

STUDY – LIVE-INS LIKELY TO BREAK UP

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WASHINGTON (July 25) - Dorian Solot isn't surprised by the rising number of couples living together before marriage. "They want to be absolutely sure this is the right person before they say, 'I do' for a lifetime," she said.

But a report released Wednesday suggests they may be hurting, not helping, their marriage prospects: These marriages are significantly more likely to end in divorce.

That is partly because people who choose to live together tend to be younger, less religious or have other qualities that put them at risk for divorce, said Catherine Cohan, assistant professor of human development and family studies at Penn State University. But that may not fully explain it, she said.

"Many people enter a cohabiting relationship where the deal is, 'If this doesn't work out we can split up and it's no big loss because we don't have a legal commitment,'" she said. "The commitment is tenuous, and that tenuous commitment might carry over into marriage."

It is one of several findings from a comprehensive report on cohabitation, marriage and divorce, described as the detailed look at cohabitation, marriage and divorce ever produced.

The report, based on a survey of nearly 11,000 women, found that by age 30, three in four women have been married and half have lived with a partner outside marriage.

It identified numerous risk factors for divorce: People who are young, with low incomes, no religious affiliation and less education. Also, children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves.

Overall, 43 percent of marriages break up within 15 years, according to data from the National Survey of Family Growth.

Black women are least likely to marry and most likely to divorce, with more than half splitting within 15 years. Asian marriages are the most stable, with whites and Hispanics in between.

Women are waiting longer to get married than they used to, and after a divorce, they are less likely to remarry than women once were.

The survey, released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that 70 percent of those who lived together for at least five years did eventually walk down the aisle.

But these marriages are also more likely to break up. After 10 years, 40 percent of couples that had lived together before marriage had broken up. That compares with 31 percent of those who did not live together first.

Part of the problem may be attitudes toward cohabitation are different than attitudes about marriage, said Wade Horn, a marriage expert who directs children and family programs at the Department of Health and Human Services.

When living together, he said, the attitude is "I vow to stay together with you as long as you make me happy." In a marriage, people focus on making their partners happy.

"If you're used to viewing being together as a test of the other person's ability to take care of your needs, once you get married it's hard to just switch that," Horn said.

Solot, executive director of the Boston-based Alternatives to Marriage Project, is more optimistic - as long as couples begin living together with similar expectations.

"If one of you thinks you're headed for the altar and the other thinks you're just splitting the cost of rent, you're both in for a surprise," she said.

The report, based on 1995 data, found other groups facing a high risk of divorce, including:

-Young people. Nearly half of those who marry under age 18 and 40 percent under age 20 get divorced. Over age 25, it's just 24 percent. The difference is maturity, says Chicago psychologist Kate Wachs.

"A lot of young people focus on right now, and if I'm not happy right now, I should get divorced," said Wachs, author of "Relationships for Dummies." Older people have more life experience and realize "if I hang in there, it will probably get better." -

Nonreligious people. Affiliating with religion - any religion - helps. Of those who don't consider themselves part of any religious group, 46 percent were divorced within 10 years.

-Children of divorce. Women whose parents were divorced are significantly more likely to divorce themselves, with 43 percent splitting after 10 years. Among those whose parents stayed together, the divorce rate was just 29 percent.

The report also found:

-Broken marriages do not always lead to divorce, with many separated couples still legally married.

This was particularly true for black women: Just 67 percent of women who were separated from their husbands were divorced three years after the separation.

-Just over half of divorced women - 54 percent - get married again within five years. These rates have been falling since the 1950s, when 65 percent of divorced women remarried.

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