

# The effects of cohabitation in today's society



The Effects of Cohabitation on Today's Society Erin Bedard Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women. When blushing brides walk down the aisle at the beginning of the new millennium, well over half have already lived together with a boyfriend. For today's young adults, the first generation to come of age during the divorce revolution, living together seems like a good way to achieve some of the benefits of marriage and avoid the risk of divorce. Couples who live together can share expenses and learn more about each other.

They can find out if their partner has what it takes to be married. If things don't work out, breaking up is easy to do. Cohabiting couples do not have to seek legal or religious permission to dissolve their union. Not surprisingly, young adults favor cohabitation. According to surveys, most young people say it is a good idea to live with a person before marrying. But a careful review of the available social science evidence suggests that living together is not a good way to prepare for marriage or to avoid divorce.

What's more, it shows that the rise in cohabitation is not a positive family trend. Cohabiting unions tend to weaken the institution of marriage and pose special risks for women and children. Specifically, the research indicates that:

- Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage.
- Living together outside of marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women, and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children.

Unmarried couples have lower levels of happiness and wellbeing than married couples.

Because this generation of young adults is so keenly aware of the fragility of marriage, it is especially important for them to know what contributes to marital success and what may threaten it. Yet many young people do not know the basic facts about cohabitation and its risks. Nor are parents, teachers, clergy and others who instruct the young in matters of sex, love and marriage. I have been in a cohabitant relationship for ten years and am interested in what the effects of cohabitation are the purpose of this paper is to report on the available research on the effects of cohabitation in todays society.

A decrease in the number of marriages and an increase in cohabitation both have come in the wake of a large increase in divorce in the last thirty years. Some people argue that these trends are due to people being less willing to make commitments, or perhaps being more fearful that others will break their promises. Many people today are seeing cohabitation as an acceptable alternative to marriage. Since 1970 the number of heterosexual couples living together outside of marriage has increased over 1000 percent, according to the Rutgers . National Marriage Project (NMP)

Traditional wisdom says that cohabitating before marriage results in a higher likelihood of divorce, a poor impact on children, and a lower standard of marital satisfaction, but is that wisdom true? Although a good deal of evidence shows that cohabiting relationships have higher risks of poor outcomes, governmental and other official bodies continue to treat cohabitation and marriage as essentially the same, cohabitants have the same legal rights and responsibilities which used to be reserved for

marriage, from property rights to the right to make decisions about children's lives.

There is a strong trend among contemporary couples toward cohabitation. Religion plays less and less of a decision in sexual relationships, therefore more couples are choosing to "get to know each other" better before getting married. They see marriage as an outmoded piece of paper that doesn't mean anything. Opposition to cohabitation comes mainly from religious groups. Opponents of cohabitation usually argue that living together in this fashion is less stable and hence harmful.

According to one argument, the total and unconditional commitment of marriage strengthens a couple's bond and makes the partners feel more secure, more relaxed, and happier than those that have chosen to cohabitation. Opponents of cohabitation commonly cite statistics that indicate that couples who have lived together before marriage are more likely to divorce, and that unhappiness, ill health, poverty, and domestic violence are more common in unmarried couples than in married ones.

Cohabitation advocates, in turn, cite limited research that either disproves these claims or indicates that the statistical differences are due to other factors than the fact of cohabitation itself. Studies conducted through the 70's, 80's and 90's showed that cohabitation has a strong correlation with divorce. Recent studies, however, have pointed to possible different results. Cohabitation is on the rise, and many people are okay with it. Should We Live Together? A Comprehensive Look at the Research The number of common-law-couple families surged 19 per cent to almost 1. million. The number of

single-parent families increased 7.8 per cent, also reaching 1.4 million and accounting for 16 per cent of families. There was also a hike in common-law relationships in general, with 2.8 million persons aged 15 and over reporting they lived with their partner outside of marriage in 2006. They accounted for 10.8 per cent of the population, up from 9.7 per cent in 2001. Common-law relationships are still most popular in Quebec, where their numbers soared by more than 20 per cent since 2001 to comprise 44. per cent of the Canadian total in 2006. Common law was not confined to the young - the number of Canadians aged 60 to 64 in common-law unions rose 77 per cent, the fastest pace of all age groups. "The increase in common-law relationships suggests greater social acceptance of this family structure, as well as a desire to be part of a couple, but perhaps with fewer perceived emotional or financial obligations than those generally associated with marriage," said Statistics Canada.

The census also shows that most same-sex couples elected to live in common-law relationships instead of rushing to marry when it became legal between 2003 and 2005, depending on the province. There was a 33 per cent hike in the number of same-sex couples who reported to Statistics Canada, up from 34,200 in 2001 to 45,300 in 2006. They comprise only 0.6 per cent of Canadian couples. Those who cohabit more than once have a divorce rate twice that of those who cohabit only with their fiancé. Those who cohabit report a lower marital satisfaction rate and a higher behavioral problem rate. They experience more fights and more violence. People who abstain from sex before marriage report a higher rate of sexual satisfaction, including number of orgasms among women, than those who do not.

Children who live with cohabiting parents are 20 - 33 times more likely to be abused. Studies have shown that 11 percent more women who are in cohabiting relationships report physical abuse than those women who are in married relationships. Moreover, couples who cohabit experience more infidelity. Education also plays a huge part in cohabitation.

The more educated someone is, the less likely they are to cohabit. This brings an interesting idea to the forefront, since many people believe marriage to be a religious issue. Most people who are highly educated tend to be less active in their religion. Cohabitation has started a gradual decline in the attitude toward marriage. . If marriage is not seen as more special or important than another form of commitment, then it will not be treated as such. Lower levels of education also point toward lower levels of income, so cohabiting couples are also likely to have lower incomes.

Does Cohabitation have an affect on Children The negative effects of cohabitation do tend to break down among cohabiting couples who intend to marry. Many, but not all couples who cohabit with the intent to marry, exhibit relational behaviors similar to married couples. Many people are of opinion that cohabitation is a good way to “ test out” a relationship and see if it’s ready for marriage. Indeed, some people are even seeing cohabitation as a substitute for marriage. Are those who are cohabiting thinking of how that practice will affect their children?

Since 2000, between 7 percent and 25 percent of all couples are cohabiting in any given year. About 50 percent of all people between the ages of 22 and 44 have cohabited at some point in their lives, compared to almost none one

hundred years ago. According to the Journal of Marriage and Family, since cohabiting couples are more likely to break up than married couples, children are five times more likely to experience the breakup of their parents. Even factoring in socioeconomic and mental health differences, cohabiting couples' children are twice as likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders, diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Ultimately, the effects on children are likely to vary by race, age, and sex of the child as well as the stability of cohabiting families. If children living with cohabiting parents continues to increase, their well-being and outcomes are likely to differ from those observed in these studies, and they may well improve. I think the volume of research that actually connects marriage and cohabitation behaviors to child outcomes is still rather limited.

No one would suggest that the differences in well-being will simply vanish if cohabiting couples were to marry. Why has unmarried cohabitation become such a widespread practice throughout modern society in such a short period of time? Demographic factors are surely involved. Puberty begins at an earlier age, as does the onset of sexual activity, and marriages take place at older ages mainly because of the longer time period spent getting educated and establishing careers. Thus there is an extended period of sexually active singlehood before first marriage.

Also, our sustained material affluence enables many young people to live on their own for an extended time, apart from their parents. During those years of young adulthood, nonmarital cohabitation can be a cost-saver, a source of companionship, and an assurance of relatively safe sexual practice. For some, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for some, an alternative to it,

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and for yet others, simply an alternative to living alone. More broadly, the rise of cohabitation in society has been attributed to the sexual revolution, which has virtually revoked the stigma against cohabitation.

In the past thirty years, with the advent of effective contraceptive technologies and widespread sexual permissiveness promoted by advertising and the entertainment industry, premarital sex has become widely accepted. In large segments of society cohabitation no longer is associated with sin or social impropriety or pathology, nor are cohabiting couples subject to much, if any, disapproval. Another important reason for cohabitation's growth is that the institution of marriage has changed dramatically, leading to an erosion of confidence in its stability.

From a tradition strongly buttressed by economics, religion, and the law, marriage has become a more personalized relationship, what one wag has referred to as a mere "notarized date." People used to marry not just for love but also for family and economic considerations, and if love died during the course of a marriage, this was not considered sufficient reason to break up an established union. A divorce was legally difficult if not impossible to get, and people who divorced faced enormous social stigma.

In today's marriages love is all, and it is a love tied to self-fulfillment. Divorce is available to everyone, with little stigma attached. If either love or a sense of self-fulfillment disappear, the marriage is considered to be over and divorce is the logical outcome. Fully aware of this new fragility of marriage, people are taking cautionary actions. The attitude is either try it out first and make sure that it will work, or try to minimize the damage of breakup by



settling for a weaker form of union, one that avoids a marriage license and, if need be, an eventual divorce.

The growth of cohabitation is also associated with the rise of feminism. Traditional marriage, both in law and in practice, typically involved male leadership. For some women, cohabitation seemingly avoids the legacy of patriarchy and at the same time provides more personal autonomy and equality in the relationship. Moreover, women's shift into the labor force and their growing economic independence make marriage less necessary and, for some, less desirable.

Underlying all of these trends is the broad cultural shift from a more religious society where marriage was considered the bedrock of civilization and people were imbued with a strong sense of social conformity and tradition, to a more secular society focused on individual autonomy and self-invention. This cultural rejection of traditional institutional and moral authority, evident in all of the advanced, Western societies, often has had "freedom of choice" as its theme and the acceptance of "alternative lifestyles" as its message.

In general, cohabitation is a phenomenon that began among the young in the lower classes and then moved up to the middle classes. . One reason for this is that male income and employment are lower among minorities and the lower classes, and male economic status remains an important determinant as to whether or not a man feels ready to marry, and a woman wants to marry him. Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers. Indeed, some evidence suggests that the

act of cohabitation actually diminishes religious participation, whereas marriage tends to increase it.

People who cohabit are much more likely to come from broken homes. Among young adults, those who experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood are more likely to form cohabiting unions than children who grew up in families with married parents who got along. They are also more likely to enter living-together relationships at younger ages. For young people who have already suffered the losses associated with parental divorce, cohabitation may provide an early escape from family turmoil, although unfortunately it increases the likelihood of new losses and turmoil.

For these people, cohabitation often recapitulates the childhood experience of coming together and splitting apart with the additional possibility of more violent conflict. Finally, cohabitation is a much more likely experience for those who themselves have been divorced. How Living together before Marriage May Contribute to Marital Failure Today, the old view of cohabitation seems yet another example of the repressive Victorian norms. The new view is that cohabitation represents a more progressive approach to intimate relationships.

How much healthier women are to be free of social pressure to marry and stigma when they don't. How much better off people are today to be able to exercise choice in their sexual and domestic arrangements. How much better off marriage can be, and how many divorces can be avoided, when sexual relationships start with a "trial period". Surprisingly, much of the

accumulating social science research suggests otherwise. Living together before marriage may seem like a harmless or even a progressive family trend until one takes a careful look at the evidence. The majority of young people want to marry and have children.

And many if not most see cohabitation as a way to test marital compatibility and improve the chances of long-lasting marriage. Their reasoning is as follows: Given the high levels of divorce, why be in a hurry to marry? Why not test marital compatibility by sharing a bed and a bathroom for a year or even longer? If it doesn't work out, one can simply move out. According to this reasoning, cohabitation weeds out unsuitable partners through a process of natural deselection. Over time, perhaps after several living-together relationships, a person will eventually find a marriageable mate.

The social science evidence challenges this idea that cohabiting ensures greater marital compatibility and thereby promotes stronger and more enduring marriages. Cohabitation does not reduce the likelihood of eventual divorce; in fact, it may lead to a higher divorce risk. Although the association was stronger a decade or two ago and has diminished in the younger generations, virtually all research on the topic has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage not preceded .

What most cohabiting couples don't know, and what in fact few people including myself didn't know, are the conclusions of many recent studies on unmarried cohabitation and its implications for young people and for society. Despite its widespread acceptance by the young, the remarkable growth of

unmarried cohabitation in recent years does not appear to be in children's or the society's best interest. The evidence suggests that it has weakened marriage and the intact, two-parent family and thereby damaged our social well-being, especially that of women and children.

We can not go back in history, but it seems time to establish some guidelines for the practice of cohabitation and to seriously question the further institutionalization of this new family form. In place of institutionalizing cohabitation, we should be trying to revitalize marriage? not along classic male-dominant lines but along modern egalitarian lines. Particularly helpful in this regard would be educating young people about marriage from the early school years onward, getting them to make the wisest choices in their lifetime mates, and stressing the importance of long-term commitment to marriages.