

Starting out together

through cohabitation or marriage

Over the last few decades, family formation patterns have changed considerably. Increasing numbers of couples are cohabiting, although the majority still eventually marry. A study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies highlights the changing trends in relationship formation and subsequent pathways.

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Over the last few decades, family formation patterns have changed considerably in Australia and other western countries. Although the majority of people still get married, marriage rates have declined. Those who now enter into marriage do so later in life, often having lived in a sexual union with their partner before marrying.

In this paper, the term “married” refers to partners living in a sexual union that has been formalised through a legal process involving a ceremony. The terms “cohabiting” or “de facto” unions are used interchangeably to refer to partners living in a sexual union without being married to one another. “Partner” refers to a married or a cohabiting spouse/partner.

Between 1975 and 2000, the median ages at first marriage increased from 23.4 years to 28.5 years for men, and from 21.0 years to 26.7 years for women. During the same period, the proportion of men and women who cohabited before they married increased from 16 per cent to 71 per cent (ABS 2001). Nevertheless, most couples who live together are married to each other – 90 per

cent in the 1996 census, down from more than 99 per cent in the early 1970s (ABS 1998; Sarantakos 1996).

The increasing prevalence of cohabitation has been accompanied by an increase in the proportion of children who are born outside marriage, from around 5 per cent in the early 1960s to 29 per cent in 1999 (ABS 1997a; ABS 2000). Consistent with this rise in cohabitation, paternity is increasingly likely to be acknowledged on the birth certificates of babies born outside marriage – from 57 per cent in 1979 to 88 per cent in 1999 (ABS 2000).

However, broad statistics on pre-marital cohabitation and ex-nuptial births do not provide information about when people enter cohabiting relationships, how long cohabitation lasts, and how it ends.

This article focuses on the first unions of women born in different years. It looks at how the first union of these women started (whether it began with cohabitation or marriage) and how old they were when they entered their first union. The proportions of women born in different years who had a child within four years of the start of their first union are also examined.



Life course survey

Patterns of family formation were examined in the *Australian Life Course Survey*, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1996. This study was based on telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of nearly 2700 respondents (around 1150 men and 1540 women) aged 25 to 70 years. Respondents provided a history of the pathways they had taken in family formation, beginning with the first time they had lived with a partner (here referred to as the “first relationship” or “first union”). This history included the dates of any periods of cohabitation, marriage, birth of children, and separation. In this study it was left to the respondents to define the start of their living-together relationship.

For simplicity, the present analysis focuses on the reports of women. Given the relatively small number of women in the sample who reported the birth of a child outside cohabitation or marriage (35 women), the different pathways followed by this group were not

assessed. In order to identify changes in family formation trends, the final sample was divided into four groups: women born between 1967-1971, 1962-1966, 1957-1961, and 1952-1956.

The oldest and youngest groups had grown up in periods markedly different from each other. The youngest group of women, born in 1967-1971, typically began their first relationship in late 1980s to early 1990s. First relationships for the second youngest women, born in 1962-1966, mostly occurred in the mid 1980s. First relationships of the other two groups, born in 1957-1961 and 1951-1956, typically occurred in the late 1970s to early 1980s, and in the mid to late 1970s respectively.

The decline in the manufacturing industry beginning in the late seventies led to a dramatic fall in the availability of permanent full-time jobs for early school leavers. The restructuring of the economy resulted in the increased demand for a skilled workforce and an increasing number of young people participating in further education after completing high school. As a result, young adults have increasingly remained financially dependent on their parents, regardless of their living arrangements (McDonald 1998). While continued participation in education and the increasing prevalence of pre-marital cohabitation have often been cited as reasons for the increase in age at marriage (for example, ABS 1997b, 2001), little is known about whether or not cohabiting relationships have also been delayed.

Pathways to family formation

Four sets of analysis were conducted: (a) the timing of the first living-together relationship; (b) whether a partnership started with marriage or cohabitation – how this has changed; (c) what happens after cohabitation – proportion who marry or separate within four years and who have a child within four years; and (d) what happens after marriage – proportion who separate or have a child.

Timing of the first relationship

The timing of the first union was similar for the two oldest groups. They tended to enter their first union at an earlier age compared with the two youngest groups. For example, 59 to 63 per cent in the oldest two groups had entered their first union by age 22, compared with 45 to 51 per cent of the youngest two groups. However, by age 27, most women had started their first union. (Some women in the youngest group were under the age of 27 at the time of the survey.)

Cohabitation or marriage?

Figure 1 (a-d) shows the changing trends in the way women enter relationships: the more recently born the respondents, the more likely they were to start with cohabitation. For instance, by the time they were 25 years old, women in the youngest group were more than twice as likely as the oldest group to have started their union with cohabitation rather than with marriage. The exact opposite pattern is evident for the oldest age group: by age 25, these women were more than twice as likely as the youngest age group to have begun their first union with marriage rather than cohabitation.

How cohabitation ends

For most couples, cohabitation was a temporary situation, ending in either separation or marriage. Figure 2 follows the pathways of couples who began their relationship with cohabitation. The figure indicates the proportions who had separated or married within four years of the start of this relationship.

It appears that marriage following cohabitation still remains a common pathway, but has become less so in recent times. Within four years from the start of their cohabiting relationship, around two-thirds of the oldest group and around one-third of the youngest group had married. On the other hand, separation following cohabitation is becoming more common. Within four years, separation had occurred for less than 10 per cent in the oldest group and around 33 per cent in the youngest group. Overall, marriage and separation seemed equally likely to occur among the youngest women, whereas marriage was more common than separation for the oldest women.

Ex-nuptial births

Consistent with Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the Institute's *Australian Life Course Survey* data suggest that having children outside marriage is increasing but still applies to a minority. Within four years of cohabitation, around one in five of the youngest group and only one in ten of the oldest group gave birth to a child while cohabiting. These trends appear to coincide with the growing acceptance of ex-nuptial births among young

people: de Vaus (1997a) found that only 30 per cent of people in their 20s disapproved of having children without marrying compared with 75 per cent of those aged 60 to 69 years and 82 per cent of those aged 70 years or older.

Married women's pathways

Compared with women who began their relationship with cohabitation, those who married at the outset were less likely to have separated and more likely to have had a child. No more than 8 per cent in the three oldest groups indicated that they had separated within four years of their marriage, while 62 to 67 per cent had given birth to a child within this period. Only a small number of women in the youngest group began their first living-together relationship with marriage, so trends for this group are not discussed.

While there was little difference in the proportion of women in the three oldest groups who had given birth to a child within four years of marriage further analysis indicated that childbearing for younger women occurred later: within the first two years of marriage, 43 per cent in the oldest group compared to 25 per cent in the youngest of these three groups had given birth to a child.

What does "cohabitation" mean today?

The circumstances surrounding cohabitation can be diverse. Couples may decide to cohabit early in their relationship when first "going steady", or they may embark on cohabitation as a trial marriage or for

Figure 1 Cumulative proportion of women who had entered their first relationship (by cohabitation vs marriage) when they were 16-27 years old, by birth cohort

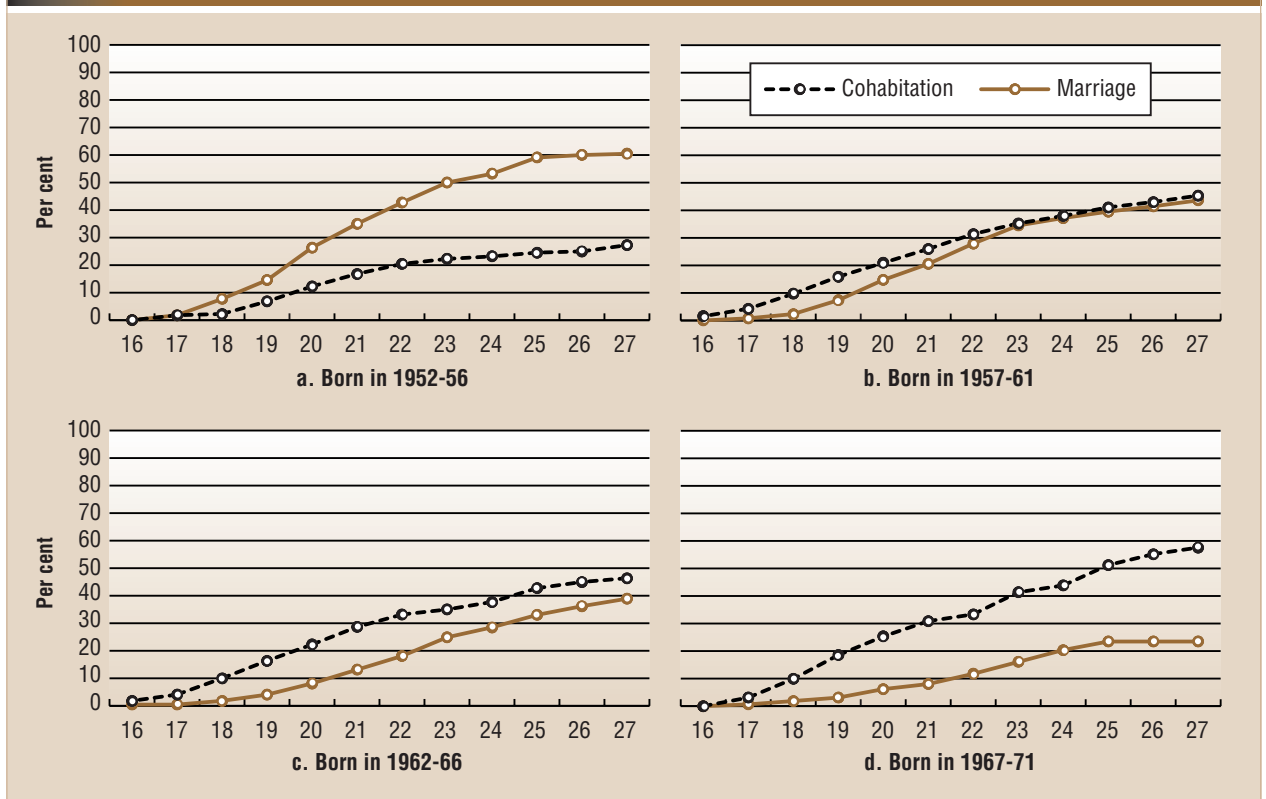
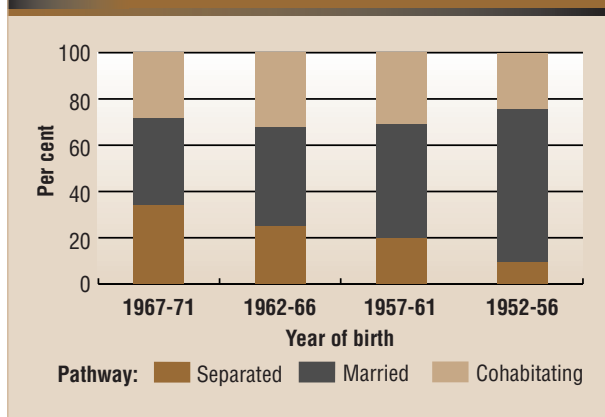


Figure 2 Women who entered first relationship by cohabitation: percentage who separated, married or were still cohabiting within four years of relationship, by birth cohort



practical reasons after having decided to marry. Others may opt for cohabitation, expecting to marry if and when they want to have children, while other committed cohabiting couples may view marriage as redundant. Still others may decide to cohabit in an attempt to avoid all commitment – a “no strings attached” strategy. Some partners in couples may agree about the meaning of cohabitation, while others may hold quite different views, and the meaning for each partner may change during the course of cohabitation

The present analysis suggests that the meaning of cohabitation may have changed. Cohabitation was predominantly a prelude to marriage for women born in the early 1950s and appears to have become progressively less so for younger generations. By contrast, childbearing while cohabiting was more prevalent for the youngest group.

At the same time, the chances of cohabitation ending in separation rather than marriage have increased in more recent times. Possibly, young couples today may be more likely to cohabit at an earlier stage in their relationship, when “going steady”, rather than when considering marriage. Alternatively, young couples may now embark on cohabitation as a “trial marriage” but hold higher expectations about having their needs fulfilled in the relationship and be more prepared to separate if their needs are not met.

Implications

These various trends in cohabitation have important implications for the legal process that some separating couples may need to follow. While increasing numbers of cohabiting couples are having children outside of marriage, those who separate may face greater difficulties than divorcing couples in resolving any disputes about property distribution and the sharing of parenting responsibilities. This is because cohabiting couples with property and children must resolve any disputes about these matters through two courts – property-related issues are dealt with by State courts and State legislation, while parenting issues are dealt with by the

(Federal) Family Court of Australia (except in Western Australia, which has its own Family Court).

This “dual track” system for cohabiting couples can be expensive, time consuming, and frustrating for each partner during a period when breaking up itself may be highly stressful. Furthermore, little is known about how partners perceive any legal implications that might arise should they separate. Indeed, there is much to be learned about the consequences of separation for cohabiting couples, any children they have had, and their extended families.

The results also have important implications for relationship education and marriage preparation courses. These courses need to be sufficiently flexible to take into account different needs of couples who are cohabiting for different reasons (for example, as a “trial marriage” or replacement for marriage), and the different relationship experiences of cohabiting and non-cohabiting couples who are preparing for marriage.

Cohabitation is not only more likely to end in separation than in the past, it is also occurring later in life. Such delayed and disrupted relationships can have a profound impact on the chances of having children (Qu, Weston and Kilmartin 2000), further highlighting the need to improve our understanding of some of the complexities surrounding cohabitation.

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