

Marriage and Couple Education

Summary of significant trends:

The continued high number of divorces in our state indicate family disruption at various stages of the couple's relationship, and numerous impacts on the family system. In the year 2001 North Carolina recorded 65,296 marriages and 37,381 divorces or annulments, or a rate of 8.0 marriages per 1,000 population and 4.6 divorces per 1,000 population. By comparison, in the United States there were approximately 2,327,000 marriages (8.4 per 1000 population) and 1,110,800 divorces (4.0 per 1000 population) in 2001.

The increase in divorce probably has elicited more concern and discussion than any other family-related trend in the United States. Although the long-term trend in divorce has been upward since colonial times, the divorce rate was level for about two decades after World War II during the period of high fertility known as the baby boom. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the incidence of divorce started to increase (10.6 divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, 1965) and it more than doubled over the next fifteen years to reach an historical high point in the early 1980s (22.6 divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, 1980). Since then the divorce rate has modestly declined, a trend described by many experts as "leveling off at a high level" (18.9 divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, 2000).

The increase in divorce rates has been

accompanied by marked decreases in the number of persons getting married. On a national level, Americans have become less likely to marry. This is reflected in a decline of more than one third, from 1970 to 2000, in the annual number of marriages per 1000 unmarried adult women. Some of this decline—it is not clear just how much—results from the delaying of first marriages until older ages: the median age at first marriage went from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to about 25 and 27, respectively, in recent years. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry. The decline also probably reflects an actual increase in life-long singlehood, though this will not be known for sure until current young and middle-aged adults pass through the life course. The percentage of adults in the population who are married has also diminished. Since 1960, the decline of those married among all persons age 15 and older has been more than eleven percentage points.

Relevance of Trends to County Programs:

A growing consensus emerging from academic researchers, policymakers, and advocates finds that children fare best when raised in a stable marriage by their two biological parents. For

example, research from the fields of sociology, economics, medicine, and psychology has found a strong association between marriage and a host of benefits for men, women, and children, including: lower mortality rates; lower rates of chronic illnesses or disabilities; less depression, anxiety, and suicide; less problem drinking and substance abuse; greater financial well-being; lower rates of intimate partner violence; better physical and mental health for children; less physical, emotional and sexual child abuse; less criminal behavior; and more stable marriages and career success when children reach adulthood. Most, if not all, of these benefits have economic implications for families and communities, states, and the nation.

Marriage education is effective in promoting marital quality and stability. Well-researched marriage education programs have demonstrated that brief, skills-based educational programs for couples increase couple satisfaction, improve communication skills, reduce negative conflict behaviors including violence, and may prevent separation and divorce. Possible roles for Extension educators might include:

1. Train community groups in marriage and couples' education.
2. Partner with existing organizations that focus on family development.
3. Initiate train-the-trainer programs for increasing the number of marriage and couples' relationship educators.
4. Teach marriage and couples' education as part of parenting or financial management education programs.
5. Train "marriage mentors."
6. Develop and train persons involved in youth development programs so that they might be more able to help others build skills that will contribute to successful relationships.

Sources of Supporting Data:

North Carolina Center for Health Statistics
North Carolina Selected Vital Statistics, Volume 1 - 2001

Information can be accessed for each county and region of the state.

<http://www.schs.state.nc.us/SCHS/health-stats/vitalstats/volume1/2001/>

Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/01statab/vitstat.pdf>

The State of Our Unions, 2002

<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/SOOU2002.pdf>

National Vital Statistics Reports

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/nvsr/nvsr.htm>

Primary Contact: Wayne Matthews, Ph.D.
wayne_matthews@ncsu.edu

2003



Family & Consumer
SCIENCE S