

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1yQNPHq>

Edited by David Leonhardt

Follow Us:

Get the Upshot in your Inbox

The Upshot
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

How We Know the Divorce Rate Is Falling

DEC. 3, 2014

Justin Wolfers

The divorce rate has been falling for more than three decades. That fact is not news, but it still surprises a lot of people. And so when Claire Cain Miller wrote about the trend for The Upshot this week, several readers asked for more detail, with some citing a [Huffington Post](#) article questioning the official Census Bureau data on the trends. As one of the researchers who has studied the issue, I thought it worth digging deeper into the data.

In one sense, divorce is easy to measure, because it leaves a paper trail, in the form of divorce certificates on file at county courthouses. At the end of each year, most states ask each county how many new divorce certificates they've issued, and the states report the total number to the federal government. The federal government then calculates a divorce rate, measured as the number of divorces per thousand people.

By this measure, the divorce rate peaked at 5.3 divorces per thousand

people in 1981, before falling to 4.7 in 1990, and it has since fallen further to 3.6 in 2011, the most recent year for which data are available. Of course, the marriage rate has also fallen over this period. But even measuring divorces relative to the population that could plausibly get divorced — the number of people who are married — shows that divorce peaked in 1979, and has fallen by about 24 percent since.

Because these data theoretically count all divorces, many researchers regard them as the gold standard for evaluating divorce trends. However, Sheela Kennedy and Steven Ruggles, two researchers at the University of Minnesota, have recently argued that this reliance may be unwarranted. They note that federal funding for states to collect detailed divorce data was cut in 1996, and they suspect that in the time since, some states may have become less vigorous in chasing down divorce numbers from every county courthouse. If the government has grown more lax in counting divorce certificates, the measured divorce rate might fall even if actual divorce rates were rising.

It's a plausible conjecture, but the bulk of evidence suggests it is not the case. The decline in measured divorce rates is not confined to just a few states. Rather, divorce has fallen since 1990 in every one of the 44 states that report such data. Given that these data come from 44 independent statistical agencies, it seems unlikely that all of them have seen their statistical systems deteriorate in sync. Indeed, the decline in divorce is also evident in those states that have high-quality systems for collecting divorce data. Likewise, the divorce rate within New York State has trended downward over the past 15 years in 56 of its 62 counties, suggesting that the aggregate decline isn't being driven by underreporting from any specific county courthouse.

It's even possible that reporting has *improved* in some states as they have adopted electronic records systems. In those states, the official statistics actually understate the recent decline in divorce, because the data for earlier years underestimated the extent of divorce then. It's far less likely that the decline in divorce rates reflects a statistical anomaly than that it reflects a fundamental shift in American family life.

Other data point to the same conclusion. An alternative approach to

measuring family change comes from asking people about their marital histories. Pollsters ask people if and when they've been through a divorce, which allows for a measure that relies on data entirely different from the divorce certificates. Reassuringly, this alternative measure also indicates that divorce has been declining over the past few decades.

These marital histories also offer a useful way of disentangling the extent to which fewer divorces are the result of marriages becoming more stable, rather than simply reflecting fewer marriages. If marriages are becoming more stable, then couples married in recent years should be more likely to celebrate their 10th anniversary together than couples married in earlier decades. And indeed, 76 percent of people whose first marriages occurred in the early 1990s went on to celebrate their 10th anniversary, up from 73 percent for those married in the early 1980s, and 74 percent for those married in the early 1970s. Marriages have become more likely to endure, although they are not yet as stable as those that occurred in the 1960s.

One problem with survey data like this is that if people don't respond to all of the questions asking about their marital history, researchers are forced to fill in missing items with their best guess. Ms. Kennedy and Mr. Ruggles worry that this statistical guesswork — known as imputation — makes these data less reliable. It is a reasonable concern, for sure, but just as imputation might lead researchers to overstate the decline in divorce, it could also lead them to understate it. The difficulty is that we can never know the divorce histories of those who refused to divulge that information to surveyors.

The crucial point is that our two best ways of estimating divorce trends are imperfect, yet both suggest that it has been falling fairly continuously over recent decades.

A third measure, though only available for recent years, also points in the same direction. For the past few years, the government has asked people in the American Community Survey whether they have gotten divorced in the past 12 months. At any one time, the answers to this question tend to overstate the divorce rate. To see why, imagine that I asked you whether you had gotten a promotion in the past year. You might say yes if your promotion was recently

announced, even if you had yet to start working in the new job. Likewise, you might say yes if the promotion was announced 13 months ago but you had started the job, say, 11 months ago. The “past 12 months” formulation tends to lead to overcounting.

With divorces, people who are only partway through the process might say yes, even if their divorce has not been finalized, as might people whose divorce became official 11 months ago. Sure enough, careful studies by the Census Bureau show that around one-tenth of those who say they’ve gotten divorced in the past year did not actually have their divorce granted during that year.

Nonetheless, even if these survey data get the level of divorce wrong, they can get the trend right — so long as we’re careful to compare similarly biased data over time. Consistent with the other data, the American Community Survey suggests that divorce has fallen by about 11 percent since these data were first collected in 2008. This decline is all the more striking given the stress that the recession must have put on so many marriages.

So why do some people worry that all of these data sources are wrong and that divorce isn’t actually declining? Because when you compare one data series today with a different data series from the past — apples and oranges, as the saying goes — the picture can get confusing. In particular, Ms. Kennedy and Mr. Ruggles contrasted the number of divorce certificates issued in 1980 with the number of women roughly 30 years later who told surveyors that they had gotten divorced in the previous 12 months; they then concluded that divorce is rising. You can probably see the problem with this comparison: The higher divorce rates recorded in recent surveys most likely reflect the tendency of the “last 12 months” question to overestimate divorce. The data from 1980, based on counts of divorce certificates, doesn’t have the same bias.

Another common error is to note that the proportion of the population who are currently divorced has risen. But family life is not static, and divorce is often followed only a few years later by remarriage, making current marital status a particularly poor proxy for the risk of divorce. Worse, such comparisons effectively confuse a stock (the number of people divorced at a

point in time) and a flow (the number of new divorces within a period of time). It's a bit like trying to measure the crime rate by the number of people who are in jail. Just as America's jails have swelled even as crime has declined, so have the ranks of the divorced grown even as divorce has become less common. The stock of people who have been divorced, like the stock of prisoners, reflects not only recent trends, but also decisions made decades ago, like that of the actor Jack Nicholson, who chose never to remarry after his 1968 divorce.

There is no question that the data on divorce, like so much social-science data, are imperfect. It's a good thing that researchers are pointing out these imperfections, because we will get a clearer picture of reality if we can get better data. But the best evidence all points in the same direction: The old claim that one in two marriages ends in divorce is no longer true.

Of course, we don't know what will happen in the future. Even if recently married couples are divorcing at lower rates, there is some reason to think that divorce rates among long-married couples will rise. After all, it's a depressing demographic certainty that every marriage eventually ends; the only question is whether it is in death or divorce. If medical progress continues to succeed at helping fewer marriages end in death, more may end in divorce.

This (mostly happy) pattern largely explains the one clear rise in divorce that we do see: the so-called gray divorce, among couples like Al and Tipper Gore who separate at later ages. As life expectancy continues to increase, gray divorce will most likely continue to rise, even if divorce at earlier ages continues to decline. You can think of the two trends as part of one larger trend, in fact. Gray divorce may rise precisely because so many marriages are surviving longer.

Justin Wolfers is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter at @justinwolfers

The Upshot provides news, analysis and graphics about politics, policy and everyday life. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter. Sign up for our weekly newsletter [here](#).

© 2014 The New York Times Company