

Family statistics and trends

Trends in couple dissolution

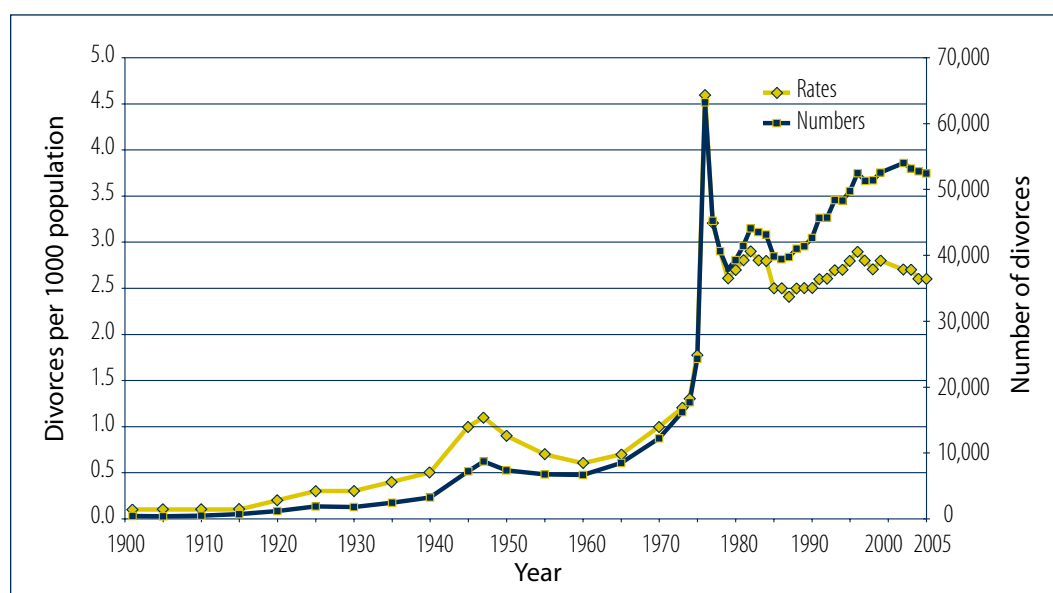
RUTH WESTON AND LIXIA QU

The first *Family Relationships Quarterly* presented an overview of Australian trends in couple formation. It was shown that the ways in which Australians form couple relationships have changed dramatically in the 20th century: marriage rates have fallen, those who marry do so at later ages, couples increasingly live together before marrying, and those who divorce are less likely to remarry. This issue of the *Family Relationships Quarterly* focuses on trends concerning the dissolution of marriages and cohabiting relationships.

Divorce rates

The increase in the divorce rate represents one of the most spectacular family-related trends in the 20th century. Figure 1 depicts the number of divorces across the years and the crude divorce rate, that is, the number of divorces granted in a year per 1,000 resident population.

Figure 1. Crude divorce rate and number of divorces, 1901–2005



Sources: ABS (various years) *Marriages and divorces* (Catalogue No. 3310.0); ABS (2006), *Divorces Australia 2005* (Catalogue No. 3307.0.55.001).

- Prior to the Second World War divorce was rare. In the first decade of the twentieth century the number of divorces recorded each year ranged from 300 to 400.
- The crude divorce rate (number of divorces per 1,000 resident population) rose slightly in the 1920s to the mid-1940s and peaked at 1.1 in 1947. In fact, the number of divorces recorded in 1947 was the highest (8,705) during the first half of the twentieth century, partly reflecting the instability of hasty wartime marriages and the disruptive effects of the war on marriage. The rate then declined slightly until the 1960s, when it began to rise substantially.
- The rate soared to a peak of 4.6 divorces per 1,000 resident population when the Family Law Act 1975 came into operation (5 January, 1976), which allowed only one ground for divorce (“irretrievable breakdown” as measured by at least 12 months separation). This change led to the formalisation of some long-term separations and the bringing forward of some divorces that had been filed in the previous years but were not as yet finalised.
- Since then the crude divorce rate has mostly fluctuated between 2.5 and 3.0, with a trough occurring in the mid-1980s.
- While the crude divorce rate has remained at a high plateau since the early 1980s, the number of divorces has increased since the mid-1980s – a trend that reflects the growth in the Australian adult population.

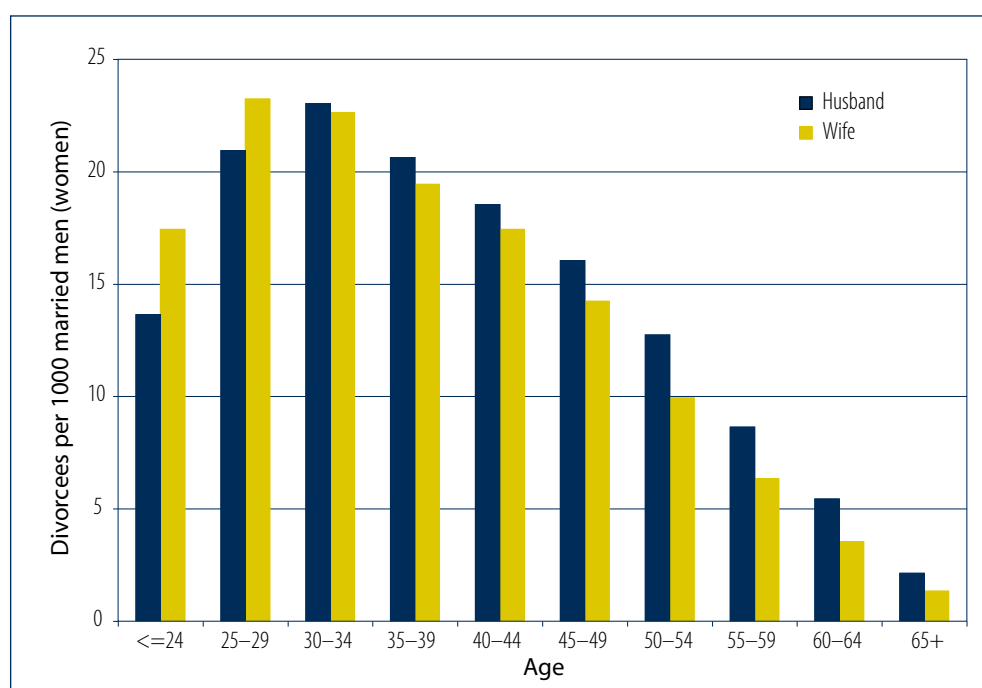
- Another measure of the divorce rate is the number of divorces per 1,000 married women. In the late 1980s these rates ranged between 10.6 and 10.9, and gradually increased throughout the 1990s. The rate over the past several years has fluctuated between 12.0 and 13.0 divorces per 1,000 married women.

Age-specific divorce rates, married men and women

A more detailed picture of the patterns of divorce is obtained by determining the rates of divorce for specific age groups. These data are presented in Figure 2. They show that:

- Among women, the divorce rate is highest for those aged 25–29 years while among married men, it is highest for those aged 30–34 years – a difference that reflects the fact that women tend to marry at a younger age than men.
 - In 2001, divorce was experienced by 21 in every 1,000 married men aged 25–29 and 35–39 years, and 23 in every 1,000 married men aged 30–34 years.
 - During the same year, the number of women experiencing divorce in every 1,000 married women of the same age was 23 for those aged 25–29, just under 23 for those aged 30–34 years, and 19 for those aged 35–39 years.
- Among married men and women in their mid-30s and older, the divorce rate declined progressively with increasing age.

Figure 2. Age-specific divorce rate by gender, 2001



Sources: ABS (2006), *Divorces, Australia 2005* (Catalogue No. 3307.0.55.001).

The stability of cohabitation

While couples are increasingly likely to live together before they marry, cohabiting relationships tend to be less stable than marriages. Data from Wave 1 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey¹ suggest that:

- Only 9% of those whose cohabitation commenced in the early 1990s were still cohabiting with the same partner in 2001 (7–11 years later).
- Only 2% of men and women who began cohabiting 10 years earlier than this (in the early 1980s) were still cohabiting with the same partner in 2001.

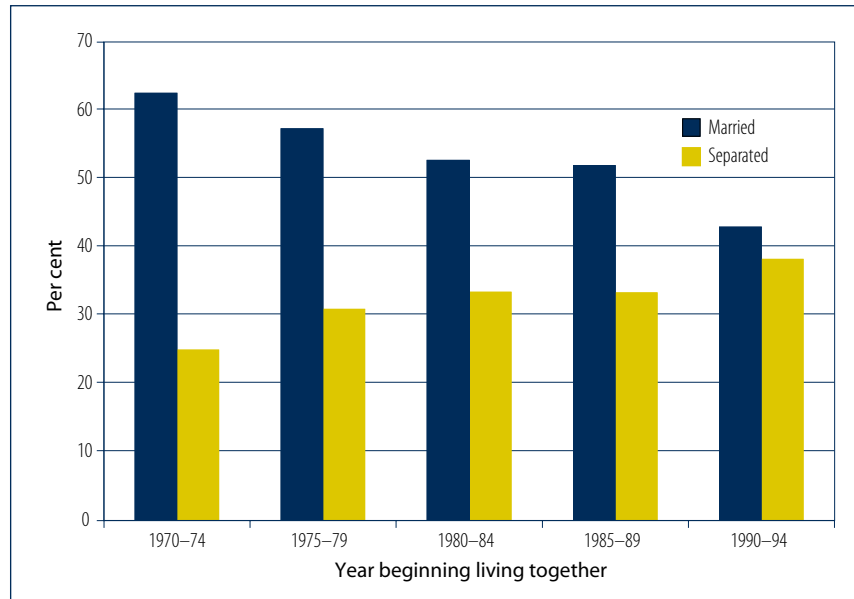
¹ The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. This survey is being conducted by a consortium of three research bodies, with the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research being the lead agency. The other consortium members are the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Council for Educational Research.

Figure 3 refers to five cohorts of HILDA respondents who began cohabiting in different years (from the early 1970s to the early 1990s). It shows the proportion in each cohort who married or separated within the first five years of the cohabiting union. (The percentages do not add up to 100 per cent because some couples continued to cohabit.)

- Cohabiting relationships that commenced in the early 1970s were much more likely to end in marriage than separation (63% vs 25%).
- Since the 1970s, cohabiting relationships became increasingly likely to end in separation than in marriage. The chance of a cohabiting couple who began living together in the early 1990s being married five years later was only slightly higher than the chance of separation (43% vs 38%).

One implication of these trends is that divorce statistics have become progressively less useful as a reflection of relationship breakdown trends.

Figure 3. Cohabiting couples: outcomes of cohabitation after 5 years



Source: The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey Wave 1.

Those without partners

Together, trends in couple formation (outlined in *Family Relationships Quarterly* Issue 1) and relationship breakdown influence the overall proportions of men and women who are partnered or unpartnered.

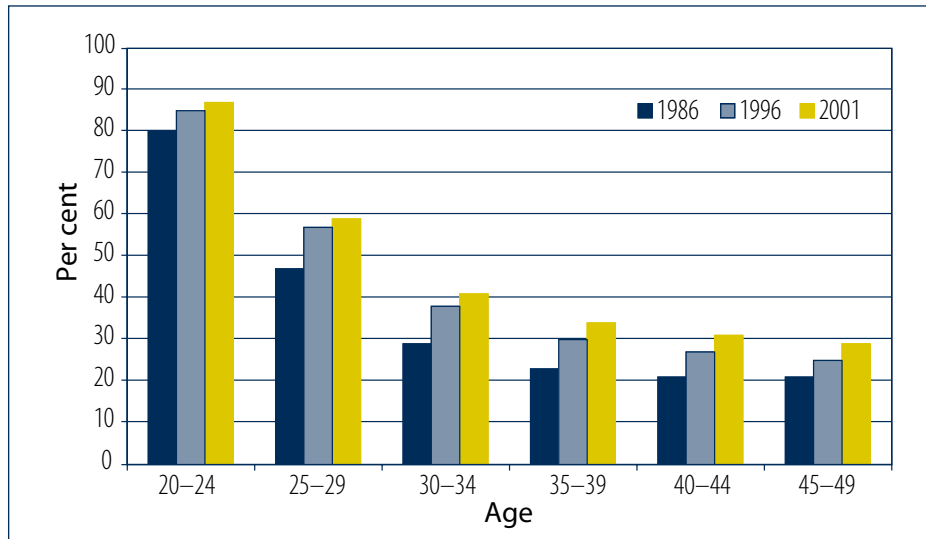
Figures 4a and 4b, which are based on analyses conducted by Birrell, Rapson, and Hourigan (2004) using Census data, indicate the proportion of men and women of different ages (below 50 years) who were living without a partner in 1986, 1996 and 2001.

- Across all five-year age groups shown (20–59 years), the proportion of unpartnered men and women increased between 1986 and 2001².
- Given that men are usually older than women when they first cohabit or marry, unpartnered rates are considerably higher at younger ages for men than women.
- Gender differences in unpartnered rates narrow with advancing age, and given the lower propensity for women to repartner at older ages, women in their late forties are marginally more likely to be unpartnered than men of this age.

In summary, patterns of couple dissolution have undergone a great deal of change. Although fairly stable over the past decade, the number of divorces per 1000 marriages was lower in the late 1980s than more recently. While cohabitation tends to be an unstable status, it is less likely to convert to marriage than in the past. In other words, the chance of cohabitation ending in separation has increased progressively. The trends in couple formation and dissolution have resulted in an increase in the proportion of Australian adults who are unpartnered.

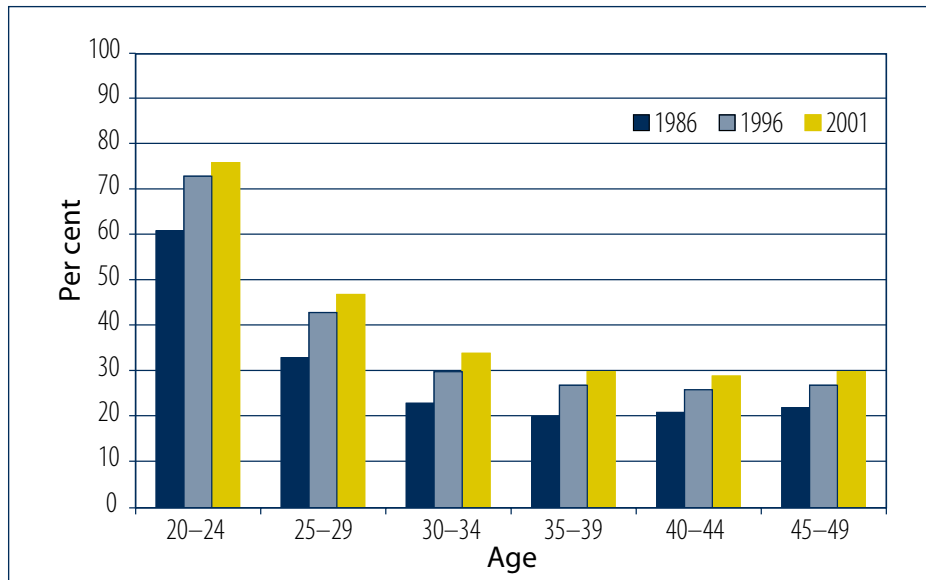
² Note: while the increase in the unpartnered rates between 1986 and 1996 is greater than the increase that occurred between the 1996 and 2001, it must be remembered that the first two periods span ten years, while the second and third periods span five years.

Figure 4a. Proportion of men who were living without a partner by age, 1986, 1996 and 2001



Source: Based on Birrell, B., Rapson, V., & Hourigan, C. (2004). *Men + women apart: Partnering in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Family Association and Centre for Population and Urban Research.

Figure 4b. Proportion of women who were living without a partner by age, 1986, 1996 and 2001



Source: Based on Birrell, B., Rapson, V., & Hourigan, C. (2004). *Men + women apart: Partnering in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Family Association and Centre for Population and Urban Research.

References and data sources

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (various years). *Marriages and divorces Australia* (Catalogue No. 3310.0). Canberra: Author.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2006). *Divorces Australia 2005* (Catalogue No. 3307.0.55.001). Canberra: Author.

Birrell, B., Rapson, V., & Hourigan, C. (2004). *Men + women apart: Partnering in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Family Association and Centre for Population and Urban Research.

Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. <http://melbourneinstitute.com/hilda>

Ruth Weston is General Manager (Research) and Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Lixia Qu is a Research Fellow and Demographic Trends Analyst at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.