

Research Handbook on the Economics of Family Law

Edited by

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4 Trends in marital stability*

Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers

1. INTRODUCTION

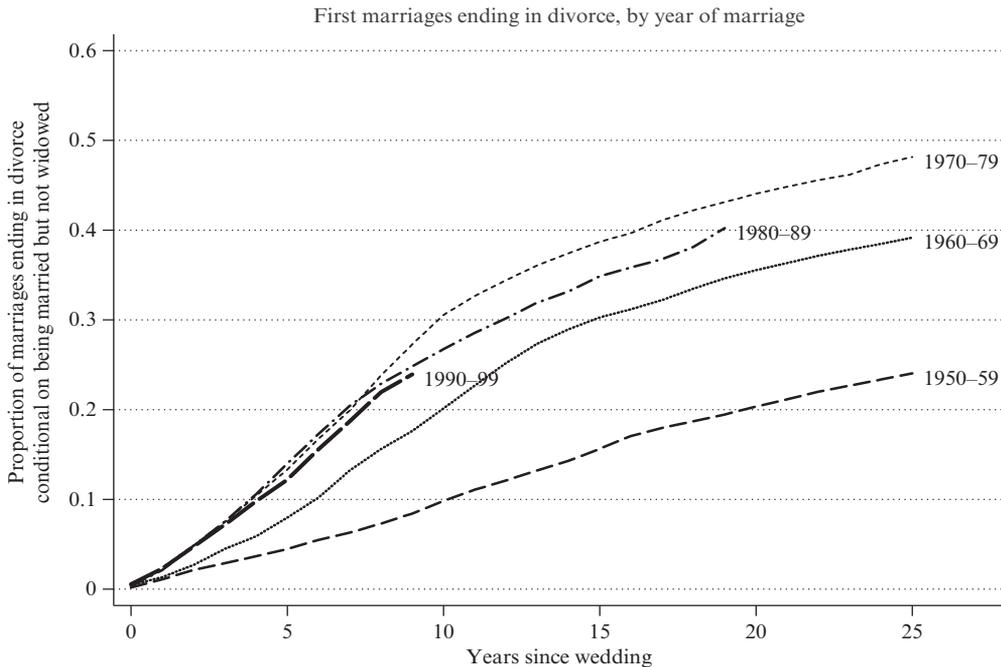
This chapter documents trends in marital stability over recent decades. Our assessment is motivated by a desire to update earlier analyses with the latest data, as well as an attempt to reconcile apparently conflicting results. The reconciliation points to an unequivocal increase in marital stability since the 1970s.

Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) analyzed retrospective marital histories from the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), finding that first marriages occurring in each decade since the 1970s have been less likely to end in divorce than marriages begun in the preceding decade. This analysis (as originally published) is presented in Figure 4.1. The finding of a lower likelihood of divorce among those who married in recent decades appears to hold irrespective of how many years into these marriages one assesses the cumulative divorce rate. The U.S. Census Bureau (2005) also analyzed these data and their analysis of the survival of first marriages at each anniversary (a function of both divorce and death), reproduced as Table 4.1, points to a similar trend of more stable marriages among those who wed in recent decades.

More recently released marital history data from the 2004 SIPP has been analyzed by the U.S. Census Bureau (2007a). In contrast to what was previously found, their tables suggest that there has been a recent rise in marital instability for marriages of all durations and that both first and second marriages since the mid-1970s were less likely to survive to celebrate 10th, 15th, 20th, or higher anniversaries than previous marriage cohorts. These data are presented, as published, in Table 4.2. Coverage of this data release in the popular press emphasized that a minority of marriages were likely to reach their silver (25th) anniversary, and reported that marital dissolution has risen in the United States over recent years.¹ Given the importance of accurate measurement of family change for

* We would like to thank Claudia Goldin for pointing us to the anomalous findings reported in this chapter and Nico Lacetera, Stephanie Coontz and again, Claudia Goldin for encouraging us to write up these findings. Erik Knodder and Hao Wang provided helpful comments. We are grateful to Martin O'Connell and U.S. Census Bureau staff for help in understanding the survey design and procedures underlying the SIPP. We thank the Zell/Lurie Real Estate Center for generous research support.

¹ For instance, the *New York Times* reported that "For the first time at least since World War II, women and men who married in the late 1970s had a less than even chance of still being married 25 years later." The same article continued, arguing that "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." ("25th Anniversary Mark Elusive for Many Couples", by Sam Roberts, *New York Times*, September 20, 2007). Similarly, the *Washington Post* reported that "For the first time since World War II, America's married couples are more likely to have split by the 25-year mark than to have stayed together." ("Most Marriages Don't Last 25 Years", *Washington Post*, September



Notes: Figure drawn from Stevenson and Wolfers (2007). We show the relevant data where we can calculate cumulative divorce probabilities for at least three of the ten annual marriage cohorts represented by each line. We exclude data on marital status in 2001, because the survey did not account for all divorces in that year.

Source: Authors' calculations based on Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2001 Panel, Wave 2 Topical Module.

Figure 4.1 Cumulative divorce probabilities, 2001 SIPP

policymakers, it is imperative to both reconcile these competing claims and to present a clearer picture of the underlying trends.

We begin by emphasizing the similarities in the analytic approaches taken. In each case, the analyses are based on conceptually similar data – self-reported marital histories drawn from representative cross-sections surveyed as part of the Survey of Income and Program Participation in 2001 and 2004, respectively. In particular, these data are representative of those spouses who survived until the survey date.² The approaches are

19, 2007). A front page story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asked rhetorically “Looking forward to your 25th anniversary?” responding that if so, you should “Count yourself among a shrinking minority,” continuing to note that the Census report “reinforces studies that have reported that American marriages are not as durable as they once were.” (“Silver Becomes Rarer Milestone”, by Andrew Maykuth, *Philadelphia Inquirer*).

² The weaknesses of self-reported data are common to each of these studies. Unfortunately, administrative panel data on marital status are not available for the United States and systematic counting of divorce certificates by year of marriage ceased in 1995. As such, these marital history data are particularly policy relevant.

Table 4.1 U.S. Census Bureau analysis of 2001 SIPP marital histories

Sex and year of marriage	Number of marriages (in thousands)	Anniversary ¹							
		5th	10th	15th	20th	25th	30th	35th	40th
FIRST MARRIAGES									
Men									
1955 to 1959	4,100	96.1	89.5	82.2	76.2	72.3	68.7	66.1	63.5
1960 to 1964	5,033	94.0	81.6	71.1	66.1	62.3	60.3	57.7	(X)
1965 to 1969	6,357	93.0	78.3	67.8	62.1	58.0	54.8	(X)	(X)
1970 to 1974	7,436	90.4	72.5	61.3	55.8	52.9	(X)	(X)	(X)
1975 to 1979	7,109	89.3	72.2	63.4	58.4	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984	7,606	89.8	74.5	66.2	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989	8,048	87.6	74.7	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994	7,718	90.1	(X)						
Women									
1955 to 1959	5,162	94.0	86.8	78.6	73.1	67.0	64.1	58.9	54.4
1960 to 1964	5,714	93.8	84.0	72.9	66.9	60.9	57.0	53.1	(X)
1965 to 1969	7,138	91.3	77.9	65.7	59.2	55.5	51.9	(X)	(X)
1970 to 1974	8,176	87.8	70.2	60.3	54.1	49.1	(X)	(X)	(X)
1975 to 1979	7,852	84.7	67.7	58.5	52.6	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984	8,448	87.3	71.5	64.2	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989	8,299	86.6	74.7	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994	7,967	86.9	(X)						
SECOND MARRIAGES									
Men									
1975 to 1979	1,985	90.8	81.0	57.6	49.0	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984	2,544	90.9	71.8	54.9	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989	2,881	90.0	72.2	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994	2,834	88.8	(X)						
Women									
1975 to 1979	2,187	86.3	75.9	55.9	47.2	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984	2,703	89.2	71	54.6	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989	3,008	86.9	67.8	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994	3,126	86.8	(X)						

Notes:

X Not applicable.

¹ Percentage of people reaching stated anniversary for specified marital order.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2001 Panel, Wave 2 Topical Module. Reproduction of Table 2 from U.S. Census Bureau (2005).

similar in that each of these studies focus on “marriage cohorts” – groups who had a first (or second) wedding in a particular period, reporting the share of each group to have achieved particular milestones (divorce, or a wedding anniversary) by the survey date. Thus, similarities in the results across each study would not be surprising. And indeed, if

Table 4.2 U.S. Census Bureau analysis of 2004 SIPP marital histories

Sex and year of marriage	Number of marriages (in thousands)	Anniversary ¹							
		5th	10th	15th	20th	25th	30th	35th	40th
FIRST MARRIAGES									
Men									
1955 to 1959	3,884	96.4	88.3	80.3	73.8	70.4	67.3	64.7	61.4
1960 to 1964 ²	4,602	95.1	85.0	75.2	69.7	65.0	62.4	59.7	52.5
1965 to 1969 ²	6,161	90.5	76.9	67.4	62.3	58.6	55.5	48.2	(X)
1970 to 1974 ²	7,075	88.5	74.4	64.6	58.1	53.8	46.2	(X)	(X)
1975 to 1979 ²	7,001	88.1	73.0	65.2	59.6	49.5	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984 ²	7,625	88.7	73.7	65.3	53.8	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989 ²	7,838	89.3	76.4	60.6	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994 ²	8,070	89.4	70.0	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
Women									
1955 to 1959	4,890	94.0	86.8	79.4	72.4	67.2	63.5	58.9	54.7
1960 to 1964 ²	5,548	92.8	82.3	72.7	66.5	60.4	56.1	52.7	44.9
1965 to 1969 ²	7,023	89.5	74.9	65.7	60.0	55.1	51.3	43.8	(X)
1970 to 1974 ²	8,139	87.1	71.6	61.4	55.4	50.6	42.1	(X)	(X)
1975 to 1979 ²	7,714	85.3	70.0	61.4	55.7	46.4	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984 ²	8,058	86.5	70.7	63.1	52.4	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989 ²	8,064	85.7	73.0	56.9	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994 ²	8,546	87.2	69.2	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
SECOND MARRIAGES									
Men									
1975 to 1979 ²	1,747	87.2	74.7	60.9	52.3	42.0	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984 ²	2,306	87.6	75.0	57.5	46.4	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989 ²	2,415	91.9	70.3	52.3	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994 ²	2,590	89.1	68.0	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
Women									
1975 to 1979 ²	1,956	86.6	72.1	56.1	47.2	36.7	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1984 ²	2,568	86.3	71.6	54.4	41.5	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1989 ²	2,790	85.7	66.8	48.7	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1994 ²	2,825	86.0	64.3	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)

Notes:

X Not applicable.

¹ Percentage of people reaching stated anniversary for specified marital order.² Approximately 10% of the cohort has not reached the stated age by the end of the latest specified time period. Because of this, estimates for this group for the highest anniversary are low.*Source:* U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2004 Panel, Wave 2 Topical Module. Table reproduces Table 2 from U.S. Census Bureau (2007a).

one focuses on the five-year anniversary, Table 4.1, Table 4.2, and Figure 4.1 all suggest that marital stability has been flat or slightly rising subsequent to the 1970s.

Yet data on survival to 10th, 15th, 20th or 25th anniversaries drawn from Table 4.1 appear to suggest a continuation of this trend, while the data from Table 4.2 suggest a

recent sharp reversal. For instance, the proportion of the 1990–94 first marriage cohort to celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary appears much lower than the proportion of those wed from 1985–89 (70.0% v. 76.4% for men; 69.2% v. 73.0% for women), suggesting a sharp rise in marital disruption. However, this seems difficult to square with predictions one might have made based on the proportions of these cohorts who reached their fifth wedding anniversary (89.4% v. 89.3% for men; 87.2% v. 85.7% for women).³ Recall, too, that Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) found their results were unaffected by the duration at which one assesses the stability of each marital cohort. Similar discrepancies are seen at each subsequent anniversary when comparing the most recent data with the survival of marriages from the preceding five-year marriage cohort. It is these comparisons that led many to infer a sharp rise in divorce between the 2001 and 2004 SIPP.

This leads one to ask: What is driving the apparent differences between Tables 4.1 and 4.2? Note that the apparent deterioration in marital stability in Table 4.2 is only evident in the most recent period. The resolution of this apparent conflict ultimately lies in measurement issues: a footnote at the bottom of Table 4.2 notes that “Approximately 10 percent of the cohort has not reached the stated age by the end of the latest specified time period. Because of this, estimates for this group for the highest anniversary are low.” This footnote is alluding to the fact that the 2004 survey was conducted from July to September 2004, and hence it is impossible for those married in the latter part of some years to have reached a measured anniversary. Around one in ten of those in each marital group considered was surveyed before having reached the measured anniversary. For instance, a couple who married in October 1994 was counted as part of the 1990–94 marriage cohort, despite the fact it was impossible for them to have celebrated their tenth anniversary before the survey date. Thus, the italicized numbers in Table 4.2 are not true survival probabilities, as many in the denominator were not actually “at risk” of reaching the stated anniversary by the survey date. Equally, these data are exactly what they claim to be: the proportion of each marriage cohort who had reached their stated anniversary by the survey date. Thus, the problem is not with the measurement technology, but rather that it was used to construct estimates that are not particularly useful, reflecting as they do the influence of both marital disruption and the timing of marriages within a calendar year.

This rather confusing coding choice affects only the (italicized) bottom number in each column of each panel of Table 4.2 (except the fifth anniversary data, which are complete for all cohorts listed). And it is these unique estimates that yielded the (mistaken) impression that marital stability had fallen. Indeed, omitting the italicized numbers from Table 4.2 yields estimates of completed marital durations for each cohort that are both similar to those shown in Table 4.1, and consistent with the view that marriage has become more stable since the 1970s. The same issues do not affect the data shown in Table 4.1, because the report based on the 2001 SIPP only estimated survival rates for marriages that had all

³ While these five-year anniversary numbers are drawn from Table 4.2, data from the 2001 SIPP in Table 4.1 also suggest that the 1990–94 first marriage cohort were more likely to have celebrated their fifth anniversary than the preceding cohort (90.1% v. 87.6% for men; 86.9% v. 86.6% for women).

actually reached the relevant anniversary. Thus, how the data was coded and reported, rather than trends in marital disruption, explains the different patterns observed across recent Census data releases.

2. RE-ANALYSIS OF THE 2004 SIPP

The previous section points out that there were some flaws in the way the recent data were reported. We now turn to asking: What are the most recent trends in marital stability? In this section, we provide a few simple ways to better answer this question, using the recently released data from the 2004 SIPP. This analysis illustrates a consistent finding of falling divorce rates for couples married since the 1970s across several data sets.

There are two ways to correct the published data so that they only reflect trends in marital stability. The simplest correction involves dividing the affected numbers by 0.9. If one in ten marriages were not “at risk” to reach a particular anniversary, then this adjustment should yield a reasonable assessment of the true marriage survival rates. Note, however, that this only involves adjustments to the last assessed marital anniversary for each marriage cohort.

A second correction potentially affects the estimates for all the groups: we simply drop the last annual wedding cohort from each five-year grouping, and re-compute our estimates from the microdata.⁴ Thus, we compare, say, those wed from 1990–93 to those wed in 1985–88, rather than the previous 1990–94 v. 1985–89 comparisons. The advantage of this approach is that it yields actual survival estimates for each anniversary, and the method is consistent, ensuring that we can make valid time-series comparisons. We show the analysis for this latter correction in Table 4.3, although it should be noted that both corrections lead to similar conclusions.⁵

The pattern for the corrected numbers is starkly different from that released by the Census. Examining first marriages, the latest data for every anniversary up to the 25th anniversary now point to flat or slightly rising marital instability. Overall, these data suggest that the trough in marital stability occurred among those wed in the 1970s, and that subsequently there is a systematic pattern of slightly increasing marital stability. In the latest realized data, survival rates for marital durations between 25 and 35 years reflect marriages from the period during which divorce was rising sharply (in the 1970s and earlier). Thus, the pattern of increasing marital stability is not evident beyond the 25th anniversary. Turning to second marriages, we see that there is no clear pattern in

⁴ While information on the month of marriage and divorce is collected, it is not, unfortunately, included in the public use files. Because of this our estimates cannot simply exclude those whose anniversary occurred in the months following the survey. Instead, by dropping every fifth year from the analysis, we drop those who are at risk of having an important anniversary occur in the months following the survey.

⁵ An alternative correction would stick with five-year marriage cohorts, but change the cohort groupings so all members of the cohort were “at risk” of reaching the stated anniversary. Thus, we could compare the proportion of those wed from 1989–93 who celebrated a 10th anniversary with the proportion among those wed from 1984–88. Not surprisingly, this correction yielded estimates very similar to those shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Corrected analysis of 2004 SIPP marital histories: marriage survival rates

Sex and year of marriage	Number of marriages (in thousands)	Anniversary ¹							
		5th	10th	15th	20th	25th	30th	35th	40th
FIRST MARRIAGES									
Men									
1955 to 1958	3,048	97.1	90.3	80.9	75.5	71.8	68.7	66.3	63.1
1960 to 1963	3,695	95.9	85.4	77.1	70.2	65.1	62.5	60.2	57.6
1965 to 1968	4,754	91.5	79.0	69.6	64.5	60.9	57.9	54.9	(X)
1970 to 1973	5,641	89.6	75.5	65.6	58.5	53.9	51.9	(X)	(X)
1975 to 1978	5,573	89.0	74.7	65.1	60.1	55.4	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1983	5,979	90.5	75.4	66.7	61.2	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1988	6,142	91.0	77.8	68.8	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1993	6,521	90.2	78.9	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1995 to 1998	6,570	90.4	(X)						
Women									
1955 to 1958	3,816	95.0	89.6	81.4	74.5	69.3	65.6	61.3	57.0
1960 to 1963	4,368	94.4	84.3	75.4	68.2	62.3	58.0	54.4	51.1
1965 to 1968	5,522	91.1	76.9	66.7	61.2	56.1	52.7	49.4	(X)
1970 to 1973	6,405	89.2	73.0	62.1	55.9	50.9	47.8	(X)	(X)
1975 to 1978	6,084	87.7	71.9	62.3	56.7	52.6	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1983	6,581	87.6	72.1	63.2	57.6	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1988	6,290	87.5	73.7	64.3	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1993	6,882	88.6	77.3	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1995 to 1998	6,582	90.8	(X)						
SECOND MARRIAGES									
Men									
1975 to 1978	1,395	87.7	75.4	60.3	51.3	46.2	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1983	1,820	88.5	76.9	58.5	52.1	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1988	1,855	92.1	71.9	59.8	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1993	2,111	89.6	74.6	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1995 to 1998	1,940	90.6	(X)						
Women									
1975 to 1978	1,497	87.7	74.3	57.2	47.8	42.1	(X)	(X)	(X)
1980 to 1983	1,991	86.3	73.5	53.9	46.8	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1985 to 1988	2,197	87.5	67.6	54.5	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1990 to 1993	2,229	88.4	72.7	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
1995 to 1998	2,241	86.1	(X)						

Notes:

X Not applicable.

Adjusted by analyzing only the first four annual cohorts from each five-year marriage cohort.

¹ Percentage of people reaching stated anniversary for specified marital order.

Source: Authors' calculations based on Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2004 Panel, Wave 2 Topical Module.

the data, although in general second marriages have slightly higher dissolution rates. It is worth noting that there are fewer second marriages and thus the estimates are less precise.

Another advantage of constructing our own estimates is that we can assess the five-year survival of one more marriage cohort – those married between 1995 and 1998. The slightly higher survival rate of these marriages also appears consistent with the trend toward greater marital stability (although they are not statistically significantly different from the 1990–93 five-year survival rates).

In Figure 4.3 we show our corrected estimates of the marriage survival rates for men and women separately, estimated from the 2001 and 2004 SIPP, alongside the published Census numbers. As can be seen, our proposed correction yields estimates that are very similar to the 2001 SIPP, but, as expected, involves a much larger adjustment to the published 2004 SIPP numbers. It is reassuring to see the same pattern in the 2001 SIPP whether or not we impose our adjustment, and also to see the trends present in the 2001 SIPP also present in the corrected 2004 SIPP numbers. All told, it appears that those who wed subsequent to the mid-late 1970s have experienced greater marital stability than previous cohorts.

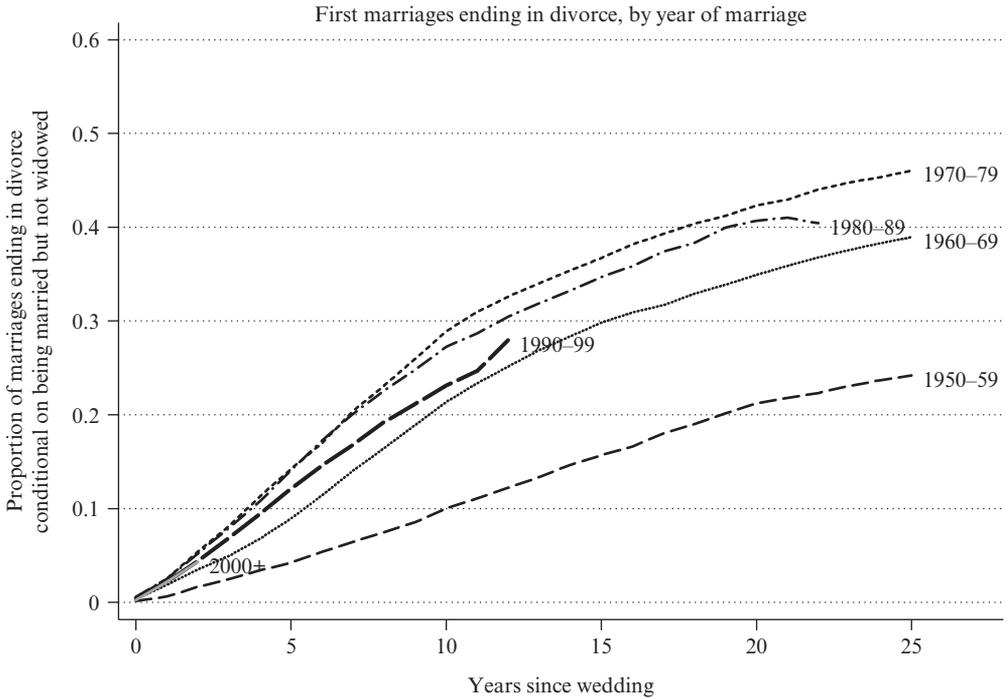
Marital disruption can be due to either death or divorce, so in order to look closer at divorce probabilities, Figure 4.2 updates Figure 4.1, so that it now represents data from the 2004 SIPP rather than the 2001 SIPP. (In order to ensure that these figures are not affected by the coding issues described above, neither figure includes data on marital status in the survey year.) The patterns described are remarkably similar in both data sets, and the evidence of declining divorce among more recent marriages is now even stronger.

It is likely that the much-cited claim that one-in-two first marriages will end in divorce will be realized for those who married in the 1970s. Thirty years after these marriages formed, 47.1% of them had ended in divorce.⁶ The more recent data give us greater confidence in forecasting that subsequent marriages are less likely to end in divorce. Indeed, the divorce probabilities of the 1990s marriage cohort are now only a little above those who married in the 1960s, when comparing couples with similar marriage durations. It is worth noting that these cohorts will likely live longer than previous cohorts, giving them a longer period of time to be “at risk” of divorcing. Thus, declining divorce probabilities at each year of marriage yield a reasonably clear forecast of longer and more stable marriages, although rising longevity complicates any assessment of the relative likelihood of marriage ending by divorce rather than death.

3. DISCUSSION

We have pointed to a subtle, but important issue in how divorce rates are measured and reported. Even simple statistics can easily be misunderstood and, as in this case, were used

⁶ Note that a limitation of constructing these estimates from retrospective marital histories is that the sampling frame is not all of those married in the 1970s, but rather those who wed in the 1970s, but survived until the survey date. Thus, differential mortality by marital status may confound these data, particularly when analyzing marriage cohorts from several decades prior to the survey.



Notes: We show the relevant data where we can calculate cumulative divorce probabilities for at least three of the ten annual marriage cohorts represented by each line. We exclude data on marital status in 2004, because the survey did not account for all divorces in that year.

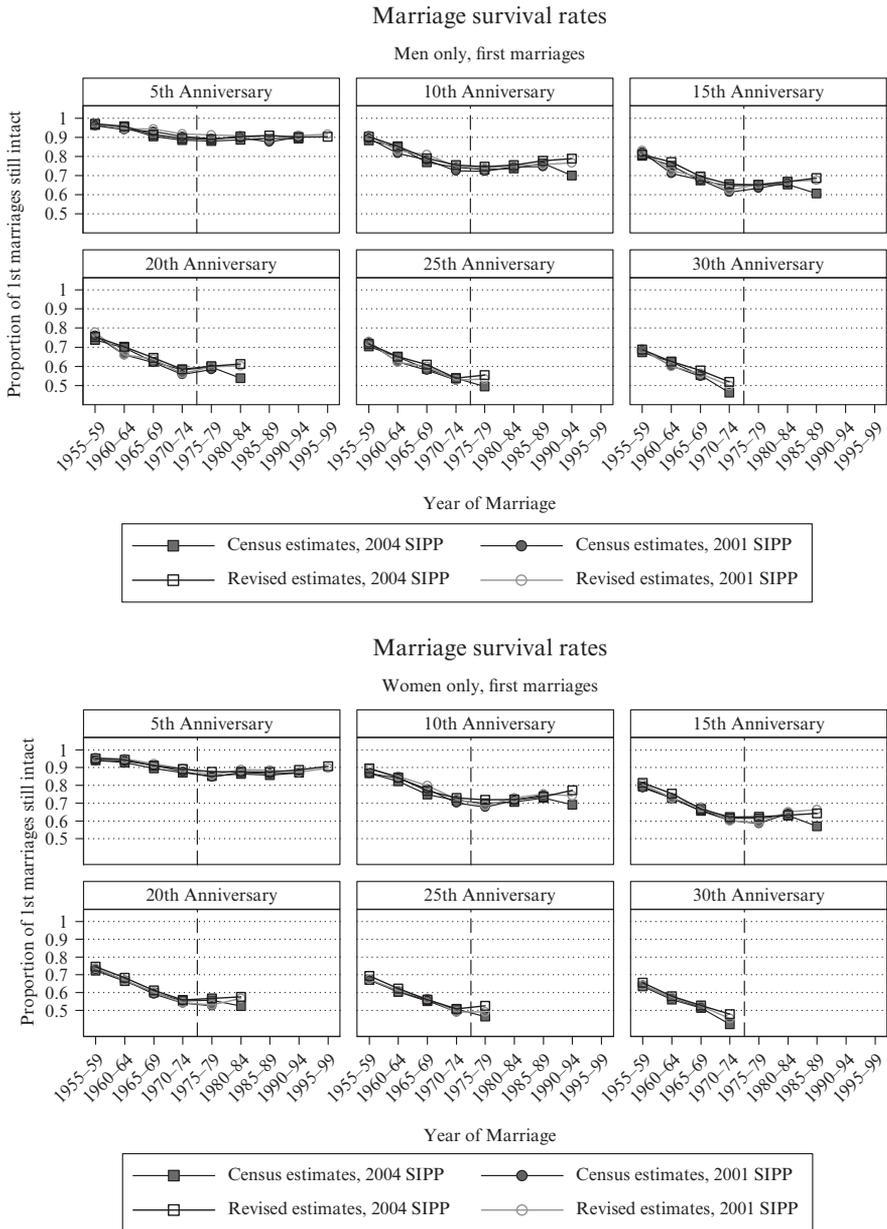
Source: Authors' calculations based on Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2004 Panel, Wave 2 Topical Module.

Figure 4.2 Cumulative divorce probabilities, 2004 SIPP

to suggest (falsely) that divorce is rising. Conversely, our results point to a decrease in divorce following the tumultuous 1970s. We can also turn to additional sources of data that provided further evidence on this front.

If divorce were actually rising, then one would expect to see the impact across several data sources. As such, Figure 4.4 shows the evolution of divorce rates, as measured by the state-by-state counts of divorce certificates compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics. These data quite clearly show a strong downward trend in divorce since the late 1970s or early 1980s, and certainly no uptick in recent years. These data are themselves somewhat imperfect, as the number of states reporting divorce data has been declining, and as Eckberg (1995) showed quite vividly (in the context of homicide statistics), changes in reporting areas can distort underlying trends. However, our (unreported) analysis of state-by-state divorce rates revealed that the observed aggregate decline in divorce is not driven by changes in the composition of reporting states.

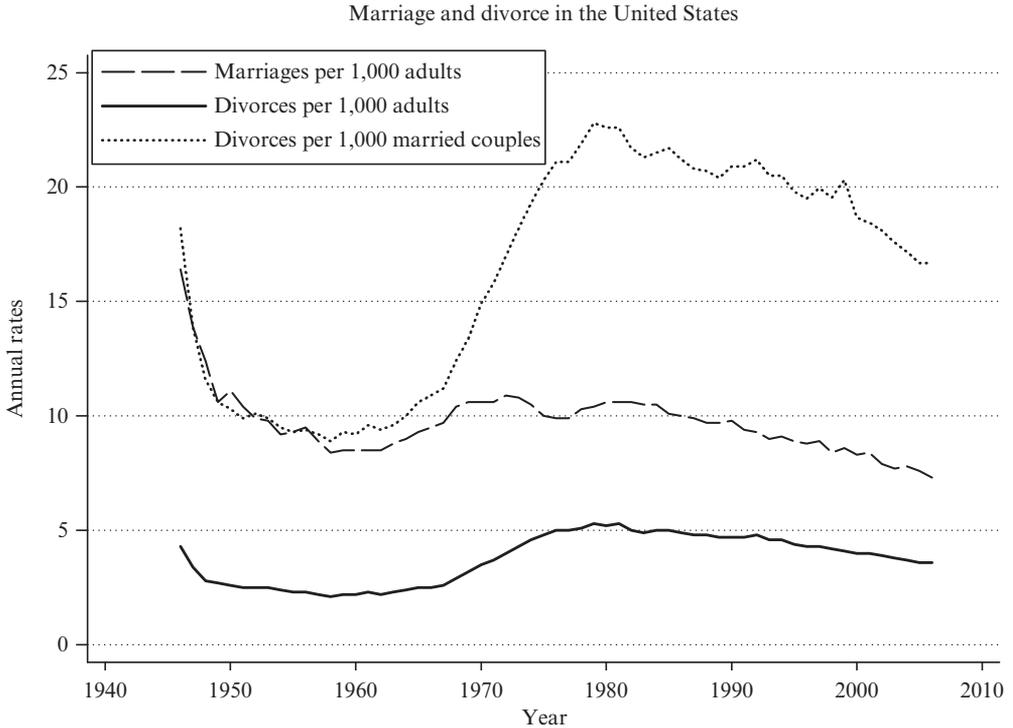
If the divorce rates show declining divorce and earlier longitudinal data supported a



Note: Revised estimates are based upon the first four annual marriage cohorts within each five-year grouping.

Source: Census estimates from U.S. Census Bureau (2005) and U.S. Census Bureau (2007). Revised estimates are authors calculations based on microdata from the 2001 and 2004 SIPP Panels, Wave 2 Topical Module.

Figure 4.3 Marriage survival rates



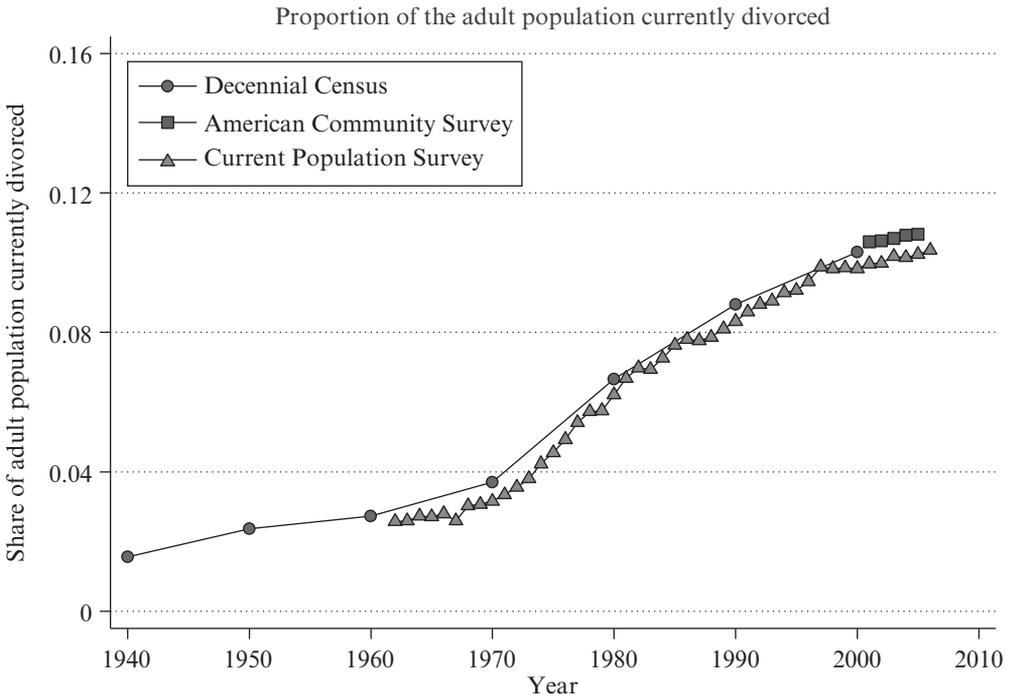
Source: Data from 1946–88 from Carter et al. (2006); 1999–2003 from U.S. Census Bureau (2007b); 2004–06 from Eldridge and Sutton (2007).

Figure 4.4 Vital statistics measures of annual marriage and divorce rates

story of decreasing divorce, then why were so many analysts (including many leading family scholars quoted in the press) easily misled into believing that divorce has been rising? A possible reconciliation is based upon stock–flow dynamics. While it is difficult to find data on the stock of ever-divorced people (most surveys only ask about current marital status), examining the currently divorced population in Figure 4.5 shows that the number of people currently divorced has continued to rise long after the divorce rate peaked; indeed, the population of current divorcees appears to have leveled off only in recent years.

Changes in the stock of ever-divorced people reflect the rate at which people divorce and the rate at which those already divorced die. Analyses of the stock of those whose current marital status is divorced are further affected by the rate at which the divorced remarry. Only in recent years are those whose marriages dissolved during the period of highest divorce rates approaching the peak years of mortality. This explains why the stock of divorcees has continued to rise even decades after the flow of new divorces slowed.

Indeed, as Figure 4.4 shows, the risk of divorce, at least measured relative to the



Source: Author's calculations based on data from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series 1940–1960 1% samples, 1970 Form 2 sample, 1980–2000 5% samples; American Community Survey data from 2001–05, and March CPS data from 1962–2006.

Figure 4.5 Evolution of the stock of divorcees

married population, peaked in 1979. And while the decline in marriage is also surely part of the reason for the fall in divorce, our analysis in Figure 4.3 shows that those marriages that did occur were less likely to end in divorce. However, as Figure 4.5 illustrates, the proportion of the population who are divorced continued to rise through the 1980s and 1990s, and has only begun to level out in recent years. Thus, despite lower divorce rates and greater marital stability today, a larger proportion of our social networks are divorcees than at any point over the past century.

Recognizing that the 1970s was an anomalous decade for marriage is important for understanding broader changes in the family. While the causes of the dramatic rise in the divorce rate between 1965 and 1975 are still being debated, it is likely that part of the explanation lies in the transition in family life and gender roles occurring through the 1960s and 1970s. Couples marrying after the 1970s were better calibrated about how their family life would play out and were likely better matched for a life together based upon modern gender roles. As such, they were likely in a better position to have their marriages survive than were those marrying in the 1970s.

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