

Cohabitation and Trends in the Structure and Stability of Children's Family Lives

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Extended Abstract

We use data from the 1995, 2002, and 2006-08 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to examine trends in cohabitation and impact of these changes on children's living arrangements. By 2006-2008, nearly one-quarter of all unmarried American women were cohabiting and nearly one-in-five women in a union were cohabiting rather than married. Cohabiting couples are increasingly bringing children into their unions--by the late 1990s, about 40 percent of children were expected to live in a cohabiting family by age 12. We estimate that 22 percent of children are now born to cohabiting parents and our completed paper will provide estimates of the number of children who will live in a cohabiting stepfamily during childhood. In addition, we will examine the implications of rising cohabitation rates for the stability of children's families.

Background

Over the past 50 years, cohabitation has progressed from extremely rarity to become a common fixture in American family life (Fitch, Goeken, and Ruggles 2005). Early cohabiting unions either transitioned into marriages or were short-lived dating relationships (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990). Over time, cohabiting unions have become less tied to marriage and longer duration, and women increasingly reside in multiple cohabiting unions (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Lichter, Turner, and Sassler 2010). Currently, about 40 percent of cohabiting couples are parenting biological or step children (Kreider 2008).

Cohabiting unions in the U.S. remain short-lived and highly instable. Only about half of women in their first cohabiting union will marry their partner, while over one-third will dissolve; more than half of these union transitions occur within two years. Marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to dissolve than direct marriages, although this relationship may be weakening now that most marriages begin through cohabitation (Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amato 2003; Goodwin, Mosher, and Chandra 2010).

The instability of cohabiting unions may have important implications for child well-being. By the early 1990s, one-third of children born to married or cohabiting parents were expected to experience the disruption of their parents' union, a significant increase over earlier periods (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Children raised in cohabiting unions have especially high levels of family instability, many experiencing multiple transitions in family structure during childhood (Graefe and Lichter 1999; Raley and Wildsmith 2004). Unfortunately, because of substantial missing data on marital dissolution in the 2002 NSFG, it was not possible until now to examine whether children's family lives have become increasingly unstable with the continued rise in cohabitation rates.

Data and Methods

The periodic National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) has provided important nationally representative data on women's family formation since 1973. In 2006, the NSFG began

continuous interviewing and has recently released interview data for the period 2006-2008. Complete cohabitation histories have been collected by the NSFG since 1995.¹ By combining these union histories with pregnancy histories, we can produce estimate of children's living arrangements. The 2006 survey addressed the errors in the previous survey's marriage dissolution data, allowing us to compare the current stability of children's families with results from the early 1990s. In each year, we will use data on women ages 19-44 as well as the children born to these women.

Using these data, we will estimate the proportion of women who have ever cohabited or who are currently cohabiting. We will use life table techniques to examine the duration and stability of cohabiting unions, as well as transitions into marriage. We will also examine educational, race and ethnic, and nativity differences in cohabitation experience.

Our analysis of children's living arrangements begins at birth, by describing children's birth families and continues throughout childhood, following children as their mothers dissolve unions or enter into new ones. We will produce updated estimates of instability in children's birth families. Using multi-state life table techniques, we will examine whether the amount of time children spend in married, cohabiting parent, and single parent families has changed since the early 1990s.

Period life table techniques are an important tool for studying family dynamics (Andersson and Philipov 2002; Andersson 2002; Bumpass and Lu 2000). We draw upon data from the five-year periods before each survey to estimate rates of women's transitions into and out of cohabiting unions and children's transitions in cohabiting families.² Using multi-state life tables enables us to track the transitions of children between married, cohabiting, and single-parent families. The results from these life tables will not reflect the experiences of any cohort, but instead are a measure of what would happen if a woman or child experienced period rates over the observation period (5 years for women's cohabiting unions, until age 12 for children). Our specific approach follows closely the methods we used in previous papers (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). We will use the SPACE program or other similar software to calculate the multi-state life tables and to test statistically socioeconomic and demographic variation (Cai et al. 2010).

Preliminary results

Table 1 presents estimates of women's cohabitation experience in 2002 and 2006-08. During the roughly five-year window between surveys, the proportion of women who have ever-cohabited increased by only 2 percentage points, from 54 to 56 percent. To put this in context, the increase between 1995 and 2002 was much larger, 9 percentage points. While we observe small increases at all ages, the largest increases occur among women in their late 20s and early 30s (4 points and 7 points, respectively). Although cohabitation has continued to rise, these results suggest that the pace of increase may be slowing.

¹ Cohabitation histories in the 2006-08 sample were limited to the current union and four previous unions, but fewer than 20 women report additional unions.

² In the 2006-2008 survey, we adjust the five-year observation period to reflect the year in which a woman is interviewed. As a result, our life table estimates will cover a seven-year period instead of the five-year periods in the earlier surveys.

Table 1 also present estimates of women's current cohabitation. Nearly one-quarter of unmarried women were cohabiting in 2006-08, including roughly 30 percent of women ages 25-34. We see increases at all ages and for both never-married and previously married women, with especially large increases among women in their 30s. Among women currently in a union, the proportion that is cohabiting rather than married has also increased over time, from 15 percent to 20 percent. Fully half of the unions of young women, ages 19-24, are informal. Because we see a much smaller change in the percent of women ever-cohabiting, our findings suggest that women are either cohabiting for longer periods of time or that serial cohabitation has continued to rise. Both of these scenarios would increase the chances that a woman is cohabiting at the time of interview, without affecting the chances that she has ever-cohabited.

Table 2 examines variation by education, race and ethnicity, as well as the immigration status of Hispanic respondents. Cohabitation experience increased in all education groups, and especially among women without a high school degree. Consequently, large educational differences remain; by 2006-08, over two-thirds of women with a high school degree or less have ever cohabited, compared to about half of women with some college or a four-year degree. Because cohabitation increased for non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black, and US-born Hispanic women, race and ethnic differences remain small. The difference between US-born and foreign-born Hispanic women, however, has grown.

In Table 3, we examine women's first union formation during the years preceding each survey. By the early to mid 2000s, nearly three-quarters of all first unions began as cohabiting unions, compared to about two-thirds in the earlier period. If we look only at women who first married during the early to mid 2000s, fully two-thirds cohabited before marrying. Most of these women cohabited only with their husband--45 percent of marriages in both the earlier and current periods. In contrast, the proportion of women who cohabited with someone other than their husband increased between the two periods. By 2001-2007, 18 percent of newly married women had cohabited with the husband and someone else compared to 13 percent in the earlier period. Cohabitation remains the normative path into marriage, while premarital serial cohabitation before has become increasingly common.

We present data on children's birth families in Table 4. In the early-to-mid 2000s, 64 percent of children were born to married mothers, 22 percent to cohabiting mothers, and 14 percent to single mothers. We can compare these children to children born in the years 1997-2001, however, it is important to keep in mind that we had to rely on imputed status for 5 percent of children in this earlier period (because of missing marital dissolution dates). Nonetheless, it is clear that the decline in marital fertility has slowed substantially over earlier periods, while births to single-mothers have remained stable or are perhaps declining. Increases in cohabitation continue to drive changes in children's family structure at birth.

Preliminary conclusions

Our results demonstrate the continued importance of cohabitation in the family lives of women and children in the U.S. Although we find some evidence that the increase in the proportion of women who have ever cohabited has slowed, when we look at women's current cohabitation we find that cohabitation has increased at a rapid pace. Future analyses will explore whether changes

in union duration or serial cohabitation help explain these findings. Our final paper will focus heavily on the trends in stability of children's family lives. Bumpass and Lu (2000) found children experienced increasing disruption of their birth families between the early 1980s and 1990s. We will examine whether this trend has continued with the expanding number of cohabiting families with children.

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Table 1. Trends by age in the percentage of women ever cohabiting and currently cohabiting: U.S. women 2002 and 2006-08

Age	% ever cohabited		Percentage currently cohabiting of not currently married						% cohabiting of current unions	
	2002	2006-08	Total unmarried		Never married		Previously married		2002	2006-08
19-24	38	40	19	21	19	20	15	22	43	50
25-29	58	62	26	29	28	30	16	25	19	25
30-34	61	68	20	32	21	32	18	32	10	16
35-39	59	61	18	26	19	25	17	27	9	11
40-44	54	56	14	19	13	21	15	18	6	9
Total	54	56	19	24	20	24	16	24	15	19
n	6440	6065	3494	3649	2562	2796	932	853	3593	3156

Table 2. Percentage of women ages 19-44 who have ever cohabited and percentage change: 2002 and 2006-08

	Percent ever cohabited		
	2002	2006-08	% change
<i>Education</i>			
< High school	64	71	12
HS/GED	63	67	7
Some College	49	50	4
Col 4-yr grad	45	47	4
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
Non-Hispanic White	54	58	7
Non-Hispanic Black	57	59	4
Hispanic	52	55	5
Non-Hispanic Other	44	40	-9
<i>Hispanic nativity</i>			
Foreign-born Hispanic	49	49	0
US-born Hispanic	56	62	10

Table 3. Percentage of first unions that were cohabitation, by marriage and union cohort, and percentage of women in the US aged 19-44 who cohabited before first marriage*

	First union cohort		First marriage cohort	
	1997-01	2001-07	1997-01	2001-07
Premarital cohabitation				
First union was cohabitation	68	73	--	--
Cohabited before first marriage	--	--	62	67
Cohab w/husband only	--	--	45	45
Cohab w/husband and others	--	--	13	18
Cohab w/others only	--	--	4	3
Direct marriage	32	27	38	33
n	1282	1199	1011	833

Note: For interviews conducted in 2006-2008, our analysis includes unions formed during the 5 year prior to each respondent's interview. As a result, our estimates cover the period 2001-2007.

Table 4. Mother's union status at birth, children born 1997-2001 and 2001-2007

	1997-01*	2001-07
Marital birth	66	64
All nonmarital births	34	36
Cohabiting mother	18	22
Single mother	16	14
% imputed	5	0
Total	2678	2621

Note: For interviews conducted in 2006-2008, our analysis includes births during the 5 year prior to each respondent's interview. As a result, our estimates cover the period 2001-2007.

*The union status was imputed for five percent of children born during the years 1997-01 because of missing marital dissolution dates. The results presented in the table allocate these births using imputed separation dates (with about two-thirds of the births classified as births within marriage).