

The Divorce Rate Is at a 40-Year Low, Unless You're 55 or Older

Younger married couples are less likely to split up, but 'gray' divorces among older couples are on the rise

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It's June, one of the most popular months of the year to marry. So perhaps it's time we talked about divorce.

In 2017, around one million couples in the U.S. called it quits.

That may sound like a lot of busted unions, but the rate of divorce—just like the rate of marriage—is down.

Today, younger married couples are less likely to split up than they once were, driving the trend. But, at the same time, the rate of divorce for older generations has increased in a phenomenon known as “gray” divorce.

Divorces hit a historical high point in 1979, when 22.6 marriages out of every 1,000 broke up, according to researchers at the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green University.

By 2017, the rate had dropped to 16.1 divorces for every 1,000 marriages. That's a decrease of 29% from the high point and the lowest the divorce rate has been in 40 years.

One cause, researchers believe, is that people are delaying marriage.

“There's a fear of divorce or a specter of divorce looming large in people's minds,” said Wendy D. Manning, co-director of Bowling Green's Center for Family and Marriage Research. “They don't want to make a mistake. They're waiting longer to get married to divorce-proof their marriage.”

In 1963, the average woman married at around age 20, according to Tera R. Jordan, an associate professor of human development and family studies at Iowa State University.

By 2017, the median age at marriage was 27 for women and 29 for men.

Using data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics and the American Community Survey, Bowling Green researchers calculated annual rates of divorce for girls and women ages 15 and older by dividing the number divorced in the past 12 months by the number divorced in the past 12 months plus the number currently married and then multiplying the result by 1,000.

They also examined the trends by age group and found that the drop in divorces has been driven by younger people.

The greatest decrease they observed was among 15- to 24-year-olds, whose divorce rate dropped by 43%, from 47 divorces per 1,000 marriages in 1990 to 27 divorces per 1,000 marriages in 2017.

The rate for 25- to 34-year-olds also dropped substantially, from 33 divorces per 1,000 marriages to 23 divorces per 1,000 marriages, a decrease of about 30%.

The rates for the next two age groups changed only slightly, dropping from 23 to 21 divorces per 1,000 marriages for 35- to 44-year-olds and rising from 13 to 15 divorces per 1,000 marriages for 45- to 54-year-olds.

After that, the rates of “gray divorce” more than doubled.

For 55- to 64-year-olds, it climbed from 5 divorces per 1,000 marriages to 15 divorces per 1,000 marriages, and for those 65 and older, it rose from 1.8 to 5.

“It represents the baby boomers,” Dr. Manning said. “A lot married young. A lot are in second marriages. Second marriages are at greater risk of divorce.”

For comparison, the researchers also calculated marriage rates.

In 1970, nearly a decade before the divorce peak, there were 76.5 marriages for every 1,000 unmarried women. In 2017, the rate had dropped to 32.2 marriages for every 1,000 unmarried women, a decrease of 58%.

“The script was high school, maybe the military or college, and then you settle down,” Dr. Jordan said. “Now, it’s high school, maybe the military or college, maybe some period of self-discovery.”

That doesn’t mean fewer people have been pairing up or even delaying entering into romantic partnerships. But instead of marrying right after high school or college, more couples have simply moved in together, usurping marriage as the most common relationship experience in young adulthood.

Forty percent of women who wedded for the first time between 1980 and 1984 lived with their husband before they married, according to the Bowling Green researchers. From 2010 through 2014, 70% did. (This only counts women who eventually married and reported living with their spouse ahead of tying the knot.)

The median age for couples who live together outside of marriage is around 22, Dr. Manning said, and the relationships traditionally last only two or three years.

That suggests for more couples, “I do” has morphed into, “I might.”

But when they finally pledge “till death do us part,” they mean it.