The Diffusion of Cohabitation and Children’s Risks of Family Dissolution
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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 Douleijn* 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 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?

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.

Data

INDIVIDUAL DATA
• Representative sample of children 4-5 years old from Statistics Canada’s National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).

CONTEXTUAL DATA
• The proportion of births to cohabiting couples in each province and annual birth cohort.

Method

• 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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