

# The Myth of the High Rate of Divorce

*Psych Central*

A few years ago, my wife and I celebrated our 25th anniversary. It is the second marriage for both of us and the relationship has only grown stronger over the years, teaching me more about love and trust and dependence than I ever imagined.

Reaching this special “silver moment” spurred me to look around and think about the number of friends we have who also have great second marriages and led me to question the alleged statistic that more than 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce. I also thought about how many friends we have who are still in their original marriages and appear to be very happy. Thus, I decided it was time to do some research on divorce rates.

In the process of preparing for this article, I learned what I had long suspected. The commonly quoted numbers are overstated myths, the more accurate numbers reflect complex factors, and that our society really has two very separate divorce rates, a lower rate (by half) for college-educated women who marry after the age of 25 and a much higher rate for poor, primarily minority women who marry before the age of 25 and do not have a college degree. (Most of the research focused on women; the little I read about men suggested similar outcomes.)

## The Statistics

A false conclusion in the 1970s that half of all first marriages ended in divorce was based on the simple but completely wrong analysis of the marriage and divorce rates per 1,000 people in the United States. A similar abuse of statistical analysis led to the conclusion that 60 percent of all second marriages ended in divorce.

These errors have had a profound impact on attitudes about marriage in our society and it is a terrible injustice that there wasn't more of an effort to get accurate data (essentially only obtainable by following a significant number of couples over time and measuring the outcomes) or that newer, more accurate and optimistic data isn't being heavily reported in the media.

It is now clear that the divorce rate in first marriages probably peaked at about 40 percent for first marriages around 1980 and has been declining since to about 30 percent in the early 2000s. This is a dramatic difference. Rather than viewing marriage as a 50-50 shot in the dark it can be viewed as having a 70 percent likelihood of succeeding. But even to use that kind of generalization, i.e., one simple statistic for all marriages, grossly distorts what is actually going on.

The key is that the research shows that starting in the 1980s education, specifically a college degree for women, began to create a substantial divergence in marital outcomes, with the divorce rate for college-educated women dropping to about 20 percent, half the rate for non-college educated women. Even this is more complex, since the non-college educated women marry younger and are poorer than their college grad peers. These two factors, age at marriage and income level, have strong relationships to divorce rates; the older the partners and the higher the income, the more likely the couple stays married. Obviously, getting a college degree is reflected in both these factors.

Thus, we reach an even more dramatic conclusion: That for college educated women who marry after the age of 25 and have established an independent source of income, the divorce rate is only 20 percent!

Of course, this has its flip side, that the women who marry younger and divorce more frequently are predominately black and Hispanic women from poorer environments. The highest divorce rate, exceeding 50 percent, is for black women in high-poverty areas. These women clearly face extraordinary challenges and society would do well to find ways to reduce not just teen pregnancies but early marriages among the poor and develop programs that train and educate the poor. Those will not only delay marriage but provide the educational and financial foundation required to increase the probability of a marriage being successful. Early marriage, early pregnancy, early divorce is a cycle of broken families that contributes significantly to maintaining poverty. The cost to our society is enormous.

Here is some additional data about divorce in first marriages before moving on to the limited data available about second marriages. Divorce rates are cumulative statistics, i.e., they don't occur at a single moment in time but add up over the years of marriage and do so at different rates. After reviewing numerous sources, it appears that about 10 percent of all marriages end in divorce during the first five years and another 10 percent by the tenth year. Thus, half of all divorces are within the first ten years. (Keep in mind this is mixing the disparate college vs. non-college group rates.)

The 30 percent divorce rate is not reached until the 18th year of marriage and the 40 percent rate is not reached until the 50th year of marriage!

Thus, not only is the rate of divorce much lower than previously thought but at least half of all divorces occur within the first ten years and then the rate of divorce slows dramatically. Since the divorce rate for women married by 18 is 48

percent in the first ten years and that group, once again, is primarily poor, minority women, the rate for educated couples is much less during those first ten years.

No wonder the divorce rate in Massachusetts is the lowest in the country. We have the highest percentage of college graduates. That explains why I have so many first marriage friends!

Finding meaningful data about the divorce rates for second marriages was difficult. But knowing that the rate for first marriages has been grossly overstated and poorly understood for decades suggested a likely similar outcome for the data on second marriages.

One report indicated that the divorce rate for remarried, white women is 15 percent after three years and 25 percent after five years. This ongoing study indicated a definite slowing of the rate over time but did not have enough years measured to draw more long-term conclusions. However, it did indicate that the same factors with first divorces were at play here.

Age, education, and income levels were also highly correlated with the outcomes of second marriages. For example, women who remarried before the age of 25 had a very high divorce rate of 47 percent, while women who remarried over the age of 25 only had a divorce rate of 34 percent. The latter is actually about the same for first marriages and likely also would prove to be an average of different rates based socioeconomic factors.

Thus, my take on this limited amount of data is that divorce rates for second marriages may not be very different than those for first marriages. So my small sample of friends, who remarried older, had college degrees, and joint incomes, is probably not a distorted view of the success rate of second marriages.

## **Cohabitation**

In the course of gathering information about divorce rates, I came across a few articles describing the growing frequency of couples choosing cohabitation over marriage. I don't have any figures that I consider accurate enough to report on the percentage of cohabiting couples but a July 24, 2007 Boston Globe article on cohabiting parents sheds some light and raises some serious concerns about this trend.

I must admit a bias here. From my professional experience, I believe cohabiting couples are afraid of the commitment that marriage requires. Certainly a piece of this is what I stated at the beginning of this article, that the myth of the divorce rate has placed a dark cloud over the institution of marriage.

The reason for my concern is the following data reported in the Globe article. There is a marked increase in births to cohabiting couples, up from 29 percent in the early 1980s to 53 percent in the late 1990s. When you compare what has happened to those relationships when the child is 2 years old, 30 percent of the cohabiting couples are no longer together while only 6 percent of the married couples are divorced. This is another serious societal problem as it contributes to the U.S. having the lowest rate of all Western countries, 63 percent, of children being raised by both biological parents.

In addition, the general data suggests that cohabiting couples break up at twice the rate of married couples. Of course, this kind of simple statistic hides many complex factors with regard to who actually constitutes the population of cohabiting couples and the likelihood that many choose to live together with no real intention of permanence. However, my main point here is the concern that many couples may be choosing cohabitation over marriage because they actually believe that the institution of marriage is unhealthy and too risky, a conclusion that my review of divorce rates strongly disputes.

## **Conclusion**

The historical belief that 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce and that over 60 percent of all second marriages end in divorce appear to be grossly overstated myths. Not only is the general divorce rate most likely to have never exceeded 40 percent but the current rate is probably closer to 30 percent. A closer look at even these lower rates indicate that there are really two separate groups with very different rates: a woman who is over 25, has a college degree, and an independent income has only a 20 percent probability of her marriage ending in divorce; a woman who marries younger than 25, without a college degree and lacking an independent income has a 40 percent probability of her marriage ending in divorce.

Thus, factors of age, education, and income appear to play a significant role in influencing the outcome of marriages and that for the older, more educated woman, getting married is not a crapshoot but, in fact, it is highly likely to produce a stable, lifelong relationship.

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**APA Reference**

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