



# Counting Couples, Counting Families



## Marriage

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Marriage is one of the basic demographic processes that shape society. Traditionally, marriage provides a shelter for the lives of the majority of the population; most of whom later marry at one time or another; and marriage is associated with childbearing. Today, although marriage is less prevalent, it continues to play an important role in an individual's wellbeing, whether it comes to children raised within or outside marriage or whether one marries or not. However, marriage effects on wellbeing are likely to be diverse because of the variation in marriage duration and order. In other words, a snapshot of marital status at one point of time neglects that many individuals experience singlehood, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce once or more than once at different points of time over the life course. Indeed, unions (marital and cohabiting unions) are transitory in the United States, a situation Cherlin (2009) describes as the "American marriage-go-round."

In addition, marriage involves two individuals. Who is available in a marriage market and who marries whom has important implications for the distributions of incomes and consumption (Boulier and Rosenzweig 1984). How men and women match together in marriage influences family size and subsequently children's IQ and socioeconomic trajectories and, thus, play a major role determining future labor market supply and composition (Preston and Campbell 1993). Who marries whom – assortative mating – is an important building block in understanding social structure and social life (Mare 1991).

We are fortunate to have various sources of data including censuses, American Community Surveys (ACS), Current Population Surveys (CPS), and longitudinal surveys such as National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to help understand changes in marriage and family. Yet, marriage-related measures are not uniform across data sources, which makes comparisons across time and place difficult. Survey data do not provide adequate sample sizes at state or local levels. In addition, we must develop more marriage-related measures to understand better causes and consequences of marriage, marital formation, and assortative mating. In this brief, I review existing measures of marriage in censuses and surveys and then discuss how these measures can be improved for our better understanding of changes in American families.

### **Marital Status**

The most commonly available measure of marriage is marital status. Census, ACS, CPS, Early Child Longitudinal Program (ECLS), NLSY, National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), Consumer Expenditure Survey, The Fragile Families and Wellbeing Study, and National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health all include a question on a respondent's marital status. This variable typically includes the following categories: married, widowed, divorced, separated, and never married. CPS further makes a distinction between whether the spouse is present for a married respondent. However, it is

unclear what “married, spouse absent” means. NSFG offers the best classification for the marital status question: married; not married but living together with a partner of opposite sex; separated, because you and your spouse are not getting along; divorced, widowed, and never married. This classification allows respondents to make a clear choice of whether they are in a cohabiting relationship. Although we can link “householder” with the unmarried partner to establish whether the householder is in a cohabiting relationship based on data from censuses, CPS, or ACS, there is no information on whether other family members are in such relationships. Thus, prevalence of cohabitation is often underestimated. It would be ideal that censuses, ACS, and other surveys adopt NSFG’s marital status classification, but allow cohabiting couples to be of the same sex.

Marital status provides an important snapshot at the time of census or survey. This variable can be used along with gender and relationship to the householder to link the householder and his/her spouse and/or cohabiting householder and his/her partner into one record. However, it neglects the duration and order of the status a respondent is in. For example, for an individual who classifies him/herself as married, we don’t know whether it is the first marriage or how long the respondent is married. Differences in wellbeing and other outcome measures by marital status are confounded by duration and order. This issue becomes more serious when marital and cohabiting unions are now “transitory.” Many young men and women have experienced multiple unions over the life course. These multiple union experiences are likely to differ from a single episode union experience.

American Community Survey has started to address some of the issue. Since 2008, in addition to current marital status, ACS includes whether an ever-married person married, divorced, or widowed in the past year, how many times the person was married, and in what year the person was last married. These questions identify marriages by order and duration and other recent changes in marital status, which allow researchers to compare differences in wellbeing and other outcomes. These new ACS data also allow us to identify incidence of first marriage for the first time since 1980. Intact marriages at the time of interviews based on marital status include those contracted many years ago and were not subject to contemporaneous marriage market opportunities and constraints. Intact data also lead to biased estimates of marriage incidence because marital disruption differs by marriage duration. It is fortunate that these selection biases are circumvented with incidence data on recently-contracted marriages identified in the ACS since 2008.

Marital status information is available in federal surveys. The NSFG marital status has the best classification and includes an individual’s cohabitation status. Yet, marital status only provides a snapshot. It is essential that marital status is supplemented by information on each status’ time and order in large surveys. Recent ACSs provide much needed information on recent marital status transition. ACS is particularly advantageous for generating reliable data for special populations at the national, state, and local levels. Sample sizes are large enough to generate estimates for racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants. It’s easier to generate estimates at the state and local levels, especially when pooling of several ACS samples is an option.

Currently, we can use gender and relationship to householder to generate estimates for gays and lesbians based on 2000 census and ACS data. However, all same-sex relationships are classified

as unmarried or cohabiting. Same-sex couples may classify as householder and husband/wife where same-sex marriages are legalized. In the U.S., gays and lesbians can legally marry in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, and potentially New York. Some other states including California and New York recognize same-sex marriages legally formed elsewhere. It will be important that such marriages will be recognized in future censuses and ACSs.

With small modifications to the ACS questions, we will be able to obtain duration of each marital status as well as same-sex or opposite-sex cohabitation information.

What is this person's marital status?

- 1) Married
- 2) Cohabiting
- 3) Separated
- 4) Divorced
- 5) Widowed
- 6) Never Married

When did this person last get –  
Year

- 1) Married?     -----
- 2) Cohabited?  -----
- 3) Separated?  -----
- 4) Divorced?   -----
- 5) Widowed?    -----

How many times has this person been married?

- 1) Once
- 2) Two times
- 3) Three or more times

This change will provide a comprehensive measure on duration of the most recent marital status. We can also obtain whether the person had previous marriage experiences. We can use gender variable to identify same-sex or opposite-sex relationships. It appears to be highly efficient and cost effective to obtaining information on a summary of marriage history. Surveys are superior to the vital statistics systems in two important ways. First is cost. Despite high costs of surveys, they are nevertheless more cost effective than the time and cost to reestablish the vital statistics systems. Second is statistical modeling. Surveys provide far more information on all kinds of variables, which can be used to explore causes and consequences of marriage.

## **2. Marriage History**

Cross-sectional surveys are not in a position to provide a comprehensive picture of marriage and cohabitation history. NLSY, a nationally representative sample of young men and women aged 14-22 in 1979, was conducted annually from 1979 to 1994 and has been conducted biannually since 1996. It is one of the best longitudinal data sources that have detailed information on marital histories. At every interview over time, each respondent is asked to report whether the

respondent still lives with the spouse reported from the previous wave(s) and/or whether there is any new marriage. For each respondent, all the marriages formed and dissolved and the dates for these events since 1979 have been captured. Marriage order and duration can be derived easily. Because NLSY includes up-to-date time varying information on a variety of important socioeconomic variables, we can ascertain causes and consequences of marriage formation, dissolution, and multiple marital transitions.

While NLSY provides rich information on marital history, the sample size is relatively small. Marital history varies by race, socioeconomic status, and other factors. We often do not have enough cases for reliable statistical analyses for some populations including Latino and Asian ethnic groups, married couples of different races, and gays and lesbians. In addition, the NLSY is a cohort-based study following a cohort of men and women aged 14-22 in 1979. Despite valuable additions from Children of NLSY79 and NLSY97, NLSY data do not capture marriage history for men and women at different age ranges in a given year.

SIPP (is SIPP discontinued?) would overcome the limitations of NLSY because of their larger sample sizes and extensive coverage of men and women at different ages. Currently, SIPP asks respondents' marital status during the first interview and then verifies marital status in subsequent interviews. SIPP also includes questions on household relationships. In future waves, more marital history questions, especially timing and duration of each marriage, should be included so that we can examine how marital experiences over the life course influence health and other wellbeing.

The existing surveys, however, do not collect detailed marital history of the spouse. The research, unfortunately, is very much based on a one-sex model, ignoring the role the spouse plays in marriage, family wellbeing, child outcomes, health, and other behaviors. Marriage involves two people. When we examine who marries whom, we must take into account how prospective spouses view the attractiveness of marrying that person. This means not just examining which women find men "marriageable" but also which women men find marriageable. Similarly, if we examine how marriage influences a child's mental health, for example, we must include not only mother's but also father's characteristics.

### **3. Children and Marriage**

In "Marriage-Go-Round," Cherlin draws attention to the unique American family life that no other countries in the world have experienced – Americans start relationships at younger ages, experience short-term cohabitations often, divorce quickly after marriage, and move into other cohabiting or marital relationships again. Americans step on and off the carousel of intimate relationships often and are free to revoke their commitments regardless of whether it is marriage or cohabitation. While men and women exercise their individual freedom, going through transitory marital and cohabiting unions one after another, children are often involved and their wellbeing is at risk.

Marriage and childbearing no longer must go hand in hand. Social norms against unmarried childbearing are weak, unmarried childbearing is on the rise, and "shotgun weddings" are on the decline. The increase in unmarried childbearing in recent decades is largely due to the growing

proportion of births among cohabitating couples. Unfortunately, cohabiting relationships are unstable. Children born to cohabiting parents are far more likely to go through single parenthood or frequent changes of their parent's live-in boyfriends or girlfriends than those born to married parents. Even if their mothers or fathers later marry, their academic and economic wellbeing in remarried families pales compared to children born in two biological parent families.

The relationship between children's living arrangement and economic wellbeing is strong. Children living in married couple families are least likely to live in poverty but children growing up in female-headed single parent families are most likely. The increase in single-parent families has been the greatest among African Americans. Meanwhile, children living in cohabiting families also tend to do poorly. In addition, when parents are involved from one relationship to another or have difficulties making ends meet, their children often live with grandparents – a pattern most common among blacks.

Living arrangement of children matters greatly in their wellbeing. As it comes to children, it also matters to policy makers how they develop appropriate programs addressing the wellbeing of children. However, surveys and censuses do not have much information about the relationships between children and adults in the family. Currently, it is relatively easy to identify biological mothers of the child, but often difficult to link the child to the father, let alone any information on the role the biological and/or the resident “father” plays in the child's life. It would be ideal also collect data on nonresident fathers. Survey questions should include whether a child's parents are present and whether the relationship of the child to those parents is biological, step, adopted, or foster. In addition, it will be helpful to include variables about the relationship quality of the parents and how couples' relationship affects children's wellbeing.

American families are undergoing dramatic changes. In recent decades, marriage has been delayed and marriage rates have declined, unmarried cohabitation has become commonplace, and same-sex unions have increased. Meanwhile, more births are born to unmarried mothers, many of whom are cohabiting. Along with these changes, marital and cohabiting unions are more transitory in the United States today than in the past. Yet, data from federal surveys do not provide us adequate information to understand these changes. Marriage is an important social institution. Although it has been declining over time, marriage has emerged to become an important dimension in social stratification. Most Americans expect to get married, but not all are able or willing to do so. Previous studies demonstrate a clear distinction in education and socioeconomic status between the married and the non-married. It is great that this conference's goal is to make recommendations about the measurement of families and couples. Clearly, a fuller understanding of marriage, marital history, and its impact on children would have important policy implications.