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CBS News Transcripts

September 29, 2007 Saturday

SHOW: The Saturday Early Show 7:00 AM EST CBS

Betsey Stevenson, University of Pennsylvania professor, talks about new study about divorce rates

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LENGTH: 994 words

CHRIS WRAGGE, co-host:

Welcome back. If you're still married, then you're part of a growing group in this country. Divorce rates are actually down, a big change from three decades ago. That's according to a new study just out this morning that contradicts all the gloomy news about marital meltdowns. Betsey Stevenson is co-author of the study and an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

Good morning, Betsey. Good to have you with us.

Ms. BETSEY STEVENSON (Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania): Good morning.

WRAGGE: You've got an Op-Ed out in The New York Times today that basically refutes a lot of the claims that divorce rates are way up.

Ms. STEVENSON: Well, what it does is it points out the divorce rate's been falling over the last quarter century, and in particular, things are continuing to get better. Last week, we heard a lot of doom and gloom saying that divorce was on the rise. And, in fact, that really represented a misunderstanding of the latest statistics that came out.

WRAGGE: Now, the '70s, you said things were worse in the '70s. My parents were divorced in the '70s.

Ms. STEVENSON: Yeah.

WRAGGE: Why was it so bad back then and what's changed?

Ms. STEVENSON: Well, we did see a big rise in divorce. I mean, this is what precipitated all the concern about divorces. The divorce rate nearly doubled between the late '60s--between the mid-60s and the mid-70s.

WRAGGE: Yeah.

Ms. STEVENSON: And one of the reasons things were so bad for people who married during that period and why we saw the divorce rate rise was because the idea of marriage was changing during that period. People married with one idea about how they were going to live their lives as adults, and the reality proves quite differently. Women ended up in the labor force. They're working more, and they wanted something different from their partner than what they thought

they were going to want when they get--got married.

WRAGGE: And so it's actually a whole new dynamic now, because both parties are so individual and women obviously don't have to be beholden to men like back in the '50s and '60s, now they can go get their own jobs for just as much money and live their own lives. How much better or how much different is the whole marriage union now as opposed to back then?

Ms. STEVENSON: Well, I think people are marrying for different reasons today. They're marrying people that they have a shared interest with, that they want to enjoy life with. Whereas, in the past, they might've married more thinking about only producing children and having a good home. And today, they want more from marriage. They're living longer, they know they're going to have more time on their own without kids. And so there's other things that are important to them.

WRAGGE: Now, why is it we always hear these numbers thrown around that one out of every two marriages end in divorce? The divorce rate is actually down, though, is that not correct?

Ms. STEVENSON: Right. So what we--one of the problems is forecasting. Rating--I talked to somebody who's married today. I have to try to figure out if they're going to eventually divorce.

WRAGGE: Yeah.

Ms. STEVENSON: And so what we see is those people who married in the early '70s, about one in two of those marriages did end in divorce. But we see that that's been recovering over time. And so people who marry today probably are going to have a higher survival rate than that.

WRAGGE: And now, are people are still racing to the altar right now? Is it still as popular as ever?

Ms. STEVENSON: No, the marriage rates are down.

WRAGGE: Yeah.

Ms. STEVENSON: But even if we talk about among married people, the divorce rate's down. So at the peak of the divorce boom, we might call it, over two and a hundred couples divorce each year. Today, that number's closer to one and a half of each--out of a hundred married couples.

WRAGGE: What do you think is the big key to stability in marriages these days? Is there one key? Is there one big bullet point out there, or is there a laundry list?

Ms. STEVENSON: You know, I think that there's a laundry list, and that's for relationship experts to talk to.

WRAGGE: Yeah.

Ms. STEVENSON: But I think marriages are different.

WRAGGE: Yeah.

Ms. STEVENSON: And so we're picking our partners for different reasons.

WRAGGE: And one of the things you said is senior citizens are actually happier--happily married...

Ms. STEVENSON: Senior...

WRAGGE: ...now, more than...(unintelligible).

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Ms. STEVENSON: ...senior citizens are more likely to be married today than at any other time in history. In fact, there's as many people over the age of 65 who are married today as there are people between the ages of 16 and 65.

WRAGGE: Wow!

Ms. STEVENSON: So we see huge marriage rates for them, among the elderly.

WRAGGE: And so we talk about divorce rates being down. Overall, what do you think? Is it people that are just willing to put up with more? People staying married more because of children and other factors being factored into the equation?

Ms. STEVENSON: Well, I think people are actually just marrying people that they're better suited with, given the way they're going to live their lives. I mean, these people made mistakes with who they picked in the '70s, and today, they have a better understanding of how they want to live their lives and what they're looking for in a partner. And so they just do a better--better job picking those people.

WRAGGE: Betsy Stevenson, thanks so much for taking the time and joining us this morning.

Ms. STEVENSON: Nice talking with you.

WRAGGE: Good talking with you as well. Very good information.

Maggie, let's go over to you. Did you hear all that?

MAGGIE RODRIGUEZ, co-host:

I did. Thank you very much, Chris.

And coming up, we are talking yogurt and lots of it. There's low-fat yogurt, yogurt for kids, probiotic, and the list goes on and on. Up next, we're going to tell you which one is best for you, right here on THE SATURDAY EARLY SHOW on CBS.

LOAD-DATE: September 29, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

DOCUMENT-TYPE: Interview

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Transcript

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