



## Counting Cohabiting Couples from 2000-2011

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WORKING DRAFT

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## **Counting Cohabiting Couples from 2000-2011**

In the span of three decades cohabitation in the United States has grown from a relatively uncommon and socially deviant behavior to an acceptable and normative experience among couples today (Bumpas and Lu 2000; Smock, Casper and Wyse 2008). As the rates of cohabitation have increased, so, too, has the amount of research devoted to this topic. Over this time family scholars and demographers have produced a large and rich body of research ranging from documenting trends in cohabitation to assessing its various consequences and implications. There have been a number of reviews on the substantive findings regarding cohabitation over this time and the objective of this project is not to repeat these. Rather, this brief provides an overview of the state of cohabitation research during the last decade with the goal of exploring three questions: (1) what are the trends in cohabitation research? (2) What are the strengths and limitations of current studies? And (3) how can we improve the data available for the study cohabitation? To answer these questions we will review twelve of the data sets most commonly used to study family life as well as each survey's measurement techniques for assessing nonmarital cohabitation. Next, we consider how the data used might influence our understanding of this social phenomenon. Finally, we will offer suggestions for future research.

### **Trends in Cohabitation and Cohabitation Research**

Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) indicate that over 60% of women ages 25-39 have cohabited at least once in their lifetime, compared to only 37% fifteen years earlier (Bumpass and Lu 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2006). Furthermore, approximately 65% of men and women who married for the first time after 1995 cohabited beforehand (Manning and Jones 2006) making cohabitation a new and significant pathway into marriage as well as a testing ground for important personal relationships. Most women who cohabit (75%) live only with men they eventually marry (Lichter and Turner 2010). And only a minority of women—approximately 15-20%—experience multiple cohabitations; though serial cohabiting is overrepresented among those with low levels of income and education (Lichter and Qian 2008). Regardless of the pathway cohabitation takes over an individual's life, the accelerating trend in cohabitation prevalence is quite remarkable.

**Table 1. Number of Peer-Reviewed Articles Published on Cohabitation<sup>1</sup>**

	ProQuest (All)	Web of Knowledge (All)	Web of Knowledge (Social Science)
1981 and earlier	11	154	93
1982-87	15	121	77
1988-93	88	145	100
1994-99	196	175	115
2000-05	436	234	165
2006-11	778	271	179
TOTAL 1981-2011	1524	1100	729

Mirroring these population level trends in cohabitation, research on nonmarital living arrangements have been appearing in peer-reviewed journals at a growing pace. For an informal appraisal of this trend we have identified widely used electronic databases that provide information on numerous journals and searched them for five keywords (“cohabitation”, “cohabit”, “cohabiting”, “cohabitor”, and “cohabiter”) appearing in citations and abstracts (ProQuest) or topics and titles (Web of Knowledge). As seen in Table 1, the results of our search produced 1,524 articles on cohabitation from 1969 to 2011, the vast majority of which (80%) were published in the last ten years. Notably, this large number of articles on unmarried cohabitation reflects only a portion of actual work done on this area as these counts exclude active scholarship, unpublished research, conference

<sup>1</sup> Note: Searches were conducted in 5/2011. The keywords for all searches included ‘cohabitation, cohabit, cohabiting, cohabitor, and cohabiter’. Search criteria for ProQuest included: keywords in citation or abstract, years by category, selection of scholarly or peer-reviewed journals. Search criteria for Web of Knowledge All included: keywords in topic or title, years by category. Search criteria for Web of Knowledge Social Sciences included: keywords in topic or title, years by category, general category of Social Science

presentations, and the wealth of books and book chapters focused on this topic. However, these numbers do reflect the type of scholarship readily available to researchers, students, and policy makers interested in cohabitation, and these estimates are a valuable overview of the rate of change in cohabitation publications over time. Of particular importance for our discussion is the work done since 2000. During this time, 1,213 articles were published on nonmarital cohabitation, of which 438 were available for review, focused on U.S. couples, and represented scholarship within the areas of general family studies or family demography<sup>2</sup>. These 438 articles will be the basis for our assessment of the current state of research on cohabitation in America, and are the building blocks for much of the academic literature on this topic.

### **Strengths of Current Cohabitation Studies**

Family scholars tend to rely on federally funded, nationally representative survey data to answer questions about family life. This is likely because national level survey data is quantitative, generalizable, and allows us to ask many of the questions we think are important (Eggebeen, 2002:189). Of the 438 articles on cohabitation published between 2000-2011, for example, nearly half (n=199) utilized one of twelve nationally representative surveys commonly used in family research and identified in the *National Center for Family and Marriage Research's* data crosswalks (see Table 2), with the lion share of articles utilizing the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey (FFCWB), the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79). To a slightly lesser extent the US Census, Current Population Survey (CPS), National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) and Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K), American Community Survey (ACS), Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE) and Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) have helped to shape the way we think about cohabitation in America, as well as what we believe about its basic prevalence and its implications for individuals and families. As noted in Table 2, the majority of these studies assess cohabitation indirectly via the household roster (n=8) or household membership questions (n=6), though a nontrivial number utilize direct assessments of cohabitation histories (n=3) or longitudinal follow-up questions about relationship status (n=4). Half of the studies used two or more of these measurement approaches. Further, the far right column provides a rudimentary 'impact' score for the articles published using each data set. This score is the average number of citations per cohabitation article published using each data set, and provides an informal barometer of each study's impact on the field of cohabitation more generally. Overall, the NSFG has the highest article impact compared to other studies, followed by the NLSY79, CE, and AddHealth studies. These highly cited studies tend to measure cohabitation in multiple ways, drawing from the household roster, household membership questions, cohabitation histories, longitudinal follow-ups and marital status measures. Some of the richest measures of cohabitation come from these projects, and as a result scholars have had the opportunity to answer many of the pertinent questions arising in our field. Across all twelve studies, researchers have produced many of the influential findings that have advanced our understanding of cohabitation, including:

- Provided information about the prevalence and correlates of cohabitation and identified disparities in cohabitation by race, age, education, employment, immigrant status, and social class.
- Demonstrated that cohabitation is more than just a pathway to marriage, but has become for many a long-term alternative or substitution for marriage.
- Challenged previously accepted notions that cohabitation before marriage increases the likelihood of divorce for all couples, and is related to poorer relationship quality, findings instead that the demographic characteristics of the couple and the type of union almost wholly drive these effects.
- Began to identify differences in cohabitation experiences and systematically examine the relationship between these forms and individual, family, and couple level outcomes.

In addition to our knowledge about cohabitation coming largely from the few key data sets identified in Table 2, the publication outlet for much of the work on cohabitation has relied on a small number of generalist

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<sup>2</sup> Articles excluded from our review include duplicate citations, book reviews, conference proceedings, articles on international populations, articles written in a language other than English, and publications geared toward health or HIV journals, animal studies, law, psychology (identity, personality, or psychological disorders), history, career development, management, business, social movements, and family therapy.

**Table 2. Federal Data Sets Used in Producing Peer-Reviewed Research on Cohabitation between 2000-2011<sup>a</sup>**

#	Data	Years	Sample	Type of Cohabitation Measure(s)	Number of Cohabitation Articles per Data Set	Average Number of Citations per Article
1	ACS	00-10	Nationally representative of all residents and households in U.S.	Household Roster	2	2.0
2	CE	03 & 10	Nationally representative of all U.S. civilian, noninstitutionalized individuals	Household Roster, Household Membership	2	32.0
3	CPS	00-10	Nationally representative of U.S. households	Household Roster	14	27.0
4	ECLS-B	01-08	Nationally representative of children born in the year 2001	Household Membership	5	2.4
5	ECLS-K	98-00, 02, 04, 07	Nationally representative of children enrolled in Kindergarten programs in 98/99	Household Membership	1	24.0
6	FFCWB	98-03, 06-09	Representative of children born in large U.S. cities between 1998-2000	Household Membership, Longitudinal Follow-up	46	24.8
7	Add Health	94-08	Nationally representative of U.S. adolescents in grades 7-12 during the 94-95 school year.	Household Roster, Household Membership, Longitudinal Follow-up, Cohabitation History	32	29.3
8	NLSY79	79-02	Nationally representative of individuals ages 14-21 as of Dec. 31 1978	Household Roster, Household Membership, Longitudinal Follow-up	21	38.1
9	NLSY97	97-03	Nationally representative of individuals ages 12-16 as of Dec. 31 1996	Longitudinal Follow-up, Cohabitation History	6	5.2
10	NSFG	88, 95, 02	Nationally representative of women (88, 95, 02) and men (02) between the ages of 15-44 years old.	Marital Status (02), Household Roster (95 & 02), Cohabitation History (95 & 02)	48	58.8
11	Census	90, 00, 10	Nationally representative of all residents and households in U.S. and DC	Household Roster	20	34.3
12	SIPP	03-06	Nationally representative of noninstitutionalized individuals over the age of 15.	Household Roster	2	12.0
13	Other	-	Includes nationally representative federal studies (e.g. HRS, PSID, NSFH), qualitative studies (e.g. TLC3), and other projects	-	239	30.9

Note: Abbreviations for data sets include ACS (American Community Survey), CE (Consumer Expenditure Survey), CPS (Current Population Survey), ECLS-B (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort), ECLS-K (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten), FFCWB (Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study), Add Health (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health), NLSY79 (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979), NLSY97 (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997), NSFG (National Survey of Family Growth), Census (U.S. Census Bureau), SIPP (Survey of Income and Program Participation) <sup>a</sup> Includes all peer reviewed articles identified with ProQuest searches on phrases 'cohabiting, cohabit, cohabitor, and cohabiter' in title or abstract which were published between 2000-2011 and inform family studies and/or family demography (n=438). The number of articles does not sum to 438 because papers that utilize two or more data sets are counted in all appropriate data set categories.

sociology, demography, and family journals. All together, the 438 cohabitation articles published between 2000 and 2011 were represented in 104 peer-reviewed journals, although the majority (61%) were published in only ten journals<sup>3</sup>. And of these, the *Journal of Marriage and Family* had the most influence on our thinking about cohabitation—it alone published twenty-seven percent of all articles on the topic and had one of the highest citation rates, averaging 45 citations per cohabitation article. While no other journal rivaled *JMF* in terms of quantity or citation rates, two journals had similarly high levels of impact (as measured by average number of citations per cohabitation article), the *American Sociological Review*, and *Demography*. These three journals have been instrumental in framing what we know about cohabitation and the type of questions we should be interested in asking, as well as setting the bar for what is expected from high quality social science research on this topic; in many cases this has meant assessing cohabitation with one or more national-level data sets, focusing on heterosexual cohabitation, and using marriage as a comparison group for cohabitation studies.

### **Weaknesses of Current Cohabitation Studies**

While this approach to research has produced some excellent scholarship over the last decade, the continued reliance on the measures found in the nationally representative data has proven problematic for several reasons, including difficulties assessing cohabitation via direct and indirect approaches, identifying start and end dates, and using retrospective reports. For example, most of the surveys identified in Table 2 vary in the criteria they use for someone to be categorized as living in a cohabiting relationship (e.g. opposite sex person of similar age in home may be automatically identified by users, or a partner may be specifically identified in the household roster by the respondent, or there is direct questioning about ‘always’ or ‘usually’ sharing a residence), the central focus of the survey (e.g. economic or family focused), and whether men or women are interviewed (Casper and Cohen 2000; Knab and McLanahan 2006; Pollard and Harris 2006). This makes harmonizing variables across surveys more difficult, and can produce sizable variations in basic prevalence rates. In a notable example of this problem, Krieder (2008) found that discrepancies between using a household roster to identify cohabitation versus asking directly about relationship status resulted in a 20 percentage point difference in estimates of the prevalence of opposite-sex cohabiting couples in the CPS compared to the ACS (Kreider 2008). Unfortunately, even when measures appear similar there may be problems with assessment because the researcher’s meaning is unclear to the respondent. During in-depth interviews with 115 cohabiting or recently cohabiting young adults, Manning and Smock (2005) found that many respondents did not understand the term “unmarried partner”, found it confusing, or expressed that the term just did not resonate with them as a relationship category. This term is used by the Census Bureau, and may lead to undercounting prevalence in one of our most important surveys because of the confusion incurred with its usage. Consistent with Casper and Cohen (2000), Casper and Hofferth (2006), Seltzer (2004), and the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2002), we suggest overcoming this problem in future surveys by utilizing multiple identifying labels and questions to make accurate identification more probable. We also recommend that new measures be tested cognitively and qualitatively for validity across diverse populations. And we urge statistical agencies to refine and build upon current collection methods used to track marriage and cohabitation behaviors of both heterosexual and same-sex couples.

A second dilemma to adequately measuring cohabitation over time is that clear beginning and end dates of cohabitation are difficult to identify in all major surveys. In fact, about 15% of couples have

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<sup>3</sup> The ten journals with the most published articles on cohabitation between 2000-2011 include: *Journal of Marriage and Family* (n=114 citations; 44.8 average citations per article), *Journal of Family Issues* (n=34; cite=22.3), *Demography* (n=25; cite=47.5), *Social Science Research* (n=16; cite=10.6), *Social Forces* (n=15; cite 30.6), *Journal of Family Psychology* (n=13; cite=17.0), *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* (n=9, cite=9.0), *Population Research and Policy Review* (n=11; cite=30.9), *American Sociological Review* (n=9; cite=49.7), and *Review of Economics of the Household* (n=9, cite=34.6).

part-time cohabitation experiences that make it hard to determine whether it is, or is not, occurring at the time of interview (Knab 2005) and about half of cohabiting couples in the 1987-88 NSFH reported different months as start dates for their relationships; both of which reflect the notion that moving in together is often a gradual process that may be seen differently by each person in the relationship (Manning and Smock 2005). Thus, as suggested by Casper and Hofferth (2006), we propose that both ongoing and future studies need to provide targeted efforts to improve the reporting of dates of relationship.

A final measurement problem common to these national surveys is that retrospective reporting common to measures of cohabitation histories or longitudinal follow-ups may introduce error into these data sets. For example, Teitler et al. (2006) found systematic bias in the retrospective reporting of unmarried parents' cohabiting status based on relationship quality, relationship trajectory, and other couples attributes. The authors suggest that misreporting at the time of initial interview could result from either post-birth optimism (leading to over-reporting of cohabitation) or fear of welfare or immigration authorities (leading to under-reporting). This indicates that more research on cohabitation should be conducted using data from multiple sources rather than a single retrospective account. Consistent with a report from the Federal Interagency Form on Child and Family Statistics (Counting Couples), we believe the best remedy to this problem would be to field a nationally representative longitudinal survey of couples of all kinds (i.e., dating, living apart together, cohabiting, and married) and both same-sex and opposite-sex, tracking relationships over time and from the perspective of both partners. Such a survey could also help to remedy misreporting of the starting and ending dates of cohabitation.

### **How can we improve the data currently available on cohabitation?**

Because population trends are leading to more “complexity of family life and a more ambiguous and fluid set of categories than demographers are accustomed to measuring” it is important to develop approaches to studying cohabitation that are responsive to changes in family life over the past 30 years, as well as changes in survey assessment over this time (Cherlin 2010). Data on cohabitation has lagged behind its prevalence in the population, so we encourage research and data collection that is reflective of recent and continuing family change, particularly as it relates to macro-level processes, rethinking basic comparison groups, and harmonizing data within and across surveys. For example, most research to date focuses on micro-level determinants of experiencing cohabitation or its implications. We suggest expanding this approach to include an examination of long-term macro-level forces that may be driving changes in cohabitation, including fluctuations in cultural forces such as increased individualism, gender egalitarianism, and sexual freedom; economic factors such as changes in men's and women's work both in and out of the home; and technological changes such as the advent of readily accessible birth control, just to name a few. Further, within the individual-level framework common to current studies, more work is needed on how social context, and beliefs about cohabitation itself, influences the link between cohabitation and individual wellbeing. For example, researchers might look at whether cohabitations defined as civil unions or registered domestic partnerships differ from unions with no legal designations in predicting individual outcomes. As part of this, we urge scholars to consider how these distinctions might matter differently for same-sex and different-sex couples in this and other research designs. Moreover, our basic comparisons in other areas should be reconsidered with the goal of moving away from an over reliance on marital comparisons toward comparing cohabiters with other similar groups—such as serious dating couples (McGinnis 2003). Finally, we encourage the harmonization and pooling of data within (e.g. Dorius, 2010) and across surveys (e.g. Amato, Meyers and Emory, 2009) where reasonable to address changes in cohabitation across groups and over time and to capitalize on the strengths of several nationally representative data collection efforts. Taken together we believe the field of cohabitation research has produced a number of path breaking and important studies over the past ten years, and by making a few direct and targeted changes to the current research agenda we will be able to continue to produce high quality and meaningful research on this topic well into the next decade.

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