



## National estimates of the rise in serial cohabitation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides new estimates of changing patterns of serial cohabitation, using data from the 1995 and 2002 *National Survey of Family Growth*. Serial cohabitation is defined as having multiple premarital cohabiting relationships. Analyses indicate that rates of serial cohabitation increased by nearly 40 percent over the late 1990s and early 2000s, and rates were especially high among young adults and recent marriage cohorts. A large majority of women – 75 percent – nevertheless lived only with men they eventually married. Although rates of serial cohabitation are higher among never-married women than ever-married women, there is little indication that single women – even older single women – have embraced serial cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or even as an intensive kind of dating. The results show that serial cohabitation is heavily concentrated among disadvantaged populations (e.g., women who grew up in single parent families). Early sexual activity and teen childbearing are especially important “risk” factors for serial cohabitation in the never-married population. There is little evidence, however, that recent shifts in the sociodemographic risk profile of the US population have been responsible for observed increases in single-instance or serial cohabitation. Increases in serial cohabitation have been broadly experienced across population groups in America.

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### 1. Introduction

The unprecedented rise in cohabitation has transformed recent patterns of partnering and parenting in American society (England and Edin, 2007; Cherlin, 2009; Sassler, 2010). But, perhaps paradoxically, the growth in cohabitation also arguably reflects the rising economic threshold and the level of emotional commitment required of marriage (Nock, 2009; Waller and Peters, 2008). Indeed, the most recent estimates from the *National Survey of Family Growth* (NSFG) indicate that the share of women who have ever cohabited increased from 45 to 54 percent between 1995 and 2002 (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008). Nearly 20 percent of unmarried women are currently cohabiting, accounting for about 15 percent of all unions in the United States. In addition, cohabitation accounts for over two-thirds of all first unions (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008); most young couples today enter marriage as cohabitators rather than as single persons living apart. Childbearing and childrearing is increasingly commonplace in cohabiting-couple families. The 2000 US census, for example, indicated that 43 percent of all cohabiting-couple households included minor co-residential children (Lichter and Qian, 2004) and the NSFG revealed that childbearing among cohabiting women now accounts for over one-half of all non-marital births (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008). Cohabitation also has increasingly become a lifestyle alternative to marriage (i.e., with the growth of long-term cohabitations) and remarriage (Bumpass et al., 1991). But, unlike in past decades, most cohabiting unions today dissolve rather segue into marriage (Lichter et al., 2006).

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The basic statistical facts about contemporary cohabitation – its incidence, timing, and disposition – are well known (Seltzer, 2000; Smock, 2000; Raley, 2001). In this paper, we examine evidence of a largely neglected dimension of cohabitation – serial cohabitation – which has potentially important but often neglected implications for union formation and relationship quality (Lichter and Qian, 2008; Tach and Halpern-Meeking, 2009), multi-partner fertility (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006; Guzzo and Furstenberg, 2007), and the family stability and developmental trajectories of children and adolescents (Manning and Lamb, 2003; Phillips and Sweeney, 2005). We define serial cohabitation here as the entry and exit from more than one co-residential cohabiting relationship. Serial cohabitation is commonly viewed as an adaptation to economic hardship, especially for single mothers, who may cycle between partners in response to economic exigencies (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Lichter and Qian, 2008). Dissolution rates among low-income cohabiting couples are exceptionally high, which presumably sets the stage for forming new intimate relationships, including new cohabiting unions (Carlson et al., 2004; Lichter et al., 2006).

This paper has three specific objectives. First, we use data from the NSFG (cycle 5 in 1995 and cycle 6 in 2002) to document, for the first time, recent short-term changes in the share of serial cohabiting unions among ever-married and never-married women in the United States. Second, we identify changing sociodemographic differentials in serial cohabitation to highlight “at-risk” groups that can be appropriately targeted for public policy interventions (e.g., marital counseling, income supplements, or housing vouchers). We regard serial cohabitation as a potential risk factor for union instability and deleterious developmental outcomes among children and adolescents. Third, we evaluate whether changes in the share of single-instance and serial cohabiting unions reflect recent shifts in population composition. That is, does recent growth in serial cohabitation reflect compositional shifts in at-risk groups (e.g., increasing shares of low-income women) or broad-based increases in rates of serial cohabitation across demographic groups? Evidence of the former (i.e., composition effects) suggests specific demographic targets for policy intervention. Evidence of the latter (i.e., rate effects) indicates demographically broad-based cultural and social changes in the United States. It suggests a further evolution of cohabitation in the mate selection process, one characterized less by cohabitation as a normatively appropriate step towards marriage with a single partner and more by a sequence of co-residential partners that may or may not lead to a stable marriage.

### 1.1. Contemporary patterns of serial cohabitation

Cohabitation in the United States is most often viewed as a step in the marriage process rather than as an alternative to marriage (cf. Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Sassler and Cunningham, 2008). As a stepping stone to marriage, cohabitation may in fact be endogenous to the marriage decision. That is, committed partners may decide to cohabit at the same time that they decide that they will marry. Cohabitation in this case represents a natural progression in a developing relationship that eventually culminates in marriage. Individuals only cohabit before marriage with the partner that they ultimately marry. Guzzo (2009) has recently reported that almost one-half of all first cohabiting unions began with the intention to marry. Alternatively, increasing shares of young adults may cycle between cohabiting partners in the search of lifelong marital partners. This alternative view is consistent with qualitative evidence that partners often “slide” into co-residence (Manning and Smock, 2005; Stanley et al., 2006) or enter into cohabiting relationships with little if any discussion of marriage beforehand (Sassler, 2004). Intentions to marry among cohabiting partners may emerge only after entering into the co-residential relationship (see Lichter et al., 2004; Guzzo, 2009; Sassler, 2004). Here, cohabitation may be viewed as a kind of intensive dating that ultimately leads to marriage, perhaps after living with several different partners.

Does the recent rise in cohabitation simply reflect growth in the share of couples who first lived with the partners they married? Or is serial cohabitation on the rise, a situation that may indicate a new stage or evolution in the dating and mating process? An affirmative answer to the first question suggests little if any increase in the share of serial cohabitation in the United States. In this case, cohabitation arguably is no threat to marriage (i.e., the deinstitutionalization of marriage), especially if cohabitation leads directly to stable marriages. In fact, Teachman (2003) recently reported that cohabitation, if limited to a woman’s husband, does not elevate the risk of subsequent divorce. Alternatively, a positive response to the second question implies accelerated growth in unstable cohabiting relationships and a new challenge to stable lifelong marriage (Cherlin, 2004, 2009; Nock, 2002, 2005). Changing patterns of mate selection – serial cohabitation, in this case – raise the specter of a growing population at risk of unintended childbearing (including multiple-partner fertility), heightened family instability, increasingly complex kin relationships, and potentially deleterious short- and long-term economic and developmental consequences for growing children.<sup>1</sup>

Previous studies provide incomplete answers to these questions. For example, a small published literature suggests that the large majority of women who cohabit will cohabit *only* with the men they eventually marry (Lichter and Qian, 2008; Teachman, 2003; Cohen and Manning, 2010). Using cohort data from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth*, Lichter and Qian (2008) tracked the number of cohabiting unions among a cohort of young women, aged 14–21 in 1979. They found that only a minority of cohabiting women (about 15 percent) were involved in multiple cohabitations before marriage. These data were limited to the marital and cohabitation histories of women who were 35–43 years of age in 2000. Presumably, partnering and parenting are much different today than just a few decades ago. Today’s young adults grew up during the

<sup>1</sup> Lichter and Qian (2008) reported that serial cohabitators were less likely than single-instance cohabiting unions to end in marriage rather than dissolve. If serial cohabitators married, divorce rates were very high – more than twice as high as for women who cohabited only with their eventual husbands. Serial cohabitation clearly is a risk factor for dissolution – both while cohabiting and after cohabiting couples marry.

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