

What You Should Know About the CDC's 2002 Study on Marriage and Cohabitation

On July 24th, 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a new report, "Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States." This fact sheet provides additional information about the report, which can be downloaded from the CDC website.

- Many of the media reports about the study exaggerate the link between cohabitation and divorce. The study found a small difference (9%) in the rate of divorce in the first ten years for spouses who cohabited before marriage compared to those who didn't. However, many other studies find that most or all of this link is explained by the differences between the kinds of people who cohabit and those who don't. Since most couples who marry today are already living together, those who don't are a more religious, conservative group with different divorce patterns. As sociologist Judith Seltzer wrote in a 2000 article in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, "Claims that individuals who cohabit before marriage hurt their chances of a good marriage pay too little attention to this evidence."

- The study did not demonstrate that cohabitation causes people to have a higher divorce rate. The two factors are correlated, but that doesn't mean that one necessarily caused the other. As CNN.com reported, "One of the study's authors said the report did not draw the conclusion that living together before marriage was the cause of the relationship ending. 'It may not be the experience of cohabiting but the people who cohabit,' said William Mosher. 'What we're saying about that is that we think that couples who cohabit before marriage may have different values than couples who do not,' he said."

- The researchers found much larger differences in divorce rates for other factors they considered. While there was a 9% difference in the ten-year divorce rate between couples who cohabited and those who didn't, the difference was 30% by family income (couples with an income of \$50,000 or more are much less likely to get divorced), 24% by age at marriage (women who marry when they're 25 or older are less likely to divorce), 14% by religion (religious women are less likely to divorce), and 13% by education (women with education beyond high school are less likely to divorce).

- The study considered only women ages 15-44.

- If you're living together now or plan to in the future, and you hope to get married someday, there are things you can do to increase the chances that your marriage will last. Check out our article, "Ten Ways To Improve Your Chances for a Good Marriage After Cohabitation," and the book *Unmarried to Each Other: The Essential Guide to Living Together as an Unmarried Couple*, by the founders of the Alternatives to Marriage Project.

