

Who are the divorced, and who divorces?



Using data from cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys, Kathleen Kiernan and Ganka Mueller have examined two questions: What does the currently divorced population look like; and what sort of people are likely to divorce (including breakdown of cohabitation)?



The currently divorced are more likely to be unemployed, rely on state benefits, and be disabled than the married population. The same factors, with financial difficulties, are precursors of divorce. The deprived are more at risk of divorce, while divorce may compound deprivation.



Men and women with lower psychological well-being were more likely to divorce in the next few years. Emotional problems in adolescence were also important signposts for later partnership breakdown.



First cohabiting unions which led to marriage were no more likely to break down than those which began as marriage. The earlier and younger a first partnership, the more likely it was to break down for both groups.



Partnership breakdown is linked to parental divorce in childhood amongst those born in 1958. If 'divorce begets divorce' we might expect divorce rates to rise still further for later cohorts.

Further information

A more detailed account of sources, methods and findings can be found in CASEpaper 7, *The Divorced and Who Divorces?* by Kathleen Kiernan and Ganka Mueller. Copies are available free of charge from Jane Dickson, CASE, at the address below, or can be downloaded from our internet site, <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/Case>.

This study poses two broad questions: what are the characteristics of the currently divorced; and who divorces? (Divorce is used as an inclusive term to include separations from marriages and separations from cohabiting unions.) Data were drawn from one cross-sectional and two longitudinal surveys. A large national cross-sectional survey, the 1993-94 Family Resources Survey, was used to identify the characteristics of the currently divorced population. The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) covers men and women of all ages, and has information on both partners prior to a separation in the next few years. The National Child Development Study (NCDS), a longitudinal study of a cohort born in 1958, allowed examination of childhood and adolescent factors as well as adult characteristics associated with partnership breakdown in adulthood.

The Currently Divorced: Evidence from the FRS

Educational attainment, employment, hours of work and earnings

- The divorced were generally less likely than the married population to have left school above the minimum age.
- Married women had higher rates of employment than divorced women.
- Divorced men were less likely to be employed than married counterparts and childless male divorcees more likely to be unemployed than female divorcees. Younger childless male divorcees were over twice as likely (24 per cent) to be unemployed as the analogous group of women (9 per cent).
- Divorced men living with dependent children were more likely than men in partnerships, with or without children, to be outside the labour force. 70 per cent of these fathers said looking after children was why they were outside the labour force. Illness or disability was the most common reason for other men.

Living standards

- Divorced mothers with children were twice as likely as divorced men with children to receive Income Support. Divorced men themselves were much more likely to receive Income Support than married men. Divorced men and women were more economically disadvantaged than married couples even when they did not support dependent children.
- Divorced men and women were less likely to be home owners than married couples. The childless divorced of both sexes were more likely to receive housing benefit than childless married couples. Divorced mothers were more likely to receive housing benefit than divorced fathers or married mothers.

Health

- There were marked sex differences in health status amongst the divorced. Male divorcees, under age 40, were more likely than female divorcees to have poor health. Male divorcees (particularly older ones) were more likely to receive disability benefits. People in partnerships (married or cohabiting) were less likely to be disabled than the divorced.

Determinants of Divorce: Evidence from the BHPS

Demographic factors

- As found in other studies, marriage instability falls with current age, and the younger people are when they marry the more likely they are to divorce or separate. Cohabiting unions were also found more likely to be continuing the older the partners. However, the stability of these non-marital partnerships, unlike marriages, did not seem to rise steadily with the age at formation. Cohabiting unions may be intrinsically more fragile than marriages regardless of age at their start.

Socio-economic factors

- Educational attainment, housing tenure and personal income did **not** seem associated with propensity to experience partnership breakdown. The ways in which household finances and tasks were organised and the division of child care between the partners also showed no consistent or robust association with partnership breakdown.
- Married men and women who thought their financial situation was comfortable (27 per cent of them) were less likely to separate over the next few years. Married women who said their financial situation was very difficult (4 per cent) were more likely to separate.
- High probabilities of partnership breakdown for the socio-economically disadvantaged were clearer when we examined couples rather than individuals. Married couples receiving benefits or unemployed were more likely to separate. Cohabiting couples receiving benefits also had a higher rate of breakdown.

Health and wellbeing

- The strongest divorce differentials with respect to health were found for men in first marriages. Men, particularly those under 40, who were registered as disabled at time of the interview in 1992 had significantly higher divorce rates in the next few years. Only 3 per cent of men were registered but the higher observed risk of divorce suggests that the stress associated with disability places additional strain on marital relationships. Women registered as disabled also had higher odds of marital breakdown (but this difference was not statistically significant, perhaps due to the very small sample size).
- A clear-cut, but not unexpected, finding was that people whose relationships were about to end (at some point over the next three years) were more likely to feel unhappy. Married men and women who subsequently broke up had lower psychological wellbeing than contemporaries who did not do so. This was pronounced amongst the married but also present amongst cohabiting men.

Family-oriented values

- Those who strongly supported the proposition that divorce was preferable to an unhappy marriage were more likely to experience divorce in the next 3 years than those who did not. For men this was the only attitude available associated with divorce propensity. For married women other attitudes were also linked with marital stability. Those who rejected the traditional divisions of gender roles were more likely to divorce, as were women who believed that adult children had no obligation to care for parents. This offers some limited evidence that traditional family-oriented values and attitudes are related to marital stability, especially for women.

Determinants of Divorce: Evidence from the NCDS

By age 33, 91 per cent of the NCDS cohort contacted at that age had entered a first partnership and 30 per cent of these partnerships had ended.

Demographic factors

- First partnerships that either began as marriages or converted from a cohabiting union into a marriage had similar rates of breakdown, 23 per cent by age 33. For those who had not married their first partner, 72 per cent had dissolved by age 33. For this British cohort there is thus little evidence that those who cohabited prior to converting a first union into a marriage had a higher risk of dissolution than those whose first union was marriage. This was the case for both men and women in the sample.
- The younger age at entry into a first partnership the more likely was it to break up. Nearly half of first partnerships entered into by teenagers had broken up by age 33, compared with 1 in 5 of those formed in the mid-twenties.

Childhood and adolescent factors

- Lower educational performance at age 16 and low qualifications were associated with adult partnership breakdown. However, controlling for age at first partnership, the relative risks of partnership breakdown across all educational groups became very similar. The risk of partnership dissolution for the less educated appears mainly due to forming partnerships at an early age; their chances of experiencing dissolution for later partnerships are similar.
- Young people with low levels of emotional well-being at age 16 were more likely to experience partnership disruption in adulthood. Controls for age at first partnership reduce but did not eliminate the relative risk. The relative risk of partnership breakdown was 41 per cent greater for those with low than those with high levels of emotional well-being. However allowing for age at first partnership reduced the excess risk to 20 per cent.
- Young people with emotional problems at age 16 may be more likely to form partnerships early, placing them at greater risk of later partnership breakdown. Young people with emotional problems may also be more likely to separate regardless of when they form partnerships.
- Men and women who had experienced parental divorce during childhood were nearly 1.7 times as likely as those brought up with both parents to experience partnership breakdown in adulthood. Excess risk was again reduced (to 1.35) when age at first partnership was allowed for.
- Children who experience parental divorce were also more likely to have emotional problems. The evidence clearly pointed to *both* parental divorce and emotional well-being being independently associated with partnership breakdown in adulthood.

About the study

This study was financed by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant L315 3015) and was carried out within CASE. The data used from the FRS, BHPS and NCDS were supplied by the ESRC Data Archive at Essex University.