

Divorce and Cohabitation

by Glenn T. Stanton

Evangelicals who attend church regularly divorce at a rate 35 percent lower than secular couples.

In a related article, "Do Half of All American Marriages Really End in Divorce?" we established that, although American divorce rates are painfully high, the 50 percent figure is an exaggeration. This paper looks at some of the demographic factors, particularly religious, that influence marital stability and the likelihood of divorce.

Some of the key factors decreasing likelihood of divorce are as follows:

Demographic Factors Produces % Decrease in Risk of Divorce
Annual income over \$50K (- 30)
Having a baby within year of marriage (vs. before) (-24)
Being over 25 when married (-24)
Family of origin non-divorced (-14)
Religious affiliation (-14)
Some college education (-13)

Studies consistently show the following:

1. The biggest factors contributing to marital success are higher income, increased education level, higher age at marriage and higher levels of religious commitment and activity.
2. The strongest factors contributing to marital failure are young age at marriage, poverty, remarriage and low education.

Barna, Religious Practice and Divorce

Does religious faith have any impact on marital success? Not if you believe the typical spin of an oft-cited Barna research report.

We often hear that divorce rates among people who identified themselves with certain Christian denominations and lived in the Southern Bible Belt states had higher divorce rates than people with no religious affiliation.

This Barna research indicates two seemingly contradictory facts:

1. The higher divorce rate in "Bible-belt" states was not new to sociologists.
2. Religious commitment, rather than mere religious affiliation, contributes to greater levels of marital success.

How do we reconcile these two facts?

Leading family sociologists David Popenoe and Scott Stanley explain that the well-established higher divorce rate in Southern Bible Belt states is due primarily to increased rates of poverty and of marriage at younger ages, rather than to the rate of religious participation in this part of the country.

How does religious commitment contribute to marital stability?



University of Virginia sociologist Brad Wilcox has studied how religious activity impacts divorce and marital stability. He finds that evangelicals who attend church regularly divorce at a rate 35 percent lower than secular couples, after controlling for various confounding sociological factors, such as economic and educational status. Similar trends are found for active Catholics and active mainline Protestants. In contrast, nominal evangelicals, who rarely or never attend church, have higher divorce rates than secular couples.

Scott Stanley found similar results in his complex analysis of marriage and divorce in Oklahoma:

Whether young or old, male or female, low-income or not, those who said that they were more religious reported higher average levels of commitment to their partners, higher levels of marital satisfaction, less thinking and talking about divorce, and lower levels of negative interaction. These patterns held when controlling for such important variables as income, education, and age at first marriage.

The specific numbers on the relation between church attendance and marital happiness are as follows:
Would you say your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy? Very happy Pretty happy Not too happy
Never or almost never attend church 52% 44% 5%
Occasionally but less than once per month 66% 30% 4%
One to three times per month 72% 25% 3%
One or more times per week 73% 25% 2%

As a result, Stanley explains, Those who say they are more religious are less likely, not more, to have already experienced divorce. Likewise, those who report more frequent attendance at religious services were significantly less likely to have been divorced.

Bottom line: The "half of all marriages end in divorce" statistic is an exaggeration (although the figures still are not encouraging). But the figures are better for couples who practice their faith commitment seriously.

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1 "The State of Our Unions 2004: The Social Health of Marriage in America," The National Marriage Project, June 2004,

<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2004.pdf> (18 May 2005).

2 W. Bradford Wilcox, "The Cultural Contradictions of Mainline Family Ideology and Practice," publication pending.

3 C. A. Johnson, S. M. Stanley, N. D. Glenn, P. A. Amato, S. L. Nock, H. J. Markman, & M. R. Dion (2002), Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce (S02096 OKDHS), Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma

Department of Human Services, p. 25.

4 Johnson et al (2002), p. 26.

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