

Counting Couples, Counting Families



A Brief on the Quality of Data on Marital and Relationship Instability in the United States

R. Kelly Raley
Population Research Center
University of Texas

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R. Kelly Raley
Department of Sociology
Population Research Center
University of Texas

Being able to accurately describe trends and differentials in marital and relationship stability is fundamental to our understanding of family change. The rapid growth in divorce during the 1970s combined with increases in nonmarital cohabitation in the 1980s led us to question whether marriage as an institution was on its way to extinction. Understanding trends and differentials is also important for our understanding of how other social institutions, like work and religion constrain and/or facilitate family life. Given the strong links between family stability and health, an accurate description of family life is important for understanding health disparities among adults and children.

Consequently, researchers have carefully evaluated the quality of available data for describing family experiences. One example is a recent report by Bumpass and Raley (2007) that evaluated the quality of data on marital instability in the United States. This report found that there was a high level of agreement across data sources regarding levels and trends in divorce. Yet there are ways that the current statistical system falls short of being able to provide us with the relevant data on trends and differentials in relationship (and family) instability. The National Survey of Family Growth is the only nationally representative source of data on cohabitation covering all men and women age 15-44. There are other sources of data that describe the experiences of specific birth cohorts, for example the Add Health or the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Because of the NSFG's upper age limit, however, none of these sources allows us to track relationship instability across the life course over time.

The current paper briefly updates this prior work by examining more recent sources of data on marital dissolution and relationship stability. Overall, our data on the experiences of marital transitions of adults is good. Unfortunately, our ability to describe the instability of children's families is much poorer.

Marital Dissolution

Demographers have used a variety of approaches to describing levels, trends and differentials in marital dissolution. The simplest measure, the crude divorce rate (the number of divorces divided by the population) is a period measure that can fluctuate substantially from year to year. If most couples formally divorce quickly after separating, this measure can provide us information about whether and how historical events, like wars or recessions, impact family life. A crude divorce rate, however, describes populations not marriages. It does not tell us what percentage of marriages will end in divorce. To describe the experience of married couples, demographers calculate cohort estimates of marital dissolution. Using life-tables to adjust for mortality, for example, we estimate the percentage of marriages that dissolve within five or ten years. We can describe trends in divorce by describing changes in the percentage of marriages dissolved within five or ten years across successive marriage cohorts. This approach not only provides more intuitive descriptions of marriages and their risk of dissolution, it also adjusts for the fact that the risk of divorce varies substantially by marriage duration and it includes both separation and formal divorce. A disadvantage of this approach is that it requires detailed survey data on marital histories.

In the 1990s – prior to the first counting couples conference -- the primary data sources on marital dissolution and divorce were the Current Population Survey (CPS), the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and vital statistics. In the late 1990s our data collection systems for tracking change in marital stability started to shift substantially, so that today the primary data sources for tracking trends and differentials in marital dissolution include the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), and the American Community Survey (ACS). Each of these has strengths and

weaknesses regarding population coverage, the use of proxy reports, the precision of measurement, and the depth of information on marital histories.

CPS/SIPP

For many years the Current Population Survey June Supplements provided our best data on marital dissolution. We could get information on divorce from vital statistics, but couples who separated without formally divorcing were not included in these records. In 2001 the marital history questions were shifted from the CPS to the SIPP. Figure 1 presents estimates of marital dissolution derived from the CPS and the SIPP, starting with the 1980-84 marriage cohort and ending with the 2000-04 marriage cohort. Similar to earlier-reported findings (Bumpass and Raley 2007) the estimates of the percentage of marriages dissolving is similar across successive surveys. There is a slight tendency for estimates from more recent surveys to be lower than the estimates from earlier surveys. For example, the 1995 CPS estimates that 17 percent of marriages dissolve within five years while the 2008 SIPP estimate is 15 percent. We detected a similar pattern in earlier work (Bumpass and Raley 2007), with more recent surveys producing slightly lower estimates of divorce for the same marriage cohort. Generally, the high level of concordance across surveys is reassuring, but the small differences across surveys should lead us to be careful in interpreting small changes in divorce as evidence for social change. Figure 1 shows that looking within a single data source, levels of marital dissolution have been roughly stable over the past 25 years, at least at early marriage durations (recent reports in the media notwithstanding).

These results indicate that the SIPP data provide consistent estimates of marital dissolution over time, but there are some ways that the SIPP falls short. First SIPP's fertility history is highly truncated, providing information only on year of first and last birth. Consequently, we cannot use this data source to describe children's experience of parental marital instability. Additionally, the SIPP provides to the public data only on year

of marriage and divorce, not on month. This can lead to downwardly biased estimates of marital dissolution unless analysts make an adjustment (see supplement for details). Even with the adjustment, the lack of monthly data also adds noise to our estimates. Another problem with the SIPP is that marital histories of all household members are reported by a single respondent. Partly because women are more often the respondent, the men's marital histories are poorer than women's.

ACS

Our most recent new source of data is the American Community Survey (ACS). Starting 2008, the ACS began collecting information on marital events in the last 12 months as well as the year of the respondents' most recent marriage. Using this information, we can calculate period estimates of divorce. These estimates have a number of advantages over vital statistics. First, both the numerator and the denominator come from the same source and the denominator includes only ever-married people. Second, we can calculate the duration-specific probability of divorce. As the population ages, the percentage of marriages that are in their first 10 years – when divorce rates are higher – is declining. Calculating duration-specific divorce rates adjusts for this population shift. In addition, the ACS collects information many factors associated with divorce such as race and educational attainment. Thus, this can be a good source of data for describing differentials in divorce. Unfortunately, the ACS does not collect information on separation and the tendency of couples to formalize the end of their marriages varies across population groups.

We know little about the quality of the divorce data provided by the ACS. The questioning approach in this survey is substantially different than in other sources such as the CPS, SIPP, or NSFG. To begin to evaluate the quality of these data, I created period estimates of divorce from the ACS and compare these to period estimates derived from the SIPP. Because of the structure of the ACS question, I combine all

marriages, not just first marriages, for this comparison. Even combining all marriages, the SIPP sample is too small to produce single-year period estimates and so I present estimates for the 2006-2008 period. (See supplement for details on the estimation approach). Figure 2 presents period estimates of the cumulative percentage of marriages surviving to 10 years duration. This figure shows a high correspondence between the SIPP and the ACS estimates, although the ACS estimates of survival are slightly lower than for the SIPP. (This combined with the earlier result comparing the 2008 SIPP to earlier SIPPS and the CPS suggests that the SIPP 2008 may underestimate divorce somewhat).

OTHER SOURCES

Marital dissolution is measured in other data sets, such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the Add Health, but the disadvantage of these sources is that they are restricted to a single cohort. Consequently, they are not good sources for describing trends and differentials in divorce. Nonetheless, earlier work indicates that estimates based on the NLSY 1979 correspond well to estimates based on the CPS despite the different survey contexts and different question wording (Bumpass and Raley 2007).

Up to this point, I have focused the discussion on marital dissolution and I have argued that the data we have on the stability of marriages is high quality and produces consistent and reliable estimates. The SIPP and the ACS each provide uniquely valuable data on divorce trends. The ACS has large sample size which is useful for describing variation across population groups in the risk of divorce, although analysts need to account for the fact that not all separations result (quickly) in a divorce. The SIPP has detailed marital histories that allow us to describe marital dissolution rates as they vary by whether it is a first or higher order marriage. The SIPP can also provide

more historical depth than the ACS that only includes reports of divorces in the last 12 months. The SIPP could be improved to be even more valuable, by adding more detail to the fertility histories. This would allow analysts to describe children's experiences of mothers' marital transitions while growing up. Given what we know about the importance of family instability for children's well being it is important to track trends and differentials in these experiences. If complete fertility histories were added, then a second way that these data could be improved is to add information about the month of marital transition, in addition to year. This would reduce the noise in the estimates of children's experience and also enable us to describe children's family stability as it varies, for example, by whether they were born prior to or subsequent to marriage. Finally, the SIPP does not allow us to estimate relationship stability because it does not collect information on cohabitation. Fortunately, the NSFG collects marital and cohabitation histories.

Relationship instability

Prior research indicates that while marital instability has not increased in recent decades, the instability of coresidential relationships has continued to increase (Raley and Bumpass 2003). The NSFG is a good data source for continuing to monitor this trend because it collects both marital and cohabitation histories. Other data sources such as the NLSY 97 and the Add Health are also useful for describing the experiences of recent cohorts, although the questioning approaches vary substantially across these surveys and some research suggests that estimates of relationship formation and stability are sensitive to these differences (e.g., Pollard and Harris 2007; Manning and Bulanda 2007).

The importance of being able to describe the instability of coresidential unions may be especially relevant to our understanding of children's family experiences. Whereas few adults refer to their cohabiting partners as husbands or wives, many

children consider their mothers cohabiting partners as step parents (Brown and Manning). Additionally, cohabitation is an important aspect of family instability associated with child outcomes and much family instability is missed if we do not consider cohabitation. Unfortunately, our data collection systems are inadequate for describing children's family instability. The NSFG includes complete fertility histories as well as dates describing the timing of marriage and divorce. Yet the upper age limit on the NSFG is 45, meaning that the experiences of children living with mothers over the age of 45 are not captured via this mechanism.

Figure 1. Marriage cohort estimate of the percentage of marriages dissolved in 5 and 10 years by data source.

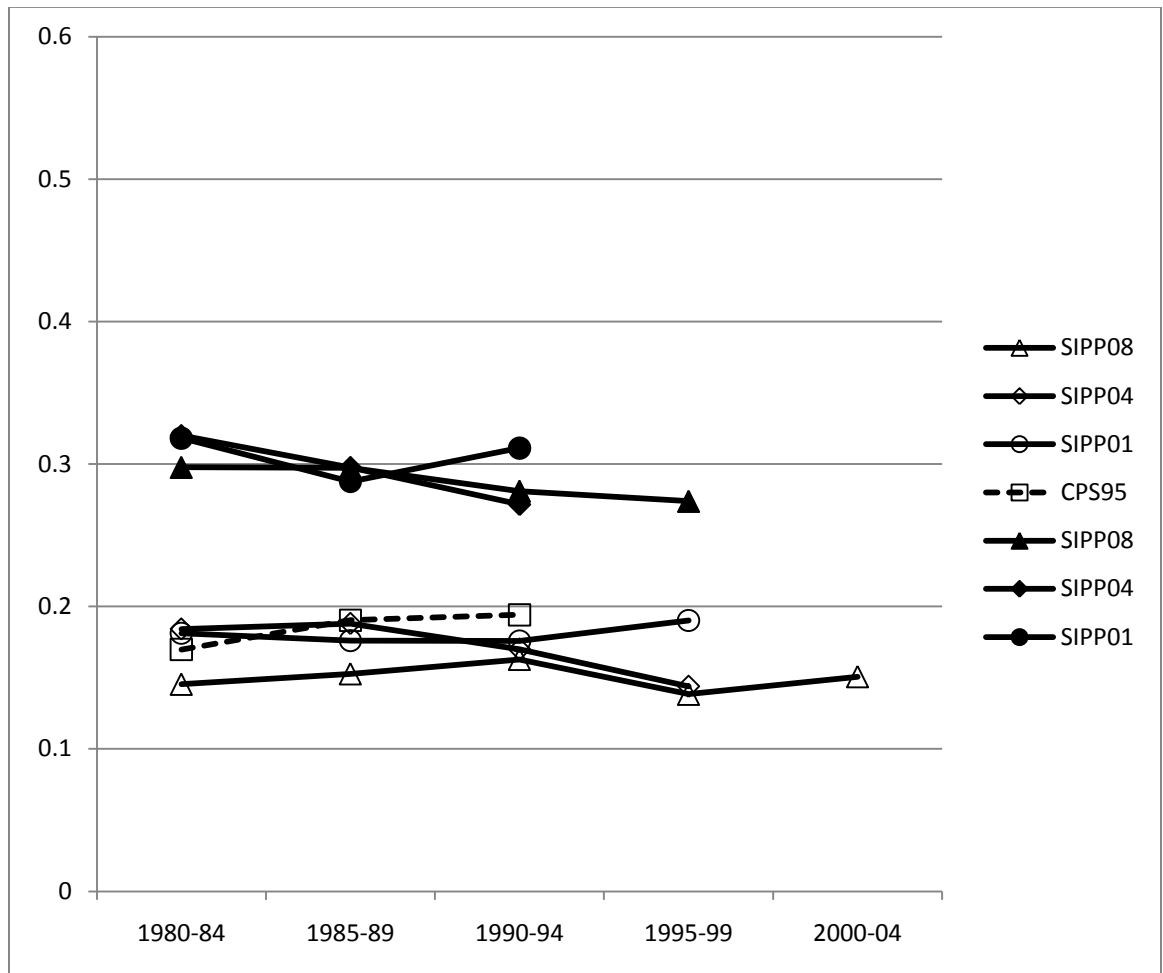


Figure 2. Period Estimates of the cumulative percentage of women's marriages ending in divorce by marital duration, ACS and SIPP.

