

Divorced couples aren't the half of it



Commentator Betsey Stevenson says that, despite all the bad news this year, something positive is going on -- the U.S. divorce rate is now the lowest it's been in 30 years.

TEXT OF COMMENTARY

Kai Ryssdal: There has been no shortage of big news this year. Health care reform, rebuilding from the rubble of the financial crisis, and whether or not Tiger Woods and his transgressions will kill golf. That one might not really count as a major story for a program about business and the economy. But it's too good a segue to pass up. We've been asking some of our regulars for their lists of economic news that didn't make the headlines. Commentator Betsey Stevenson points that despite all the bad news this year, something positive is going on.

BETSEY STEVENSON: Just about every day this year, we've been assailed by the latest statistics telling yet another bad news story.

But there's been a good news story that hasn't received its due: divorce is down. This year will record the lowest divorce rate since 1970. You might be tempted to credit this decline to the economy. After all, who can afford to get divorced these days? But that's missing the bigger picture.

Today's low divorce rate is part of a steady decline that has now lasted 30 years. Yes, you heard that right, divorce has been falling for the last three decades. Unfortunately media reporting on divorce just hasn't kept up.

It is true that around one in two marriages among my parents' generation ended in divorce. But they were unusual; they married in the tumultuous 1970s, and their generation has been more likely to divorce than either their parents', or their children's generations.

So, is it still true that one in two marriages will end in divorce? Probably not, but we'll have to wait and see.

The early numbers look good. My generation has been celebrating more anniversaries than our parents. I've crunched the numbers, and those who married in the 90s were about one-fifth less likely to have divorced in the first decade of marriage than those who married in the 70s. Those who wed in the noughties are also divorcing at slower rates.

Now there's still a chance that half of these recent marriages will end in divorce, even with a lower annual divorce rate. You see, it's a sad mathematical fact that all marriages must end by either death or divorce. And in this horserace, divorce may pull even, but only because advances in health care mean that death is slowing.

So we might live long enough to see half of our friends marriages end in divorce. But the good news is that those marrying today are more likely than ever to be physically able to celebrate a gold or platinum wedding anniversary and more of my generation is striving to keep their marriages as healthy as their hearts.

RYSSDAL: Betsey Stevenson is an assistant professor of economics at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.