

Are Cohabiting Unions Lasting Longer? Two Decades of Change in the Duration of Cohabitation (1980-2004)

Extended Abstract

One of the most remarkable changes in family life in the past quarter century has been the growth in cohabitation. It is well established that cohabitation has become ubiquitous, the share of women in their early thirties who have ever cohabited nearly doubled from 40 percent in the late 1980s to nearly three-quarters in the late 2000's (Manning 2013). A key defining feature of cohabiting unions is their relatively short duration; however, little empirical work has examined, as cohabitation become more common, the shift in the duration of cohabiting unions. Drawing on the National Survey of Growth, we examine the duration of two cohabitation cohorts spanning a twenty year period, cohabiting unions formed in 1980-1984 and 2000-2004. This study focuses on differentials in the stability of both premarital and postmarital cohabitation. Given the variation in the experiences in stability of cohabitation (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011), shifts in the duration of cohabitation are estimated based on marital history, presence of children, race/ethnicity, and education.

Background

The growth in cohabitation has been well documented and has been referred to as a cohabitation revolution. The increase in cohabitation has required that scholars re-conceptualize family life across the age spectrum from teenagers to young adults to older Americans (Brown, Lee and Bulanda 2006; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Manning and Cohen 2014). The interest in cohabitation is high in part because of the pace of change in cohabitation. It changed from a minority to majority experience over a short time span. As cohabitation has become more common the characteristics of cohabitators and their unions have changed. Cohabitators are a less select group of individuals than they were a quarter century ago, but nonetheless remain distinct from marrieds. Cohabitators are on average younger, lower levels of education and employment, less often have children present than marrieds (e.g. Joyner et al. 2013).

A challenge in studying cohabitation has been that while it has become widespread, on average it does not last long. Based on the work by Bumpass and Kennedy (2008) the average duration is often cited as 18 months in duration. Thus, at any given point in time there may not be many individuals cohabiting, but a high proportion have spent some time in a cohabiting union or 'ever' cohabiting. Taken together, cohabitation is not a long duration union but appears to have a substantial influence on the family lives of adults and children (Brown 2004).

Compared to many other industrialized countries where cohabitation is more institutionalized, cohabiting union in the US has been and is still short-lived (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). However, the past few decades has shown important changes in the relationship between marriage and cohabitation. In the 1980s, more cohabiting unions ended in marriage than dissolution (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Research suggests a reversal of this trend by the early 1990s when cohabitation became increasingly less stable due to lower transitioning to marriage among cohabitators (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Towards the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the lengthening of cohabitation combined with the decline in transition to marriage from

premarital cohabiting union. The results were more cohabiting unions of longer durations. More recent evidence showed continued decline in the proportion of cohabiting unions ending in marriages (Guzzo 2014; Kennedy and Bumpass 2011). Between 1997-2001 and 2002-2007, the proportion of cohabitators separating instead of marrying or continuing to live together increased (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011).

Previous studies of stability of cohabiting unions leave important gap in the knowledge of this emerging institution. Compared to most of its antecedents, the present study expands the time interval between the cohabiting cohorts analyzed, spanning two decades of change. Secondly, the cohorts of cohabitators in this study were comparable, especially in terms of age and selection. Lastly, we extend the existing literature by analyzing the trends in stability of both premarital and postmarital cohabitation.

Increased rate of union dissolution (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014), declining remarriage rate (Teachman 2008), and optimism about repartnering among previously married Americans (Cherlin 2009) have paved ways for increasing risk of postmarital cohabitation in the US. In fact, increase in postmarital cohabitation offsets much of the decline in rate of remarriage over the past decades (Raley and McNamee 2011), particularly among recent cohorts (Wu and Balakrishnan 1994). Fewer than half of women who remarried in the 1980s reported having cohabited with their second husbands (Bumpass et al. 1991) but more than two-thirds of more recent cohorts of women did (Teachman 2008). Individuals with divorce experiences are more accepting of cohabitating unions (Cunningham and Thornton 2005) and cohabitation provides more affordable access to the benefits of coresidential unions (Furstenberg 1996) while at the same time offering some of the advantages of singlehood (Brown 2005). Not only are divorcees increasingly opting for cohabitation over remarriage, but they also tend to form those unions quickly. In the early 2000s, a study of recent divorce-filers showed that one year after filing for divorce, about one-quarter of adult parents had formed new cohabiting unions (Anderson et al. 2004). Though the increase in postmarital cohabitation has been widely documented, most prior work on postmarital cohabitation has focused on fertility (Brown 2000) or relied on earlier data (Bumpass, Sweet and Cherlin 1991), or outside the US context (Wu 1995). The present study seeks to examine the trends in the stability of postmarital cohabiting unions in the US between the 1980s and the 2000s.

Knowledge of changes in the stability of cohabiting unions is important for several reasons. First, it provides us with a broader perspective on the institutionalizing cohabitation and its changing roles in the US. Understanding the trends in transitions from premarital cohabitation to marriage serves as a lens into the evolving relationship between cohabitation and marriage. Further, cohabitation is increasingly assuming the traditional role of marriage as a viable context of childbearing and child rearing. In fact, the recent growth in unmarried childbearing in the US is driven mostly by the shift from marital to cohabiting births (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). As greater proportion of American children spend parts of their childhoods in cohabiting unions (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011), it becomes increasingly important for researchers to document stability in these unions. Experience of parental cohabitation not only

affects child outcome (Brown 2010), it also influences subsequent marital trajectories (Raley and Wildsmith 2004).

In this paper, we examine the correlates of stability in cohabiting unions as well as the patterns and differentials in stability of cohabiting unions during a period of rapid socioeconomic and attitudinal changes in the US – 1980-2004. We analyze how individual's background characteristics – race/ethnicity, mother's education, childhood family background and other covariates of stability of cohabiting unions – age at first cohabitation, presence of children, and educational attainment, influence the risk of terminating cohabitation by marriage or by dissolution. A key distinguishing factor is considering premarital and postmarital cohabitation separately.

Data and Methods

We utilized data from cycle 4 and the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a cross-sectional survey of reproductive aged women (aged 15-45) living in various households in the US. The survey which is being conducted by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC), the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), and other supporting agencies, provides valuable information about union formation, union dissolution, fertility patterns, and other aspects of family life in the US. Details of the data collection procedures have been documented elsewhere (see US Department of Health and Human Services 1994). Between January and August 1988 (NSFG cycle 4), about 8450 noninstitutionalized women of all marital statuses were interviewed. About two decades later and as part of the NSFG 2006-2010 wave of data collection, about 12279 provided similar information to those collected in the cycle 4 of the survey.

Our analyses focus on premarital and postmarital cohabitation. Our preliminary findings and sample description are based on trends in stability of first premarital cohabitation. We will next consider postmarital cohabitation. We recognize that the age cap of the NSFG will prevent broad generalizations of postmarital cohabitation, but it will speak to postmarital cohabitation changes among young and midlife adults. In this study, we employed the life table techniques to examine trends in the stability of first premarital cohabiting unions consummated between 1980 and 1984, and two decades later, between 2000 and 2004. In the two waves of the NSFG (cycle 4 and the 2006-2010) employed in our analyses, women provided detailed histories of their union formation and dissolution, including the start and end dates of each union. This information allows us to estimate the duration of time (in months) spent in first premarital cohabiting union regardless of how the cohabitation ended.

About 3,032 women interviewed in 1988 (NSFG cycle 4) had cohabited with at least one partner. Of these ever-cohabited women, 741 experienced post-marital first cohabitation and were therefore excluded from our initial sample. We further limited our sample to a single cohort of women who formed their first cohabiting unions between January 1980 and December 1984. This restriction constrains our analytical sample to about 632 women. Lastly, one respondent did not provide valid information about her educational attainment and was therefore dropped from the analysis. Our sample of first premarital cohabitators from the cycle 4 of the NSFG comprises

of 631 women aged 17-44 who formed their first premarital cohabiting unions between 1980 and 1984.

In attempt to capture the changes in stability of first premarital cohabiting unions over a period of twenty years, we estimated the duration of cohabiting unions formed by the cohort of women who consummated their first premarital cohabiting unions between 2000 and 2004 using the 2000-2010 NSFG. There were about 6,450 ever-cohabited women in the 2006-2010 NSFG of whom about 462 cohabited only after their first marriages ended. Another 4376 women commenced their first cohabiting experiences before January 2000 or after December 2004. By limiting our analyses to women who reported first premarital cohabiting unions formed between 2000 and 2004, our sample size generated from the NSFG 2006-2010 shrunk to about 1,612 women aged 16-44. The combined sample from both waves of data includes 2,243 women aged 16-44. The sample for our analysis of stability of postmarital cohabitation includes both first and higher order cohabitation following the dissolution of first marriage.

For women who reported ever cohabiting with a partner prior to marriage in the NSFG, the duration of their first premarital cohabitation was constructed from the reported start and end dates of the cohabiting unions corresponding to their first premarital cohabitations. A woman is identified as having had a birth prior to her first premarital cohabiting union if she satisfies either of two conditions: (1) if the date of birth of her first biological child precedes her reported start date of first cohabitation or (2) if the date of outcome of any of her reported pregnancies that resulted in live births falls in between the start and end dates of her first premarital cohabiting union.

Respondents' reports of their racial/ethnic group identification in the NSFG were recoded into the following categories: Hispanic (single race), non-Hispanic White (single race), non-Hispanic Black (single race), and "non-Hispanic other or multiple" racial/ethnic groups. Although we included women who identified with the "other" racial/ethnic category in other parts of our analyses, we only compare the stability of first premarital cohabiting unions among Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, and non-Hispanic Black women.

We classified women into four educational categories - less than high school degrees (1), high school degrees or GED (2), some college, including 2-year degree (3), or bachelor's degree or higher (4). A dichotomized measure of mother's highest educational attainment allows us to compare trends in stability of first premarital cohabiting unions among women whose mothers attended college and those whose mothers or mother figures did not. We also examined possible differences in the first premarital cohabitation experiences of women from intact family backgrounds and those whose parents were separated while they were 14 years of age.

We applied the techniques of multiple decrement life table to estimate women's probability of transitioning out of first cohabiting unions either through separation or through marriage. We followed each first cohabitation formed within the time-frame being examined over the period of five years. An individual is censored if she remains in her first cohabitation at the end of the fifth year or till the date of interview.

In the second part of our analyses, we estimated women's risks of marrying or separating from their first cohabiting partners in a series of discrete-time logistic regression models. Each woman with a history of first cohabitation, contributed person-years, measured in discrete intervals of months, from the start date of her first cohabitation, until the date she married, dissolved the union, or was censored. This approach will be extended to postmarital cohabitation.

Preliminary Results

Bivariate Results

As indicated above, though we plan to analyze the trends in stability of both premarital and postmarital cohabitation, we only presented our preliminary findings based on changes in first premarital cohabiting unions in this abstract.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of our focal variables. The average duration of first premarital cohabitation increased by as much as 50 percent, from 18 months to 27 months, between 1980-1984 and 2000-2004. Also, in line with studies reporting declining selection into cohabiting unions in recent years (e.g. Manning and Cohen 2012), the later cohorts of first premarital cohabitators in this study are older than their counterparts from the 1980s. Our study also reaffirms the increased childbearing and childrearing within cohabiting unions found in previous analyses (e.g. Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). The proportion of cohabiting women with children almost doubled across the two cohorts. Apart from the increased Hispanic representation in the NSFG, the racial/ethnic composition of our sample changed little between 1980-1984 and 2000-2004. Women's educational attainments were also fairly comparable across the study period.

Table 2 presents our life table estimates of cumulative probability of surviving till first, third, and fifth year among first premarital cohabiting unions formed between 1980-1984 and 2000-2004. Our estimates from the 1980s slightly differ from those of Bumpass and Sweet (1989) who used the 1987/1988 NSFH data due to differences in the cohabitation cohorts selected for the two studies. Although, still relatively short-lived, the increasing stability of cohabitation in the US is evidenced in the large increase in the share of cohabiting unions lasting for more than a year. While fewer than half of earlier cohorts of cohabitators in this study survived their twelfth month anniversary, more than two-thirds of the more recent cohabitation cohort did. Similarly, the proportion of cohabiting unions surviving until the end of the fifth year increased from less than 10 percent in the early 1980s to about one-fifth in the early 2000s.

The lengthening of first premarital cohabitation over the past two decades cut across the different sociodemographic groups. However, during the study period, cohabitators with children were in more stable unions than those without children. Childless cohabiting unions in the 2000-2004 cohort were shorter than the 1980-1984 cohorts of childless cohabitators. Also, white cohabitators in both cohorts dissolved their unions more quickly than non-whites. We found increasing educational divergence in the stability of cohabiting unions over time. By the early 2000s, education played a more important role in determining the stability of cohabiting unions that survived beyond the first year, with college-educated cohabitators most likely to dissolve their unions and those with less than high school degrees lasting for longer duration. Virtually all first

premarital cohabiting unions formed by college-educated women terminated by the end of the fifth year.

Table 3 displays the trends in the competing risks of ending first premarital cohabitation by marriage and dissolution. As shown in the table, the increased duration of cohabiting unions reported above is attributable almost exclusively to the declining rate of transitioning to marriage among cohabitators. Three out of every five women married their first cohabiting partners within five years in the early 1980s but only two out of five women did so two decades later. There was virtually no change in the probability of separation after the first, third, and the fifth year, between 1980-1984 and 2000-2004. The later cohort of cohabitators (2000-2004) were as likely to marry as they were to separate, 41 percent married by the end of the fifth year and 40 percent separated.

We found some changes in the role of having premarital birth on the stability of first premarital cohabiting unions over time. In the 1980s, both the childless cohabitators and those with children were more likely to marry than to separate, though the probability of marriage was higher for those with no premarital birth. By the early 2000s, cohabitators with children were less likely to marry and more likely to separate whereas their childless counterparts exhibited higher probability of marriage and lower probability of separation. In both 1980-1984 and 2000-2004, Hispanic cohabitators were more likely to marry than to separate whereas dissolution was the common exit from first premarital cohabitation among black women. Although cohabiting unions among white women had higher risks of transitioning to marriage than separation in 1980s, they were as likely to dissolve as they were to result in marriage in the early 2000s. Yet, greater proportion of white cohabitators married their partners in both cohorts than their racial minority counterparts. For the majority of college-educated women in the US, premarital cohabitation was, and still is, a prelude to marriage. Nearly two-thirds of college-educated cohabitators transitioned to marriage in both 1980s and early 2000s. In contrast, there was a reversed trends in the probability of ending first premarital cohabitation by either marriage or dissolution among women with less than high school education between 1980-1984 and 2000-2004. Slightly more cohabiting unions formed by women with no high school degrees resulted in marriage than dissolution in the 1980s but by 2000s, separation became their dominant exit out of first premarital cohabitation. Only one-quarter of cohabitators who did not graduate from high school married their first premarital cohabiting partners among the 2000-2004 cohort.

Preliminary Conclusion and Next Steps

Our analyses showed increased duration of first premarital cohabitation that is due mostly to women's declining odds of transitioning to marriage from first premarital cohabiting unions. In our subsequent analyses, we will be examining the trends in the stability of premarital and postmarital cohabitation in a series of discrete-time multinomial logistic regression models. Our final paper will also present results of interactions between the predictors of duration of cohabiting unions and cohabitation cohort to document any changes in the effects of the predictors on stability of cohabitation. These results will contribute to research on the changing landscape of family life in the United States.

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Table 1. Summary of Study Variables

Variables	1980-1984	2000-2004
Duration of first cohabitation	17.77 (18.20)	27.46 (4.94)
Age	27.05 (4.13)	30.28 (24.42)
Presence of Children		
With Children	20.05	38.51
Without Children	79.95	61.49
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic	9.35	16.94
Non-Hispanic White	73.47	60.37
Non-Hispanic Black	13.64	14.26
Others	3.54	8.43
Educational Attainment		
Less than High Sch.	15.05	18.37
High Sch./GED	36.17	26.73
Some College	27.22	29.96
College Degree or Higher	21.56	24.94
Unweighted n	631	1612

Source: National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 4 and 2006-2010 Data; Note: Standard deviation in parentheses where appropriate

Table 2. Cumulative Probability of Remaining in First Premarital Cohabiting Union, by Duration (US Women Aged 16-44)

Characteristics	% still cohabiting after					
	1 year		3 years		5 years	
	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004
All Women	43.69	70.20	14.26	35.02	6.42	18.82
Presence of Children						
With Children	57.70	84.45	30.57	57.84	17.41	37.33
Without Children	40.17	61.28	10.17	20.73	3.66	7.24
Race/Ethnicity						
Hispanic	42.22	70.93	21.29	45.52	12.12	32.78
Non-Hispanic White	41.40	68.14	10.98	31.25	4.51	14.05
Non-Hispanic Black	53.96	73.80	26.07	43.60	13.92	24.73
Educational Attainment						
Less than High Sch.	53.65	72.53	27.47	45.36	16.36	31.36
High Sch./GED	38.00	71.74	12.46	42.05	5.99	25.48
Some College	41.13	67.65	12.51	33.74	5.39	15.95
College Degree or Higher	49.51	69.89	10.27	21.42	1.57	5.94

Source: National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 4 and 2006-2010 Data

Table 3: Cumulative Probability of Transitioning Out of First Premarital Cohabiting Unions (US Women Aged 16-44)

Characteristics	% Transitioning into Marriage or Dissolution after											
	1 year				3 years				5 years			
	Marriage		Dissolution		Marriage		Dissolution		Marriage		Dissolution	
	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004	1980-1984	2000-2004
All Women	34.53	15.08	21.79	14.72	54.13	33.79	31.61	31.18	58.70	41.42	34.88	39.76
Presence of Children												
With Children	29.52	7.74	12.78	7.81	38.41	19.44	31.02	22.73	46.35	26.94	36.24	35.73
Without Children	35.78	19.68	24.05	19.04	58.07	42.79	31.76	36.48	61.79	50.48	34.55	42.28
Race/Ethnicity												
Hispanic	38.78	17.61	19.00	11.46	52.30	33.75	26.42	20.73	57.49	41.02	30.39	26.20
Non-Hispanic White	36.38	15.98	22.21	15.89	58.86	36.09	30.16	32.66	62.59	44.67	32.91	41.28
Non-Hispanic Black	23.27	11.01	22.77	15.18	33.50	24.58	40.42	31.82	39.23	29.32	46.85	45.95
Educational Attainment												
Less than High Sch.	28.23	12.19	18.13	15.29	41.33	23.72	31.20	30.91	45.85	26.61	37.79	42.02
High Sch./GED	38.57	14.47	23.44	13.79	54.45	25.02	33.10	32.94	57.93	30.99	36.08	43.54
Some College	37.09	14.17	21.79	18.17	55.69	30.70	31.80	35.56	61.20	40.52	33.41	43.53
College Degree or Higher	28.91	18.95	21.58	11.15	60.56	54.33	28.82	24.25	65.77	64.55	32.32	29.50

Source: National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 4 and 2006-2010 Data