

Serial Cohabitation and Family Formation: New Estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth

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Background

This paper provides national estimates of serial cohabitation using data from the 2002 *National Survey of Family Growth*. Serial cohabitators are defined as having cohabited with more than one partner and who often have children with different partners. We argue here that entry and exits from a series of coresidential intimate relationships is a potentially significant “risk” to forming lasting marriages.

This paper has several specific objectives. First, we provide estimates of the percentage of ever-cohabited (both single and serial cohabitation) among 5-year age cohorts of men and women of reproductive age. We document inter-cohort changes in serial cohabitation. Second, we provide new estimates of the duration and disposition of cohabiting unions. How long do they last and how do they end (i.e., marriage or dissolution)? Specifically, we examine inter-cohort shifts in (serial) cohabitation as a stepping-stone to marriage. Third, we examine linkages between serial cohabitation and fertility, including multiple-partner fertility. We argue that the rise in multiple-partner fertility is both cause and consequence of the recent rise in temporary co-residential relationships.

This paper builds directly on recent analyses of cohabitation using the 1979-2000 panels of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Lichter and Qian, 2008). This analysis revealed that most women did not cohabit and only 15 to 20 percent of those who cohabited were involved in multiple cohabitations. The large majority of cohabiting women only cohabited with their husbands. However, serial cohabitators were overrepresented among economically disadvantaged groups, especially those on welfare. Higher-order or serial cohabitations also were less likely to end in marriage. Even when social, economic, and demographic variables were controlled in a model of divorce, serial cohabitation places women at much greater risk of marital dissolution. Divorce rates for serial cohabitators were roughly 40 percent higher than for women who never cohabited and twice as large as divorce rates for women who cohabited with their husbands only.

Data

A limitation of the NLSY data, of course, is that they are based on the marital and cohabitation histories of women who were 35-to-43 years of age in 2000. The circumstances of young adults today may be decidedly different from the 1980s. Today’s young people grew up during a period of family upheaval and rising divorce, high child

poverty rates (in the 1980s), and diminished stigma associated with early premarital sexuality, multiple sexual partners, and impermanent cohabiting relationships before marriage. Furthermore, the proportion ever cohabiting has increased substantially, with cohabitation becoming the normative first co-residential intimate union among young adults (Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007).

New data from the NSFG 2002 provides an unusual opportunity to update preliminary estimates across the entire age range for a more recent period. In addition, the NSFG provides information on the number and duration of cohabiting unions, which can be linked to the fertility and marital histories reported by men and women in the NSFG. Our overall goal is to provide benchmark estimates of the incidence, timing, duration, and disposition of serial cohabitators. These data can be compared with single-instance cohabitators, including those who married their partners.

Preliminary Results

Our preliminary analysis of the NSFG 2002 provides information on the number of cohabiting partners among the never-married (N=3,517) and ever-married women (N=4,059). These results indicate that only 11.5 percent of never-married women cohabited more than once, while 9.5 percent of ever-married women cohabited more than once. These results indicate that serial cohabitation is perhaps less widespread than previously believed. Our earlier study, based on the NLSY, indicated that only 20 percent of all ever-cohabited women were serial cohabitators.

Tables 1 and 2 provide information on noncohabitators, single-instance cohabitators, and serial cohabitators, both for never-married and ever-married women. These data will constitute the core of our analyses. In addition, we will provide estimates of the duration of cohabiting unions and how they end (i.e., marriage or dissolution). We can also track recent increases by estimating rates of serial cohabitation for 5-year age groups for women of different birth cohorts (e.g., comparing cohabitation for women aged 30-34 for consecutive birth cohorts).

Summary

Serial cohabitation is sometimes viewed as an adaptation to economic hardship. To our knowledge, this study will provide the first set of nationally representative estimates of serial cohabitators. The NSFG 2002 provides a unique opportunity to meet our objectives.

References

- Lichter, Daniel T., and Zhenchao Qian. 2008. "Serial Cohabitation and the Marital Life Course." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70(November): forthcoming.
- Schoen, R., Landale, N.S., & Daniels, K. 2007. "Family Transitions in Young Adulthood." *Demography* 44 (November): 807-820.

Table 1. Differentials in Serial Cohabitation, Never-Married Women, 2002

	All women (N=3516)	0 cohabitation (N=2170)	1 cohabitation (N=940)	2+ cohabitations (N=406)
mean age	24.4	22.5	26.8	29.3
% some college	48.0	48.1	50.7	41.1
% enrolled in school	43.8	58.8	22.2	13.8
% lived in intact family from birth to 18	56.9	61.5	52.3	42.4
Hispanic	19.9	17.3	24.8	21.9
non-Hispanic white	48.8	52.4	42.3	44.6
non-Hispanic black	27.0	25.3	29.6	29.6
non-Hispanic other	4.4	4.9	3.3	3.9

Table 2. Differentials in Serial Cohabitation Ever-Married Women, 2002

	All women (N=4051)	0 cohabitation partners (N=1982)	1 cohabitation partner (N=1684)	2+ cohabitation partners (N=385)
mean age	33.8	34.2	33.3	33.6
% some college	61.7	63.3	59.4	63.1
% enrolled in school	11.1	11.0	10.5	13.2
% lived in intact family from birth to 18	67.9	75.8	62.1	52.7
% Hispanic	21.4	24.4	19.1	15.8
% non- Hispanic white	59.8	58.1	60.7	64.2
% non- Hispanic black	14.2	12.0	16.3	16.1
% non- Hispanic other	4.7	5.5	3.9	3.9