbearing. While unmarried cohabiters have been shown to have lower fertility than married women (Bachrach, 1987), they probably have higher rates of pregnancy than unmarried women who are not cohabiting (Blanc, 1984). While many pregnancies to unmarried cohabiters are
undoubtedly legitimated by marriage, many others probably result in abortions or out-of-wedlock births. If this line of reasoning is true, the recent increases in unmarried cohabitation may have played an important role in the rise of unmarried childbearing since 1975.

In addition to the compositional effects of changing marital patterns on childbearing just discussed, there are also potentially important behavioral effects. Earlier we argued that the dramatic rise in divorce may have produced increased concerns about the viability of marriage, the probability of personal success in marriage, and the negative outcomes often associated with divorce. Since divorce adjustments are particularly difficult for mothers with young children, these concerns may cause women to invest more of their time and energy in establishing and maintaining careers in order to be able to support themselves if that is needed (Weitzman, 1985). Given the well-known negative relationship between female employment and fertility, the likely result of this adjustment is reduced fertility. It is, thus, possible that the increased divorce rate could have been a contributor to the decline in the marital fertility rate which occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Household Composition

Trends in marital patterns—particularly out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce, and remarriage—have played a dominant role in producing the substantial increase in single parent families. Between 1960 and 1982 the number of households headed by women with young children more than doubled. In the latter year nearly one-fifth of all households with minor children were headed by a single woman (Thornton and Freedman, 1983).

Although the living arrangements of divorced men receive less scholarly and media attention than those of their ex-wives, they, of course, also must adjust their living arrangements. For many divorced men the likely outcome at least for
a period of time is independent residence, either alone or with housemates.

**Standard of Living**

The economic consequences of living in a single-parent household have been well documented. The living standards of mothers and their children decline sharply after divorce, and the living standards of never-married mothers and their children are also often deficient (Duncan and Hoffman, 1985; Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). The result is that single parent households are significantly over-represented among the poverty population. One outcome of this financial hardship may be fewer accomplishments in elementary and high school and lower aspirations and expectations for college attendance among children of divorced mothers (McLanahan, 1985). It will almost certainly negatively impact upon the ability of parents to assist their children with college expenses and ultimately reduce the educational achievements of children (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1988).

If the fear of divorce and its associated financial hardships motivate women to invest more in job skills and in the establishment of rewarding careers, as we argued earlier, the result could be enhanced financial well being for continuously married couples. That is, the woman who is motivated to maintain and enhance her earning capacity in the event that she needed to rely solely on those skills may at the same time be making significant contributions to the family's budget. Thus, for such families, the lack of confidence in marriage could enhance the family's living standard. This outcome would tend to accentuate even more the income differences between married couples and single parent households, particularly in those cases where the single mother was unprepared to financially support herself and her children.

**Migration and Geographic Mobility**

Recent changes in marital processes in the United States also influence
patterns of migration and geographic mobility. Both empirical evidence and theoretical argument suggest that models of mobility decision making must consider the role of the family in the decision making process (DaVanzo, 1981). Indeed, strong evidence links changes in the family life cycle and changes in marital status to geographic mobility (Sandefur and Scott, 1981; Speare and Goldscheider, 1987). Several of the recent changes in marriage behavior described in this paper hold likely consequences for mobility.

First, the increased prevalence of divorce in the United States is likely to increase the mobility of the individuals involved. Divorce inevitably forces a change in living arrangements and changes in living arrangements necessarily involve geographic mobility. Thus, divorce causes the migration of at least one spouse, along with the formation of a new household. Previous evidence is consistent with the conclusion that the majority of mothers live as household heads after a marital dissolution (Sweet, 1972). When only one spouse moves, the presence of children affects whether it is the man or the woman who moves (Speare and Goldscheider, 1987).

Often divorce causes both spouses to move. This situation may be induced by a need to sell the family home because of economic necessity or legal constraints (Weitzman, 1985). Divorce may also result in a chain of moves. For example, mothers may move in with others before establishing their own households (Sweet, 1972).

Divorce also affects the geographic mobility of the children of a divorcing couple, with the initial change in living arrangements often causing a move for the children. Beyond this effect, divorce may also set up a pattern of residential rotation where the children are shuttled back and forth between the homes of the parents.

Just as a marriage results in geographical mobility (Speare and
Goldscheider, 1987; Sandefur and Scott, 1981), so does remarriage following divorce. This change will usually involve migration for at least one member of the remarrying couple.

The initiation and termination of non-marital cohabiting relationships are also likely to produce migration. Similar to marriage and divorce, the initiation and termination of cohabiting unions generally involve a change of living arrangements and an accompanying move, at least for one of the individuals. Because cohabiting unions have high rates of termination (discussed above), and union termination generally leads to geographic mobility, cohabitation may tend to produce more mobility than its counterpart, marriage.

Besides patterns of mobility resulting from these changes in the composition of marital and related experiences in the United States, the potential behavioral impact of changes in marriage also deserves some consideration. For instance, employment opportunities, the most frequent reason for moving in the United States, might be weighed differently by those in a cohabiting union than by those in a marital union. Those in a cohabiting union may be more likely to move to take advantage of a distant employment opportunity than those in a marital union. Likewise, someone in a cohabiting union may be more likely than someone in a marital union to terminate the relationship rather than move when his/her partner moves to take advantage of a distant employment opportunity.

Morbidity and Mortality

Recent changes in marriage behavior influence morbidity and mortality. Marital status is known to be related to both mental health and mortality risks (Bloom, Asher and White, 1978; Gove, 1973). Divorce, in particular, increases mental and physical illness and death among both adults and children (Bloom, Asher and White, 1978; Gove, 1973; Longfellow, 1979; Angel and Worobey, 1988; Mauldon, 1988). For instance, among adults divorce has been explicitly linked to
stress, depression, and suicide (Bloom, Asher and White, 1978; Menaghan and Lieberman, 1986; Trovato, 1986). Thus, changes in the divorce rate probably affect trends in morbidity and mortality.

Social support may be one of the important links between marital status and illness and death. According to House, "social supports are potent variables that can reduce exposure to stress, promote health, and buffer the impact of stress on health, thus contributing to both the quality and quantity of life," (p. 267, 1986). Intimate social supports such as marriage appear to be more important in this capacity than other social supports (House, 1986). Thus, the termination of marriage through divorce may reduce the amount of social support available to an individual, thereby increasing the risk of morbidity and mortality.

Divorce may also induce changes in behavior which increase the risk of morbidity and mortality. For example, divorce may lead some individuals to take up smoking, to abuse alcohol, or to take jobs which involve irregular risks. While it is difficult empirically to explore whether such behaviors cause divorce or are the result of divorce, there is some evidence supporting the expectation of higher rates of such risk-taking behaviors among the divorced (Bloom, Asher and White, 1978).

The influence of divorce on children is complex, affecting mental and physical health (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974; Longfellow, 1979; Angel and Worobey, 1988; Mauldon, 1988), as well as other aspects of social and personal development (Hetherington, 1972; Peterson and Zill, 1986; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). The effects of divorce are complicated because divorce may sometimes be a positive influence on children's well-being, particularly when one parent is "inaccessible, rejecting, or hostile" while living in a two-parent family (Hetherington, p. 857, 1979). Some evidence indicates the negative influences which do exist may impact younger children more strongly than older children.
Other recent changes in behaviors related to marriage in the United States also influence health and morbidity. The increased acceptance of sexual relations outside of marriage has been accompanied by increases in both teenage and out-of-wedlock childbearing, which in turn, are associated with higher rates of maternal morbidity and mortality (Strobino, 1987; Cramer, 1987).

CONCLUSION

During the past three decades there have been important shifts in the marriage formation system in the United States. Marriage rates have fallen, age at marriage has increased, premarital sex has become more common, nonmarital cohabitation has become a frequent occurrence, and divorce rates have increased. These behavioral changes have been accompanied by value and normative transformations. Most importantly, there has been a substantial weakening of the norms to marry, to stay married, and to refrain from sexual relations outside of marriage. However, at the same time Americans remain positive towards family life, marriage, and parenthood.

Since the family is a major determinant of demographic behavior and economic well-being, these changes in marital behavior have important ramifications for many dimensions of American life. We have noted that increases in age at marriage and a higher prevalence of divorce has decreased the portion of the life course spent married, which could lead to smaller families and higher ages at childbirth. Both out-of-wedlock childbearing and marital dissolution have increased the prevalence of single-parent families, with their lower levels of economic well-being and physical and mental health. New patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage also have implications for household composition and geographical mobility. Finally, high levels of divorce in American society may have led to a questioning of the institution of marriage and a decline in
people's willingness to invest in marriage as a way of life, which may have contributed to the decline in marriage, the increase in cohabitation, the increased involvement of women with careers, and reduced fertility within marriage. Of course, while this paper emphasizes the importance of marriage and divorce trends for several dimensions of American life, the determinants of these other behaviors are numerous, and changing marital behavior is only one of their many causes.

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