The Diffusion of Cohabitation and Children’s Risks of Family Dissolution
David Pelletier, Université de Montréal

**Background**

Cohabitation’s Instability

- As a general rule, cohabiting couples are less stable than married ones, but the gap between both union types varies with time and place.
- Liefbroer and Dourleijn* found that the stability of cohabiting unions depends on the level of diffusion of cohabitation within the 16 European countries analysed.
- They estimated that the ratio of dissolution risk between cohabiting and married couples have a U-shaped pattern: It was larger in countries and generations with very high or very low proportions of cohabiters, and smaller when about half of couples started their union by cohabiting.


**Cohabitation in Canada**

- The proportion of births to cohabiting couples has been increasing in each of the ten Canadian provinces, but remains much higher in Québec.
- Cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages in all provinces, but the stability gap is narrower in Québec.

**What we learned**

- Globally, children’s risks of family dissolution are not much influenced by the diffusion of cohabitation.
- For children born to married parents, the association is weak, but it is strong and negative for children born to cohabiting parents.
- The ratio of cohabitation to marriage dissolution hazards decreases non-linearly with the diffusion of cohabitation.

**What we asked**

- Is the diffusion of cohabitation as a family form associated with changes in children’s risks of parental separation?
- Are these changes similar for children born to married or cohabiting parents?
- How does the cohabitation/marriage hazard ratio of family dissolution evolve with the diffusion of cohabitation?

**Data**

**Individual data**

- Representative sample of children 4-5 years old from Statistics Canada’s National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).
- A total of 24,267 children born between 1989 and 2004, with almost a quarter born to cohabiting parents.

**Contextual data**

- The proportion of births to cohabiting couples in each province and annual birth cohort.

**Method**

**Discrete-time survival model**

- Logistic models estimating the monthly risk of parental separation.
- Separate models for children born to married and cohabiting parents.
- Quadratic function of the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth.

**Results**

**Parental union survival for all children**

- Figure 1: Predicted parental union survival functions according to the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth, all children combined.

**Parental union survival by union type at birth**

- Figure 2: Predicted parental union survival functions according to the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth, by parent’s union type at child’s birth.

**Union type hazard ratio**

- Figure 3: Hazard ratio of parental separation for children born to cohabiting (vs. married) parents according to the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth.

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**Contact**

david.pelletier@umontreal.ca