



# Family Focus On...

## Divorce and Relationship Dissolution

Issue FF36

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## What is the Divorce Rate? A Complicated Answer to a Simple Question

Throughout the 20th century, particularly since the 1960s, divorce has become a reality for a large number of American families. One of the most frequently asked questions of family professionals is “What is the divorce rate?” This question turns out to be more complicated than expected, because there are several ways in which it can be answered. (More on that later.)

An additional complication is that the federal government stopped collecting detailed data on divorce in January, 1996. The government took this step largely to save money. The National Center for Health Statistics continues to publish an annual “divorce rate,” although several states (including California) do not participate in data collection or dissemination. Consequently, the rate excludes the population of these states.

The “crude divorce rate” is based on the number of divorces that occur in a given year divided by the total population of participating states x 1000. This figure reflects the number of divorces in a given year for every 1000 people. This statistic rose from 2.2 in 1960 to a high of 5.3 in 1981 and then declined to 3.8 in 2003. These figures suggest a 28% decline in the divorce rate since 1981. The crude divorce rate, however, can be distorted by age changes in the population and by cohort changes in the timing of marriage and divorce.

This statistic also captures a “period” effect. Consequently, these year-to-year tallies can

be affected by specific historical events. For example, in 1946 the number of divorces spiked dramatically, after which the divorce rate dropped precipitously. The number of divorces during this particular year was the highest ever recorded up to that point in U.S. history. Social scientists and historians agree that the wartime turmoil for families and the resultant upheaval involved in returning soldiers’ reintegration into domestic life introduced extraordinary stressors into marriages—and consequently produced an unusually high number of post-war marital breakdowns among couples.

An alternative way of framing the question—one that provides the information that most people really want to know when they ask about the divorce rate—is “What is the overall likelihood of divorce for couples throughout a lifetime?” This figure is called the “cohort” divorce rate. Calculating this figure is more complicated—but it provides a reliable and easily understood picture of what is happening.

Using the cohort approach, family demographers look across the U.S. population for marital disruptions as they occur in separate birth cohorts over time. Using a camera analogy, this allows scientists to develop not just a snapshot but a time-lapsed photographic picture in answering this question. This result, which represents a lifetime probability of divorce for a particular birth cohort, is less susceptible to particular historic events, shifts in the age distribution of the population, and cohort changes in the

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## A COMPLICATED ANSWER

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timing of marriage and divorce. In an August 2006 article in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Robert Schoen and Vladimir Canudas-Romo calculated cohort rates for various birth years and discovered that the probability of marriages ending in divorce increased more or less continuously until 1990 and then stabilized. Their statistical model predicts that between 43% and 46% of current marriages will end in divorce. If one includes separations that do not end in divorce, then the current rate of marital

disruption is about 50%—a figure that has not declined during the last quarter century. For more information, see Schoen, R. & Canudas-Romo, V. (2006). Timing effects on divorce: 20th century experience in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 749–758. ■

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