

What Really is the Divorce Rate?

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Scott M. Stanley, Ph.D.
University of Denver

I first wrote this piece many years ago. (At least 6 or 7 years ago, but I'm not sure when since I did not date it.) However, the content of it remains as valid now as it did then. This version, updated August, 2007) contains some updated thoughts and references, but is otherwise essentially the same document I wrote years ago.

1. First, about myths. Some have suggested that the “real” divorce rate is nothing near 50% but that it is more like 15%—meaning that 5% of couples who marry will divorce. I do not well understand where the 15% number comes from, but the arguments in its favor are usually supported by a serious misunderstanding of where the 40-50% numbers come from. The assumption has been (by those who have not studied it carefully) is that the 50% number came from someone noticing that, in the U.S., we have about 2.4 million marriages a year and 1.2 million divorces a year. Hence, 50% of married couples divorce. Having set forth this explanation, people arguing for the lower percent as being the real divorce rate, go forth with their case.

No serious demographer ever looked at the approx 2.4 mil marriages a year and 1.2 mil divorces a year to arrive at the 50% number. That is a misunderstanding that began early in the debate about what the divorce rate really is—a misunderstanding that is, unfortunately, widely perpetuated. The 40-50% number comes from detailed analyses of various population demographics, including ages, divorce rates by ages, lifespan projections, etc. It represents a sophisticated projection—much like the projected life span projections for babies being born today. As with any projection, the number could change if conditions in society change, but it is a very valid projection under current conditions. In 1992, the U.S. Bureau of Census completed a sophisticated analysis and concluded:

. . . if one assumes a continuation of recent divorce trends, about 4 out of 10 first marriages to the youngest cohort may eventually end in divorce. Alternatively, if one assumes a return to the pattern of divorce during the 1975 to 1980 period, 5 out of 10 first marriages may eventually end in divorce (Current Population Reports, P23-180, 1992, p. 5),

Some have suggested that demographer failed to take into account the marriages already in existence, many of which have a very low likelihood of divorcing. That's simply not true.

A more recent publication (that is accessible online) is one of the best I have ever read for clarity about the divorce rate. It is by Kelly Raley and Larry Bumpass, who are demographers.

Raley, R. K., & Bumpass, L. (2003). The topography of the divorce plateau: Levels and trends in union stability in the United States after 1980. *Demographic Research*, 8, 245-260.

In addition to reasserting the typical projection of a likelihood of divorce for newly marrying, young couples in the 40 to 50% range, overall, they show how the divorce rate is now very different depending on amount of education someone has received. I am not sure if this was always true and no one looked before or something quite new. I summarize some points from their paper in the following panels from recent talks of mine.

Raley & Bumpass (2003)
The Topography of the Divorce Plateau

- Half of all first marriages will dissolve
 - (based current trends; representing a leveling off on a plateau)

HOWEVER

- “Our understanding of family stability is impaired if we focus only on divorce rates: for example, children’s family lives have become increasingly unstable during the plateau in the divorce rate (Bumpass & Lu 2000).”

The latter point they make is due to the fact that many more children are now born to cohabiting couples than ever before, so break-ups of those relationships (that surely affect children as much as the average marital break up) are not even accounted for by looking at divorce statistics. In other words, more children than ever before are experiencing their parent’s relationship coming apart (or never coming together), and this fact is not captured well in divorce data alone.

Now, regarding projected divorce rates by educational attainment, they show the following.

Raley & Bumpass (2003)
The Topography of the Divorce Plateau

- But, how does divorce breakdown by education?
 - Not HS Grad 60%
 - HS Grad 53%
 - Some College 51%
 - College Graduate 36%
- This is an area within the “plateau” where the differences have widened.

Now, back to the main point of this little paper.

2. The 40-50% number is a projection for younger folks marrying for the first time. However, conditions in society could change to affect this either way. In fact, Andrew Cherlin, one of the prominent scientists in this area, believes that these kinds of projections are very valid, but also suggests that it is particularly hard to confidently predict the future in times of great social change. We live in such times.

3. So, what is the divorce rate? Consider the following statements:

- Approximately 31% of your friends, aged 35 to 54, who are married, engaged, or cohabitating have already been previously divorced. (NOT a projection, but this would vary by a lot of things that are too numerous to go into. But, if you have average friends, this would be the average likelihood (or close enough for this argument's sake).)
- If your parents have been married many years (let's say 35+ years) and have never been divorced, the likelihood of their marriage ending in divorce is nil.
- The rate of divorces per year per 1000 people in the U.S. has been declining since 1981.
- A young couple marrying for the first time today has a lifetime divorce risk of 50%, unless current trends change significantly. (And, they have not changed all that much but the variations for groups and types of risk factors have been changing.)

Each of these statements is true and defensible. They each tell you something different about divorce. On the positive side, the rate has been slowly declining. On the negative side, a young couple really does have a very high chance of not making it—and those who say otherwise do not understand the data. I think the way people commonly understand the divorce rate is actually quite close to the truth: marriages starting out today are at great risk for divorce or marital distress.

4. Some have implied that the real divorce rate is closer to 15% to 25%. But that has to be a serious underestimate because it is the percentage of adults already divorced, and includes so many people with many years to live who simply have not gotten divorced yet. The 25% can only go higher for some time, unless one believes that young people are going to divorce at lower rates than their grandparents. No scientist in this field that I know of believes that will happen.

So, the truth is that couples marrying today are at very high risk for divorce. While it is true that most couples in the older generation will never divorce, 40-50% in the younger generation probably will--unless we do much more as a society to help prevent this.

Some years ago, William Mattox, of the USA Today, raised excellent concerns about the ways such numbers can be misunderstood. Do couples really understand that the 40-50% number is only a projection that is not written in stone? Does this projection leave couples demoralized, feeling that most couples are doomed to fail anyway? Or does it give rise to motivation to take

marriage more seriously? We really do not know the answer to this question. My point boils down to this: the projection is valid, not some casually made up number. But Mattox's point is also valid: couples need to know that they do not have to live out the prevailing societal trends. There's nothing wrong with the 40-50% projection, it's just that we don't necessarily have to stand by and let it continually come to pass.

Scott M. Stanley, Ph.D.
University of Denver
Author of *The Power of Commitment*