

# research in brief

## **Marital Stability and Instability**

A recent study using census and National Center for Health Statistics data indicated that out of all men and women married in the United States between 1950 and 1970, one-fifth of all the men and one-fourth of all the women are known to have experienced divorce.

## *Contributing Factors*

Women who marry between the ages of 14 and 17 are twice as likely to divorce as those who marry between the ages of 18 and 19. The divorce rate was 3 times higher when the 14-to-17-year-old category was compared to the 20-to-24-year-old category. The rates were similar for males of corresponding ages.

The levels of education also showed similar trends. People with less than a high school education had especially low levels of marital stability. Men and women with college educations had especially high levels of marital stability. Other data cited by the authors indicated women with graduate school training had much more marital instability than women who ended their formal education with four years of college training.

Family income and the number and sex of children also contributed to marital stability. The lower the family income, the greater the marital instability. Families with no children showed the most marital disruption. The absence of children tended to increase the chances of separation and divorce; however, marital disruption may encourage people not to have children or at least delay having children.

The sex of the child also tended to make a difference. Women with at least one son were more likely to remain married. In our society, particularly for the males, there's a strong desire to have at least one son to carry on the family name. If this desire isn't satisfied and other complications

are already present in the marriage, divorce may ensue. Another speculation is that mothers of sons may hesitate to become involved in a divorce and then try to rear sons without the presence of another male in the home. Other literature cited by the authors indicates that boys are generally harder than girls to rear without a husband's help.

*Implications* Marital stability should be, and likely is, of great concern to all Extension workers. These research findings raise some very challenging questions for Extension workers to consider:

1. *Are we sponsoring the type of 4-H and other Extension programs that help in delaying the age of marriage?*
2. *Most of Extension's family-related programs go to families with children. The highest rate of divorce or marital disruption occurs in couples with no children. What programs do we have directed at childless couples?*
3. *Families with low incomes are at a high risk for marital instability. Do our programs aimed at low-income clientele go beyond the basic food and nutrition emphasis?*
4. *Most of Extension's programs aimed at the family are conducted by females and attended by females. Are we doing enough programming that involves males in preparation for marriage and parenthood?*

"Marital Instability in the United States: Some Correlates and Recent Changes." Graham B. Spanier and Paul C. Glick. *Family Relations*, XXX(July, 1981), 329-38.

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