

Reprinted with permission from  
FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL  
700 Thirteenth St. NW Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: 202.393.2100, Fax: 202.393.2134

## LIVING TOGETHER

---

by  
*Bridget Maher*

Cohabitation -- living together before or in place of marriage -- is on the rise in America. The number of cohabiting couples has increased from just over half a million in 1970 to 4.2 million in 1998.<sup>1</sup> Today over 50 percent of marriages are preceded by cohabitation.<sup>2</sup> General acceptance of what used to be termed "living in sin" is also gaining ground. A Zogby poll conducted in March 2000 found that 56 percent of Americans thought that it was acceptable for an engaged couple to live together prior to marriage.<sup>3</sup> Following their elders, teenagers are also very accepting of living together. Almost 60 percent of high-school seniors "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement "it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along."<sup>4</sup>

Researchers attribute the rise in cohabitation to several factors, including the sexual revolution and the weakening of the institution of marriage.<sup>5</sup> People often cohabit in order to try out marriage in an attempt to avoid divorce later on. However, living together before marriage actually makes divorce more probable.<sup>6</sup> Numerous studies have demonstrated the other negative effects of cohabitation on marriage. Here are a few:

- Cohabitors report higher levels of alcohol problems than married people do.<sup>7</sup>
- Aggression is twice as common among cohabitators as it is among married couples.<sup>8</sup>
- Premarital cohabitation is associated with greater marital instability, lower marital satisfaction and poorer communication in marriage.<sup>9</sup>
- Depression rates among cohabiting couples are more than three times the depression rates among married couples.<sup>10</sup>
- Cohabitors report more frequent disagreements, more fights and violence, lower levels of fairness in and happiness with their relationships compared to married people.<sup>11</sup>

About 1.5 million (36 percent) cohabiting households have children under age 15 in their homes.<sup>12</sup> Living in a cohabiting household negatively affects children. Consider the following studies:

- One study found that children living with cohabiting biological parents who are unmarried are 20 times more likely to be abused and children whose mother lives with a boyfriend who is not the biological father are 33 times more likely to be abused than children with married biological parents.<sup>13</sup>
- The 1996 poverty rate for children living in married couple households was about 6 percent, compared to 31 percent for children living in cohabiting households.<sup>14</sup>
- Compared to children in intact families, children in cohabiting households had more behavioral problems and poorer academic scores.<sup>15</sup>

*Miss Maher is a policy analyst on marriage and family at the Family Research Council.*

---

## ENDNOTES

1. Statistical Abstract of the United States 1990, Table No. 54 and Statistical Abstract of the United States 1999, Table No. 68.
2. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Should We Live Together? What Young Couples Need to Know about Cohabitation Before Marriage," National Marriage Project, 1999, p. 3.

3. March 15, 2000, Zogby America poll of 1,213 adults.
4. Popenoe and Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" p. 3.
5. Ibid, pp. 9–10.
6. Ibid, p. 4.
7. Allan V. Horowitz et al, "The Relationship of Cohabitation and Mental Health: A Study of Young Adult Cohort," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60 (1998): 505–514.
8. Jan E. Stets, "Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 669–680.
9. Jan E. Stets, "The Link Between Past and Present Intimate Relationships," *Journal of Family Issues* 14 (1993): 236–260.
10. Popenoe and Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" p. 7
11. Susan L. Brown and Alan Booth, "Cohabitation Versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 668–678.
12. Statistical Abstract of the United States 1999, Table No. 68.
13. Popenoe and Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" p. 8
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.