

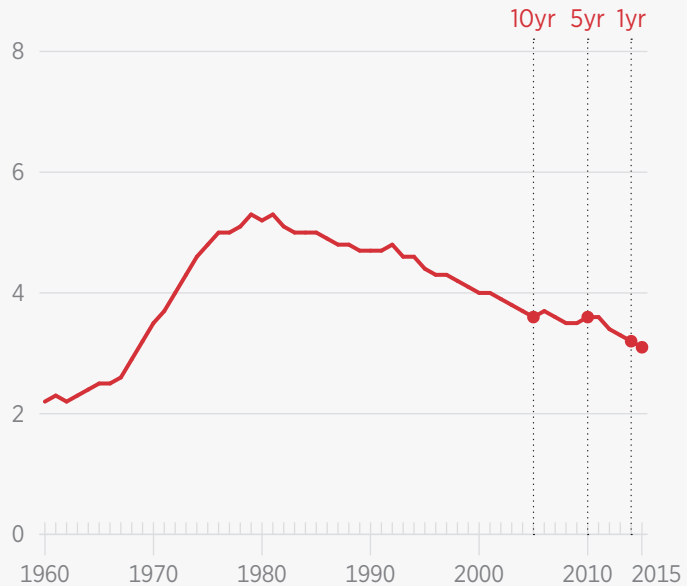
## Divorce Rate

From 2005 to 2015, the divorce rate remained relatively stable, decreasing by 0.5 divorces per 1,000 people.

**NOTE:** Data in this chart are based on divorces per 1,000 total population (the crude divorce rate). In 1996, the National Center for Health Statistics began collecting only provisional divorce rate data, based on preliminary counts of divorce certificates from states. See Indicator Sources on p. 102 for further detail.

**SOURCE:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.

NUMBER OF DIVORCES PER 1,000  
TOTAL POPULATION



# Marriage: Neither Rocket Science nor Child's Play

Helen M. Alvaré

Divorce is not in the news today as often as it was in the past, although rates remain stubbornly high. Gone are the frequent reports of the 1990s and early 2000s about the mounting evidence of divorce's effects on children and communities. Capturing the headlines instead is the rise of practices and habits associated with a greater likelihood of divorce. Unless we understand and respond to these practices and habits, it is unlikely that we will get sufficient traction in the important work of reducing America's divorce rates and the misery often associated with divorce.

Lifelong marriage is not rocket science, but neither is it child's play. It requires patience, discipline, kindness, practical realism, commitment to the value of commitment, and

habits that reinforce these skills and attitudes. It is no wonder, therefore, that studies continually show a negative relationship between enduring marriage and such practices as cohabitation, premarital sexual relations, premarital childbearing, and pornography. It is also no wonder that young people from households without stable marriage role-modeling struggle to attain "til-death-do-us-part" marriages for themselves.

Today, the majority of Americans cohabit before marriage, even though decades of research show a generally negative correlation with higher divorce rates.<sup>1</sup> They cannot see past their own "logic" to the reality of cohabitation. "Testing" partners seems the safer path in a world of divorce. Substituting surveillance for

the will to persist in love and sacrifice, however, becomes a way of thinking, even if the couple did not start with that mindset. Cohabiting couples are less likely to pool their resources or interact with extended family. As with the tendency to marry much later, cohabitation has become both a *sign* and a *cause* of an indisposition to commit.

Serial premarital sexual partnerships also undermine the opportunity for lifelong marriage.<sup>2</sup> There is both good news and bad news here. Overall, even though fewer high school and college students report nonmarital sexual activity,<sup>3</sup> Americans today have more prior partners than in the past.<sup>4</sup> Vanishingly few enter marriage with no prior sexual partners (5 percent) or only their future spouse (22 percent).<sup>5</sup> Yet rates of divorce are lowest for those with no or just one prior sexual partner.

Moreover, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Americans are also marrying later (the median age is over 27 for women and nearly 30 for men), increasing the risk of nonmarital sexual partnerships and divorce, because delaying marrying until the early 30s is associated with a higher risk of marital breakup. In fact, for each year beyond 32, the odds of divorce increase by 5 percent per year on average. More Americans are bumping up against or breaking through this 30-something marriage age ceiling.<sup>6</sup>

Pornography is also increasingly associated with relationship troubles, including greater divorce risks—interestingly, especially if married women watch it.<sup>7</sup> Habits begin early. Young children increasingly access pornography by accident or on purpose. One of the most popular hard-core porn sites today reports 2016 traffic

at a rate of 64 million visits *per day*.<sup>8</sup> A 2006 study showed that 34 percent of people between 18 and 49 viewed porn online, and 84 percent acknowledge watching pornographic films.<sup>9</sup>

In the seemingly endless genre of college campus “hookup” books, young women report being asked to participate in more and more degrading sex based on the pornography habits of male students. Some seek to “measure up” to porn stars. They report that these early experiences color their later relationships: Sex can seem unappealing, and the ability of couples to talk with one another or to risk opening their hearts to a potential spouse can be negatively affected.<sup>10</sup>

We are racking up decades and generations of practices associated with the increased risk of divorce. Intergenerational and “grey” divorce rates (over 50 and over 65, respectively) are a growing fact of life. Despite occasional dissenters who insist that private sexual choices leave no wake, the empirical data point overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. Research also points to divorce as a source of female poverty and troubling economic and racial gaps.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, we know a lot more today about how divorce begins in a marriage and the tools that might curb it.<sup>12</sup> We are beginning to collect helpful information about which marriage-strengthening programs work or don’t work and why.<sup>13</sup> It is time again to incorporate this vast trove of knowledge directly into marriage education, political speech, public and private programs, and popular culture.

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