



UNMARRIED WITH CHILDREN

Has the Upward Trend of Cohabiting Couples with Children Halted?

Boundaries and behavioral problems

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down,” Robert Frost argues in the “Mending Wall.”

Certainly something in human nature, since the Garden of Eden, doesn’t like the constraint of boundaries. There are and have always been those who have chaffed at the traditional mores governing sexual intimacy and marriage. The moral precepts and laws protecting marriage, however, reflect the experience of countless generations in all cultures and religious traditions. The functionality of these boundaries has often been disputed on various grounds by anti-traditionalists, but researchers continue to turn up data showing that marriage is the *gold standard* when it comes to family life, especially for kids.

Figure 1 shows a halt in the upward trend in the number of cohabiting couples with children under 15 years of age.

The painful consequences of single parenthood for children are well-documented: Children of divorced parents have more health-related problems, are more likely to do poorly in school, are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, are more likely to be involved in crime, and have higher rates of suicide than children in intact families.

Cohabiting relationships are experimental in nature, tenuous at best, and tend to dissolve at roughly twice the rate of married couples; hence, children living in such

situations are arguably twice as vulnerable to the anguish and hardships associated with separation from a parent.

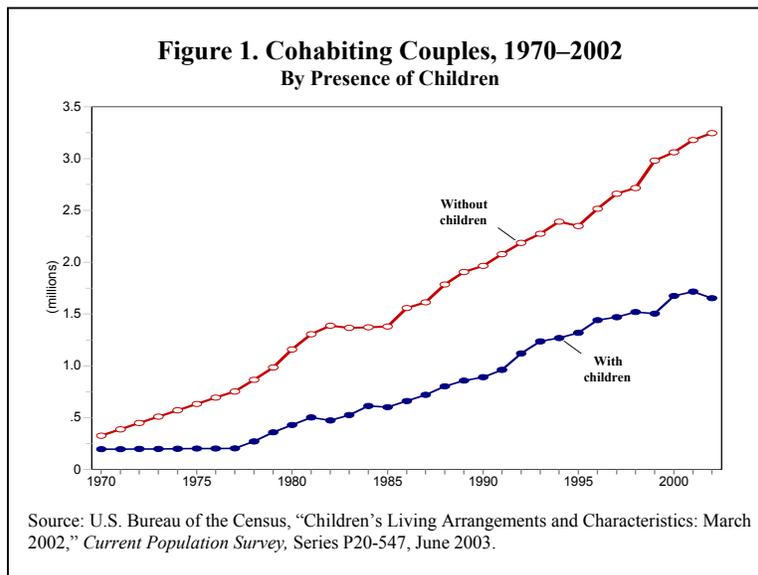
“There is an important emerging literature that demonstrates that exposure to a household structure not anchored by one’s own biological parents is damaging to the long run life chances of children.” This is the nuanced language of the academic researcher attempting to leave open the door to the *possibility* that cohabiting biological parents *may* also produce a healthy

environment for children that is on a par with marriage. What is being avoided in this prosaic assertion is the rate of breakup of non-marital unions and the fact that the best situation for children is the one where the biological parents have sealed their commitment to one another by formal marriage. As weak as the marriage bond has become in the era of no-fault divorce, on average the harmony, stability, and longevity

of marital unions are still far superior to that of cohabiting couples. The whole truth put simply is: Marriage is not merely good for kids, it is *best* for them!

Road to Harmony or Heartache.

Many have seen the rise in cohabitation among young people as a response to their disenchantment with marriage related to the anger and irreparable loss that they experienced when their own parents divorced. Thus cohabitation is viewed by some as a substitute for



marriage, divorce and remarriage. How ironic that they should substitute the even more unstable relationship of cohabitation—with its attendant heartache—for traditional marriage, weakened though it has become in this age of radical individualism.

Nevertheless, a very large percentage of couples who cohabit go into it with the expectation that it will serve as a way-station on the road to marriage, a trial marriage of sorts without the fuss of a legal divorce in case they prove incompatible.

Herein lies the problem with this approach to maintaining a relational bond: Despite their biologically driven attraction to one another, many are so alienated from the opposite sex because of their bitter childhood experiences, that the weak ties of a “trial marriage” have little chance of holding the couple steady under pressure. Inevitably some difficult conflict comes along that taps into and unleashes the hidden caldron of pain

and attendant hostility waiting to erupt like a broken water main. Instead of tenaciously trying to work things out and regain the harmony they experienced during the initial stages of attraction, they opt to “cut and run” without regard to the consequences for anyone else. This response reflects both the excesses of individualism as well as the flawed institutional arrangements these values have spawned. (During the 1970s, about 60 percent of cohabiting couples married each other within three years, but this proportion has since declined to less than 40 percent.¹)

Potential Beneficial Impact of Research:

The most recent data on family living arrangements give a small measure of hope that the research data combined with the common sense understanding of what is good for children may be taking hold. In 2002 the number of cohabiting couples with children showed a substantial decline (see Figure 1). One year does not constitute a reversal of trend, but it is a hopeful sign that the research is starting to have an impact; we certainly witnessed a massive change in behavior relating to smoking as research documented its health hazards, truth already known through common sense and experience. The number of persons cohabiting who did not have children—those designated by the Census Bureau as persons of the opposite sex sharing living quarters (POSSLQs)—on the other hand, continued its steep upward trend both in absolute and relative terms (see

Figure 2). By the middle of the 1990s, half of all persons under age 40 had lived in a cohabiting relationship.

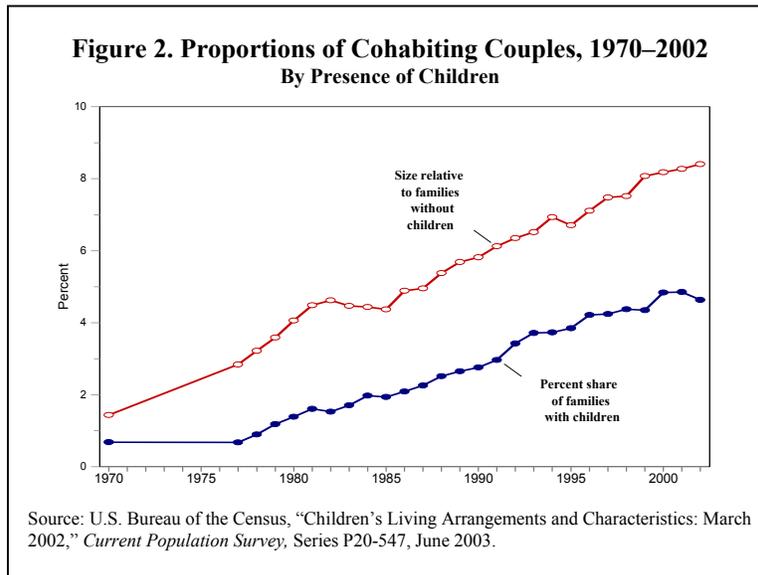
Like today’s cohabitators’ disdain for the legal niceties of a marriage license and wedding ceremony, the poet Robert Frost has the protagonist in the “Mending Wall” question the need for the boundary since there are no cows to keep from straying. The answer given is that “Good fences make good neighbors.” Reluctant to give ground to traditional wisdom and keen to advance his position, he presses further, “But why?”

When confronted with the data showing the inferior outcomes of the children **NOT** raised by their married biological parents, the anti-traditionalists seek to cloud the discussion of the contribution of marital boundaries with the response that “it may be so, but we don’t know why.”

Dr. Suzanne Bianchi, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center on Population, Gender, and Social

Inequality at the University of Maryland, fell back on this tactic when asked to summarize the discussion at the Conference on *Counting Couples: Improving Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Cohabitation Data in the Federal Statistical System*. She put the *but-why* question indirectly by having it come from the mouth of one of her students at the end of a lecture on marriage. “What does it matter whether we marry or live together or whatever?” Humans have no propensity to stray?

Regrettably, the best that Bianchi had to offer to the conferees was a pathetic attempt to make it appear that the knowledge base supporting the value of marriage is weak. Her synopsis was that “a very major reason as to ‘why it really matters’ is the very strong belief on the part of many legislators that marriage and cohabitation matter for children’s well-being.” To which she adds, “I say ‘belief’ because I think the volume of research that actually connects marriage and cohabitation behaviors to child outcomes is still rather limited. Also within the scientific community, perhaps more so than within the policy community, the size of those effects of marriage and cohabitation and the strength of the causal relationships is still, for many of us, really an open question.” Will there ever be enough research data—in addition to a thousand generations’ experience—for the skeptic who is unwilling to accept boundaries?



¹ Bumpass, Larry L. 1994. *The Declining Significance of Marriage: Changing Family Life in the United States*. Paper presented to the Potsdam International Conference “Changing Families and Childhood,” December 14-17.