

# Cohabitation and Future Marital Stability

Today, more Americans than ever before are living together before marriage—an average of 1.5 years<sup>1)</sup> Men and women in their twenties and thirties are living together at much the same rate as before, but with a significant difference: Many more now cohabit rather than marry. People who live together before marrying divorce at about twice the rate of couples who do not cohabit before marriage, and four times the rate if they marry someone other than their present partner.<sup>2)</sup> Furthermore, many of these young adults express uncertainty about their future together.<sup>3)</sup>

The proportion of marriages preceded by a period of cohabitation increased from 8 percent in the late 1960s to 49 percent in 1985.<sup>4)</sup> Over half of Americans in their thirties today live in a cohabiting relationship, and more than half of recent marriages were preceded by cohabitation.<sup>5)</sup> Larry Bumpass, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor in the Center for Demography and Ecology, noted in an address to the Population Association of America that “Sex, living arrangements and parenting depend less on marriage.”<sup>6)</sup>

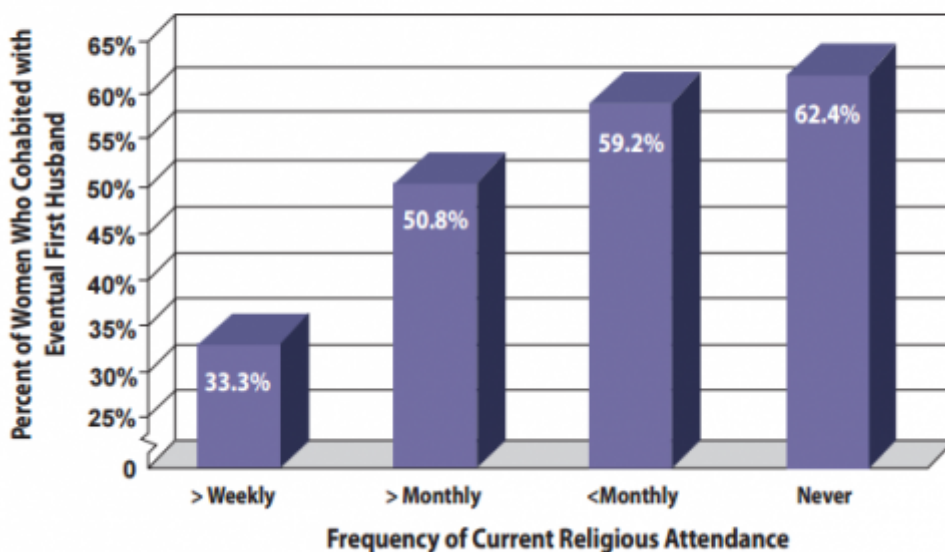
One reason for this change in American values lies with parents who divorce: Their children are [more likely to cohabit](#) before marriage as young adults. In 1990, 29 percent of those who had always-married parents had cohabited before their own marriage, but between 54 percent and 62 percent of children from divorced families cohabited before marriage.<sup>7)</sup>

Cohabitation doubles the rate of divorce, and the rates double again for those who cohabit before marriage with someone other than a future spouse.<sup>8)</sup> Forty percent of cohabiting couples have children in the home, and 12 percent of all cohabiting couples have had a biological child during cohabitation.<sup>9)</sup> More than half of adults (56 percent) who live together outside of marriage and beget children and then marry will divorce. About 80 percent of children who have lived in a household with cohabiting parents will spend some of their childhood in a single-parent home.<sup>10)</sup>

## 1. Related American Demographics

According to the National Survey of Family Growth, 42.5 percent of women who grew up in an intact married family cohabit with their eventual first husband, followed by women from single divorced parent families (55 percent), intact cohabiting families (56.2 percent), married stepfamilies (59.5 percent), always single parent families (69.4 percent), and cohabiting stepfamilies (72.9 percent).<sup>11)</sup> (See [Chart](#) Below).

### “Women Who Cohabited with Eventual First Husband” by Current Religious Attendance



Source: National Survey of Family Growth (2002)

- <sup>1)</sup> Larry L. Bumpass, “What’s Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change,” Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (November 1990), pp. 483-498.
- <sup>2)</sup> , <sup>10)</sup> Larry L. Bumpass, Teresa Castro Martin, and James A. Sweet, “The Impact of Family Background and Early Marital Factors on Marital Disruption,” *Journal of Family Issues* 12 (1991): 22-42
- <sup>3)</sup> , <sup>4)</sup> , <sup>5)</sup> , <sup>6)</sup> , <sup>8)</sup> Larry L. Bumpass, “What’s Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change,” Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (November 1990), pp. 483-498.
- <sup>7)</sup> Arland Thornton, “Influence of the Marital History of Parents on the Marital and Cohabitational Experiences of Children,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (1991), pp. 868-894.
- <sup>9)</sup> Larry Bumpass, James Sweet, and Andrew Cherlin, “The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, no. 4 (1991): 923.
- <sup>11)</sup> These charts draw on data collected by the National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 (2002). The sample consists of women between the ages of 14 and 44 and numbers 7,643. Patrick Fagan and Paul Sullins, ““Women Who Cohabited with Eventual First Husband” by Current Religious Attendance and Structure of Family of Origin,” Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF10I111.pdf>

This entry draws heavily from [Marriage and Economic Well Being: The Economy Rises or Falls with Marriage](#) and [How Broken Families Rob Children of Their Chances for Future Prosperity](#).

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