COHABITATION, MARRIAGE AND CHILD WELLBEING

A Cross-National Perspective

DAVID POPENOE

The National Marriage Project

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The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The project is financially supported by the university in cooperation with private foundations. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing.

The National Marriage Project has five goals: (1) annually publish *The State of Our Unions*, an index of the health of marriage and marital relationships in America; (2) investigate and report on younger adults' attitudes toward marriage; (3) examine the popular media's portrait of marriage; (4) serve as a clearinghouse source of research and expertise on marriage; and (5) bring together marriage and family experts to develop strategies for revitalizing marriage.

Leadership

The project is co-directed by two nationally prominent family experts. David Popenoe, Ph.D., a professor emeritus and former social and behavioral sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of *Life Without Father*, *Disturbing the Nest* and many other scholarly and popular publications on marriage and family. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D., an author and social critic, writes extensively on issues of marriage, family and child wellbeing. She is the author of *Why There Are No Good Men Left*, *The Divorce Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), and the widely acclaimed *Atlantic Monthly* article "Dan Quayle Was Right."

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Introduction

No family change has come to the fore in modern times more dramatically, and with such rapidity, as heterosexual cohabitation outside of marriage. Within three decades in most advanced nations the practice of non-marital cohabitation has shifted from being a widely eschewed and even illegal practice to one which, increasingly, is viewed as a normal part of the life course and a necessary prelude to, or even substitute for, marriage. In America before 1970, for example, cohabitation was uncommon, a deviant and unlawful practice found only among people at the margins of our society. Since 1970 the number of Americans living together outside of marriage has increased more than 1,000 percent, with such couples now making up about ten percent of all couples.[1]

What does this trend mean for the future of marriage and the wellbeing of children? How should we respond to this striking social development, as individuals and together as a society? In seeking information and answers to cohabitation questions it is useful to look abroad. The practice of cohabitation in many other developed nations is longer established and far more common than in the United States, as are certain characteristic legal and public policy responses. In Sweden, for example, around 30 percent of all couples are cohabiting, and "domestic partnership" legislation has been on the books for several decades.[2] What is done elsewhere does not always have relevance to our own situation; among developed nations, the culture of the United States is in some respects unique. Nevertheless, there are many commonalities in advanced societies and on an issue like cohabitation, where we have such limited knowledge, all sources of new information warrant close investigation.

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[1] David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2007* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2007) p. 19

[2] See Table 1.

Non-marital cohabitation has become a normal part of the life course in the eyes of more than half of young singles in the United States.

TABLE 1 Cohabitors as percent of all couples

	1990s		2000s		% Change
Australia	1996	10.1	2006	15.0	48.5
Canada	1995	13.9	2006	18.4	32.4
Denmark	1995	24.7	2006	24.4	-1.2
France	1995	13.6	2001	17.2	26.5
Germany	1995	8.2	2005	11.2	36.6
Italy	1995	3.1	2003	3.8	22.6
Netherlands	1995	13.1	2004	13.3	1.5
New Zealand	1996	14.9	2006	23.7	59.1
Norway	2001	20.3	2007	21.8	7.4
Spain			2002	2.7	NA
Sweden	1995	23.0	2005	28.4	23.5
United Kingdom	1995	10.1	2004	15.4	52.5
US	1995	5.1	2005	7.6	49.0

France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Spain generated from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Statistical Database, Gender Statistics (http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/Default.asp).

Australia: Statistics Australia Census Tables, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 2914 (2006) and No. 4102 (1996).

Canada: Statistics Canada 2007, Legal Marital Status, Common-law Status, Age Groups & Sex.

Denmark: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (1995) & Statistics Denmark (2006).

New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand, Census of Families and Households & 2006 Table Builder, Marital Status.

Norway: Statistics Norway, Population & Historical Census, Table 24 and Statistical Data Bank.

Sweden: For 1995, all couples from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe data less married women from Statistics Sweden. For 2005, Population Table 28 and Statistics Sweden Statistical Database.

Great Britain: Focus on Families & Focus on Families National Statistics.

United States: America's Families and Living Arrangements, 1995 & 2005 (rate is based on self-identified unmarried cohabitors not POSSLQ (Persons of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters).

In this brief analysis, drawing on the best and latest empirical data, I shall review the reasons for the swift rise of non-marital cohabitation, discuss its practice in a number of advanced Western nations, analyze its social consequences to the best of our current knowledge, especially for child wellbeing, and discuss reasonable public-policy responses. The nations specifically included in the analysis, in addition to the United States, are the major nations of Western Europe and Scandinavia—Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain,

Sweden and the United Kingdom—together with Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These nations harbor important data, experiences, and scholarly documentation that can be helpful for better understanding the cohabitation situation in the United States, particularly the likely consequences and what the best public responses might be.

Cohabitation in the United States

Non-marital cohabitation has become a normal part of the life course in the eyes of more than half of young singles in the United States. Attitudes against cohabitation, which were once predominant in this country, have given way to acceptance, especially among the young. In the past 25 years the percentage of high school seniors who "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along" has climbed from 45 percent to 64 percent for boys and 32 percent to 57 percent for girls.[3] In a statistically representative national survey of young adults between the ages of 20 and 29, commissioned by the National Marriage Project in 2001, 43 percent agreed that "you would only marry someone if he or she agreed to live together with you first, so that you could find out whether you really get along."[4]

The practice of cohabitation has grown enormously. As of 2002, over 50 percent of women ages 19 to 44 had cohabited for a portion of their lives, compared to 33 percent in 1987 and virtually none a hundred years ago.[5] And it should come as no surprise that at the same time cohabitation rates have skyrocketed, marriage rates have plummeted. The yearly number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women age 15 and older has dropped by nearly half since 1970, from 76 to 41 in 2005.[6] A major reason for the decline of marriage rates is precisely the rise of cohabitation. Without the possibility of cohabitation, a much higher percentage of the population would be married; there has been little decrease in recent times in the propensity of young people to desire to "become couples."

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Yet cohabitation in place of marriage should be considered a major societal concern. For one thing, marriage typically brings with it, according to an abundance of research, many benefits for those involved. Married people tend to be

3 David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2007* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2007), Figure 18, p. 28

4 David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2001* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2001), p. 10

5 Sheela Kennedy and L. Bumpass, "Cohabitation and Children's Living Arrangements: New Estimates from the United States." Unpublished manuscript (Minnesota Population Center, Minneapolis, MN, Dec., 2007)

6 David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2007* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2007) Figure 1, p. 17

happier, healthier, wealthier, and they live longer. The available empirical evidence suggests that these benefits of marriage diminish considerably if the marital bond is replaced by non-marital cohabitation. Moreover, the evidence is now clear that people who marry after cohabiting (assuming that they are not already engaged or committed to each other when they first cohabit) tend to have a higher chance of breakup.[7]

Of even greater societal concern, however, should be the negative effects of cohabitation on child wellbeing. More than 40 percent of cohabiting couples today have children, and the percentage is growing partly due to a declining propensity of cohabiting couples to convert to marriage.[8] Cohabiting couples have a significantly higher dissolution rate than married couples, thus putting more children through the stress of family break up and the probable loss of one residential parent. One recent study found that "children born to cohabiting versus married parents have over five times the risk of experiencing their parents' separation."[9] Cohabiting couples also fail to measure up to married couples in many other respects. They tend to have higher rates of child abuse and family violence, for example, and significantly lower incomes.[10]

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Why Do People Cohabit?

Why are people today, especially young people, cohabiting in such large numbers? To a large extent cohabitation is an offshoot of the sexual revolution that began in the 1960s, a revolution which essentially gave premarital sex a social stamp of approval. The change mainly altered the sexual behavior of women; men had been violating the stricture against premarital sex for decades, even centuries, perhaps since the very invention of marriage, however furtive and with prostitutes if necessary. But prior to the 1960s most women, unlike men, remained virgins until marriage. And men wanted to marry and have children with women who had had no sexual experience.

Why the 1960s? This was a time when there was a widespread revolt against over-conformity to established social norms and institutions in many different spheres; a result of the new freedoms brought about, in part, by the unparalleled affluence of the post-World War II era in combination with the huge cohort of youth that made up the Baby Boom—a cohort so large that it was able successfully

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7 W. Bradford Wilcox, et. al. *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 2nd Edition (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005); Linda L. Waite and M. Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000)

8 Kennedy and Bumpass, op.cit.

9 Cynthia Osborn, W.D. Manning and P.M. Smock, "Married and Cohabiting Parents' Relationship Stability: A Focus on Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (2007): 1345-1366, p. 1345

10 For review of the research, see; Mary Parke, "Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?" (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003). See also: David Crary, "Abuse Risk Seen Worse as Families Change," Associated Press (Nov. 24, 2007)

TABLE 2 Number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women 15+

Country	1990s		2000s		% Change
Australia	1996	33.4	2006	32.0	-4.3
Canada	1995	34.0	2006	22.2	-34.7
Denmark	1994	36.0	2005	31.2	-13.4
France	1994	22.3	2005	20.8	-6.8
Germany	1994	29.3	2005	23.0	-21.5
Italy	1994	27.3	2001	22.1	-19.1
Netherlands	1994	28.9	2005	22.6	-21.8
New Zealand	1991	42.7	2006	24.8	-41.9
Norway	1994	23.0	2002	25.0	8.6
Spain	1994	47.2	2001	38.7	-18.1
Sweden	1994	17.2	2005	20.0	16.1
United Kingdom	1994	30.6	2005	27.2	-11.2
US	1995	50.8	2005	40.7	-19.9

Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway (1994), Spain, Sweden, and UK calculated using base of single women 15+ from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and marriage count from Eurostats marriage indicators (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/).

Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Demographic Yearbook, 1986-2006.

Canada: Statistics Canada: Marriages, by province and territory, 1995 & 2006

New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand, Population Indicators 2006 (& historical)

Norway: (2002) Statistics Norway, Tables 54 & 92.

United States: Base from Current Population Surveys, Single Women 15+, and marriage count from National Vital Statistics Reports, Marriage.

to challenge the traditional social norms of parents and other adult figures of authority. Even more importantly, it was a time when relatively reliable birth control for women first became available, followed soon by the legalization of abortion. These revolutionary changes greatly diminished the age-old problem of unwanted pregnancy for unmarried women.

With women now socially permitted to have sex before marriage, far more women became sexually available to men and men no longer had to marry to regularize their sexual lives. Men reacted by pulling back from marriage and from having children, expanding their now notorious "inability to commit." This gradually took the form not just of having regular sex outside of marriage but of actually living with one's sexual partner in non-marital cohabitation.

At the same time, the sexual revolution was enhancing the gender revolution which was bringing greater equality to women, especially in the workplace. Being less impelled to marry at a young age, women entered jobs and careers in ever larger numbers and marriage and childbearing were increasingly delayed. The delay

TABLE 3 Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women

	mid 90s		mid 00s		% Change
Australia	1995	26.6	2005	32.2	21.1
Canada	1995	30.5	2005	25.6	-16.1
Denmark	1995	46.5	2005	45.7	-1.7
France	1996	38.9	2006	50.5	29.8
Germany	1996	17.0	2006	30.0	76.5
Italy	1995	8.1	2005	15.4	90.1
Netherlands	1996	16.4	2006	35.0	113.4
New Zealand	1995	40.7	2005	45.2	11.1
Norway	1996	48.3	2005	53.0	9.7
Spain	1995	11.1	2005	26.6	139.6
Sweden	1996	53.9	2006	55.5	3.0
United Kingdom	1996	35.5	2006	43.7	23.1
US	1996	32.4	2006	38.5	18.8

Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, UK extracted from United Nations Economic Commission on Europe, Statistical Database, Gender Statistics (http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/Default.asp).

Australia: Bureau of Statistics, Cat 4102, Social Trends, National Summary 1996-2006, Table 1.

Canada: Annual Demographic Statistics and CANISM, Statistics Canada, Births, 2005, Table 2-5.

New Zealand: Demographic Trends, Statistics New Zealand.

US: Births: Data for 1996 and Births: Preliminary Data for 2006, Table 1 (release date Dec 2007).

With marriage and child bearing delayed, and with premarital sex now acceptable, cohabitation outside of marriage...[is]...a natural outcome.

was enhanced by women's greatly increased entry into higher education, desired not only in its own right but often required by the jobs and careers that women aspired to. The average age of marriage for women climbed dramatically from around 20 at the beginning of the period to today's 26. With marriage and child-bearing thus delayed, and with premarital sex now acceptable, cohabitation outside of marriage was a natural outcome.

The gender revolution, especially the rapid increase of women in the workplace, enhanced the divorce revolution. The divorce rate had been rising for centuries, but it reached unprecedented heights after the 1960s. One of the reasons was that married women no longer were so economically dependent upon their husbands. In a bad marriage they were newly able to resort to divorce and still remain economically viable through their new access to jobs. Once divorced, women often went on the marriage market. Thus more opportunities were opened for married men who wanted to divorce yet find a new mate, further increasing the divorce rate.

The divorce revolution, in turn, accelerated the practice of cohabitation. People became more worried about marriages gone wrong; if at all possible, they wanted to avoid divorce with its financial and legal complications. This meant delaying marriage until they were older and presumably wiser, which could now be done more easily thanks to the wider acceptance by both men and women of premarital sex and cohabitation. And it meant a new emphasis on "mate selection," the art and "science" of finding the right mate. Would you buy a new car without first test driving it, or a new pair of shoes without first trying them on? Certainly not! And a growing number of young people—especially males—came to believe that one should never enter a marriage without first living with the person to see how it works out. Also, cohabitation rather than marriage became increasingly popular among the rapidly growing number of older people who had been through a divorce. Why face a second divorce when there is the opportunity to "just live together?"

It should be obvious, then, that in an era of relatively unrestricted premarital sex, women in the work place, delayed marriage, and high marital breakup, there is a profound logic—almost an inevitability—about the practice of living together before marriage. What are the alternatives? Either marriage at a young age (not a good idea because, among other reasons, it limits access to higher education and is associated with a much higher risk of divorce), no sex before marriage (hard to imagine reinstituting this social norm across the population), or "sleeping around" rather than living with one sex partner (not good for a variety of reasons). It seems likely, therefore, that non-marital cohabitation is a practice that is not going away anytime soon. Still, its effects on marriage, and on any children involved, are issues which warrant far more public discussion than they have received to date.

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The Practice of Cohabitation in Western Europe and the Anglo-Countries

Consensually living together without formal marriage was an ancient custom in Western Europe up until the late middle ages, when the Catholic Church brought formalization procedures to the institution of marriage.[11] In many countries so-called common-law marriages, marriages informally made yet publicly accepted, were still permitted well into the 20th Century. And in some parts of Scandinavia non-marital cohabitation remained an accepted, although not a widespread, practice. Yet in the early Post-World War II period marriage rates in Western Europe were extremely high, just as they were in the United States, and the institution seemed to be thriving in what has been called a "golden age" of marriage.[12]

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[11] John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)

[12] P. Festy, "On the New Context of Marriage in Western Europe," *Population and Development Review* 6 (1980): 311-315

Then, in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with the Scandinavian nations leading the way, marriage rates began to drop and cohabitation rates soared. In Sweden the percentage of all couples who cohabited was an estimated one percent in 1950, and climbed to seven percent in 1969 and eleven percent in 1975.[13] Today, the percentage stands at around 30 percent. Denmark was not far behind, and from the late 1970s the practice of cohabitation quickly spread across central and Northwestern Europe. Within a few decades, with non-martial cohabitation being the primary generating factor, the populations in many nations shifted from being the most married in modern European history to the least married.

Today, non-marital cohabitation has become a dominant part of the cultural landscape of Northern and Central Europe, plus the United Kingdom and the Anglo-nations abroad, with more than three quarters of the population in many of these countries and more than 90 percent in Sweden and Denmark living together before marriage.[14] Cohabitation percentages are highest in the Nordic countries plus France; mid-range in the UK, the German-speaking countries, plus the Netherlands and Belgium; and lowest in the southern European nations. In all of the nations of Western Europe and its Anglo outliers, there have been sharp percentage increases between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s in the number of couples that are cohabiting, ranging from 23 percent in Italy, 26 percent in France, 37 percent in Germany, 48 percent in Australia, and 52 percent in the UK, to a surprising 59 percent in the New Zealand. In general, all the nations seem to be gradually headed in the direction of the high cohabitation rates found in Scandinavia.[15]

Today, non-marital cohabitation has become a dominant part of the cultural landscape of Northern and Central Europe.

At the same time, as could be expected, marriage rates have dropped precipitously. Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, the marriage rate (number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women) dropped eleven percent in the U.K., 13 percent in Denmark, 21 percent in Germany, 22 percent in the Netherlands, and 35 percent in Canada.[16] One study found that, at the beginning of the 21st century, German-speaking Europeans (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) married at least 30 percent less than three decades before.[17] In Britain, the marriage rate has fallen by two thirds since the early 1970s, and by 2005 the number of people choosing to get married fell to the lowest level in 111 years.[18]

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[13] G. Thorborn, *Between Sex and Power* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 195

[14] Kathleen Kiernan, "Cohabitation in Western Europe: Trends, Issues, and Implications," in A. Booth and A. C. Crouter (eds.) *Just Living Together* (Mahwah, NJ: L Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 3-31

[15] See Table 1.

[16] See Table 2.

[17] Maria Winkler-Dworak and H. Engelhardt, "On the tempo and quantum of first marriages in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland: Changes in mean age and variance," *Demographic Research* 10-9 (2004): 231-264

[18] Rosemary Bennett, "Love and Marriage Don't Have to Go Together, Say Modern Couples," Timesonline (January 23, 2008); *The State of the Nation Report: Fractured Families* (UK: The Social Policy Justice Group, Dec. 2006), p. 9

TABLE 4 Number of divorces per 1000 married women 15+

Country	mid 1990s		early 2000s		% Change
Australia	1996	13.2	2006	10.5	-20.2
Canada	1999	9.4	2003	9.2	-3.1
Denmark	1994	12.9	2005	14.2	10.0
France	1994	9.8	2005	12.9	31.4
Germany	1994	8.5	2005	10.9	27.8
Italy	1994	1.9	2005	3.9	106.6
Netherlands	1994	10.2	2005	9.1	-11.1
New Zealand	1991	12.7	2006	13.1	3.2
Norway	1994	12.3	2002	11.9	-2.9
Spain	1994	3.7	2001	4.6	26.6
Sweden	1994	13.3	2005	12.9	-3.4
United Kingdom	1994	12.5	2005	12.4	-1.1
US	1995	19.8	2005	16.4	-17.2

Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and UK calculated using base of married women 15+ and divorce count from Eurostats marriage indicators

Australia: Bureau of Statistics, Demographic Yearbook, 1986-2006

Canada: Statistics Canada: Divorces by province and territory, 1999 and 2003

New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand, Population Indicators, 2006

Norway: Statistics Norway, Tables 54 & 92

US: Base from Current Population Surveys, married women 15+, and divorce count from National Vital Statistics Reports, Divorce

Indeed, across Western Europe attitudes toward marriage have grown negative or at least indifferent. A 2006 AC Nielsen global survey of 25,000 consumers polled over the internet found 77 percent of Europeans agreeing with the statement "I consider a stable, long term relationship just as good as marriage" (compared to only 50 percent of Americans). And 44 percent of Europeans agreed that "the concept of marriage is not relevant today" (compared to 27 percent of Americans).[19] Another survey, of people in 14 European nations, found that when asked about a variety of seemingly negative population trends the most positive attitudes were expressed toward the declining number of marriages and increasing number of unmarried couples.[20]

Modern cohabitation in Europe started as an alternative to dating among a small group of singles, moved on to being seen as a useful preparation for marriage, or trial marriage, and then became a substitute or alternative for marriage.

[19] Global Consumer Confidence Survey (New York: A.C. Nielsen, June 2006)

[20] "The Demographic Future of Europe—Facts, Figures, Policies," Population Policy Acceptance Study (Stuttgart, Germany: Federal Institute for Population Research, 2005)

The couples most likely to cohabit tend to be younger, more secular, and to come from broken homes.

In some nations today—notably in Scandinavia—cohabitation and marriage are said to have become in many respects indistinguishable. One does not ask (or often even know) whether or not a particular couple is married or cohabiting. Many couples go through life without getting a marriage license. A recent estimate is that only sixty percent of today's young Swedish women will ever marry, and the corresponding figure for Britain is about 75 percent.[21]

In some nations today...cohabitation and marriage are said to have become in many respects indistinguishable.

The reasons for the growth of cohabitation in Europe are essentially the same as those occurring in the United States, as sketched out above—the sexual and gender revolutions and the rise of divorce. The more rapid emergence and greater prevalence of cohabitation in Europe, however, are largely the result of the more secular nature of European cultures. Among the industrialized nations, the United States stands virtually alone in being a country where a sizeable percentage of the population remains actively religious. In much of Western Europe religion has all but disappeared, and therefore the kind of pro-marriage appeals found in America—appeals based on religious tradition and values—are seldom put forth.

The more well-developed welfare systems in Europe may also play a role in the greater prevalence of cohabitation there. These systems tend to make the family, and therefore the institution of marriage, less important in the lives of citizens. People in the welfare states need to rely less on family members for support in the areas of economics, education, child care, health care, and special welfare needs. Extensive welfare benefits and other policies adopted by some welfare states, such as individual rather than joint marital taxation and the almost identical treatment by the law of marriage and non-marital cohabitation, have (perhaps inadvertently) helped to undercut marriage. One study that looked at 17 countries over the decades of the 1980s and 1990s found that every 1000 euro increase in yearly benefits to lone-mother families resulted in a two percent increase in the incidence of such families.[22]

The lowest cohabitation rates in Western Europe are found in the Roman Catholic Countries of the south, Spain and Italy, where the percentage of all couples that were cohabiting was only three percent in Spain in 2002 and four percent in Italy in 2003.[23] These nations can be characterized as having more traditional family structures and less reliable welfare states. Religious belief remains more prominent, and young people tend to live longer with their parents, rather than move out and cohabit. Also, the stigma against non-marital births is stronger,

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[21] For Sweden, Council of Europe, 2005. The proportion of Swedish women born in 1965 and never married by age 50 was projected to be close to 40%. For Britain, *The State of the Nation Report: Fractured Families* (UK: The Social Policy Justice Group, Dec. 2006) p. 28

[22] Libertad Gonzalez, "The Effect of Benefits on Single Motherhood in Europe," (Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor, March 2006)

[23] See Table 1.

which tends to limit cohabitation. Nevertheless, the family situation in these southern European nations may only be a step or two behind the others. Marriage rates in Spain and Italy are dropping rapidly: between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s the rate decreased 18 percent in Spain and 19 percent in Italy. And non-marital birth percentages, while still low by European standards, have jumped enormously in recent years as explained below.[24]

The Anglo nations of Canada, Australia and New Zealand have a family situation that is, not unsurprisingly, similar to that of their mother country. In the mid-2000s the percentage of cohabiting couples in the UK was 15 percent; in Australia 15 percent; in Canada 18 percent (but much higher in Quebec and lower in the Western provinces); and in New Zealand 24 percent. The marriage rates in these nations were also quite similar, with the lowest rate found in Canada.[25]

Many cohabiting couples have children, and when a child is born into a cohabiting family it normally is counted as an unwed childbirth. Naturally, therefore, the percentage of unwed births in these nations is closely associated with the percentage of cohabiting couples. Unwed birth percentages (2005/6 data) range from 15 percent in Italy and 27 percent in Spain, to 30 percent in Germany, 44 percent in the U.K., 50 percent in France, and 55 percent in Sweden. In several nations—the late-comers to this trend—there have been staggering percentage increases in the number of unwed births in the past decade: From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, a 76 percent increase in Germany, 90 percent in Italy, 113 percent in the Netherlands, and 140 percent in Spain. During the same period the UK had a 23 percent increase and France had a 30 percent increase in unwed births.[26]

A final and highly important piece of the family picture of these nations, especially as concerns children, is the divorce rate. It is well known that the US divorce rate has long been the highest in the industrialized world, but what is less well known is that the US rate has been falling while in a number of European nations divorce rates have been climbing. In the mid-1990s to mid-2000s period, the US divorce rate dropped by 17 percent while it jumped ten percent in Denmark, 27 percent in Spain, 28 percent in Germany, and 31 percent in France. In the mid-2000s the US rate stood at 16.4 divorces per 1000 married women. But not far behind were the divorce rates of Denmark (14.2), France and Sweden (12.9), and the UK (12.4). The lowest divorce rates are found in Italy (3.9) and Spain (4.6).[27]

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[24] See Tables 2 and 3.

[25] See Table 1. The Province of Quebec in Canada appears to have the highest cohabitation rate in the Western World, at 35% of all couples.

[26] See Table 3.

[27] See Table 4.

Government Policies and Laws Concerning Cohabitation

Governments of the nations under study have come up with a surprising diversity of responses to the rise of cohabitation, although legal and policy developments seem headed in a common direction. Almost all of the nations have "registered partnership" legislation which establishes a legal institution more or less analogous to marriage, yet everywhere but France, the Netherlands, and Belgium these partnerships are restricted to same-sex couples. The Netherlands, Spain and Belgium allow civil marriages by same-sex couples, but for couples (both heterosexual and same-sex) who do not want to marry, France, the Netherlands and Belgium also permit a registered partnership in its place. The procedures for breaking up these partnerships are quite analogous to divorce.[28]

Everywhere non-marital cohabitation remains distinctive in that no specific procedures exist for getting into it, and none for getting out.

There are widely varying marriage-like legal consequences for being a cohabiting couple (thus a modern version of "common-law marriage"), ranging from partner coverage in health insurance to inheritance provisions following the death of one partner. Also varying are the conditions needed to be fulfilled before the informal cohabitation of a couple is recognized in law, such as the length of the duration of the cohabitation, the existence of a sexual relationship, and the holding of a joint address or household (in the US, Canada, and Australia, the laws vary by states and provinces). But everywhere non-marital cohabitation remains distinctive in that no specific procedures exist for getting into it, and none for getting out.[29]

Regarding the age-old issue of whether legal reforms foster social change, or vice versa, it is not entirely clear how legislation has affected the extent and growth of cohabitation in these nations. France and the Netherlands permit legally registered partnerships but have relatively low levels of cohabitation compared, for example, to the Nordic nations. However, the Nordic nations, with high levels of cohabitation, attach by far the most legal consequences to informal cohabitation, while among the European nations Germany, with a low level of cohabitation, attaches the least legal consequences. For the most part, it appears, legislation has been drawn up after widespread cohabitation has become an established fact. Yet there is movement in these nations toward making the legal consequences of cohabitation more and more like those of marriage, thus giving a public stamp of acceptance to the practice. In general, such legislative recognition of cohabitation, while often justified in terms of human rights, is likely to encourage the practice and thus at the same time weaken the distinctive cultural and legal status of marriage.

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[28] Information about policies and laws concerning cohabitation was collected for this report from official sources in each nation.

[29] Kees Waaldijk (ed.) "More or Less Together: Levels of legal consequences of marriage, cohabitation and registered partnerships for different-sex and same-sex partners," (Paris: Institut National d'Etudes Demographiques, 2004)

The Key Findings from Cross-National Investigation

1. Cohabitation has become a permanent part of the life course

Cohabitation appears to have become imbedded as a normal part of the life course in modern nations; that is, the great majority of people in these nations are likely to cohabit outside of marriage sometime during their lives. There is no sign in any nation that cohabitation is in decline; quite the opposite, it is increasing everywhere. Most young people are planning to cohabit, at least as an alternative to dating and as a "trial marriage," but increasingly as an alternative to marriage. One recent study in the United States found the same trend that is evident in Europe: "For growing numbers of couples, cohabitation is now becoming an alternative to marriage or being single…Many couples seem to be living together longer without marrying or ending their relationship."[30]

There is no sign in any nation that cohabitation is in decline; quite the opposite, it is increasing everywhere.

2. Cohabitation has led to fewer marriages

There are many reasons for the decline of marriage, but the rise of cohabitation is certainly one of them. There are three main components to the falling marriage rates of recent years: later age at first marriage (made possible, in part, by the acceptability of cohabitation); more frequent non-marital cohabitation; and fewer marriages following on from cohabitation. Once established in the culture, cohabitation seems gradually to be corroding the desire of couples to move to marriage.[31]

3. Cohabitation is not the same as marriage; most importantly, cohabiting couples break up at a much higher rate than married couples

The primary way in which cohabitation differs in its social character from marriage is the lower level of interpersonal commitment that is involved, a phenomenon which surely is related to its more informal nature and to the absence of a formal promise or solemn pledge to stay together. Cohabiting partners tend to have a weaker sense of couple identity, less willingness to sacrifice for the other, and a lower desire to see the relationship go long term. This holds true even in nations where cohabitation has become common and institutionalized. One study using data from Norway and Sweden, for example, found that compared to married couples, cohabitors overall "are less serious, less satisfied, and more often consider to split up from their current relationships."[32]

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[30] Interview with Sharon Sassler by Ohio State University News Service, Oct. 19, 2006. Sharon Sassler and J. McNally, "Cohabiting couples' economic circumstances and union transitions: a re-examination using multiple imputation techniques," *Social Science Research* 32 (2003): 553-578

[31] In Canada, cohabitational experiences were found to delay the timing of first marriages by 26 percent for men and 19 percent for women. Zheng Wu, *Cohabitation: An Alternative Form of Family Living* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 143

[32] Eva Bernhardt, T. Noack and K. A. Wiik, "Cohabitation and Commitment: Is cohabitation really indistinguishable from marriage in Norway and Sweden?" (Stockholm: Center for Gender Studies, ND), 1 (N.D.)

One of the most telling measures of low commitment is the break-up rate of couples. We know from many studies that cohabiting couples break up at a far higher rate than married couples, by one estimate in the United States, the rate is five times higher.[33] Of course, much of this is due to the fact that many cohabiting relationships are relatively transient and not expected to be long term. But even when children are involved, a situation where one would expect to find a higher level of commitment and permanence, the break-up rate of cohabiting couples is far higher than for married couples. A study in Norway found that children of cohabiting couples were almost two and one half times more likely to face parental breakup compared to children of married couples, and that over several decades this discrepancy has not changed.[34] A massive British study reports that "nearly one in two cohabiting parents split up before their child's fifth birthday compared to one in twelve married parents," and "three quarters of family breakdown affecting young children now involves unmarried parents."[35]

We know from many studies that cohabiting couples break up at a far higher rate than married couples, by one estimate in the United States, the rate is five times higher.

4. The relationship between cohabitation and the divorce rate is both negative and positive

Many studies in the US have shown that couples who cohabit before marriage have a higher risk of divorce when they do marry.[36] Several reasons have been put forth to account for this. One is that it is mostly due to selectivity; that is, those people who are willing to cohabit are the same people who already are more divorce prone. They may be less committed to traditional family values, less inclined toward or more tentative regarding long-term relationships, and may have personality traits that make them less suitable as marriage partners. A second reason involves the actual experience of cohabitation, that is, attitudes and behaviors developed through cohabitation may be inimical to long-term marriage. For example, cohabitation may generate the attitude that relationships are mainly for the purpose of testing compatibility, an attitude poisonous to long-term marriages. A third reason is that cohabiting couples, compared to dating couples, often find it harder to break up due to the greater complications of household and financial as well as emotional matters. They therefore may drift through inertia into inappropriate marriages, only to break up farther down the line.[37]

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[33] Georgina Binstock and A. Thornton, "Separations, Reconciliations and Living Apart in Cohabiting and Marital Unions," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 432-443

[34] An-Magritt Jensen and Sten-Erik Clausen, "Children and Family Dissolution in Norway: The Impact of Consensual Unions," *Childhood* (Sage Publications, 2003), 65-81

[35] *The State of the Nation Report: Fractured Families* (UK: The Social Policy Justice Group, 2006), 9-13

[36] See, e.g.., Binstock and Thorton, op.cit.; and Jay Teachman, "Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 444-455; Claire M. Kamp Dush, C.L. Cohan and P.R. Amato, "The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 539-549

[37] For a review of these theories, see Scott M. Stanley, G. K. Rhoades and H. J. Markman, "Sliding Versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect," *Family Relations* 55 (2006): 499-509

It seems to be the case, however, that cohabitation has both a negative and a positive effect on divorce. In the United States and a few other modern nations, with increased cohabitation, divorce rates have been leveling off or dropping. Cohabitation clearly has contributed to rapid drops in the marriage rate, and it may be that marriage is, therefore, gradually becoming more selective of people who really desire it. In other words, many ill-matched couples who in earlier years would have gone on to marriage and later divorce, because cohabitation was not possible for them, today cohabit instead. If and when they break up, which they do in large numbers, their break up is, of course, not reflected in the divorce rate.

There is also new evidence that, in several nations where cohabitation is much more common than in the US, the effect of premarital cohabitation on later marital breakup has diminished or even reversed.[38] For one thing, when cohabitation becomes almost universally practiced, as it is in these nations, any outcome comparisons with those few who don't cohabit becomes rather meaningless.

Whatever the effects, the relationship between cohabitation and divorce points up a very serious problem in measuring family breakup in modern nations: Using the divorce rate alone is no longer very useful because it doesn't include the breakup of the huge number of cohabiting couples. While no official statistics are kept on the breakup rate of cohabiting couples, it is not hard to realize that, especially in the high-cohabitation nations, relying solely on the divorce rate seriously underestimates the amount of family breakup that prevails. In fact, the highest family breakup rates in the world today may be found in Scandinavia, which not only has relatively high divorce rates but also the highest percentage of cohabiting couples.

5. The relationship between cohabitation and the birth rate is both negative and positive

The relationship between the rise of cohabitation and fertility levels in modern nations is rather ambivalent. In a given society cohabiting couples tend to have fewer children than married couples.[39] Also, the delay of marriage made possible through cohabitation is strongly associated with the low birth rates in the European nations; the later the age at first childbirth, the lower the fertility level.[40] Thus cohabitation could be said to be an important factor in the long-run decline of fer-

[38] Paul J. Boyle and Hill Kulu, "Does Cohabitation Prior to Marriage Raise the Risk of Marital Dissolution and Does this Effect Vary Geographically?" School of Geography and Geosciences, University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews Scotland (2007); Michael Svarer, "Is Your Love in Vain? Another Look at Premarital Cohabitation and Divorce," *The Journal of Human Resources* 39 (2004); A. C. Liefbroer and E. Dourleijn, "Unmarried Cohabitation and Union Stability: Testing the Role of Diffusion Using Data From 16 European Countries," *Demography* 43-2 (2006): 203-221

[39] For Canadian data, see: Zheng Wu, op. cit. p.152

[40] Hans-Peter Kohler, F. C. Billari, and J. A. Ortega, "The Emergence of Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe During the 1990s," *Population and Development Review* 641 (2002); also by same authors: "Low Fertility in Europe: Causes, Implications and Policy Options," in F. R. Harris (ed.) *The Baby Bust: Who Will do the Work? Who Will Pay the Taxes?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 48-109; Tomas Frejka and Jean-Paul Sardon, "First birth trends in developed countries: Persisting parenthood postponement," *Demographic Research* 15-6 (2006): 147-180

tility in modern times.

In an important reversal of this negative effect of cohabitation on fertility, however, the southern European nations (Italy and Spain) with the lowest levels of cohabitation also today have the lowest birth rates. It seems to be the case that, in modern nations where so many children are born out of wedlock, if cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births are culturally stigmatized—as they still are in the southern European nations—women will simply not have as many children as they otherwise might.[41] Put differently, the higher fertility rates found in places like France and Sweden are strongly related to the far higher percentage of unwed births in those nations, most of which take place within cohabiting unions. It is important to note that Italy has no more childless women than France and Sweden; the lower fertility there results from the fact that more Italian mothers have just one child.

6. Cohabitation has been a major contributor to the rise of unwed births and lone-parent families

Perhaps the most universal family trend in modern nations today is the shift of child rearing from married parents to single or lone parents, most often mothers. Lone-parent families in these nations have skyrocketed in recent years, along with non-marital cohabitation. The percentage of children living in lone-parent families in Spain jumped almost 80 percent in the period from 1991 to 2001, while in France it climbed 49 percent. The percentage of all children living with a single parent in Germany, New Zealand and Norway now equals or surpasses the 26 percent currently found in the United States, the nation long known as the lone-parent leader.[42] In several nations the chances are now better than 50-50 that a child will spend some time living with just one parent before reaching adulthood.[43]

Lone parenthood stems both from unwed births and from parental breakup after birth. The increase in cohabitation is obviously related strongly to higher percentages of out-of-wedlock births. But the most important reason for lone parenthood in these nations today is the breakup of parents after birth.[44] And, as noted above, the breakup rate for cohabiting couples who have children *is more than twice* what it is for married couples with children.

7. Through contributing to unwed births and lone-parent families, cohabitation has negative effects on child wellbeing

There is abundant empirical research in the United States that demonstrates the

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41 Marta Dominguez, T. C. Martin and L. Mencarini, "European Latecomers: Cohabitation in Italy and Spain." Paper delivered at the Population Association of America annual meeting, March 2007.

42 See Table 5.

43 Patrick Heuveline, J.M. Timberlake and F.F. Furstenberg, Jr., "Shifting Childrearing to Single Mothers: Results from 17 Western Countries," *Population and Development Review* 29 (2003): 47-71

44 Ibid.

strongly negative effects of cohabitation and lone-parent families on child wellbeing.[45] Although research on this topic is not nearly so well-developed in Europe and the Anglo nations as it is here, the research that does exist comes up with essentially the same findings. One classic Swedish study published by the British medical journal, *Lancet*, in 2003 found that Swedish children growing up in non-intact families compared to those in intact families, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and psychological health of the parents, were twice as likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders, diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse.[46] A Norwegian study that examined the relationship between cohabitation and child wellbeing concluded that "for children, being born into a consensual union has several implications: the risk of dissolution is persistently high…; they are likely to be born into a precarious socioeconomic situation; they are more likely to live with their mother than their father after dissolution, their family experience evades public surveillance, and they are not likely to have siblings with whom they have common parents."[47]

The State of the Nation Report in Britain, published in 2006, found that 70 percent of young offenders come from lone-parent families, and children who had grown up in lone-parent or broken families were between three to six times more likely to have suffered abuse. "Childhood in a broken family," states the report, "is more likely than average to be unhappy [and] to involve violence, abuse, debt, drug/alcohol problems, as well as high levels of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and mental illness." The report concludes that "the impact of family breakdown on children is generally negative. In many cases it has insidious effects which impact their own future capability to maintain healthy relationships."[48]

A recent article that reviewed long-term studies from Sweden, Israel, and the U.K. as well as the United States, and published in a Scandinavian pediatric journal, concluded that children who lived with both a mother and a father had significantly fewer behavioral and psychological problems than those who lived with their mother only.[49] In speaking to a newspaper reporter, one of the authors said: "It may seem obvious that what's worked for centuries is good for individuals and society, but that's what we found."[50]

There is abundant empirical research in the United States that demonstrates the strongly negative effects of cohabitation and lone-parent families on child wellbeing

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[45] See, for example, Sara McLanahan and G. Sandefur, *Growing up with a Single Parent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Mary Parke, "Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?" (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003); Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children* 15-2 (2005): 75-96; and W. Bradford Wilcox, et.al., *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 2nd Edition (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005)

[46] Gunilla Ringback Weitoft, A. Hjern, B. Haglund and M. Rosen. "Mortality, severe morbidity, and injury in children living with single parents in Sweden: a population-based study," *The Lancet* 361 (2003): 289-295

[47] Jensen and Clausen, op.cit., p. 78

[48] *The State of the Nation Report: Fractured Families* (UK: The Social Policy Justice Group, Dec. 2006) pp. 11, 20 and 46

[49] Anna Sarkadi, R. Kristiansson, F. Overklaid, S. Bremberg, "Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: a systematic review of longitudinal studies," *Acta Paediatrica* 92-2 (2008): 153-158

[50] Reported by Jenny Hope: "Dads DO matter: Why children brought up by BOTH parents are happier and more successful," *The Daily Mail* (February 12, 2008)

TABLE 5 Percentage of Children in Lone-Parent Families*

	1990s/early 00s		mid to late 00s		% Change
Australia	1996	16.3	2006	19	16.6
Canada	2000	21.3	2005	22.5	5.6
Denmark	1996	23.8	2006	26.0	9.2
France	1991	8.9	2001	13.3	49.4
Germany	1995	28.4	2005	30.9	8.8
Italy	1991	8.4	2001	9.2	9.5
Netherlands	1991	13.0	2005	12.0	-7.7
New Zealand	2001	27.3	2006	28.4	4.0
Norway	2001	23.2	2007	25.4	9.5
Spain	1991	8.3	2001	14.9	79.5
Sweden	1999	21.0	2005	21.3	1.4
United Kingdom	2001	22.9	2004	24.0	4.8
US	1996	25.4	2004	26.4	3.9

** To make comparisons consistent, lone-parent families refer to a single parent and a child or children. Married or cohabiting parents are counted as a two-parent family.*

Australia: Children <15 living in lone-parent families. Family and Community National Summary 1996-2006, Table 1; Australian Social Trends 2006.

Canada: Children <15, tabulated using CANSIM. Family Characteristics by Family Type, Table 111-0010.

Denmark: Children <18 2006, Table Fam1, Statistics Denmark. 1996 data from BRN09 base = all children in lone-parent families or with both parents

France: Children <15 from Eurostats. Children in lone-parent families from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

Germany: Children <15 from Eurostats & children in lone-parent families from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

Italy: Census 1991 & 2001 tabulated using Eurostats

Netherlands: Base number of children extracted from EUROSTATS (<18). Children in lone-parent famlies from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

New Zealand: National Family & Household Projections: 01 thru 21, Table 3. (2006 data based on projections from Series 5B projections.)

Norway: Children 0 to 17, Statistics Norway, Table 1.

Spain: Census 1991 & 2001 tabulated via Eurostats

Sweden: Children <18. Children and Families, 1999 & 2006.

UK: National Statistics Office, Census 2001, Table T01, and 2004 Focus on Families Data.

US: Living Arrangements of Children: 1996 & 2004, Household Economic Studies, Survey of Income and Program Participation, Table 1.

TABLE 6 Lone-Parent Families as Percent of all Families with Children

	1990s/early 00s		mid to late 00s		% Change
Australia	1996	18.3	2006	20.7	13.1
Canada	1996	22.3	2006	29.1	30.5
Denmark	2000	18.3	2007	20.7	13.1
France	1990	14.5	2001	18.0	24.1
Germany	1995	18.4	2005	20.1	9.2
Italy	1995	14.4	2003	16.5	14.6
Netherlands	1996	15.6	2006	20.0	28.2
New Zealand	2001	30.7	2006	32.0	4.2
Norway	2001	19.1	2006	21.3	11.5
Spain	1990	9.2	2002	13.2	43.5
Sweden	1990	18.0	2006	24.5	36.1
United Kingdom	1998	23.9	2005	25.9	8.4
US	1996	28.3	2006	27.8	-1.8

** To make comparisons consistent, lone-parent families refer to a single parent and a child or children. Married parents or cohabiting parents are counted as a two-parent family.*

Australia: Children <15. Family and Community National Summary 1996-2006, Australian Social Trends 2006, Table 1. * No distinction between married & defacto couples in Australian Social Trends 2006.

Canada: Children <18. Table 111-0011 & 06 Profile of Language, Mobility & Immigration. Statistics Canada (Base = all families with children) & 1996 Census Tables. Lone-parent families based on 20% sample.

Denmark: Children <18. Statistics Denmark, Table Fam1. FAM44 calculated from STA-BANK DENMARK.

France: 1990 & 2001 data calculated using Eurostats data extraction. (Base = couple with children households and lone-parent families.)

Germany: Children <15 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. (Base = couple with children households & lone-parent households.)

Italy: Children <15 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. (Base = couple with children households & lone-parent households.)

Netherlands: Size & Composition of Household, Position in Household, Jan. 1996-2007. Statistics Netherland.

New Zealand: Table 3. National Family & Household Projections: 01 thru 21. (2006 data based on projections from Series 5B projections.)

Norway: Children <18. Lone-parent families as a percent of all families with children, Statistical Yearbook; Statistics Norway, Table 63.

Spain: Children <15 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. (Base = couple with children households & lone-parent households.)

Sweden: Children <18. Census 1990; and Women and Men in Sweden, 2006.

UK: Families by Type and Presence of Children, Labor Force Survey, Office for National Statistics, 2006 & Living in Britain 1976-2000, General Household Survey, Table 3.7. (Base = couple with children and lone-parent families for all children <18 unless child not in school.)

US: Calculations using Table FM-2. All parent/child situations by type race & Hispanic origin: 1970 to present. Lone-parent totals less unmarried couples total from Table UC-1. Unmarried-Couple Households (POSSLQ) by presence of children: 1960 to present. Current Population Survey.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

There can be no doubt that the rise of non-marital cohabitation in modern nations has seriously weakened the institution of marriage, and strongly contributed to substantial and continuing increases in unwed births and lone-parent families. This means, in turn, that more and more children are growing up in families that do not include their two biological parents. The reason this is a serious problem is because all the evidence we have shows that individuals fare best, both in childhood and in later life, when they benefit from the economic and emotional investments of their natural parents who reside together continuously and cooperate in raising them. The evidence for this seems to be nearly as strong in other modern nations as it is in the United States.

It is clear that modern societies would be better off if biological parents stayed together and made large, cooperative investments in their children.

From a society-wide, child-oriented perspective there is little social benefit to the rise of non-marital cohabitation. It is clear that modern societies would be better off if biological parents stayed together and made large, cooperative investments in their children. To be sure, the experience of many nations suggests that much can be done to improve child wellbeing through economic and other supports where the institution of marriage has seriously weakened and cohabitation has become common.[51] But even in nations that have the most extensive welfare measures, such as the Scandinavian countries and France, a substantial gap in child wellbeing remains between those children who grow up in intact families, and those who do not.

Yet cohabitation has become an almost fully accepted practice for adults in modern societies, and if present trends continue it is only going to increase, not decrease. The issue before these societies, therefore, is whether they should just sit back and try to adjust to the new social conditions, or instead make an effort to improve child wellbeing through increasing the chances that children will grow up in families that include their two married parents. And if the latter, through what measures could that goal possibly be achieved?

A realistic answer to this question is that there is probably not much that government policies or social action can do to change the situation. If major change is to come about it will have to occur through a broad cultural shift, reflected in the hearts and minds of the citizenry, in the direction of stronger interpersonal commitments and families. Over the course of history there have been such cultural

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[51] There is no strong relationship between level of cohabitation and the over-all wellbeing of children in a nation because so many other factors affect child welfare, such as the level of wealth of a nation and the proportion of expenditures that go toward children's needs. See: Jonathan Bradshaw, P. Hoelscher and D. Richardson, "An Index of Child Well-Being in the European Union," *Social Indicators Research* 80 (2007): 133-177, 169-170; "Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries," (Florence, Italy: Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2007)

shifts, but it is difficult to say how they have been generated and whether similar conditions prevail in modern times. Still, there surely are actions that societies can take to try to improve the situation and not make it worse; actions that discourage cohabitation and encourage marriage, at least when children are involved.

To improve child wellbeing, modern nations need to foster more long-term, committed relationships among child-rearing couples. This means, essentially, that the institution of marriage, in some form, needs to be strongly encouraged, supported, and protected. Marriage itself has changed markedly over the centuries, from an economic partnership to a love relationship and from male dominance to egalitarianism, but it has not changed in its importance for children. For all of history, so far as we know, marriage has had as its primary function the holding together of parents to raise their children, and there really is no other institution in sight that could successfully replace it. Because cohabitation is not going away, the goal should be to get more cohabiting couples, when they have children, to shift into marriage and maintain that marriage over the long term. The following specific actions could help to achieve this goal:

To improve child wellbeing, modern nations need to foster more long-term, committed relationships among child-rearing couples.

1. Educate young people about marriage and its strong relationship with successful child-rearing outcomes from the early school years onward, so that it becomes a lifetime goal at least for those who desire children.
2. Due to the many difficulties of maintaining marriages today, encourage all couples who are anticipating marriage or who are married and having problems to take "marriage education" courses. In the United States, the initial empirical studies that have been done indicate that these courses have proven to be helpful in strengthening marriages.[52]
3. Develop a national program of parenthood education and family assistance to help parents in the all-important task of raising young children. The many stresses of raising children today have become a contributor to later marital breakup.
4. Continue to indicate support for married couples, especially those with children, in public programs such as economic assistance, tax benefits, and inheritance rights.

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[52] See reviews in *Family Relations* 53-5 (October, 2004), and Elizabeth B. Fawcett, A.J.Hawkins, and V.S. Blanchard, "Does Marriage Education Work? A Comprehensive Meta Analysis of Effectiveness of Marriage Education." Unpublished manuscript (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2006)

5. Modify divorce laws so that they better take into account the needs of children.

6. Avoid the legal establishment of new institutions that compete with marriage. These give to unmarried couples similar rights and obligations to those of married couples, and thus inevitably tend to weaken the institution of marriage.

In the final analysis, the issue of cohabitation comes down to a conflict between adult desires and children's needs. It seems a tragedy that, with all the opportunities that modernity has brought to adults, it may also be bringing a progressive diminution in our concern for the needs of children—and thus for the many generations to come.

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