

Counterintuitive Trends in the Link Between Premarital Sex and Marital Stability

by Nicholas H. Wolfinger | @NickWolfinger | June 6, 2016 8:00 am

American sexual behavior is much different than it used to be. Today, most Americans think premarital sex is okay[1], and will have three or more sexual partners before marrying. What, if anything, does premarital sex have to do with marital stability?

This research brief shows that the relationship between divorce and the number of sexual partners women have prior to marriage is complex. I explore this relationship using data from the three most recent waves of the National Survey of Family Growth[2] (NSFG) collected in 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2013. For women marrying since the start of the new millennium:

- Women with 10 or more partners were *the most likely* to divorce, but this only became true in recent years;
- Women with 3-9 partners were *less likely* to divorce than women with 2 partners; and,
- Women with 0-1 partners were the *least likely* to divorce.

Earlier research found that having multiple sex partners prior to marriage could lead to less happy marriages[3], and often increased[4] the odds of divorce. But sexual attitudes and behaviors continue to change in America, and some of the strongest predictors of divorce in years gone by no longer matter as much as they once did. In my 2005 book *Understanding the Divorce Cycle*[5], I showed that the transmission of divorce between generations became weaker as divorce grew more common. Could the same thing have happened with sexual behavior? Somewhat surprisingly, the answer appears to be no.

Even more noteworthy has been the decline in the proportion of women who get married having had only one sex partner (in most cases, their future husbands). Forty-three percent of women had just one premarital sex partner in the 1970s. By the aughts, this was down to 21 percent. Neither of these two trends changed much after the first decade of the twenty-first century. Following in the wake of the sexual revolution, the 1970s have been characterized as a decade of carnal exploration. But this doesn't seem to have been the case for the vast majority of women who ultimately tied the knot in that decade: almost two-thirds of them had at most one sex partner prior to getting married. Even in the 1980s, slightly over half of women had a maximum of one sex partner before walking down the aisle. Things looked very different at the start of the new millennium.

Table 1: The Distribution of Women's Premarital Sex Partners, by Marriage Cohort

| | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | 2010s |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 0 partner | 21% | 17% | 14% | 12% | 5% |
| 1 partner | 43% | 36% | 26% | 21% | 22% |
| 2 partners | 16% | 15% | 13% | 13% | 12% |
| 3 partners | 8% | 11% | 11% | 11% | 11% |
| 4-5 partners | 6% | 12% | 16% | 17% | 18% |
| 6-9 partners | 4% | 5% | 11% | 13% | 14% |
| 10+ partners | 2% | 4% | 10% | 14% | 18% |
| total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| N | 268 | 1,921 | 4,312 | 3,598 | 273 |

By the 2010s, only 5 percent of new brides were virgins. At the other end of the distribution, the number of future wives who had ten or more sex partners increased from 2 percent in the 1970s to 14 percent in the 2000s, and then to 18 percent in the 2010s. Overall, American women are far more likely to have had multiple premarital sex partners in recent years (unfortunately, the NSFG doesn't have full data on men's premarital sexual behavior, and in any event they recall their own marital histories less reliably than do women[6]).

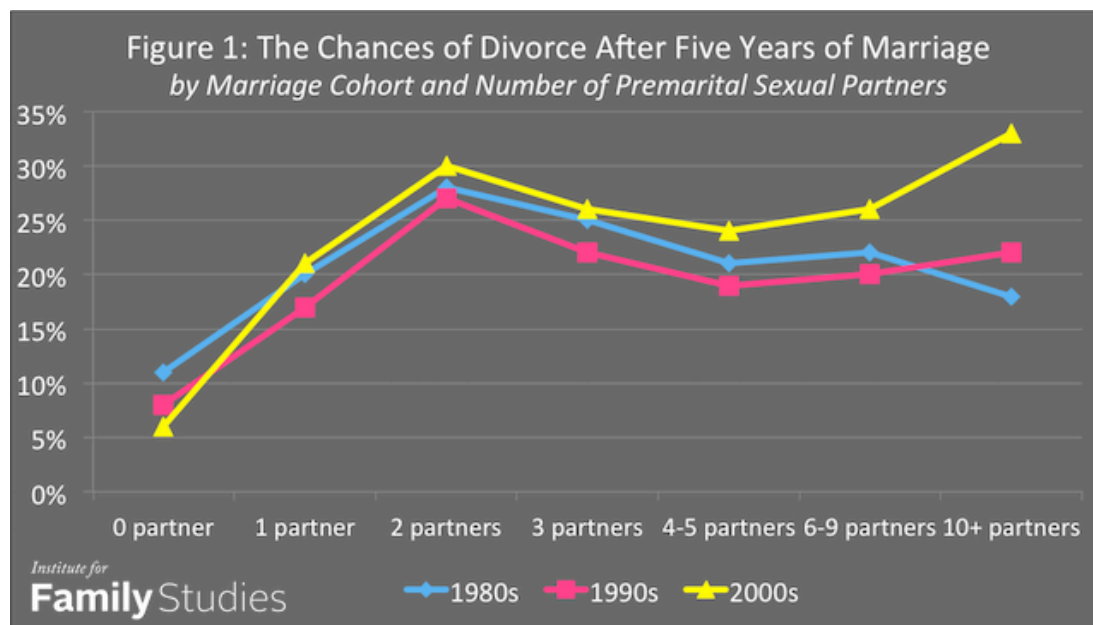
As premarital sex became more acceptable, it's reasonable to anticipate that its negative effects on marital stability waned. In general, Americans became more accepting of nonmarital sex[7]. Certainly fewer men entered marriage with the expectation of a virgin bride. All of the fanfare associated with hooking up is evidence that some young people have become comfortable with the idea of sex outside of serious relationships.

Be that as it may, this prediction is only partially borne out by the data shown in Figure 1. The following chart depicts the percentage of

first marriages ending in divorce within five years of wedlock according to the decade the wedding took place and how many sex partners a woman had prior to marriage.¹ Consistent with prior research, those with fewer sex partners were less likely to divorce. However, there are considerable differences by marriage cohort. For all three cohorts, women who married as virgins had the lowest divorce rates by far. Eleven percent of virgin marriages (on the part of the woman, at least) in the 1980s dissolved within five years. This number fell to 8 percent in the 1990s, then fell again to 6 percent in the 2000s. For all three decades, the women with the second lowest five-year divorce rates are those who had only one partner prior to marriage. It's reasonable to assume that these partners reflected women's eventual husbands. Even so, premarital sex with one partner substantially increases the odds of divorce.

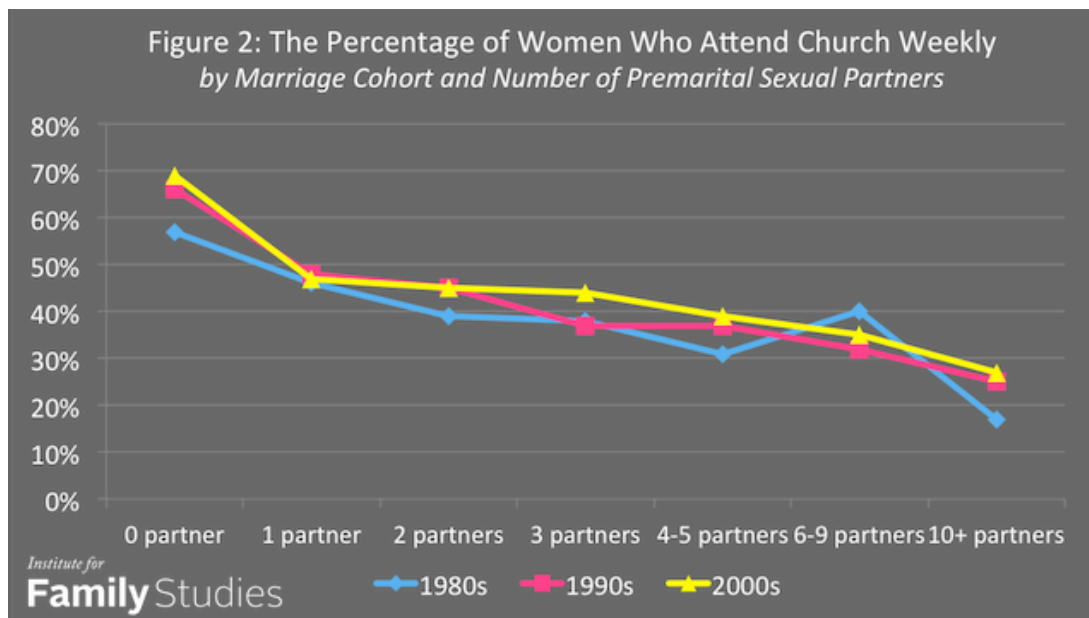
In the 1980s and 1990s, the highest five-year divorce rates were reserved for women who had two partners. The effect was particularly strong in the 1980s, when these women had divorce rates of 28 percent, substantially higher than those of their peers who had ten or more sex partners prior to marriage (18 percent). Even in the aughts, women who had two partners had, at 30 percent, the second highest divorce rates in the table.

The highest five-year divorce rates of all are associated with marrying in the 2000s and having ten or more premarital sex partners: 33 percent. Perhaps it is not unexpected that having many partners increases the odds of divorce. The greater surprise is that this only holds true in recent years; previously, women with two partners prior to marriage had the highest divorce rates.



Source: NSFG, 2002-2013

How can these findings be explained? It's easiest to make sense of the low divorce rates of people with minimal sexual experience prior to marriage. Obviously, one of the most common reasons for premarital abstinence is religion, and NSFG data support such an interpretation.² Figure 2 shows that women who marry as virgins are far more likely than other women to attend church at least once a week. It's also noteworthy that virgin marriages increasingly became the domain of religious women between the 1980s and 2000s—and during the same years, the divorce rate for virgin brides continued to drop. These findings make sense in light of the fact that people who attend church frequently have lower divorce rates^[8] than do non-participants.



Source: NSFG, 2002-2013

Generally speaking, women who have multiple sex partners are less likely to be regular churchgoers. Since women with many partners don't consistently have high divorce rates, there is little reason to suspect that religion is an important explanation for the relationship between sex partners and divorce outside of women who marry having had one or no partners.

Women who marry having had just one sex partner are unlikely to have had children with another man. Getting married with a child already in tow has a profound negative effect[9] on marital happiness. And marriages preceded by nonmarital fertility have disproportionately high divorce rates[10]. This is another reason why divorce rates are lower for women who marry having had only one sex partner, or none at all. Ultimately we're left to speculate about why having exactly two partners produces some of the highest divorce rates.

My best guess rests on the notion of *over-emphasized comparisons*. In most cases, a woman's two premarital sex partners include her future husband and one other man. That second sex partner is first-hand proof of a sexual alternative to one's husband. These sexual experiences convince women that sex outside of wedlock is indeed a possibility. The man involved was likely to have become a partner in the course of a serious relationship—women inclined to hook up will have had more than two premarital partners—thereby emphasizing the seriousness of the alternative. Of course, women learn about the viability of nonmarital sex if they have multiple premarital partners, but with multiple partners, each one represents a smaller part of a woman's sexual and romantic biography. Having two partners may lead to uncertainty, but having a few more apparently leads to greater clarity about the right man to marry. The odds of divorce are lowest with zero or one premarital partners, but otherwise sowing one's oats seems compatible with having a lasting marriage.

But not too many oats, if one married after the start of the new millennium. The highest divorce rates shown in Figure 1, 33 percent, belong to women who had ten or more premarital sex partners. This is the result most readers of this brief probably expected: a lot of partners means a lot of baggage, which makes a stable marriage less tenable. It's also entirely likely that the correlation is spurious, the product of certain personal characteristics. For instance, people who suffered childhood sexual abuse are more likely[11] to have extensive sexual histories. Childhood abuse also increases the odds[12] of a problematic marriage.

This is an extreme example. Most of the time, spuriousness probably has less measurable causes. Some people may just have a high level of sexual curiosity, an attribute that doesn't appear to bode well for a stable marriage, at least since the start of the new millennium.

The odds of divorce are lowest with zero or one premarital partners.

Two caveats are in order. First, the 33 percent divorce figure for women with ten or partners who married in the 2000s is not statistically significantly higher than the 30 percent five-year divorce rate for women who had two partners. Second, it is unknown as to why having ten or more partners has become more strongly linked to divorce only recently. This is a surprising development given the increasing frequency of having multiple partners, as well as people's greater overall acceptance of premarital sexuality. Perhaps this acceptance is more complex than has been acknowledged. Having a handful of sex partners—anywhere between three and nine—may be perfectly acceptable, but more than that is problematic for marriage in a way it didn't used to be. In any event, a full understanding is beyond the

scope of this report.

Finally, I sought to explain the relationship between premarital sexuality and marital stability via multivariate analysis. Generally speaking, major social and demographic differences between survey respondents explain only a small portion of the relationship between numbers of sex partners and marital stability. At best, these differences account for about one quarter of the observed association between sex partners and divorce. At worst, they make essentially no difference. Due to the design of the NSFG, a limited number of socio-demographic variables were amenable to analysis, including race, family structure of origin, urban vs. rural residence, age at marriage, and church attendance.

Aside from religion, race and family of origin accounted for the largest portion of the sexual partners/divorce relationship. Caucasian and African American women had similar premarital sexual behavior, but Latinas and members of the “Other” population group had notably fewer sex partners and lower divorce rates than either whites or blacks. Similarly, people who grew up without both parents had more partners and divorced more. Detailed psychometric data would be necessary to further explain the relationship between numbers of sex partners and marital stability.

It won’t be surprising to most readers that people with more premarital sex partners have higher divorce rates, broadly speaking. That said, this research brief paints a fairly complicated picture of the association between sex and marital stability that ultimately raises more questions than it answers.

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1. The figure depicts life table five-year marriage failure rates. The sample sizes are too small to look at sex partners and divorce for marriages formed in the 1970s and the 2010s. Also, the data don’t permit the analysis of same-sex marriage.

2. Some caveats. First, although church attendance is a good measure of religious involvement, it doesn’t fully capture religiosity. Second and more important is the fact that church attendance is measured at the time of the NSFG interview, so it might be a consequence as well as a cause of marital behavior. Divorce affects religious participation: female NSFG respondents are almost 25 percent less likely to attend church frequently compared to married women. Accordingly, findings concerning religion should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive.

Appendix: Cox Regression Estimates of the Effects of Premarital Sex Partners and Other Factors on Women’s Marital Stability in First Marriages (Tables 1 – 4)

Note: Results are hazard ratios indicating increased odds of divorce compared to reference category of 0 partners (total abstinence before marriage). For example, Table 1 shows that women who married in the 1990s and had one premarital sex partner had 75% higher odds of divorce compared to women who married as virgins in the 1990s.

For all tables, Ns are:

1980s: 1,899

1990s: 4,292

2000s: 3,597

Ns are too small for analysis of divorce and sex partners for people marrying in the 1970s and the 2010s.

* = not significant

** = $p < .10$

Table 1: Baseline

| | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|
| 0 partner | -- | -- | -- |
| 1 partner | 1.19* | 1.75 | 2.54 |
| 2 partners | 1.83 | 2.72 | 4.05 |
| 3 partners | 1.56 | 2.13 | 3.5 |
| 4-5 partners | 1.41 | 1.85 | 3.18 |
| 6-9 partners | 1.22 | 1.99 | 3.22 |
| 10+ partners | 1.48 | 2.54 | 4.25 |

Table 2: Controls for family structure of origin, urbanicity, race, and education

| | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s |
|--------------|--------|-------|-------|
| 0 partner | -- | -- | -- |
| 1 partner | 1.15* | 1.61 | 2.28 |
| 2 partners | 1.66 | 2.43 | 3.49 |
| 3 partners | 1.42 | 1.97 | 2.85 |
| 4-5 partners | 1.31** | 1.61 | 2.54 |
| 6-9 partners | 1.09* | 1.77 | 2.60 |
| 10+ partners | 1.3* | 2.21 | 3.24 |

Table 3: Adding age at marriage/age at marriage squared

| | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|
| 0 partner | -- | -- | -- |
| 1 partner | 1.16* | 1.50 | 2.13 |
| 2 partners | 1.74 | 2.46 | 3.69 |
| 3 partners | 1.57 | 2.20 | 3.14 |
| 4-5 partners | 1.50 | 1.87 | 3.00 |
| 6-9 partners | 1.33* | 2.13 | 3.02 |
| 10+ partners | 1.50 | 2.74 | 3.81 |

Table 4: Adding church attendance

| | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s |
|--------------|--------|-------|-------|
| 0 partner | -- | -- | -- |
| 1 partner | 1.10* | 1.40 | 2.03 |
| 2 partners | 1.61 | 2.27 | 3.48 |
| 3 partners | 1.44 | 1.99 | 2.93 |
| 4-5 partners | 1.35** | 1.70 | 2.79 |
| 6-9 partners | 1.25* | 1.90 | 2.76 |
| 10+ partners | 1.3* | 2.41 | 3.41 |

Endnotes:

- okay: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/changing-attitudes-about-premarital-sex-homosexuality/>
- National Survey of Family Growth: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/index.htm>
- lead to less happy marriages: <http://before-i-do.org/>
- increased: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2003.00444.x/abstract?userIsAuthenticated=false&deniedAccessCustomisedMessage=>
- Understanding the Divorce Cycle*: <http://www.nicholaswolfinger.com/blog/book/understanding-the-divorce-cycle/>
- they recall their own marital histories less reliably than do women: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3319113/>
- more accepting of nonmarital sex: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-015-0540-2>
- lower divorce rates: <http://www.soulmates-thebook.com>
- profound negative effect: <http://before-i-do.org/>
- disproportionately high divorce rates: <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=fAmGAwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=out+of+wedlock+wu&ots=bv7k3szMN&sig=GscAyvyuby7UPIhhUZi-KUDchNk#v=onepage&q=out%20of%20wedlock%20wu&f=false>
- likely: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2657425?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- increases the odds: <http://marriage.psych.ucla.edu/publications/Nguyen%20et%20al%202016.pdf>
- Nicholas H. Wolfinger*: <http://www.nicholaswolfinger.com/>
- Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Children, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos*: <http://www.soulmates-thebook.com/>

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