



# FocusFamilyINSIGHT

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**To:** Interested Students of the Family

**Re:** **Confusing Reports: New Cohabiting Research from CDC**

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**USATODAY... “Report: Cohabiting Has Little Effect on Marriage Success”**

**The New York Times... “Study Finds Cohabiting Doesn’t Make Unions Last”**

Two stories on the same report published the same day in two very different kinds of newspapers with completely opposite conclusion. *Interesting!*

*So which one gets the story right?*

Well, actually *The NYT* piece (surprise, surprise!) did a better job in its reporting.

The subject of these stories (and numerous others you might have seen this week) is a new report from the Centers for Disease Control based on data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth.<sup>1</sup> It gives a good snapshot of the nature of marital and cohabiting relationship at a point in time: 2002. Of course, newer data on cohabitation has been published and I have presented it in past FFIs, but this new offering from the CDC is still helpful and informative to students of the family.

## **What are the Findings?**

*Non-engaged cohabitators are different than marrieds...*

If a couple cohabited before marriage, and were not engaged, they were – according to this report – more than ten percentage points more likely to break up before their 10-year wedding anniversary compared to those who didn’t cohabit before marriage.<sup>2</sup> That is a smaller margin of marital success between pre-married cohabitators and non-cohabitators than many other studies indicate, but it is still significant.

It is critically important to note that this CDC report does not become the new “truth” on how cohabitation impacts marital success. Good social science conclusions are not based on just one or two studies, but more on the collective body of research on a topic. And it happens that a meta-analysis which looks at 26 published studies from 1970 to 2008 was also just published: February 2010.

This *Journal of Marriage and Family* study reports, based on these 26 methodologically rigorous studies, that consistently “cohabitation had a significant negative association with both marriage stability and marital quality.”<sup>3</sup>

*Engaged cohabitators more similar to marrieds...*

Both the CDC and the new meta-analysis found that those who cohabit after engagement only looked *slightly less healthy* than couples who didn’t cohabit before marriage. This is not a new finding. It started showing up in studies over the past few years and it indicates the importance of the commitment and relational clarity among the couple and the extended family. *Let me explain.*

## **What Makes Engaged Cohabitators Different?**



# MEMO

Cohabitation is certainly a moral issue, but seeing it as a sociological and psychological issue as well reveals that cohabiting relationships tend – with all other things being equal – to be shorter-lived and more volatile than marriages because cohabitation is an ambiguous relationship.

The man typically sees the relationship less seriously and more temporary than the women and each partner's parents and extended family are not sure what the nature of the relationship is. Would a father-in-law be as likely to get his daughter's live-in boyfriend a job down at the factory or provide the money for their first home as he would his daughter's husband, his son-in-law? Of course not and this demonstrates one way how cohabiting relationships are practically very different.

But when an engagement has taken place, the ring is bought, caters are being interviewed, dresses being considered, the clarity of the relationship becomes clearer for all involved. Expectations are clearer. This is what University of Denver sociologist Scott Stanley – one of the leading scholars on marriage and cohabitation in the world - was referring to in his quote in the USATODAY piece: the “nature of commitment at the time of cohabitation is what's important.”

## Other Findings from the CDC

- By 2001, 52% of all non-marital births were to cohabiting women, compared to 33% of non-marital births to cohabiting women in 1984.
- Data continues to suggest that cohabiting has negative effects on child outcomes, affecting both academics and behavior of children with cohabiting mothers compared to those with married mothers.
- In 2002, only 8% of married women had an unemployed husband whereas 15% of cohabiting women's partners were unemployed, indicating that cohabiting women are more likely to have a man that won't commit, but also doesn't work.
- College educated women were *more likely to be married* than their non-college educated peers, 63 to 49% respectively.
- Women with college degrees were *much less likely to be cohabiting* than those with only a high school diploma, 17 to 5% respectively.
- Young people who grew up with two parents at home were consistently less likely to cohabit prior to marriage, compared to their peers who did not grow up living with both parents.

## Child Birth and Relational Longevity

- Women having their first child 8 months or more after the wedding have a 79% chance of celebrating their tenth marriage anniversary.
- Women who have no pre- or post-marital births have only a 34% chance of reaching the ten-year marriage mark.
- Women who have a premarital first birth have a 55% chance of doing so and those who had a premarital conception had a 54% chance of reaching ten years.

<sup>1</sup> Paula Y. Goodwin, William D. Mosher and Anjani Chandra, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States: A Statistical Portrait Based on Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth,” *Vital Health Statistics Series 23, Number 28*, (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, February 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, *et al.*, 2010, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Anita Jose, Daniel O'Leary and Anne Moyer, “Does Premarital Cohabitation Predict Subsequent Marital Stability and Marital Quality? A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72 (2010): 105-116.