



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 18, 2011

Cohabitation Has Replaced Divorce as Biggest Threat to Children

A new report from a pair of organizations dedicated to strengthening the institution of marriage shows that an alarming number of U.S. couples are deciding to have children without being married — a decision that places those children at risk for physical, emotional, financial, and other social problems.

The study, released by the [National Marriage Project](#) and the [Institute for American Values](#), found that while, toward the end of the 20th century, “divorce posed the biggest threat to marriage in the United States,” in today’s world “the rise of cohabiting households with children is the largest unrecognized threat to the quality and stability of children’s family lives.”



The report noted that “because of the growing prevalence of cohabitation, which has risen fourteen-fold since 1970, today’s children are much more likely to spend time in a cohabiting household than they are to see their parents divorce.” In fact, according to the [National Survey of Family Growth](#), compiled by the federal Centers for Disease Control, by the age of 12 a staggering 42 percent of children have lived with co-habiting parents, a number that dwarfs the 24 percent of children who have lived with divorced parents.

Statistics show that “more children are currently born to cohabiting couples than to single mothers,” the report noted. “Another 20 percent or so of children spend time in a cohabiting household with an unrelated adult at some point later in their childhood, often after their parents’ marriage breaks down. This means that more than four in ten children are exposed to a cohabiting relationship.”

Dr. W. Bradford Wilcox of the National Marriage Project and the study’s lead author observed that “the divorce rate for married couples with children has returned almost to the levels we saw before the divorce revolution kicked in during the 1970s. Nevertheless, family instability is on the rise for American children as a whole. This seems in part to be because more couples are having children in cohabiting unions, which are very unstable.”

Wilcox told [National Public Radio](#) that the marital conflict depicted in the classic 1979 film [Kramer Vs. Kramer](#) is no longer representative of relationship dysfunction in America. It’s now “*Kramer vs. Kramer vs. Johnson and Nelson*,” he quipped. “We’re moving into a pattern where we’re seeing more instability, more adults moving in and out of the household in this relationship carousel.”

According to Wilcox, Americans who grew up during the 1970s and ’80s divorce epidemic were conditioned to hold marriage at arms’ length, postponing it even after having children. But research shows that cohabitating couples are twice as likely to split as married couples. “Ironically,” he told



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NPR, “they’re likely to experience even more instability than they would [have] if they had taken the time and effort to move forward slowly and get married before starting a family.”

NPR cited [another study](#) showing that a quarter of American women with more than one child had those children with multiple partners. Psychologist John Gottman, co-author of the National Marriage Project report, said that such instability has a major negative impact on kids of those relationships. “Both in externalizing disorders, more aggression, and internalizing disorders, more depression,” he said, “children of cohabiting couples are at greater risk than children of married couples.”

The study, which surveyed more than 250 peer-reviewed journal articles on marriage and family life in the U.S. and elsewhere, noted that children of cohabiting parents are more likely than those from traditional married families to face such emotional and social problems as drug abuse, depression, dropping out of high school, physical and sexual abuse, and poverty.

As reported by the [Catholic News Agency](#), the study also found that “family stability is part of a class divide. Children from college-educated homes have seen their family lives stabilize, while children from less-educated homes have seen their lives become increasingly unstable.”

Observed Wilcox: “There’s a two-family model emerging in American life. The educated and affluent enjoy relatively strong, stable families. Everyone else is more likely to be consigned to unstable, unworkable ones.”

The report noted that a surge in couples cohabitating and having children began to dominate poor communities in the late 1960s, but the trend has now migrated into lower middle-class families in America. “Out-of-wedlock births among white women with a high school diploma rose more than sixfold in recent decades,” the [New York Times](#) cited the report, “jumping to 34 percent in the late 2000s, from 5 percent in 1982. In contrast, the rate for white college graduates stayed flat at about 2 percent.”

“While births to white women in cohabiting relationships rose by about two-thirds from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, the proportion jumped by about half for black women and nearly doubled for Hispanic women, though that increase was affected by a large influx of immigrants,” continued the *Times*, quoting Sheela Kennedy, a research associate at the Minnesota Population Center. “There’s growing evidence that families that would be unstable anyway are just skipping marriage,” said Kennedy, suggesting that cohabitation may be as much a symptom of instability in the lives of children as it is a cause.

Nonetheless, the study’s authors insisted, an intact marriage between a child’s biological parents remains the “gold standard” for successful families. “Children are most likely to thrive economically, socially, and psychologically, in this family form,” declared the Institute for American Values in a statement about the study.

The study’s authors contended that the benefits of marriage are not reserved for just the wealthy and educated, but “extend to poor, working-class, and minority communities, despite the fact that marriage has weakened in these communities in the last four decades.”

The study concluded that whether society succeeds or fails “in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern and an issue of paramount importance if we wish to reverse the marginalization of the most vulnerable members of our society: the working class, the poor, minorities, and children.”



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