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Union formation and separations in Sweden

The aim of the study is to investigate union formation and separations during the early 2000s. The data is based on the Swedish Total Population register and covers about 30 000 couples that had their first biological child in 2000. The couples are followed from the day that they started to live with each other to a possible separation or the end of 2010. The couple is assumed to live together if both partners are registered in the same dwelling unit. Since this study is based on registers, the actual resident might not always be the same as were you are registered.

All couples don't have children, so the results from this study won't give a general description of union formation and separations. The reason that childless couples are excluded is that they often cannot be identified in the population registers. Couples without children can only be linked together if they are married. Unmarried and married couples without children probably differ when it comes to e.g. tendency to separate and that's why we have chosen to exclude childless couples in this study.

Modes of union formation

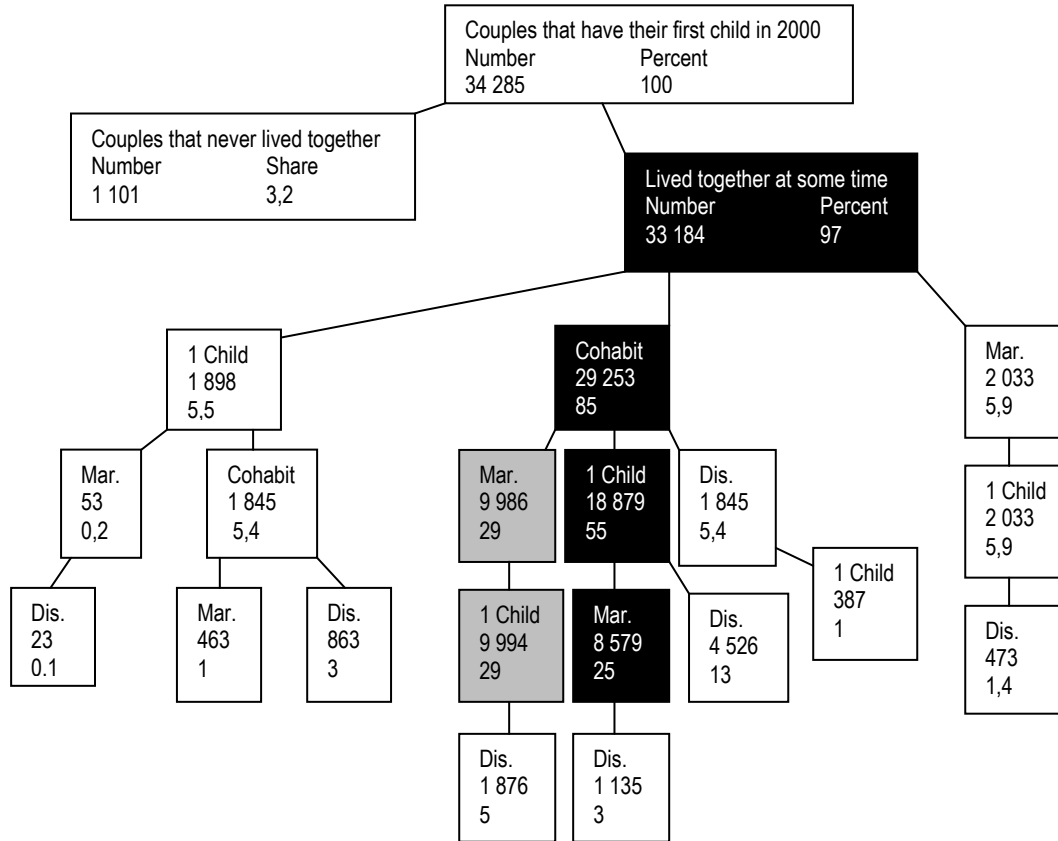
Figure 1 shows the complexity of the stage on which union breakups take place. It displays the different life paths that can lead up to the dissolution of the couples that had their first child in 2000. The boxes depict the various life statuses involved, and the lines between them represent possible direct transitions. Couples that had their first child usually lived together at some time during the studied period. About three percent never lived together five years before or after the arrival of their first child. Most became parents after cohabitation and married after the child was born. The second most common path is cohabitation, marriage and then having the first child. Only six percent starts with marriage. Almost as many unions, 5 percent, had their first joint child before they married or started to cohabit.

For couples that had their first child before they cohabited or married, nearly 50 percent had separated before the end of 2010. The corresponding for couples that started with cohabitation was about 30 percent. The lowest rate of separation, just over 20 percent, had those who entered a union with marriage.

Men and women's age at the start of cohabitation varies, about 50 percent of the women are between 20 and 25 years while men tend to be a few years older. Considering time between moving together and first common child, 40 percent of the couples had their first child within one year after started cohabitation. About 20 percent had their first common child five to nine years after they had moved in with each other.

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Figure 1. Modes of union formation to possible union dissolution for unions having their first joint child in 2000. 2000 – 2010.



Cohabit=cohabitation; 1 Child=first joint child; Dis. =union dissolved; Mar. =married

Among unions that dissolved during the studied period, slightly more than 20 percent separated within two years after the arrival of their first joint child. The share of separations the years after childbirth is ten percent during the first year and then slightly over ten percent each year for the following three years. Between five and nine years after childbirth, a little less than ten percent of the unions were dissolved each year.

The data is analyzed using a Cox proportional hazard regression model and the results show for example that the propensity to separate is higher for younger couples. If the woman is younger than 22 years at the birth of the first child the risk of dissolution is almost three times higher compared to couples where the woman was between 27 and 29 years. The propensity for a union to dissolve decreases with age and women that are older than 34 years at the union's first childbirth nearly have 20 percent lower dissolution risk than the baseline group. Compared with couples with persons in the same age, couples with an older woman have a 40 percent higher propensity to dissolve the union while it is almost the same for unions with an older man. If the he is more than eight years older, the risk is slightly more than 10 percent higher.

If the woman has a low level of education, the risk of union dissolution is almost twice as high compared to if she has secondary education. If she has higher education than secondary, the risk to separate is nearly 30 percent less. Compared to unions where both have the same level of education, the risk for dissolution is about 24 percent higher in unions where the woman has higher level of education than her partner. Corresponding for couples where the man has a higher level of education is 17 percent lower. Having children is often a sign for a stable relationship and the risk of dissolution is more than half for those who get their second child compared to those who stay with one child. For those who either is married before the birth of their first child or get married during the studied period, the propensity to dissolve the union is about 40 percent lower than for those who don't get married. Having a second or third child and getting married are included as time-dependent covariates. The results also show that the risk to separate is about 70 percent higher for unions where the woman is born in Sweden and her partner born abroad, than if both were Swedish born. The risk to dissolve the union is also higher for couples where both are foreign-born and where the man is foreign-born while his partner is Swedish-born.

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Table 1. Relative risk of union dissolution by different factors. Preliminary results

| Factor | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------|
| Womans age at childbirth | < 22 years | 2,79 |
| | 22-27 years | 1,50 |
| | 27-29 years | 1 |
| | 30-33 years | 0,92 |
| | > 34 years | 0,74 |
| Difference in age at childbirth | Older woman | 1,40 |
| | Same age | 1 |
| | Older man | 0,98 |
| | Man more than eight years older | 1,13 |
| Level of education, woman | Pre-secondary | 1,94 |
| | Secondary | 1 |
| | Tertiary | 0,72 |
| Level of education, difference | Woman higher | 1,24 |
| | Same level of education | 1 |
| | Man higher | 0,83 |
| Children | Second child | 0,48 |
| | No second child | 1 |
| Married | Yes | 0,57 |
| | No | 1 |
| Country of birth | Both swedish born | 1 |
| | Woman Swedish born, man foreign-born | 1,71 |
| | Man Swedish born, woman foreign-born | 1,36 |
| | Both foreign-born | 1,28 |