

September 29, 2007
Op-Ed Contributors

Divorced From Reality

By BETSEY STEVENSON and JUSTIN WOLFERS

PHILADELPHIA

THE great myth about divorce is that marital breakup is an increasing threat to American families, with each generation finding their marriages less stable than those of their parents.

Last week's release of new divorce statistics led to a smorgasbord of reporting feeding the myth. This newspaper warned readers, "Don't stock up on silver anniversary cards" because "women and men who married in the late 1970s had a less than even chance of still being married 25 years later." And apparently things are getting worse, as "the latest numbers suggest an uptick in the divorce rate among people married in the most recent 20 years covered in the report, 1975-1994." Other major newspapers ran similar articles.

The story of ever-increasing divorce is a powerful narrative. It is also wrong. In fact, the divorce rate has been falling continuously over the past quarter-century, and is now at its lowest level since 1970. While marriage rates are also declining, those marriages that do occur are increasingly more stable. For instance, marriages that began in the 1990s were more likely to celebrate a 10th anniversary than those that started in the 1980s, which, in turn, were also more likely to last than marriages that began back in the 1970s.

Why were so many analysts led astray by the recent data? Understanding this puzzle requires digging deeper into some rather complex statistics.

The Census Bureau reported that slightly more than half of all marriages occurring between 1975 and 1979 had not made it to their 25th anniversary. This breakup rate is not only alarmingly high, but also represents a rise of about 8 percent when compared with those marriages occurring in the preceding five-year period.

But here's the rub: The census data come from a survey conducted in mid-2004, and at that time, it had not yet been 25 years since the wedding day of around 1 in 10 of those whose marriages they surveyed. And if your wedding was in late 1979, it was simply impossible to have celebrated a 25th anniversary when asked about your marriage in mid-2004.

If the census survey had been conducted six months later, it would have found that a majority of those married in the second half of 1979 were happily moving into their 26th year of marriage.

Once these marriages are added to the mix, it turns out that a majority of couples who tied the knot from 1975 to 1979 — about 53 percent — reached their silver anniversary.

This surveying glitch affected only the most recent data. Still, factoring in an appropriate adjustment yields the conclusion that divorce rates have been falling, not rising. This is not just statistical smoke and mirrors: the Census Bureau warned that the most recent data understate the true stability of recent marriages. But a warning buried in a footnote does not always make the headlines. (Indeed, this newspaper reprinted the table, but omitted the warning.)

The narrative of rising divorce is also completely at odds with counts of divorce certificates, which show the divorce rate as having peaked at 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 1979 and to have fallen by 2005 to 16.7.

Why has the great divorce myth persisted so powerfully? Reporting on our families is a lot like reporting on the economy: statistical tales of woe provide the foundation for reform proposals. The only difference is that conservatives use these data to make the case for greater government intervention in the marriage market, while liberals use them to promote deregulation of marriage.

But a useful family policy should instead be based on facts. The facts are that divorce is down, and today's marriages are more stable than they have been in decades. Perhaps it is worth stocking up on silver anniversary cards after all.

Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers are assistant professors of business and public policy at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.