Measuring Cohabitation

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Number of Peer-Reviewed Articles about Cohabitation

- ProQuest (All)
- Web of Knowledge (All)
- Web of Knowledge (Social Science)
Background

- Started with ~1500 articles
  - Published in peer-reviewed journals
  - Published between 2000–present
  - Focused on US populations
  - Key word in title or abstract (cohabitation, cohabit, cohabitor, cohabiter, cohabiting)
- Ended up with N=438 (economics, population studies, sociology, policy, psychology)


What we excluded, continued

Outside of general family scholarship
Did not use US populations (given our topic here at the
Geared toward therapy
Law briefs
Books/book chapters
Examples of Included Articles


Half used data from following surveys:

- American Community Survey (ACS)
- Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE)
- **Current Population Survey (CPS)**
- Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort (ECLS–B)
- Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort (ECLS–K)
- **Fragile Families and Child Well Being (FFCWB)**
- National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)
- National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79)
- National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97)
- **National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)**
- US Census Bureau (Census)
- Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)
Value of National Surveys

- Disparities by race, age, education, employment, immigrant status, and social class.
- Transitions to adulthood
- Differences in experiences
- Challenged accepted notions
- Systematically examined the relationship between cohabitation and individual, family, and couple level outcomes.
Concerns with measures

How, When, and Who
How is it measured?

- Direct versus indirect questions (e.g. household roster)

- All family members or head only?

- Phrasing of questions
  - Sharing a ‘usual’ or ‘single’ residence?
  - Must include sexual intimacy?
  - What does ‘marriage–like’ mean?
When does it take place?

- About 15% of couples have a hard time determining whether they are currently *in* a cohabiting relationship.
- Start and end dates are especially difficult to identify.
- Men and women tend to give unique dates

See Knab 2005; Knab and McLanhan 2006; Manning and Smock 2005 for more details.
Issues of “When”

Problems with accuracy of retrospective reporting.
- Relationship quality
- Relationship trajectories
- Couple attributes
- Post–partum optimism
- Fear of welfare or immigration authorities

See Hayford and Morgan (2008); Manning and Smock (2005); Teitler, Reichman, and Nepomnysaschy (2004) for more details.
Who is involved?

- Ambiguity about who is in the family, or what one’s relationship status really is, especially as complexity increases.

- Ambiguity exists between
  - Children and parents
  - Members of the Couple

How far have we gotten?
Past recommendations

- Accurately identify cohabiting couples
- Identify biological and social parents for each child
- Establish histories for adults of all ages
Recommendations

- New comparison groups needed
  - Marriage or dating?

- Need information on same-sex couples

- Ask about relationships from both members of the couple

- More identifying labels and questions in the same survey
  - E.g. unmarried partner
  - Test
Use harmonization strategies to facilitate research within (e.g. Dorius, 2010) and between surveys (e.g. Amato, Meyers and Emory, 2009).

Use publically available harmonized data (e.g. IFSS and RAND/HRS)