Fast Facts & Commentary Index

- Relationship Commitment 1-21
- Fidelity 22-28
- Domestic Violence 29-36
- Impact on Children 37-46
- Adolescent Crime 47-48
- Cohabitation & Parenting 49-60
- Economic Impact on Cohabiting Partners 61-68
- Mental Health and Well-being 69-73
- Substance Abuse 74-76
- Sexual Relations 77-81
- Domestic Partner Benefits 82-88
Relationship Commitment

1. Half of all cohabiting couples either broke up or married within two years, and after five years, only 10-percent of cohabiting couples stayed together. In contrast, 55-percent of first marriages lasted a lifetime.


2. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the spread of non-marital unions occurred at variable rates across Europe. In the Nordic countries of Sweden and Denmark, consensual unions were as common as marital unions. In the Mediterranean region (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain), cohabitation was substantially lower. The idealization of marital commitment hindered the spread of informal unions in Poland. Cohabitation was perceived as something unstable and insecure in Poland.


3. A study of U.S. divorce rates indicated that cohabitation increased the likelihood of divorce by about 35-percent among those who live together before marriage.


4. More than half of first marriages were preceded by cohabitation, compared to virtually none in the mid-1900s.


The dissolution rate for women who cohabit premaritally with their future spouse were, on average, nearly 80-percent higher than the rate of those who do not.

5. A husband’s dedication to his wife and levels of satisfaction in marriage were significantly lower if cohabitation had preceded the wedding.

6. In a 40-year period at the end of the 20th century, the number of U.S. cohabiting couples increased by nearly 1,200-percent. In comparison, U.S. population grew 61-percent in the same time frame.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported 4.5 million cohabiting couples in 1999, compared to just 1.6 million in 1980.

7. U.S. couples that cohabited before marriage had a 46-percent greater risk of divorce than couples that did not live together before marriage.

8. “Throughout the annals of human experience, in dozens of civilizations and cultures of varying value systems, humanity has discovered that the permanent relationship between men and women is a keystone to the stability, strength, and health of human society — a relationship worthy of legal recognition and judicial protection.”

9. Couples in the Netherlands that cohabited prior to marriage had a 29-percent higher risk of divorce than couples that did not cohabit.

10. Premarital cohabiters in Canada had more than twice the risk of divorce in any year of marriage when compared with non-cohabiters.

11. An international study revealed that within two years, 32.4-percent of cohabiting couples had separated, compared to just 8.3-percent of married couples. Cohabiters had rates of separation that are 4.62 times as high as married couples.

12. In spite of a high divorce rate, 92-percent of people surveyed said having a successful marriage is very important to them.
13. After five to seven years, 39-percent of all cohabiting couples have broken their relationships, 40-percent have married (although the marriage might not have lasted) and only 21-percent still cohabit.


14. Forty-six percent of all cohabitations in a given year are classified as “precursors to marriage.” Yet, only 52-percent of those classified as “precursors to marriage” actually married after five to seven years and 31-percent split up.


15. The expectation of a positive relationship between cohabitation and marital stability has been shattered by studies in several Western nations. Those who cohabit before marriage had substantially higher divorce rates than those who did not; the recorded differentials ranged from 50-100 percent.


16. Young people who had cohabited desired significantly fewer children and were significantly more approving of divorce than young people who never cohabited.


17. Couples with single and multiple cohabitation experiences displayed poorer communication skills compared to couples with no premarital cohabitation.

18. Couples that cohabited prior to marriage reported greater marital conflict, poorer communication, more individualistic views of marriage (wives only), less commitment to the institution of marriage, and a greater likelihood of divorce.


19. Cohabitation was probably least harmful when viewed as prenuptial — when both partners definitely planned to marry, had formally announced their engagement and had chosen a wedding date.


20. The reasons for cohabitating vary. Some saw it as a prelude to marriage, some as an alternative to marriage, and for others it was an alternative to living alone.


21. No positive contribution of cohabitation to marriage had ever been found.

22. Couples that cohabited prior to marriage were at 39-percent greater risk of marital infidelity. 

23. Cohabiting women were 3.3 times more likely than married women to cheat on their partners. The researchers stated: “Cohabiting relationships appeared to be more similar to dating relationships than to marriage.” 

24. Twenty percent of cohabiting women had a secondary sex partner, compared to only 4-percent of married women. 

25. Cohabitants were twice as likely to be unfaithful as are married people. Researchers concluded that the lower investments of cohabiting unions — rather than their values — accounted for the increased infidelity. 

26. Young men who fathered a child outside of marriage were twice as likely to cohabit and much less likely to marry than those who did not. 
27. A U.S. study found divorce more common among those who engaged in premarital sex. Men were 63-percent more likely and women 76-percent more likely to divorce if they had sex before marriage.

28. “A major problem with cohabitation is that it is a tentative arrangement that lacks stability; no one can depend upon the relationship — not the partners, not the children, not the community, nor the society.”
Dr. Janice Shaw Crouse, Senior Fellow, The Beverly LaHaye Institute of Concerned Women for America.

Compared to married peers, cohabiting men were almost twice as likely to cheat on their partners.

Cohabiting couples reported rates of physical aggression in their relationship that were three times higher than those reported by married couples.


29. The Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire found that cohabiters were much more violent than married couples, that the overall rates of violence among cohabiting couples was double that of married couples and “severe” violence was five times as high for cohabiters.


30. Cohabiting women were more likely than married women to report experiencing lifetime and current relationship intimate partner violence (42-percent vs. 30-percent). Compared to cohabiting or single women, married women reported less substance use. Women may increase their drug use frequency in response to experiencing partner violence.


31. Three times as many cohabiters admitted “hitting, shoving, and throwing things at their partners in the past year,” compared to married couples. Cohabiters are also more likely to exhibit depression and drunkenness than married couples.


32. Aggression was at least twice as common among cohabiters as it is among married partners. During a one-year period, 35 out of every 100 cohabiting couples experienced physical aggression, compared to 15 out of every 100 married couples.

Aggression was at least twice as common among cohabiters as it is among married partners. Women in cohabiting relationships were more likely than married women to suffer physical and sexual abuse.

Impact on Children

**CHART 2**

Children living in homes occupied by their mothers’ boyfriends or other non-relatives were up to 48 times more likely to die from child abuse than those who live with two biological parents. Households with a single parent and no other adults had no increased risk of fatal injury.

37. Child abuse has increased in recent decades by more than 10-percent a year, according to one estimate. Researchers suggest this increase is related strongly to changing family forms.


38. Cohabitation was more unstable for children than either married two-parent or single-mother families and tended to produce worse outcomes for children.


39. Children in several nations were beaten by stepfathers at a rate of 100 times more than genetic fathers. The rate was 120 times in Canada. Children residing with stepparents were at higher risk of abuse even when socio-economic factors were considered.

40. Parental cohabitation was associated with worse child outcomes, especially relative to two biological parent married families. Adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies were more delinquent than their counterparts in married stepfamilies and they exhibited lower levels of well-being than their counterparts in two biological married parent families. Adolescents in stable cohabiting stepfamilies reported high levels of academic problems.

Susan Brown, “Parental Cohabitation and Child Well-Being,” unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, pp. 5, 6, 23, 27.

41. Children living in cohabiting households were less inclined to care about school and homework performance and their academic performance was poorer than that of children living with their married biological parents.

Impact on Children continued

42. The poverty rate for children living in cohabiting households was more than five times the poverty rate of married couple households, (31-percent to 6-percent).


43. Cohabiting couples with children in the household earned just two-thirds of the annual income of married couples with children. The difference was attributed to the fact that the average income of male cohabiting partners was only about half that of male married partners.


44. Children in cohabiting households demonstrated more emotional and behavioral problems, such as not getting along with peers, experiencing difficulty in concentration and feeling sad or depressed. Among adolescents ages 12-17, the percentage of those exhibiting emotional and behavioral problems was six times greater in cohabiting stepfamilies than in married biological-parent families. Negative school engagement was also more common among children in cohabiting families.


Compared to children with married parents, four times as many children in cohabiting homes live in poverty.


Impact on Children continued

CHART 5

Students with Low Grades in Two or More Subjects, by Home Conditions


45. Children in single-parent families, born to unmarried mothers, living in stepfamilies or cohabiting relationships faced higher risks of poor outcomes. Compared with children from traditional families, children from nontraditional families showed more psychological problems (as rated by their parents) and more internalizing behavior (as rated by their teachers). Boys from nontraditional families were especially at a disadvantage; they demonstrated lower self-concept, more externalizing, poorer classroom behavior and lower grade-point averages.


Children whose parents are married are healthier, display higher educational attainment and were less likely to be on welfare or involved in crimes and drugs.

Impact on Children continued

Few propositions have more empirical support in the social sciences than this one: Compared to all other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents best for children.

David Popenoe, “The Scholarly Consensus on Marriage,” Center for Marriage and Family at the Institute for American Values Fact Sheet #2 (February 2006).

CHART 6

46. Children currently living with their mother and her unmarried partner had significantly more behavior problems and lower academic performance than children in intact families.


Adolescent Crime

47. Family structure was one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations of urban violence across the United States. All else equal, in cities where family disruption is high, the rate of violence was also high.


48. The vast majority of juvenile delinquents in Wisconsin were either born out of wedlock or the product of broken homes. Only 13-percent of delinquents came from families in which the biological mother and father were married to each other. By contrast, 33-percent had parents who were either divorced or separated and 44-percent had parents who were never married.


A study of adolescents convicted of homicide found that at the time of the crimes 43-percent of their parents had never been married, 30-percent were divorced and 9-percent were separated.

Cohabitation and Parenting

49. Eighty-six percent of people worldwide agreed that “all things being equal, it is better for children to be raised in a household that has a married mother and father.”

50. A substantial proportion of non-marital births occurred with couples that lived together. In the 1990s, 40-percent of out-of-wedlock births occurred in cohabiting unions.

51. An estimated 40-percent of all children were expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household while growing up. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children declined from 57-percent in 1987 to 44-percent in 1997.

52. Regardless of economic and parental resources, the outcomes of adolescents in cohabiting families were worse, on average, than those experienced by adolescents in families headed by two married, biological parents.

53. Compared with married mothers, those living in cohabiting unions were more likely to give birth prematurely (14-percent), have undersize babies (18-percent) and deliver underweight babies (21-percent). Their newborns stood a 7-percent greater risk of dying within the first six weeks of birth and a 23-percent greater risk of dying within a year. The disparities persisted when the researchers accounted for factors such as the mother’s age, education and whether she had given birth before. Between 1990 and 2004, the number of children born into cohabiting relationships doubled.
Cohabitation and Parenting continued


55. Young men who fathered a child outside of marriage were twice as likely to cohabit and much less likely to marry than those who do not.


56. Daughters of single parents were 164-percent more likely to have a premarital birth of their own, 111-percent were more likely to give birth as teenagers and 92-percent were more likely to divorce than daughters of married parents.


57. The infants of married mothers were more likely to be securely attached than those of cohabiting or single mothers, even after controlling for age, ethnicity and education.


58. Married mothers showed greater psychological well-being and reported less ambivalence and conflict, and greater love and intimacy in their relationships with their partners than cohabiting or single mothers.


The instability of cohabiting families was revealed in statistics showing that “nearly half of cohabiting mothers have ended their relationship with their child’s father by the time their children were three years old.”

The infants of married mothers were more likely to be securely attached than those of cohabiting or single mothers, even after controlling for age, ethnicity and education.


59. Unmarried parents were five times more likely to break up than married parents. Three-quarters of all family breakdown affecting young children involved unmarried parents.


60. Cohabiting parents reported lower psychological well-being, on average, and they tended to provide less parental control and support than married parents (Thomson, Braun, and Curtain 1992; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994).

Cited by: Susan Brown, “Parental Cohabitation and Child Well-Being,” unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, p. 6.
Economic Impact on Cohabiting Partners

61. Individuals who were not continuously married had significantly less wealth than those who remained married throughout the course of life. Overall, unmarried adults experienced a 63-percent reduction in total wealth relative to those who are married. Researchers reported the following wealth reductions: 77-percent for those who were separated, 75-percent for those never married, 73-percent for the divorced, 58-percent for the cohabiting and 45-percent for the widowed.


62. Cohabiters were more likely to have separate bank accounts and less likely than married people to support or be financially responsible for their partner.


63. In general, married women worked less than cohabiting women and married men work more than cohabiting men.


64. After dissolution, formerly cohabiting men’s economic standing declined moderately, whereas formerly cohabiting women’s declined much more precipitously, leaving a substantial proportion of women in poverty. This effect was particularly pronounced for African American and Hispanic women.


65. Cohabiters were less likely to share their income than married couples.

Despite the apparent popularity of cohabitation among young people, women were less interested in this lifestyle than men.


66. The median family income for two-parent families was more than double that of families in which the mother was divorced and more than four times that of families in which the mother never married.


67. Relative to their married peers, cohabitants were significantly less likely to give help to their parents, to have received help from their parents and to turn to their parents in emergency. This lack of “exchange relationships” with their parents thwarts the kind of intergenerational ties that often make for a successful relationship and marriage.


68. Family members were more willing to transfer wealth to “in-laws” than to cohabiting boyfriends or girlfriends.

The Benefits of Marriage for Adults
- Better health and greater longevity
- Safer homes
- More wealth
- Healthier society
- Better intimate relations
- Less substance abuse and addiction
- Lower taxes
- More happiness

The Benefits of Marriage for Society
- Less premarital sex
- Less abortion
- Less poverty
- Less crime, less violence
- Healthier society
- Less hardship and better outcomes for children
- Less government
- Safer homes


69. Cohabiters had a “significantly higher” risk of suicide than married people “even though cohabitation was almost equivalent to an officially certified marriage relationship in the eyes of most people in Denmark.”


70. Compared to married couples, cohabiting couples reported more frequent disagreements, more violence and less happiness with their relationships.

Married mothers had lower rates of depression than single or cohabiting mothers.


71. Married workers were, on average, more productive workers. Married men work longer hours, had lower quit rates and longer job tenure than non-married men. Marriage makes men more focused and motivated at work. Married people adopt healthier lifestyles, reduce consumption of alcohol and other substances and engage in fewer risky behaviors. Thus, married employees are less likely to show up for work hung over, sick or sleep deprived.


72. Annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples were more than three times that of married couples.


73. Married couples reported more commitment and happiness in their unions and better relationships with their parents than did cohabiting couples.

Substance Abuse

74. Marriages preceded by cohabitation were more prone to drug and alcohol use, more permissive sexual relationships and an abhorrence of dependence than marriages not preceded by cohabitation.

75. Cohabitants tolerated behavior in their partners that husbands and wives would discourage -- particularly smoking, alcohol and substance abuse.

76. Young people involved in substance use during their secondary school years were more likely than average to become cohabiters during their twenties. High school seniors who smoked cigarettes, and/or used more alcohol, and/or used marijuana and/or used cocaine, were more likely to become cohabiters after high school.
Sexual Relations

77. Female partners of unfaithful men were at great risk for sexually transmitted disease because of the behavior of their male partners.

78. Cohabiting couples reported lower levels of happiness, lower levels of sexual exclusivity and sexual satisfaction than married couples and poorer relationships with their parents.

79. The rate of women experiencing an accidental pregnancy from condom failure increased from 17.2-percent for married women to 25.5-percent for those not in a union and to 34.2-percent for cohabiting women.

80. Among sexually active people, married couples who are sexually faithful to one another experienced the most physical pleasure and emotional satisfaction with their sex lives.

81. Married couples who practiced fidelity reported the most positive feelings about sex. They felt “taken care of,” “loved,” “satisfied” and “wanted.” They were the least likely to experience “sadness,” “being anxious or worried,” “afraid or scared” or feeling “guilt” about sex.
Domestic Partner Benefits

82. Social change agents are not concerned about health insurance, but in gaining public approval of alternatives to marriage. The extension of spousal benefits to domestic partners erodes the status of marriage, reduces the well-being of children and increases taxpayer costs while reducing worker productivity and economic progress.

83. The average enrollment shift – the number of domestic partners added to the insurance plan – for all companies was 1.2-percent.

84. The unavoidable adverse selection associated with domestic partner benefit plans exacerbated health-insurance costs for participating firms. An employer with a 1-percent shift in enrollment and only 25-percent adverse selection faced an increase of 14-percent in health-care costs.
85. Typically, less than one percent of the work force benefits from domestic partner benefits.

86. After the City of New Orleans, Louisiana enacted a domestic partnership ordinance for same-sex couples and funded benefits to partners of municipal employees, citizens sought an injunction against it. The trial court held that the plaintiffs lacked standing. The Louisiana Supreme Court reversed, holding that a decision requiring spending of tax money affects the public, and taxpayers have an interest that confers standing to challenge the ordinance. Ralph v. City of New Orleans, No. 06-C-0153, Supreme Court of Louisiana, May 5, 2006.

87. It is often claimed that senior citizens are discriminated against and harmed financially if a state doesn’t offer a domestic partner registry. It appears, however, that few senior citizens find this to be a concern. The American Association of Retired Persons did not take a position on domestic partner benefits. Kathy Barrett Carter, *Domestic Partners Awaiting Their Day*; Newark Star-Ledger, July 06, 2004.
88. Michigan Appeals Court Rejects Domestic Benefits

Following voter passage of the Michigan marriage amendment in 2004, a group of public employees sought a declaratory judgment that public employers could offer health care benefits to unmarried partners of their employees (National Pride at Work v. Governor). A trial court agreed, saying that health care benefits are benefits of employment, not benefits of marriage. Thus, extending the benefits to same-sex couples would not conflict with the marriage amendment’s policy.

The Michigan Court of Appeals, in 2007, reversed the trial court on the grounds that the amendment prevents public employers from offering benefits to employees “if the benefits are conditioned on or provided because of an agreement recognized as a marriage or similar union.” The court said the domestic partnership policies here “recognized” a same-sex union by “require[ing] proof of the existence of a formal domestic partnership agreement to establish eligibility.” To the court, because the domestic partnership is a “public proclamation” of the couple’s relationship, it creates a “union.” The union is similar to marriage because both (1) have requirements related to the sex of the parties, (2) require an agreement between the parties, (3) prohibit blood relations from contracting, (4) prohibit married persons from entering, (5) include an age requirement and (6) create legal obligations for third parties (here, the employment benefits).

Plaintiffs had also argued that if the amendment were interpreted to preclude benefits, it would conflict with the Equal Protection guarantee in the state constitution. The court rejected this argument, saying that the people of Michigan “could rationally conclude that the welfare and morals of society benefit from protecting and strengthening traditional marriages . . .”

"...[T]he people of Michigan ‘could rationally conclude that the welfare and morals of society benefit from protecting and strengthening traditional marriages . . .’"

Michigan Appeals Court Rejects Domestic Benefits, The Marriage Law Foundation

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