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Marriage and Divorce: Changes and their Driving Forces

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Abstract

We document key facts about marriage and divorce, comparing trends throughout the past 150 years and outcomes across demographic groups and countries. Over the past 150 years, divorce rates have risen over the past 150 years, they have been falling for the past quarter century. Marriage rates have also been falling, but more strikingly, the importance of marriage at different points in the life cycle has changed, reflecting a rising age at first marriage, rising divorce followed by high remarriage rates, a combination of increased longevity with a declining age gap between husbands and wives. Cohabitation has also become increasingly important, emerging as a common step on the path to marriage. Out-of-wedlock fertility has also risen, along with declining "shotgun marriages". Compared with other countries, marriage maintains a central role in American life. We present evidence on some of the forces causing these changes in the marriage market: the rise of the birth control pill and women's control over their own fertility; sharp changes in wage structure including a rise in inequality and partial closing of the gender wage gap; dramatic changes in home production technologies; and the emergence of the internet and new matching technology. We note that recent changes in family forms demand a reassessment of theories of the family and argue that consumption complementarities may be an increasingly important component of marriage. We discuss the welfare implications of these changes.

Keywords

Abortion, Age, AIDS, American Community Survey, Bargaining power, Bargaining power within marriage, Birth control, Census, Children, Cohabitation, Cohabiting couples, Contraception, Demography, Divorce, Divorce rates, Divorce trends, Economic family, Educational attainment, Employment, Family change, Family dissolution, Family formation, Family forms, Family life, Female employment, Female labor participation, Fertility, First marriage, Gender, HIV, HIV/AIDS, Household production

Household structure, Internet dating, Labor force, Labor market, Labor supply
Life expectancy, Longevity, Marital aspirations, Marital behavior, Marital dissolution
Marital expectations, Marital formation, Marital history, Marital life cycle, Marriage
Marriage markets, Marriage trends, Modern family life, Mortality, Out-of-wedding
childbirth, Poverty, Premarital household formation, Premarital households,
Remarriage, Sexual activity, Sexual behaviors, Sexual exclusivity, Sexual initiation
Sexual partners, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Sexually Transmitted Infections
Shotgun marriages, Statistics, STD, STI, Survey Data, Technological innovation
Timing of marriage, Unemployment, Unilateral divorce laws, United States,