

# Marriage Trends in Western Culture: A Fact Sheet

## Variations in family formation patterns occurring in other industrialized nations

### Background and Importance

This Fact Sheet presents data and trends over time in marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and non-marital birth rates for countries in three European regions: Northern Europe, Southern Europe, and Western Europe. Countries for which data are presented include Sweden, Norway and Denmark; Italy, Portugal, and Spain; and the United Kingdom, France and Germany. For purposes of comparison, rates for North America—the United States and Canada—are also included.

From 1970 to the present, countries in all three European regions have seen decreases in marriage rates, and significant increases in divorce, cohabitation, and non-marital birth rates.

European demographic data are drawn from two primary sources: the Council of Europe's report entitled "Recent Demographic Developments in Europe" and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development Family Database. Crude marriage and divorce rates are reported across countries of interest. The crude rate reports the number of marriages, and divorces, per 1,000 individuals in the population. Although this rate does not indicate the probability that a marriage will end in divorce, or the portion of people who will eventually marry by, for example, age 50, it is the most reliable means for comparing data across Western countries.

This Fact Sheet provides relationship education practitioners and policymakers in the United States with an understanding of the variations in, and magnitude of family formation patterns that are occurring in other industrialized nations around the world as a point of comparison and potential insight into underlying driving forces.

### Headlines/Trends

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### Definitions

**Crude marriage and divorce rates** describe the number of marriages or divorces per 1,000 individuals in the population. The crude rate is mainly used to provide a sense of how common marriage and divorce is over time. One limitation of the crude rate is that it includes children and currently married individuals—populations that are not "at risk" of marriage.



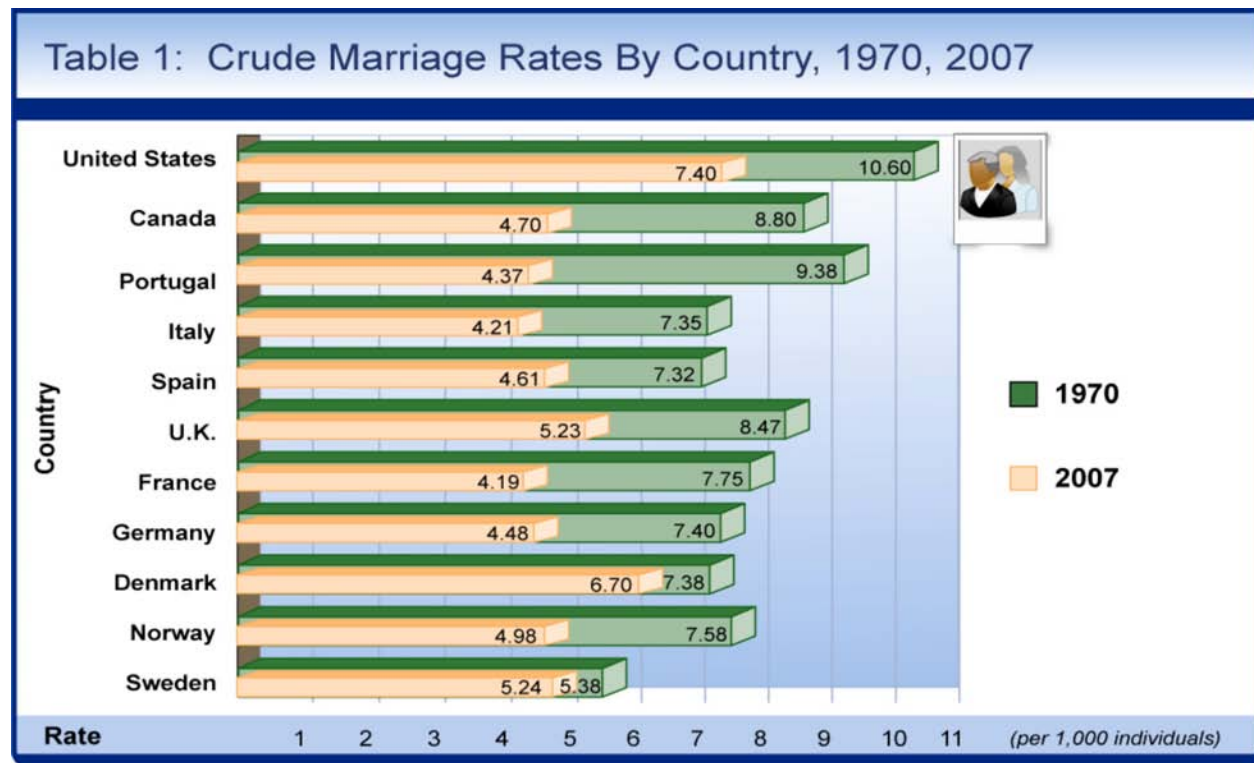
In addition, the rates only represent a single point in time. Crude marriage and divorce rates provide rough descriptions of trends in marriage and divorce over time, and allow comparisons between the U.S. and other countries.

**Cohabiting** couples, as defined in scholarly literature, are unmarried romantic partners sharing a household. Some cohabit with the intent to marry while others cohabit as an alternative to marriage. There are also those who cohabit out of convenience. “Cohabitants” could be engaged couples, common-law husbands and wives, or singles living together in a romantic relationship.

## Data

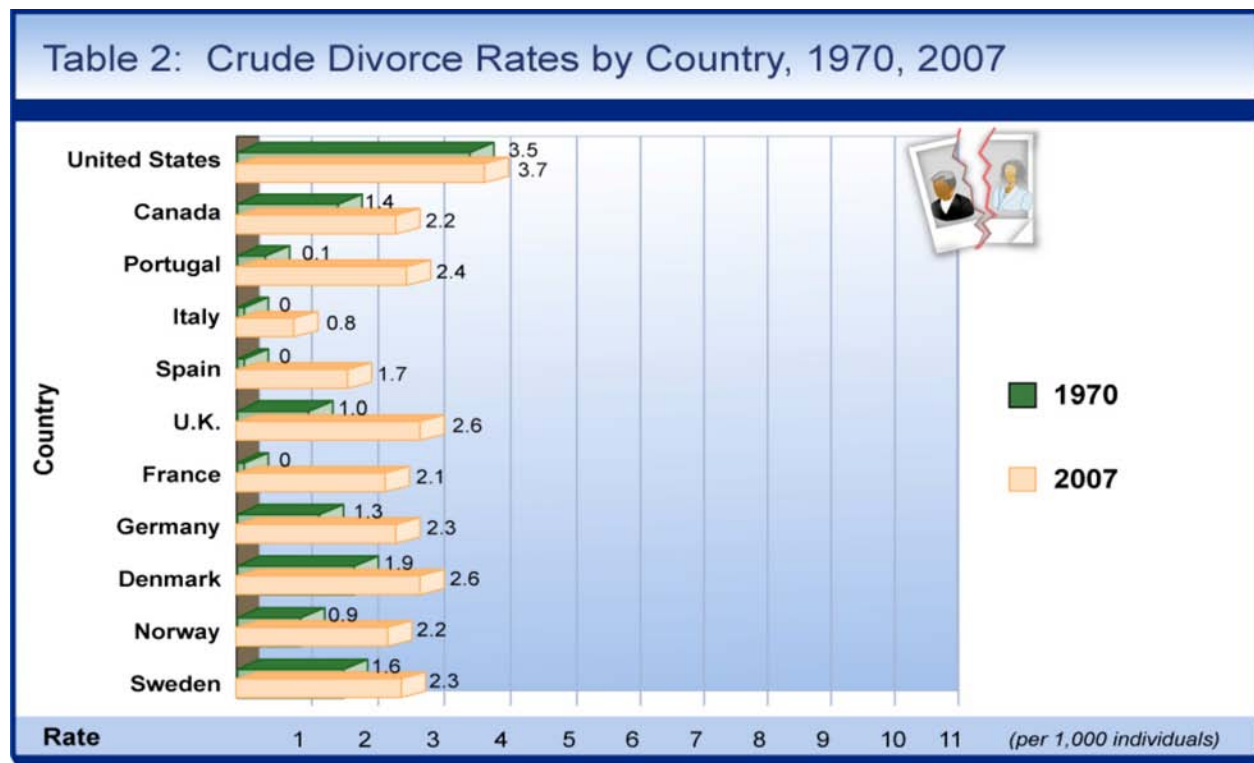
### Marriage rates

For 2007, Denmark had the highest crude marriage rate (6.7), next to the United States (7.4), and France had the lowest (4.19). However, there has been a steady decline in the marriage rate for most countries. Table 1<sup>i</sup> below shows that between 1970 and 2006, there has been a significant decline in almost all countries in the crude marriage rate, except for Sweden, which experienced a modest decline, but also had the lowest marriage rate in 1970 of all countries listed (half the crude marriage rate of the United States). One explanation for the low marriage rates in Sweden is the high prevalence of cohabitation. Portugal had the largest drop in the marriage rate over the 37-year period, followed by Canada (8.80 to 4.70)<sup>ii</sup>. Demographers note that a major factor driving the large decline in the crude marriage rates across these countries is the later age of first marriage for both men and women.<sup>iii</sup>



## Divorce rates

As illustrated in Table 2<sup>iv</sup>, while all countries saw an increase in the crude divorce rate between 1970 and 2007, there are variations in the changes experienced by each country and each region. In 1970, Southern European countries had the lowest divorce rates and experienced the largest combined increases in the crude divorce rate over the period. A likely factor driving this increase is that divorce in these three countries was legalized in the past three decades.<sup>v</sup> Overall, Scandinavian countries had the lowest increases in the crude divorce rate. By comparison, while the United States had the lowest increase during this time period, in 1970 it had the highest divorce rate of all countries reported in this Fact Sheet. The Canadian crude divorce rate in 1970 was 1.4, which increased to 2.2 in 2007.<sup>vi</sup>



## Cohabitation rates

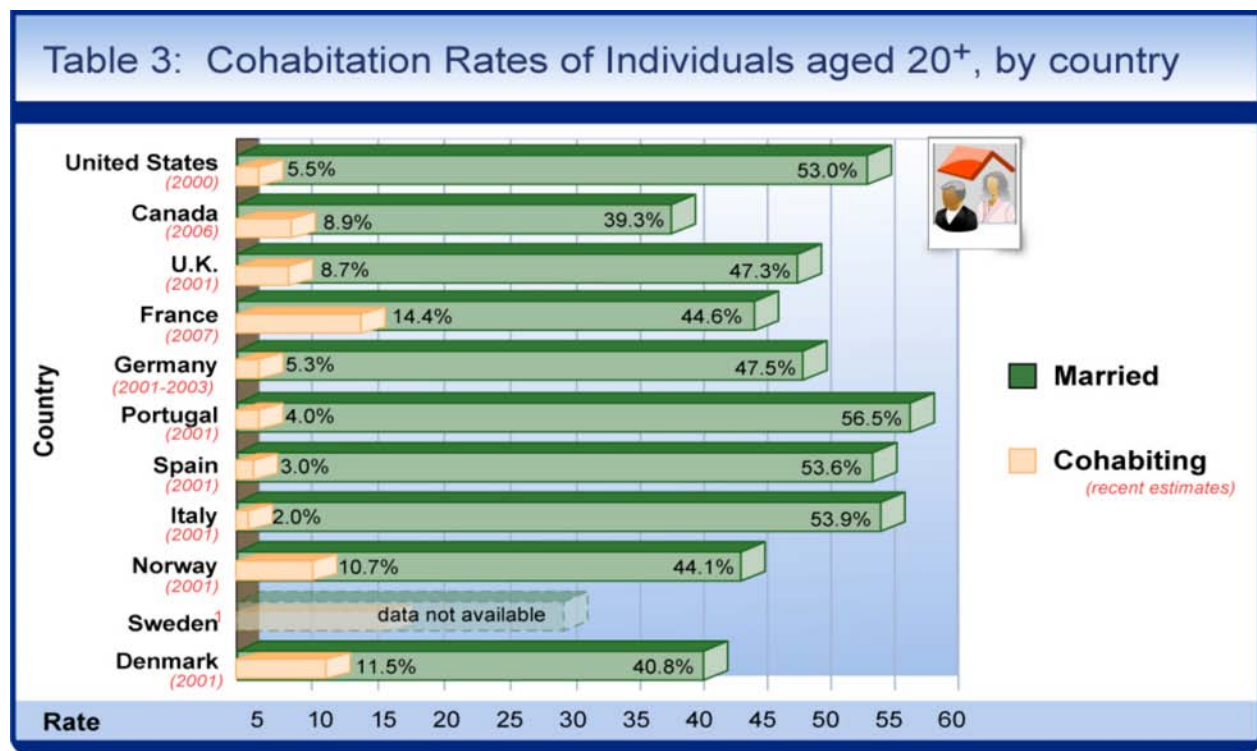
Across all nations chronicled in this Fact Sheet, over the decades there have been a trend towards increased cohabitation among couples, either as a prelude to, or a substitute for, marriage. A number of Northern and Western European countries—France, Great Britain, Germany, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—have acknowledged cohabitation by allowing partners to legalize their relationships through civil unions.<sup>vii</sup>

In terms of viewing cohabitation as a “substitution” for marriage, research finds that Sweden is furthest along this pathway. One study found that in 1996, only 7% of 25-29 year old women in Sweden were married without having lived with their partner; 41% who married had cohabited, and 52% were cohabiting with their partners.<sup>viii</sup> This trend was less pronounced in other countries. The same study found that among 25–29 year-

old women in Great Britain, slightly more than one third had married without cohabiting, one third who were married had previously cohabited, and just less than one-third were in cohabiting unions. In contrast, in Italy and Spain, the portion of women in that age bracket who were cohabiting was under 15%. Most had married without ever having cohabited.

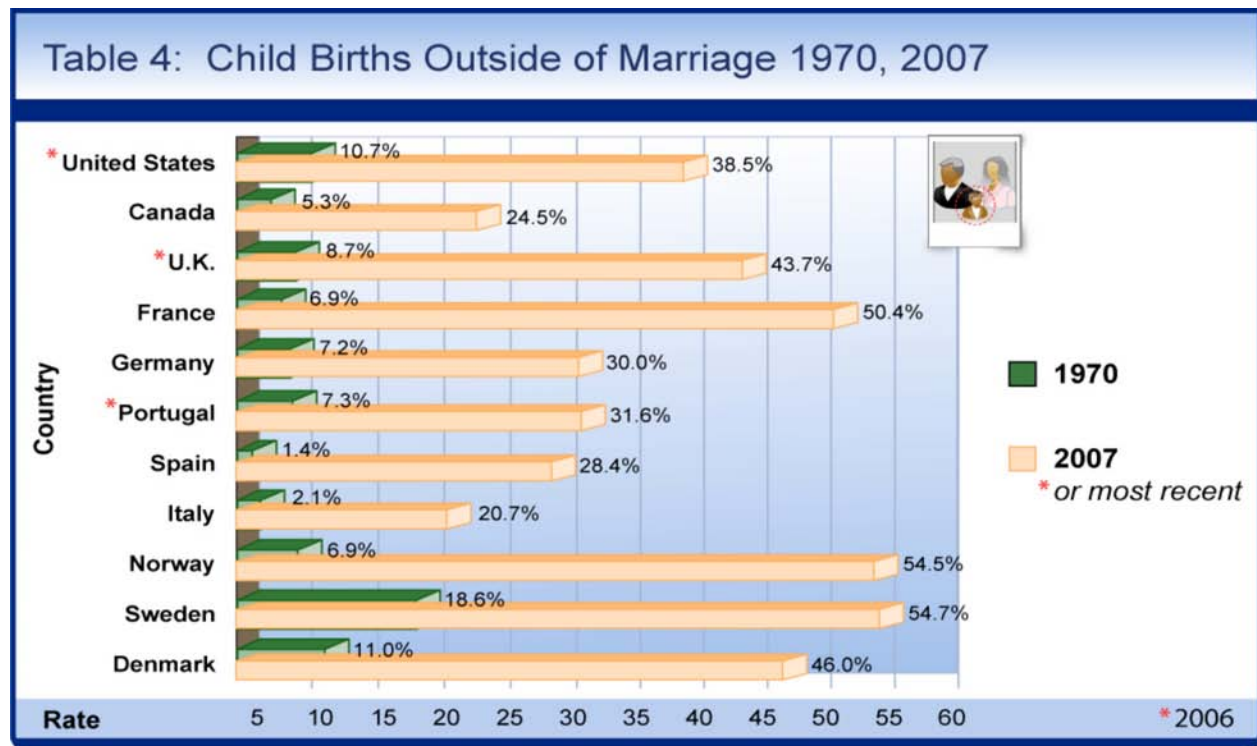
The cohabitation trend in Sweden has been explored in various studies finding that young people in Sweden overwhelmingly approve of childrearing within cohabiting unions. One survey conducted in 1999 of 2,300 22-30 year old men and women in Sweden found that over 85% approved of this arrangement. Interestingly, the same survey found that a majority of respondents living with their partner expected to marry within five years. The survey also revealed that the most important reasons for marrying were to stage a wedding to show the seriousness of the relationship, and because respondents believed that it was “romantic” to get married.<sup>ix</sup>

Table 3<sup>x</sup> below presents the most recent estimates of cohabitation rates among individuals age 20 or older across the countries of interest. The data show the variation in the prevalence of cohabitation. As Table 3 indicates, France, Denmark, and Norway had the highest cohabitation rates, with Italy having the lowest. Data for Sweden was not available through this data source (see footnote #1 for explanation). The U.S. cohabitation rate is most comparable to that of Germany and Canada’s rate is most comparable to the U.K.



## Non-marital childbirths

In 1970, all of the countries of interest had non-marital birth rates that did not exceed 11%, with the exception of Sweden, which had a non-marital birth rate approaching 20%. However since 1970, as Table 4<sup>xi</sup> illustrates, non-marital birth rates have soared for all of these countries. In 2007, the rates ranged from 20% (Italy) to 55% (Norway and Sweden). Similar to Italy, Canada had a low non-marital birth rate (24.5%). In the Northern European countries where cohabitation is prevalent and often long-term, about half of all births to women are outside of marriage. France, where cohabitation rates are also high, had a similarly high non-marital birth rate. Southern European countries have the lowest non-marital birth rates – at both points in time—of all three regions.



## Conclusion

Since 1970, countries described in this Fact Sheet in Northern, Western, and Southern Europe have all seen declines in marriage rates as well as significant increases in divorce, cohabitation, and non-marital birth rates. There are notable variations among countries, and, to a large extent, among regions, in the size of these rates. Northern European countries experienced the highest cohabitation and non-marital birth rates; researchers believe that many non-marital births in these countries are occurring to cohabiting biological parents. Italy, Spain and France have the lowest divorce rates; Italy and Spain have low cohabitation and non-marital birth rates; and France has low cohabitation rates, similar to those of Northern European countries. Information in this Fact Sheet reveals that trends in family formation patterns in the United States are following the same direction as those in Europe, and lays the groundwork for understanding the different cultural and economic forces that may be driving these trends.

## Data Sources

- i. Data for Table 1 taken from OECD (2008) SF8: Marriage and Divorce Rates. OECD Family Database. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/19/40321815.pdf>. The 1970 crude marriage rate for Canada was taken from Indicators of Well-Being in Canada, produced by Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Retrieved on March 3, 2010 at <http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/c.4nt.2nt@-eng.jsp?cid=14>
- ii. OECD (2008) SF8: Marriage and Divorce Rates. OECD Family Database. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/19/40321815.pdf>.
- iii. Council of Europe Publishing. (2004) Recent Demographic Developments in Europe. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from [http://www.coe.int/t/e/social\\_cohesion/population/Demo2004EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/e/social_cohesion/population/Demo2004EN.pdf).
- iv. Data for Table 2 taken from OECD (2008) SF8: Marriage and Divorce Rates. OECD Family Database. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/19/40321815.pdf>.
- v. Giuliano, P. (2007) Living Arrangements in Western Europe: Does Cultural Origin Matter? Journal of European Economic Association, 5(5), 927-952.
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- vii. OECD (2008) SF8: Marriage and Divorce Rates. OECD Family Database. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/19/40321815.pdf>.
- viii. Kiernan, Kathleen. (2001) The Rise of Cohabitation and Childbearing outside Marriage in Western Europe. International Journal of Law, Policy, and the Family 15, 1-21.
- ix. Bernhardt, Eva, "Cohabitation or Marriage? Preferred Living Arrangements in Sweden," April, 2004, Austrian Institute for Family Studies, retrieved on February 7, 2010 at <http://www.oif.ac.at/sdf/sdf04-04-bernhardt.pdf>
- x. f OECD (2008) SF9: Cohabitation rate and prevalence of other forms of partnership. OECD Family Database. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/52/27/41920080.pdf>.
- xi. OECD (2008) SF6: Share of births outside marriage and teenage births. OECD Family Database. Retrieved on January 31, 2010 from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/38/6/40278615.pdf>. 1970 non-marital childbirth rate taken from National Center for Family and Marriage Research, Table 2, Percentage of Births to U.S. Unmarried Women by Year, 1940-2005, accessed on February 5, 2010 at [http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/fertility\\_characteristics.pdf](http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/fertility_characteristics.pdf)