# COHABITATION, MARRIAGE, AND DIVORCE IN THE UNITED STATES: TRENDS AND RACIAL DIFFERENTIALS, 1970-2002

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**Abstract:** On a time scale of more than three decades, this paper offers a description of union formation and dissolution for four racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Our strategy is unique. We pool retrospective histories from a number of surveys and use this common data set to estimate the life-time likelihood of experiencing the union statuses listed below, the transition probabilities between these statues, and duration in each:
1. Never-married & not-cohabiting;
2. Currently married;
3. Widowed & not-cohabiting;
4. Divorced & not cohabiting;
5. Never-married & cohabiting;
6. Widowed & cohabiting;
7. Divorced & cohabiting.

We use multi-state increment-decrement life table models to display a hologram-like model of nuptial processes. This multi-state life table model can condense unwieldy race-age-sex-specific occurrence/exposure rates into several much more concentrated and interpretable measures, which in turn are much less affected by the distortions inherent in the conventional period crude rates and total rates of marriage/union formation and dissolution. Our paper is the first study to use common data and consistent methodology to examine this full range of union statues changes including cohabitation over more than three decades. We also present this description for race-ethnic subgroups, a second important contribution.

Our estimates confirm many findings in the literature, but our methodology also allows estimation of some unique summary measures. The findings include a tremendous increase in life-time probability of cohabitation, a substantial decrease in direct transition from never-married to married, and a significant decrease in overall probability of ever-married and re-married, as well as a substantial decrease in probability of transition from cohabiting to marrying. We also present and discuss for the first time following a comprehensive multi-state life table approach about the enormous racial differentials in marital/union formation and dissolution in the past more than three decades. These findings may provide new insights in understanding the trends and patterns in the past and their implications for the future trajectories, and they are the basis for further exploring the underlying mechanism.