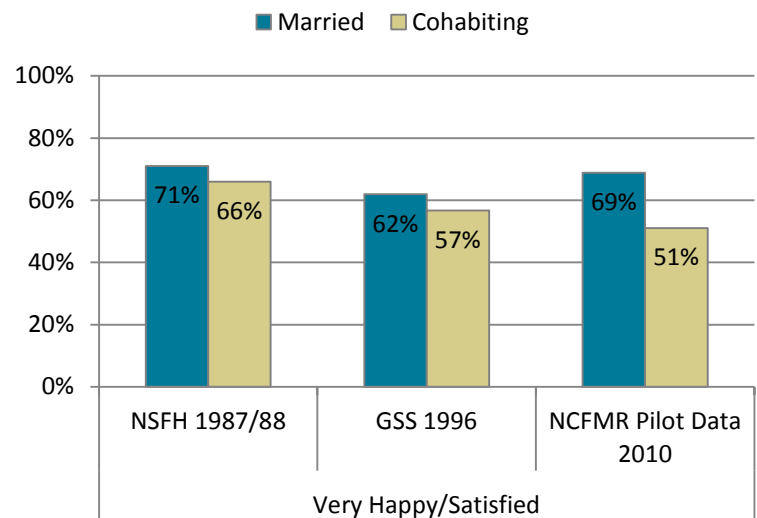


The number of heterosexual cohabiting couples in the U.S. has rapidly increased since 2000, while the number of married couples has increased only modestly (FP-10-02). With the rise in cohabiting couples, it is unclear whether the relationship quality of cohabiting versus marital unions has shifted in recent years. This profile uses individual-level data (responses from only one partner in a couple) to show the trend over time in relationship quality for married versus cohabiting individuals. Additionally, using newly released *Married and Cohabiting Couples* data (responses from both partners in a couple), this profile also assesses couple agreement on relationship quality for today's cohabitators versus marrieds and examines the effects of cohabitators' plans to marry on relationship quality.

Relationship Happiness/Satisfaction Trends

- Married *individuals* consistently report higher average levels of relationship quality compared to cohabitators (Figure 1).
- Relationship quality is relatively stable for marrieds from 1987/88 to 2010. However, for cohabitators, relationship quality has declined steadily.
- Today, only about 50% of cohabitators report being very satisfied in their relationships compared to nearly 70% of marrieds.

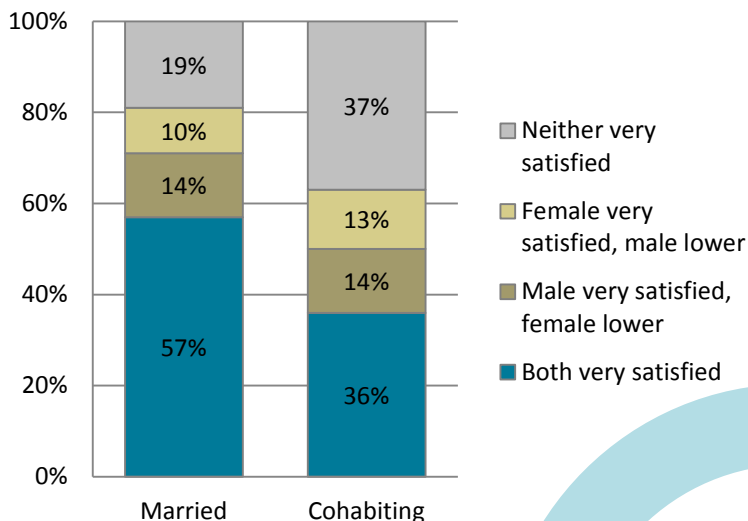
Figure 1. Relationship Happiness/Satisfaction by Union Type Over Time



Source: National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) 1987/88, General Social Survey (GSS) 1996, *Married and Cohabiting Couples* 2010. For coding details, see [endnote](#)¹.

Couple Relationship Satisfaction: Married vs. Cohabiting Couples

Figure 2. Relationship Satisfaction: Married vs. Cohabiting Couples



Source: *Married and Cohabiting Couples* 2010.

- Similar proportions of married and cohabiting *couples* agree on their level of relationship satisfaction. About one-quarter express disagreement (Figure 2).
 - Married couples more often agree they are very satisfied with their marriage (57%) than cohabiting couples (36%).
 - Cohabiting couples (37%) are twice as likely as married couples (19%) to agree they are not very satisfied.

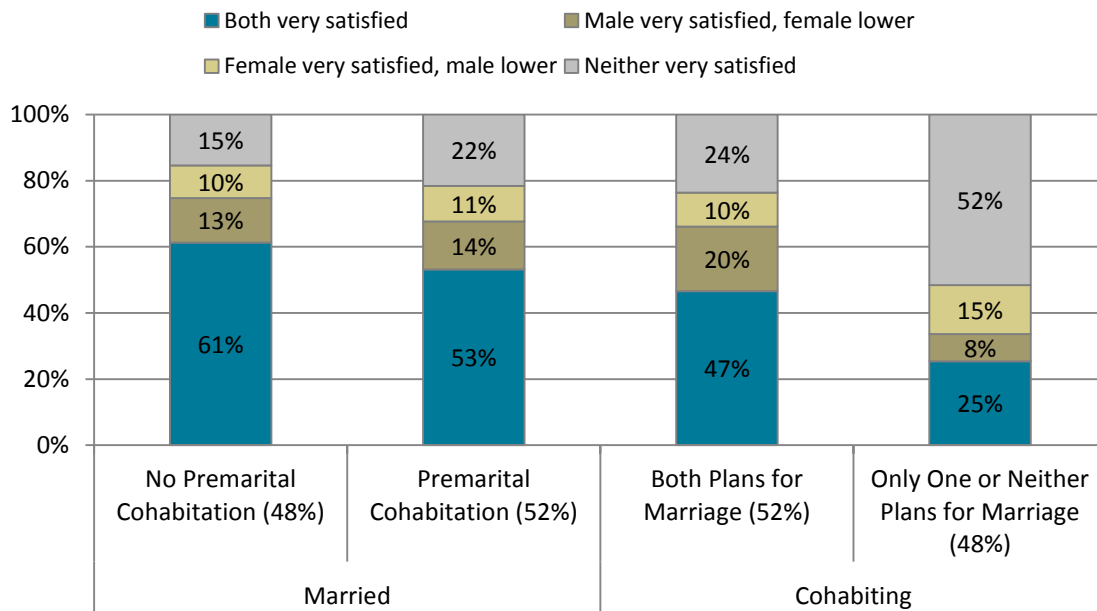
Family Profiles examine topics related to NCFMR's core research themes. Data are presented at both the national and state levels using new data sources. Written for both researchers and broad communities, these profiles summarize the latest statistics on U.S. families.

Couple Relationship Satisfaction: Different Types of Married and Cohabiting Couples

- Similar proportions of married couples agree on their relationship satisfaction regardless of whether they married directly or cohabited first. About one-quarter disagree in their reports of relationship satisfaction (Figure 3).
 - Couples who married directly agree more often that they are very satisfied with their marriage (61%) than those who premaritally cohabited (53%).
 - Couples who cohabited prior to marriage agree more often that they are not very satisfied (22%) compared to those who married directly (15%).
- Cohabiting couples in which both partners plan on marriage express slightly less agreement about their relationship quality than couples in which only one or neither partner has plans for marriage (71% vs. 77%, respectively).
 - Cohabiting couples who both report plans for marriage agree nearly twice as often that they are very satisfied with their relationship than couples with at least one partner who does not have marriage plans (47% vs. 25%, respectively).
 - Twice as many cohabiting couples in which at least one partner does not have plans for marriage agree they are not very satisfied (52%) in contrast to cohabiting couples with marriage plans (24%).

Suggested Citation:
Burgoyne, S. (2012). Relationship Quality Among Married and Cohabiting Couples (FP-12-12). National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/family_profiles/file114312.pdf

Figure 3. Couple Relationship Satisfaction by Union Type: Married and Cohabiting Couples Differentiated



Source: *Married and Cohabiting Couples 2010*.

This project was supported with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, grant number 5 UOI AEOOOOOI-05. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the federal government.

¹Note on Figure 1. The following questions and coding were used for each dataset: NSFH 1987/88 – Married respondents were asked the following question about their marital happiness: “Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?” Cohabiting respondents were asked the following question about their marital happiness: “Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship?” Response categories range from very unhappy (1) to very happy (7). Only respondents who report a 6 or 7 are shown in Figure 1 on page 1. GSS 1996 – Married respondents were asked the following question about their marital happiness: “Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Cohabiting respondents were asked the following question about their relationship happiness: “Taking all things together, how would you describe your romantic relationship? Would you say that your relationship is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Only very happy respondents are shown in Figure 1 above. NCFMR Pilot Data 2010 – Married and cohabiting respondents were asked the following question about their relationship satisfaction: “Taking all things together, how satisfied are you with your relationship with your spouse or partner?” Response categories range from very satisfied (1) to very dissatisfied (5). Only very satisfied respondents are shown in Figure 1 on page 1.