

# Cohabitation

## Part 1 of 2

*American College of Pediatricians – March 2015*

**ABSTRACT:** Contrary to the current perception of many adolescents and young adults who view cohabitation as a substitute for marriage or as a stepping stone to a more secure marriage, studies show that cohabiting unions are more likely to dissolve than marriages and that marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to dissolve than marriages that were not preceded by cohabitation. Cohabiting unions are more likely to involve infidelity and also more likely to involve violence. Furthermore, children, whether born prior to, during, or after parental cohabitation, are at increased risk for negative sequelae including premature birth, school failure, lower education, more poverty during childhood and lower incomes as adults, more incarceration and behavior problems, single parenthood, medical neglect and chronic health problems both medical and psychiatric, more substance, alcohol and tobacco abuse, and child abuse. Cohabiting women are also more likely to choose to end their child's life prior to birth.

### Part I. Effects of cohabitation on the men and women involved.

#### Incidence and attitudes

Cohabitation has increased exponentially in the US over the last few decades. From 1987 to 2002, the number of women aged 35-39 who had ever cohabitated increased from 30% to 61%. More young people are first cohabitating than first marrying.<sup>1</sup>

Incidence	Cohabitation only	Cohabitation then marriage	Marriage without prior cohabitation
Men	15%	28%	18%
Women	15%	28%	23%

In addition, the percent of cohabitating couples who married in the subsequent 3 years decreased from 60% in the 1970's to about 33% in the 1990's.<sup>2</sup> A survey of unmarried 15-19 year olds in 2006-8 showed the following:<sup>3</sup>

2006-2008 survey of 15-19 year olds	Percent approval
Cohabitation	66%
Unwed pregnancy	67%
Divorce for difficult marriages	40-44%

By 2001, one study of college students revealed that over half either "agreed" or "mostly agreed" that it is a good idea for couples to live together before they get married to make sure that they can get along in a domestic situation.<sup>4</sup> However studies demonstrate just the opposite.

## **Cohabitation puts future marriage at risk rather than strengthening it.**

The cohabitation relationship itself seems to be fraught with problems. Individuals entering a cohabitating relationship generally know their partner for a shorter period of time prior to moving in than their married peers.<sup>5</sup> Men in cohabiting relationships work less hours than those who are married and are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed (15% vs. 8%).<sup>6</sup>

Women who cohabit first are about two thirds as likely to marry by age 25 and remain less likely to marry until after age 35 compared to women who did not cohabit. This is also true to a lesser degree for men, but the differential disappears after age 30. Cohabitation before marriage is associated with lower marital satisfaction, dedication, and confidence as well as increased negative communication<sup>7</sup> with couples spending less time together<sup>8</sup> and men spending more time on personal leisure<sup>9</sup>; there is more violence and a higher rate of divorce.

### **Violence**

Women in cohabiting relationships are about nine times more likely to be killed by their partner than are women in marital relationships.<sup>10</sup> Kenney and McLanahan studied violence among couples who had begun cohabiting or had married up to 5 years earlier.

Incidence of violence

Married, stayed married	Married, then separated or divorced	Cohabited, stayed cohabiting	Cohabited, then married	Cohabited, then separated
15.5%	31.1%	35.3%	21.9%	42.6%

Thus among unions that dissolved, violence was a third more common among those who cohabited, and it was over twice as common among those remain cohabiting compared to those who remained married. Even among those who married in the interim, the couples who had begun by cohabiting had a third more violence than those continually married.<sup>11</sup> Yllo and Straus found that severe violence was nearly 4 times higher among cohabiters than among those married.<sup>12</sup>

### **Dissolution of relationship/Divorce**

The percent of cohabitating couples who later married decreased from 60% in 1970's to about 33% in 1990's.<sup>13</sup> Dash, et al. found that even when controlling for risks associated with higher divorce rates including race, income, education, welfare receipt, second marriage and parental divorce, there was no change in the 50% increased risk of divorce associated with premarital cohabitation, nor did this risk decline as cohabitation became more socially acceptable. They theorized that the cohabitation experience itself decreased marital stability through promoting individual desires over the interdependence associated with marriage.<sup>14</sup> More recently, it has been asserted that premarital cohabitation commenced after 1996 leads to no increase in the divorce rate and if preceded by engagement prior to moving in together, may even slightly decrease the risk of divorce.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup> These papers contain methodological flaws and/or do not contain the raw data. Even if the assertions should prove accurate, they ignore the 27% dissolution rate of cohabitations within the first 3 years, more than double the divorce rate. Even limiting the question to cohabitations preceded by engagement, they do not include the subset of these cohabitations that dissolved prior to marriage. With or without engagement, if cohabitation is considered "a marital responsibility equivalent" then its dissolution is a "divorce equivalent".

Study	# years after onset of marriage (M) or cohabitation (C)	M still M	M then S/D (S=separated) (D=Divorced)	C then S/D (+/- interim M)	C still C	C now M	C to M to S/D	C now S
A-1	Under 5 to plus 5-7		20%	40%				
A-2	Under 1 to plus 5-7		23.3%	35.6%				
A-3	“Likely to S/D” 6-12 yrs after M or C	12.6%			39%			
B	10 years				10%	36%	21%	33%
C	Women: 10 years after marriage		34%				45%	
C	Men: 10 years after marriage		31%				47%	
D	Women: 10 & 20 years after marriage		29% & 43%				39% & 55%	
D	Men: 10 & 20 years after marriage		27% & 40%				34% & 51%	
E	First child born over 8 months after marriage: 20 years		women: 32% men: 26%					
E	Pregnant at marriage: 20 years		women: 59% men: 57%					
E	Pregnancy prior to marriage: 20 years		women: 67% men: 58%					

A<sup>18</sup> = 303 cohabitating and 1032 married couples first interviewed in 1987-88 and interviewed again in 1992-94 (couples included had all been together for less than 5 years (A-1) or for less than 1 year (A-2) when first interviewed); A-3 is percent of couples where at least one partner thought that there was over a 50% likelihood of future separation or divorce.

B<sup>19</sup> = 1995 study of cohabitating women

C<sup>20</sup> = Cohabitation prior to engagement; 2002 study

D = Cohabitation prior to engagement; 2006-10 study Engagement prior to cohabitation increased the likelihood that subsequent marriages would remain intact for men, however, engagement prior to cohabitation was not protective

for women.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, using only the subset of the same data who married after 1996, Manning concluded that women but not men benefitted from engagement prior to cohabitation.<sup>22</sup>

E<sup>23</sup> = 2006-10 study

When premarital sex, rather than cohabitation, was studied, white women from 1965-1988 had a consistent 60% increased rate of divorce if they had engaged in premarital sex; among black women the benefit has been apparent only since 1975, but is increasing.<sup>24</sup>

1988 study	Virgin brides White (Black)	Non-virgin brides White (Black)	Relative risk of S/D non-virgin brides	% virgin brides white (black)
Rate S/D at 5-8 years (married between 1980-83)	14% (13%)	24% (44%)	1.7 (3.4)	14% (4%)
Rate S/D at 9-14 years (married between 1975-79)	21% (29%)	34% (48%)	1.6 (1.65)	22% (5%)
Rate S/D at 15-19 years (married between 1970-74)	30% (61%)	46% (53%)	1.5 (negative)	30% (10%)
Rate S/D at 19-24 years (married between 1965-69)	30% (57%)	50% (58%)	1.7 (none)	43% (12%)

None of the more recent studies control for the negative impact of premarital sex, apart from cohabitation, upon marriage dissolution. Nor do they report on the effect of prior cohabitation with a previous partner on subsequent marital stability. To adequately investigate the effects of both premarital sex and cohabitation, the correct questions need to be asked in the next national survey to enable the following groups to be compared:

(1) a control group of virgins at onset of marriage, (2) non-cohabiters who married but had premarital sex only with each other, (3) non-cohabiters who married but also engaged in serial monogamy with previous partners, (4) cohabiters whose cohabiting union dissolved without marriage, (5) cohabiters who are still cohabiting with the same original partner (6) cohabiters who subsequently married their first cohabiting partner, and (7) cohabiters who married after a previous cohabitation dissolved.

### **Infidelity**

Cohabitation has twice the risk of infidelity as marriage, and those who cohabitated before marriage were half again as likely to commit adultery. Controlling for sexual values, attending religious services more frequently is associated with lower likelihood of infidelity. Having had more sexual partners previously is associated with a greater likelihood of infidelity. Besides a public commitment, those married are more likely to have children and to own a home jointly. They face higher exit costs should the relationship end. Because cohabiters risk less by an affair, it is not surprising that cohabiters are more likely to have secondary sex partners (Dolcini, et al., 1993). Each additional sex partner between age 18 and the first union increased the net odds of infidelity by 1%. After controlling for other factors, cohabiters were more than twice as likely to engage in infidelity as married people.<sup>25</sup> In the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) reported in 2005, 92-93% of currently married men and women reported only 1 sexual partner while 4% reported 2 or more. In contrast, 15% of cohabiting men and women reported 2 or more sexual partners in the preceding year.<sup>26</sup>

2005 NSFG study	1 sexual partner	2 or more sexual partners
Married	Men: 92% Women: 93%	Men: 4.5% Women: 4%
Cohabiting	Men: 80% Women: 80%	Men: 16% Women: 15%

## Summary

In summary, although it may appear to be a practical, positive stepping stone to a healthy marriage, research indicates living together before marriage (cohabitation) can bring significant harm to the relationship and the individuals involved. Cohabitation makes it more likely that couples will break up, and more likely that they will divorce if they do marry. Partners who cohabit are also more likely to be unfaithful than are married spouses, and are more likely to be violent toward the other partner. As detailed in Part II of this report, the children coming from a cohabiting relationship are at increased health risks as well. The doctors of the American College of Pediatricians urge their adolescent patients to avoid cohabitation and to recognize the life-long benefits of marriage. They also encourage parents to have those tough conversations with their teen children and educate them about the risks of cohabitation. Saving the sexual relationship for marriage brings physical, emotional, and mental benefits to a couple.

## Part 2 of this paper: Effect of Parental Cohabitation on Children.

**Primary Author: Patricia Lee June, MD, FCP**

Originally posted May 2014

Updated March 2015

*The American College of Pediatricians is a national medical association of licensed physicians and healthcare professionals who specialize in the care of infants, children, and adolescents. The mission of the College is to enable all children to reach their optimal physical and emotional health and well-being.*

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