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Updated March 2007

Overview of Cohabitation Research

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What is the rate of cohabitation for couples getting married?

There are now over 5.1 million heterosexual couples cohabiting in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), which is a tenfold increase from 1970 when only 500,000 couples were cohabiting.

According to the renowned demographer Larry Bumpass, the current rate of cohabitation before marriage is nearly 70%. This means that for 70% of young people, their first couple experience is cohabitation rather than marriage. About half of cohabitating couples either marry or break up after 2 years of cohabitation (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2007).

Of the cohabiting couples that have recently married, 58% lived with their partner before marriage and 14% of those had also lived with someone else other than the person they married (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2007).

Using data on premarital couples who took PREPARE-ENRICH in 2006, about 40% of premarital couples had cohabited with their partner before marriage (Olson, 2007). This finding is based on a national sample of over 50,000 premarital couples who took PREPARE, PREPARE-MC and PREPARE-CC. The percentage of cohabiting couples varied by inventory: 100% for PREPARE-CC; 30% for PREPARE and 44% for those who took PREPARE-MC. The rate of 40% cohabiting with partner is lower than the national average of 58% because many couples taking PREPARE are married in a church setting and it is the first marriage for most of them.

It appears that the rate of cohabitation will continue to increase. In a representative national survey, 66% of high school senior boy's and 61% of girls indicated that they "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement, "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along" (Bachman, Johnston & O'Malley, 2001).

Why has the rate of cohabitation increased so rapidly?

Given the predominant rates of cohabitation, it is difficult to believe that only 30 years ago living together for unmarried heterosexual couples was both illegal and considered immoral. This revolutionary change in attitude can be attributed to several factors:

- The delaying of first marriages until older with the median age for females 25 years and 27 for males (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).
- A decline in Americans who choose to marry, more than 1/3 from 1970-1996 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).
- The sexual revolution has reduced some of the stigma attached to cohabitation. The saturation of sexuality within the entertainment industry and the media has greatly contributed to this change.
- Concern over the continuing high rate of divorce has led couples to seek a weaker form of union with less commitment to life long marriage (The State of Our Union, 2000).

What reasons do couples give for cohabiting?

With the increasing number of years that most young adults are single and the growing social acceptance of cohabitation, couples report several common reasons for cohabiting.

- **Economic advantages:** *“We can save money by sharing living expenses.”*
- **Time together:** *“We are able to spend more time together.”*
- **Increased intimacy:** *“We have more opportunities to share sexual and emotional intimacy without getting married.”*
- **Less complicated dissolution:** *“If the relationship doesn’t work out, there is no messy divorce.”*
- **“Testing” compatibility:** *“Living together enables us to better learn about each other’s habits and character and see how we operate together day-to-day.”*
- **Trial Marriage:** *“We are planning to marry soon.”*

How are Cohabitors different from married couples?

There are several characteristics that distinguish cohabiters from married couples and they include the following:

1. Cohabiting couples have lower levels of personal happiness and higher rates of depression than married couples (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).
2. Cohabitors value independence more than married partners and have more individual freedom (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).
3. Cohabitors are less likely to be supportive financially of one another than are married partners (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).
4. Cohabitors have more negative attitudes about marriage than non-cohabiters (Axinn & Barber, 1997).

What are some characteristics of couples that cohabit?

- On PREPARE & ENRICH, cohabiting couples have significantly lower scores on most categories (Olson, 2001).
- Couples living together have the lowest level of premarital satisfaction when compared to other living arrangements (Stewart & Olson, 1990; Olson, 2001).
- Marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to end in divorce (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999).
- Cohabitors have lower scores than non-cohabiters on religious behaviors, personal faith, church attendance and joint religious activities (Thorton, A., Axinn, W.G. & Hill, D.H., 1992).

- Married couples that cohabitated prior to marriage have poorer communication skills in discussing problems than couples that did not cohabit (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2000).
- Cohabiting couples are less sexually committed or trustworthy (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).
- Cohabiting males are less involved in housework and childrearing (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).
- Cohabiting increases the risk of couple abuse and, if there are children, child abuse (Thompson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994).

Does Cohabitation Contribute to Marital Failure?

Most research has focused on cohabitation's negative effect on a future marriage. The following are two possible explanations:

Lack of Commitment to Marriage:

One explanation is that while the basis for marriage is a strong ethic of commitment, cohabiting couples are much more oriented toward their own personal autonomy and are more willing to terminate the relationship. It is easy to speculate that once this low-commitment, high autonomy pattern of relating is learned, it becomes hard to change (National Marriage Project, 2000).

Inability to Make Decision about Marriage:

Cohabitation reflects uncertainty. As professor Pepper Schwartz explains, "I think there is something in the experience of cohabitation that makes it hard to know when is the time to make a choice, to change one way of living for another, and to say, yes, this person... is the one for me" (Schwartz, 2000).

Is cohabiting a good way to prepare for marriage?

Generally not. The social science evidence suggests that living together is *not* a good way to prepare for marriage or to avoid divorce. In fact, virtually all the major studies have shown a higher divorce rate among couples that cohabited before marriage than those who did not. No positive contribution of cohabitation to a successful marriage has been found to date.

It is important to note that cohabiting that is within 3-6 months before marriage is different from cohabiting as an alternative to marriage. If a couple cohabits a few months before the wedding and if each partner has had no prior cohabitation experience and no children, then the adverse effects are not strongly supported in research (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999).

What is a good way to prepare for marriage?

The PREPARE-CC Program is one effective way to build a stronger and happier marriage. Our recent PREPARE Outcome Study (Knutson & Olson 2003) demonstrated the value for couples in taking the PREPARE Inventory and having 4-5 feedback sessions using the Six Couple Exercises. Couples significantly improved their couple satisfaction and their relationship type (the PREPARE Program increased Vitalized couples by 52% and decreased Conflicted couples by 83%).

PREPARE-CC (Cohabiting Couples)

Clearly, cohabiting couples have common traits that distinguish them from premarital couples that are not living together. For this reason, we have developed a version of PREPARE and some of the features include:

- Items are designed to help couples understand and focus on issues related to cohabiting.
- 50 new items—30% different than PREPARE.
- Background questions ask about family and other relative's feelings about their cohabiting.
- New Category called *Cohabitation Issues*--10 new items.
- Two-three new items across all PREPARE categories.
- ***New Items in PREPARE—CC:*** You can use this handout to ensure that you have covered all the relevant issues.

REFERENCES:

The following are some excellent resources about cohabitation:

Bahmann, J.G., Johnson, L.D., & O'Malley, P.M. (2001). *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 2000*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, Univ of Michigan.

Center for Marriage and Family. (December, 2000). *Time, sex and money. The first five years of marriage*. Creighton University, Omaha, NE.

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Larson, J. (2000). The verdict on cohabitation vs. marriage. *Marriage & Families*, 7-12.

Popenoe, D. & Whitehead, B. (1999). *Should we live together? What young adults need to know about cohabitation before marriage*. The National Marriage Project, New Brunswick, NJ.

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Waite, L. & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier and better off financially*. New York: Doubleday.