

Cohabitation over the Last 20 Years: Measuring and Understanding the Changing Demographics of Unmarried Partners, 1996-2017

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Short Abstract

Cohabitation has more than doubled in the last 20 years, reflecting either increasing normalization or perhaps increasing social disadvantage. Over this same period, the Current Population Survey has significantly improved the measurement of cohabiting partners, including adding a direct cohabitation question in 2007, which revealed “hidden” cohabiting households and cohabiting subfamilies. The goal of this study is to better understand the changing demographics of cohabiters from 1996 to 2017 in light of improved measurement using two strategies. The first strategy is to compare only the social characteristics of cohabiters between years where measurement was stable. I will compare 1996 to 2006 and 2007 to 2017, but not 1996 to 2017. The second strategy is to make long-term historical comparisons (1996-2017) *under the condition* that the newly discovered cohabiting groups in 2007-2017 do not significantly bias the social characteristics of the total cohabiting population, which will be tested extensively in this paper.

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Extended Abstract

While there has been a noted rise in cohabitation (i.e., unmarried partners living together) starting in the 1970s, many have noted a particularly large “boom” in cohabitation starting in the mid-1990s (Fry and Cohn 2011). In 1996, estimates from the Current Population Survey (CPS) reported 5.9 million cohabiting adults, or 3.0 percent of the total population, but these estimates rose to 17.4 million cohabiting adults in 2017, now 7.1 percent of the total adult population (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). Cohabitation has become so common that the majority of American adults now cohabit before they marry (Guzzo 2014), and 35 percent of unmarried parents that live with an underage child live with a partner now compared to 20 percent in 1997 (Livingston 2018). Demographers debate whether the growth is a result of increasing normalization across different demographic groups or the result of growing social inequality that has resulted in disadvantaged groups increasingly adapting non-traditional family patterns (see Cherlin 2004, 2009; Furstenberg 1996; Manning 2013; Musick and Michelmore 2015). Greater normalization would entail increases in demographic groups historically underrepresented as cohabiters, like elderly populations, while greater inequality would be suggested by increases in the concentration of socially disadvantaged groups, like those with low income, low education, and/or racial minorities. It is possible that both phenomena may be contributing to rising cohabitation rates depending on the group studied (see Manning 2013; Stepler 2017). In any case, this study seeks to illuminate the changing demographics of cohabiters in the wake of the “boom” in the cohabiting population over the last 20 years, as this may affect family outcomes and future trends in family composition (Musick and Michelmore 2015).

During this period of growth in the unmarried partner population, the U.S. Census Bureau also made significant changes to the CPS that improved the measurement of cohabiting couples. In 1996, the

CPS added an “unmarried partner” response category in the question asking about the relationship of each household member to the householder (person who owns or rents the home). This was praised as a substantial improvement over inferring cohabitation from the coresidence of opposite sex unrelated adults (i.e., “POSSLQ,” 1967-1995),¹ which lacked precision and captured many people who most likely were boarders and domestic helpers, not cohabiters (see Fitch, Goeken, and Ruggles 2005). In 2007, the measurement of cohabitation again improved with the addition of a direct cohabitation question, which asked unmarried adults with an adult nonrelative present, “Do you have a boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner in this household?” If the response was “yes,” the respondent was asked to identify the cohabiting partner and the interviewer recorded that partner’s line number. This direct question allowed researchers to detect two new groups of cohabiters. The first group was “hidden” cohabiting households that answered “roommate” or “other non-relative” instead of “unmarried partner” in the relationship question, most likely understanding the term “boyfriend/girlfriend” in the direct question better than “unmarried partner” (see Manning and Smock 2005). The second group discovered were cohabiting subfamilies, where a cohabiting couple is living in someone else’s home, most commonly with parents (Kennedy and Fitch 2012). These newly discovered groups of cohabiters compose approximately 17 percent of the total cohabitation estimate between 2007 and 2009 (Kennedy and Fitch 2012; Kreider 2008). Thus, some of the uptick in cohabitation between 2006 and 2007 in the CPS pertained to improved measurement (see U.S. Census Bureau 2017a), though increases in the cohabiting population continued after 2007 (Stepler 2017), and other surveys with stable cohabitation measurement confirm large increases in cohabitation over the last 20 years (see Manning 2013).

Given that the CPS is one of the most popular population surveys to measure family patterns over time (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b), an important question arises: How do we compare the

¹ For a description of how POSSLQ is calculated, see Footnote #3 in Table AD-3 here: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/families/time-series/adults/ad3.xlsx>

demographic characteristics of cohabiters over the last 20 years in light of these beneficial changes in measurement starting in 2007? One approach is only to compare years where measurement was stable. For example, compare 1996 to 2006 and 2007 to 2017, but not 1996 to 2017. This would at least allow one to compare “like-with-like” between similarly measured years. The comparison between 1996 and 2006 would include cohabiting households (partnerships that include the householder), not subfamilies, and only among those who understood the term “unmarried partner.” However, this may be permissible given how past research has shown how the overall characteristic distributions of cohabiters have been robust to measurement changes despite known miscounts and imprecision, as evidenced by the transition from POSSLQ to “unmarried partner” in 1996 producing similar social characteristics despite distinctly different forms of measurement (Casper, Cohen, and Simmons 1999).

Another approach is to test whether the inclusion/exclusion of certain “hidden” cohabiting groups revealed by the direct question introduced in 2007 shift the overall characteristic distributions of cohabiters in a given year compared to restricting to cohabiting households. As noted, the direct cohabitation question unveiled two “hidden” cohabitation groups: 1) householder unions that perhaps misunderstood the “unmarried partner” option in the relationship to householder question; and 2) subfamily unions that exist within a household and don’t include the householder. There are some significant demographic differences between these groups and those that are detected through the “unmarried partner” response in the relationship item (Kreider 2008; Kennedy and Fitch 2012). This is particularly true with regard to the subfamily unions, which tend to be young, disadvantaged, and more sensitive to the economic landscape (Kennedy and Fitch 2012; Vespa and Kennedy 2017). Given the unique nature of the subfamily cohabiting unions, they may significantly skew the overall demographic distributions of cohabiters, and make historical comparisons difficult. However, the inclusion of unions that did not fully understand the “unmarried partner” response in the relationship question may be

permissible *under the condition* that they do not significantly skew the overall demographic composition of cohabiting couples. In this case, historical comparisons of unmarried partner households, excluding subfamilies, may still be feasible.

Thus, the main goals of this study are twofold. First, this study seeks to better understand the changing demographics of cohabiters over the last 20 years and how it may reflect either increased normalization and/or increased disadvantage. Evidence of normalization would include growth in groups traditionally underrepresented in the cohabitation population, like people ages 50 and over, who appear to be cohabiting at higher rates according to some estimates (Stepler 2017). Evidence of disadvantage would suggest a growing concentration of marginalized groups in the cohabiting population (e.g., low income, low education, racial/ethnic minorities, etc.), with some suggesting that this may be occurring among those with a high school education or less (see Manning 2013). Second, the study seeks to offer an approach to make tentative demographic comparisons of cohabiters over time despite known measurement changes, specifically in contexts where the inclusion of these newly discovered cohabiting groups in 2007 do not appear to significantly change the overall characteristic distributions. In this way, this research provides both substantive and methodological contributions that will illuminate the demographic changes that occurred among cohabiters in recent times as well as provide better procedures for researchers to make historical comparisons of cohabiters in future research.

Data

Data for the study come from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the CPS for the following years: 1996, 2006, 2007, and 2017. For 1996 and 2006 survey years, “unmarried partner households” are householders and respondents who were identified through the “unmarried partner” option in the relationship to householder survey item. For 2007 and 2017 survey years, the identification of cohabiters expands to include additional groups of cohabiters who were reported via the

direct cohabitation question, “Do you have a boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner in this household?” These additional cohabiters are separated into two subgroups, the first of which were “hidden” cohabiting households that reported another response category for the relationship to householder question, often “roommate” or “other non-relative” (Kennedy and Fitch 2012), but nonetheless included the householder and a partner as identified through the direct cohabitation question. The second group of newly identified cohabiters includes cohabiting subfamilies, who are identified through the direct cohabitation question and do not include a householder in their union. Thus, the 2007 and 2017 estimates include three groups of cohabiters: unmarried partner households (83 percent of total in 2007-2009), “hidden” cohabiting households (11 percent), and cohabiting subfamilies (6 percent; see Kreider 2008; Kennedy and Fitch 2012). To measure the social characteristics of cohabiters over time, I use the following survey items: age, race, ethnicity, nativity, marital status, presence of children, educational attainment, labor force participation, income (adjusted for current dollars), and poverty status.

The study’s analytical approach is to examine descriptive statistics and implement significance testing to examine differences in characteristics over time. It is broken down into three parts. Part 1 focuses on the significant changes in the social characteristics of cohabiters over similarly measured years: 1996 to 2006 and 2007 to 2017. The changing demographics in Part 1 will provide preliminary evidence regarding whether the changes in the cohabiting population reflect more normalization or more social disadvantage. Part 2 divides the 2007 and 2017 estimates into a) unmarried partner households, b) “hidden” cohabiting households, and c) cohabiting subfamilies. I test for significant differences between the three groups as well as see how the inclusion/exclusion of the two latter groups affect the overall characteristics of cohabiters relative to focusing only on unmarried partner households, the only group measured between 1996 and 2006. The logic here is that if the inclusion of one or both of the newly discovered cohabiting groups significantly changes the social characteristics of the total cohabiting

population, then it is perhaps unwise to make historical comparisons across years when cohabitation was measured differently. In this context, the “missing” cohabiting groups pre-2007 would most likely have altered the social characteristics of cohabiters had they been measured through the direct cohabitation question. However, if the inclusion of one or both of the newly discovered cohabiting groups does not significantly change the overall social characteristics of the total cohabiting population, then *tentative* comparisons over the last 20 years may still be permissible.² This leads to Part 3, which would include a test of cohabiting characteristics in 1996 compared to 2017 *assuming* that the inclusion of the cohabiting groups found through the direct cohabitation question do not significantly alter the social characteristic distributions in Part 2. I predict that this section most likely will exclude cohabiting subfamilies, as they tend to have distinct social characteristics relative to the other two groups and may significantly skew the social characteristics of cohabiters toward younger ages and more disadvantaged characteristics (see Kennedy and Fitch 2012). In this sense, tentative historical comparisons may be possible, though only when restricting the focus to cohabiting households (excluding subfamilies). Analyses will be done in SAS 9.4 and will use replicate weights provided by the U.S. Census Bureau for variance estimation.

Conclusion

The boom in the cohabiting population from the mid-1990s to today necessitates a better understanding of how the cohabiting population has changed over time and whether the characteristics of cohabiters exhibit increased normalization/social diversity or increased divergence toward social disadvantage. While the changes to the measurement of cohabiting groups has been beneficial with the introduction of the unmarried response category in 1996 and the direct cohabitation question in 2007, this also poses a challenge for those interested in measuring historical trends in the characteristics of

² I use the word “tentative” because one will not know how the characteristics of cohabiters would have looked like in 1996 had the CPS included a direct cohabitation question like what was introduced in 2007. I am assuming that if the characteristics of cohabiters are robust to the inclusion of those “hidden” cohabiting households and cohabiting subfamilies in 2007/2017, then they also would be robust in 1996, but there is no way to test this assumption.

cohabiters. This study seeks to understand the historical changes in the social characteristics of cohabiters in light of the improvements in measurement, which will provide useful guidance for future research on this growing population in the country.

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