



RESEARCH BRIEF

Clarifying Confusion About Divorce Rates

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Why Do We Track Divorce Rates?

Statistics on marriage and divorce are of great interest to federal, state, and local public officials, researchers, and members of the general public. Stories based on these statistics—for example, reporting on whether divorce rates are rising or falling—often appear in the media and are considered key indicators of family strength and child wellbeing. However, people are frequently confused and misled by these data and think they are more reliable than they are.

The full brief aims to clarify the confusion and explain the complexities involved in counting divorce.

Where Do Divorce Statistics Come From?

There are multiple sources of data on family formation, which result in confusion and conflicting reports about divorce rates.

- **National Vital Statistics System** is a voluntary partnership between federal and state governments to record all the marriages, divorces, births, and deaths that occur each year.
- **National and State Surveys** are sponsored by federal or state agencies and capture multiple characteristics and behaviors of a representative sample of individuals at a single point in time and provide additional demographic and sometimes attitudinal information about marriage and divorce.

How Are Divorce Rates Calculated?

Several distinct measures used to track divorce in the general population are often cited incorrectly or used interchangeably, resulting in inaccurate or misleading reports. When the phrase “divorce rate” is cited it is important to know which type of measure is being used: Crude Divorce Rate, Refined Divorce Rate, Percentage of Divorced Adults, and Probability of Divorce (*for full definitions of these terms, see full brief*).

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Is the Divorce Rate Rising or Falling?

Whether the divorce rate is cited as rising or falling, in Oklahoma and elsewhere, depends on the source and the way the rates are calculated. Some studies conclude rates have steadily declined while others find rates have been rising:

- In 1990, the U.S. annual crude divorce rate was 5.0 (per 1,000 population) and fell steadily to 3.6 (per 1,000) in 2011, although the rate of decline slowed after 2000.
- Following the national trend, the Oklahoma (crude) divorce rate declined from 7.7 in 1990 to 6.6 in 1995 to 5.2 in 2010.
- A 2014 study concluded that rates of divorce have been relatively stable since the 1980s. Trends in divorce differ by age, however; divorces have increased among couples over age 35 and declined among younger couples. Age-standardized rates (that take into account the changing age composition of the population) show a general increase in divorce during this time.

What Are Better Ways of Measuring Program Success?

Researchers agree that divorce rates are not the only or the best way to assess the well-being of children or to evaluate the success of programs or initiatives designed to strengthen marriage, such as Project Relate. More important outcomes to track are family stability and parents' relationship quality.

Project Relate provides a wide range of preventive education services designed for couples, individuals, and youth throughout the family life cycle. These services aid Oklahomans developing relationship skills, making good choices, and learning when to get help. In partnership with its nationally renowned Research Advisory Group, Project Relate leaders regularly discuss using additional measures beyond divorce rates—such as improvements in parents' relationship satisfaction, negotiation and communication skills, and reductions in rates of reported domestic violence, child abuse and neglect—to assess the success of Project Relate's efforts. The program has seen success in several of these areas in rigorous evaluation studies conducted by national research teams.

PROJECT RELATE

Project Relate leads the nation in providing a free, statewide marriage education system that has reached over 400,000 Oklahomans. Project Relate is changing future generations by helping individuals and couples prepare for and sustain healthy relationships and marriages. Through the systematic, statewide deployment of its research-proven curriculum, Oklahomans are acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary for relationship resiliency and satisfaction. A comprehensive body of research is clear that adults and children will be the direct beneficiaries of the stronger, more stable families formed and supported by this effort and from a generation of youth and adults accustomed to being active learners and help-seekers for their most important relationships.

RESEARCH ADVISORY GROUP

Paul Amato, Ph.D.
 Bill Coffin, MA
 Philip Cowan, Ph.D.
 Carolyn Cowan, Ph.D.
 Ronald B. Cox, Jr., Ph.D., CFLE
 Kathryn Edin, Ph.D.
 David Fournier, Ph.D.
 Sarah Halpern-Meekin, Ph.D.
 Steven Harris, Ph.D.
 Ron Haskins, Ph.D.
 Alan J. Hawkins, Ph.D.
 Christine Johnson, Ph.D.
 Pamela Jordan, Ph.D., RN
 Howard Markman, Ph.D.
 Theodora Ooms, MSW
 Galena K. Rhoades, Ph.D.
 Scott Stanley, Ph.D.
 Brad Wilcox, PhD

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Counting Divorce Is Not a Simple Matter; Caution Needed

Statistics on marriage and divorce are of great interest to federal, state, and local public officials, researchers, and members of the general public. Stories based on these statistics—for example, reporting on whether divorce rates are rising or falling—often appear in the media and are considered key indicators of family strength and child wellbeing. However, people are frequently confused and misled by these data and think they are more reliable than they are. Individuals do not always understand differences between the data sources or the different ways that divorce rates are calculated.

This brief, the first in a new series about Project Relate, aims to clarify the confusion and explain the complexities involved in counting divorce. It suggests that the many flaws in past and current data warrant caution before coming to conclusions about divorce rates. It then summarizes what we can say with some confidence about divorce and marriage trends across the nation and in Oklahoma. Finally, the brief concludes that divorce rates are not the only or the best measure to assess the success of initiatives designed to strengthen family life for children.

Who Keeps Track of Marriage and Divorce?

When people refer to the divorce rate, they most often are referring to the estimates of crude divorce rates published by the National Center on Health Statistics (NCHS). For the reasons discussed below, however, these figures should be interpreted cautiously.

There are two main sources of data about marriage and divorce—vital records and national and state surveys. Each of these resources has strengths and weaknesses.

- 1. The National Vital Statistics System (NVSS)**, administered through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), is a voluntary partnership between the federal and state governments. The system keeps track of all the births, deaths, marriages, and divorces that occur annually in each state. Marriages and divorces are legal events between two people witnessed and registered by county officials. County clerks issue marriage licenses and provide copies to State Health Departments. County Courts grant divorces and send records to the appropriate authorities at the state level. States report total counts of marriages and divorces granted in each year to the federal government, which compiles them and publishes total counts in National Vital Statistics Reports.
- 2. National and State Surveys** are often sponsored by federal or state agencies and provide additional demographic (and sometimes attitudinal) information about marriage and divorce.

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NATIONAL SURVEYS PROVIDING INFORMATION ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Decennial Census. The Census short form, given to most households every ten years, provides the total count of all people in the population but does not include questions related to marital status. The long form (given to 1 in 6 households) includes questions about current marital status but does not include questions on people's marital histories.

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is conducted monthly by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics and samples about 60,000 households. Its March supplement contains data on marital status and other family characteristics.

National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), conducted periodically since 1973 by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, collects information on families, fertility, and health from a national survey of women 15–44 years of age. In 2002, men were added to the survey for the first time.

Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is conducted by the Census Bureau and is a key source of data about cash and non-cash income, taxes, and program participation. The survey also collects some family characteristics data. SIPP data were used for several years by researchers to calculate divorce rates, but data quality problems (especially high nonresponse rates) led to considerable underreporting of divorce and thus is no longer recommended for this purpose.

The American Community Survey (ACS), launched in 2005, is conducted on an ongoing basis by the Census Bureau in every community in the United States. It has become an especially important data source on economic needs and conditions such as housing and transportation. Each year the ACS samples around three million households. In 2008, new marital questions were added, asking individuals whether they were married, divorced, or widowed within the past 12 months, as well as whether they had ever married, the number of times married, and the year of the most recent marriage.

State and County Surveys

At the beginning of the 21st century, concern about the negative impact of current trends in divorce and marriage on children led a handful of state governments— including Oklahoma, Utah, Florida, Kentucky, Texas, Tennessee, California, Michigan¹—to conduct their own state or county-wide surveys. These surveys asked questions about marriage and divorce behavior, attitudes, values, and marital quality. The results were sometimes used to help plan programs and policies that seek to strengthen marriage.

¹ These reports available at: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research-and-policy/marriage-facts/state-and-local/index.aspx>

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Key Findings From Oklahoma's 2001 Statewide Survey on Marriage & Divorce²

- Oklahomans marry an average of 2.5 years younger than the national age at first marriage. Since those who marry young are more likely to divorce, Project Relate developed preventive educational curriculum offered statewide to high school students.
- 77% of low-income respondents said they would consider using relationship education to strengthen their relationships and marriage. This led Project Relate to adapt and make available its educational programs for low-income individuals and couples.

How Good Are These Data?

Despite the general usefulness of vital statistics data, they are limited with respect to understanding divorce. In 1996, the federal government stopped funding the collection of vital statistics on divorce. Since then, most (but not all) states have continued to send annual counts of divorce to the federal government, although attention to data quality and completeness has declined. By 2005, six states (including California, the largest state) had stopped reporting divorce data to the federal government. For this reason, divorce rates based on vital statistics are incomplete.

Additional examples of confusing and misleading divorce vital statistics reported in the past are:

- In 2001 and 2002, Oklahoma reported a sharp drop in statewide divorce rates. Upon investigation, it was learned that the two counties with the highest populations did not report their divorce data to the state government in these years.

- In 1998, Michigan reported divorce and marriage rates that were twice as high as the national rates. This was apparently because they counted the number of *persons* married and divorced in that year rather than the number of marriage and divorce *events*. This was an error and was later corrected.

The American Community Survey represents a considerable improvement over vital records and other surveys and is currently the best source of data on divorce. Because the question on divorce was added only in 2008, however, the ACS cannot be used to describe long-term trends. As more survey rounds are conducted, the ACS should be able to estimate reliable trends in divorce. However, in 2014 the U.S. Census Bureau announced their intention to drop the question on divorce (along with several other family-related questions) from the ACS. A final decision on this issue is currently pending.

Reports using different surveys can come to seemingly opposite conclusions about trends in family formation due to differences in definitions, time periods and measures used. This can even be the case when the same data source is used. For example, below are two very different media headlines referring to a new Census report issued in 2001: "The Nuclear Family Rebounds, Census Bureau Reports" (U.S. Commerce Department Press Release 4/01) and "The New Single Mom—Why the Traditional Family is Fading Fast" (*Newsweek* 5/28/01).

How Are Divorce Rates Calculated and How Do They Differ?

The divorce rates commonly cited in publications or by the media may be referring to crude divorce rates, refined divorce rates, ratios of divorces to marriage, the percentage of divorced individuals in the population, or estimates of the probabilities of a marriage ending in divorce. These are distinct measures, but are often referenced interchangeably or used inaccurately (see text box on page 4 for definition of these terms).

² Johnson, C.A., Stanley, S.M., Glenn, N.D., Amato, P., Nock, S.L., Markman, H.J., et al. (2002). Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce (SO2096 OKDHS). Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

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COMMONLY USED MEASURES RELATED TO THE DIVORCE RATE

- **Crude Divorce Rate (CDR)** is the number of divorces per 1,000 people in the population that occur that year. This is the measure reported by the federal NCHS (and most generally referred to by the public), but it can be misleading because children and single adults are not at risk of divorce.
- **Refined Divorce Rate (RDR)** is the number of divorces per 1,000 married women in a given year. This rate is preferable to the CDR because the denominator includes only those people at risk of divorce (i.e., married women. Although married men also are at risk of divorce, women are generally used as the reference group because their reports tend to be more reliable.)
- **Percentage of Divorced Adults** is sometimes referenced in media reports as if it were a “divorce rate.” This usage is not correct, however. The percentage of divorced people in the population depends not only on the frequency of divorce but also on the frequency of remarriage following divorce. Remarriage following divorce has declined substantially in recent years. For this reason, the percentage of divorced adults in the population can increase even if the frequency of divorce remains constant.³
- **Probability of Divorce (Risk of Divorce).** A common misconception is that the risk of divorce can be estimated based on the ratio of total divorces to total marriages in a given year. However, people who marry and divorce in the same year represent different “marriage cohorts.” People who marry in different years (for example, 2010 versus 1990) are likely to differ in many respects, including their probability of eventually divorcing. To estimate the probability (or risk) of divorce, one must examine marriage cohorts (based on year of marriage) separately. Demographers have developed a sophisticated “life-table method” of estimating the overall risk of divorce that incorporates the timing of marriages and divorces into their analyses.

What Factors Affect Divorce Rates?

Income, education, relationship quality, attitudes, beliefs, policies, and legal factors can all affect divorce rates—but so can other demographic behaviors and the age at which they occur. If the (crude) state divorce rate declines, it may be a result of fewer people getting married in the state, people getting married at older ages, or divorced people not remarrying but deciding to live together. All of these factors create a smaller pool of people “at risk” of divorce.

Likewise, if the state divorce rate rises, it could be because a higher percentage of people are getting married, marrying at earlier ages, or remarrying more often—creating a larger pool of people “at risk” of divorce.

³ Brown, S. L., & Lin, I. (2013). Age variation in the remarriage rate, 1990-2011. (FP-13-17). National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/family_profiles/file134878.pdf

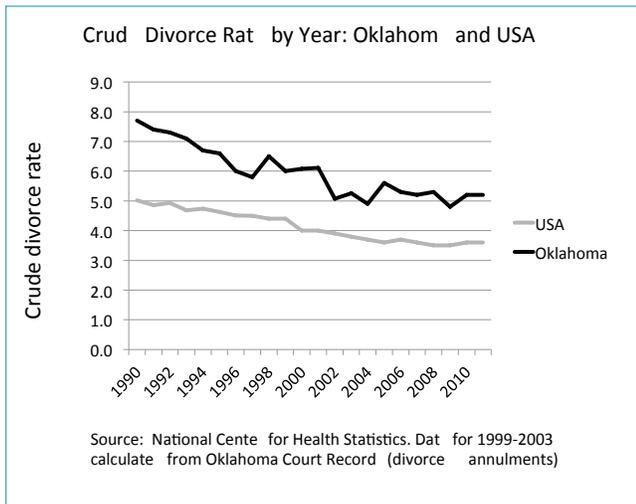
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Is the Divorce Rate Rising or Falling?

The divorce rates published by the NCHS and other sources suggest that divorces have been steadily declining since 1990 and are now relatively stable. However, not all demographers agree with this conclusion.

Vital statistics data show that in the last three decades U.S. crude divorce rates have steadily declined, as have the rates in Oklahoma (as shown in Figure 1).

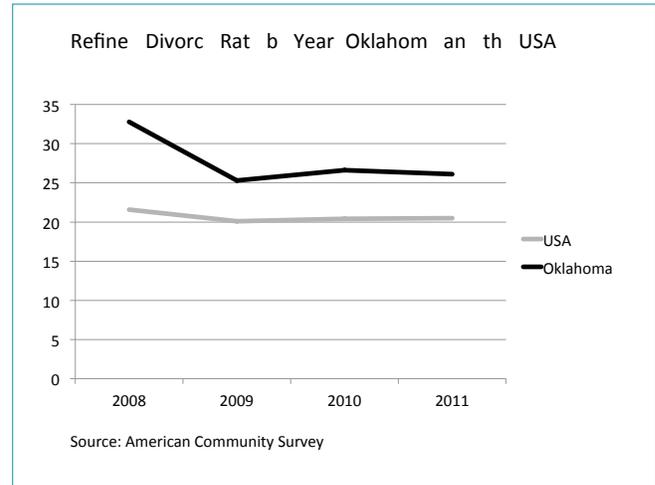
Figure 1



- In 1990, the U.S. (crude) annual divorce rate was 5.0 (per 1,000 population) and fell steadily to 3.8 (per 1,000) in 2010, although the rate of decline slowed after 2000.
- Following the national trend, the (crude) divorce rate in Oklahoma declined from 7.7 in 1990 to 6.6 in 1995 to 5.2 in 2010.

The ACS shows that between 2008–2010 the U.S. divorce rate was essentially flat (about 20 divorces per every 1,000 married women). However, in Oklahoma the divorce rate declined 2008–2009 and has remained stable since then as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2



In a paper published in 2014, Kennedy and Ruggles argued that “both vital statistics and survey data on divorce after 1990 underestimate recent marital instability.”⁴ When they calculated age standardized divorce rates (which adjust for the rising age of the married population), they found that rates have increased. Specifically, divorce rates doubled among couples over age 35. But among younger couples, divorce rates declined.

One can argue that the divorce rate is declining, increasing, or staying the same, depending on what source of data is used (e.g., vital statistics versus the ACS) and whether one adjusts for changes in age composition. This discussion demonstrates the difficulty and complexity of counting divorces and estimating divorce rates from available data.

⁴ Kennedy, S. & Ruggles, S. Breaking Up Is Hard to Count: The Rise of Divorce in the United States, 1980–2010, Demography, 2014.

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What Is the Likelihood of a Marriage Ending in Divorce?

Couples getting married these days have a 42–47% chance of eventually getting divorced (depending on various assumptions). If permanent separations are included, then the odds of union disruption are close to 50:50.⁵

However, these probabilities are averages. We know that some groups of people are at much higher risk of divorce than others. For example, individuals with less education, whose parents were divorced or never married, and who marry as teenagers are much more likely to get divorced than those with a college degree, whose parents stayed together, and who marry in their twenties.

Is Divorce the Most Important Family Indicator to Focus on if We Care About Child Wellbeing?

Project Relate concludes that the divorce rate is not the only or the best way to measure the success of Project Relate. The quality and stability of the parents' relationship are the more important outcomes.

Project Relate's initial declared goal in 2000 was to reduce the state's very high rates of divorce and thereby improve children's lives. We now know a lot more about the flaws in the divorce data. Moreover, there are additional important reasons for measuring other outcomes.

- Sometimes divorce is necessary and better for the children and spouse(s) than staying in a high conflict or abusive marriage. Thus in some individual cases, divorce may be the best outcome.
- Rising divorce rates are no longer the main reason for entry into single parenthood. Increasing numbers of children are being born to unmarried adult parents, age 20–29. (Teen births, however, have declined by 52% since the early nineties). At the time of birth, about half of these unmarried couples live together and another third are romantically involved. Five years later, only one third are still together.⁶ The parents who have split

typically form new unions and have additional children by them.

- Children raised in these “fragile families” experience enormous instability, economic insecurity, and complexity in their family relationships as a result of what is called “multiple-partner parenting.” We know that the quality and stability of their parents' relationship are generally the most important factors for children's wellbeing.⁶

For these and other reasons, the Project Relate decided early on to broaden its mission and put forth a more preventive and comprehensive goal—namely, to help more children grow up with their two married, biological (or adopted) parents who have a stable, healthy, and committed relationship. To pursue this goal, the Project Relate has engaged in a wide range of preventive education and support activities for youth, single adults, unmarried, married, and divorcing couples.

While collecting divorce outcomes for program participants is a worthwhile practice, the county/state divorce rate data for the broader population is not useful as the primary measure of program success. Instead, experts recommend using other measures of family stability and relationship quality. Measures being discussed by the Project Relate's Research Advisory Group include length of time a child lives with both biological parents, parents' relationship (marital) satisfaction, their improvements in negotiation and communication skills, and reductions in rates of reported domestic violence and child abuse and neglect. There are challenges related to measuring these outcomes, as well, across the entire population, but Project Relate has used its participation in rigorous evaluations to measure progress in these areas within families receiving services.

**For additional resources see
Marriage and Divorce Relates Statistics:
Collections by Topic at HealthyMarriageInfo.org**

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⁵ Schoen, R. & Canudas-Romo, V. (2006). Timing effects on divorce: 20th century experience in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 749–758.

⁶ McLanahan, S. & Beck, A. N. Parental Relationships in Fragile Families, *Future of Children*, 20(2), Fall 2010.

⁷ Amato, Paul R. The Impact of Family Formation Change on Cognitive, Social and Emotional Wellbeing of the Next Generation, *Marriage and Child Wellbeing, Future of Children*, 15(2), Fall 2005. Available online at www.futureofchildren.org