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Population and social conditions

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About one marriage in four in the EU ends in divorce

As disaffection with marriage persists, so the tide of divorce continues to rise: in most countries of the European Union, crude divorce rates reached unprecedented levels in 1995.

In order to gain a clear understanding of this phenomenon, we need to look beyond the crude rates and place the divorce figures in the context of the marriages which give rise to them. This issue of Statistics in focus looks at the proportion of marriages dissolved by divorce per calendar year, i.e. the total divorce rate, and per year/marriage cohort.

In 1995, the total divorce rate in EUR15 was 0.3 divorce per marriage: the most recent observations suggest that nearly one third of all marriages would end in divorce. In the Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom, the figure is 0,40-0,50.

Looking at the marriage cohorts, the proportion of divorces is estimated at 14% for marriages entered into in the EU in 1960 and about 25% for more recently married couples, less than half the level in the United States. Married couples in the EU are getting divorced sooner: the mean duration of marriages dissolved by divorce has declined from 14 years for the 1970 cohort to 12 years for the 1980 cohort.

Fewer and fewer marriages ...

Following a slight increase at the end of the 1980s, the crude marriage rate in EUR15 has again gone into decline: there are just five marriages per year for every 1 000 inhabitants in the EU today, compared with nearly eight in 1970. The decline of marriage has also been observed during the same period in the United States, although the marriage rate is considerably higher there than in the EU: 9‰ compared with 5‰ (Figure 1).

... and more and more divorces

Alongside the declining marriage rate, the frequency of divorce has increased. The crude divorce rate in the Community has risen from an average of 0.8‰ to 1.8‰ in the space of 25 years. In the United States, the crude rate appears to have stabilised since 1980, or even to have gone into decline, although the rate continues to be much higher than in Europe.

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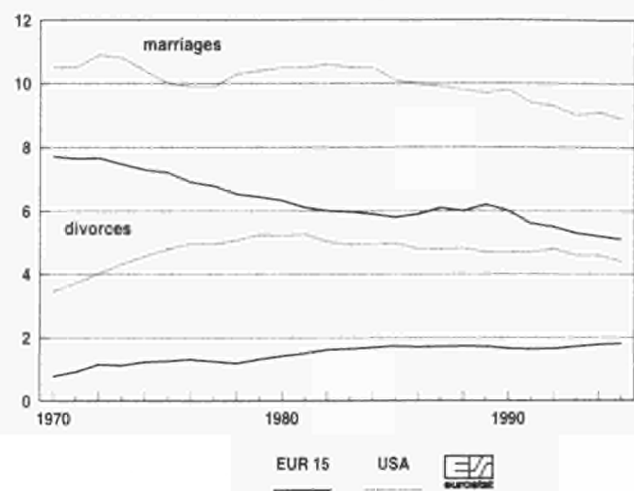
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Figure 1
Marriages and divorces in EUR 15 and the United States, 1970-1995

Number of marriages/divorces per 1 000 inhabitants



One might expect the decline in marriage rates to be followed after a time lag by a decline in the frequency of divorces. This is already being seen in the United States. The process has not yet set in within Europe, however. Changes to the legal framework have had a big influence on the divorce rate by releasing a flood of pent-up divorces which would otherwise never have happened. Between 1970 and 1995, almost every country made substantial changes to its divorce laws, with the result that divorce is now an option throughout the EU (see box, page 3), although the length and intricacy of the divorce procedure varies from country to country.

Common trends

The decline in the marriage rate is a trend common to all EU Member States. At the beginning of the 1970s, the crude marriage rate in Portugal was 9.4 per 1 000 inhabitants and 5.1 in Sweden. Less than 25 years later, the rates in the Member States ranged from 6.6 per 1 000 in Portugal and Denmark to 3.8 per 1 000 in Sweden. In other words, the decline is a general one and the spread between countries has become smaller (Table 1).

Compared with the Community average, there have been big declines in Ireland, the Netherlands, Finland and, above all, France (from 7.8‰ to 4.4‰). There are, however, some exceptions: Greece and Norway, where the marriage rate has increased in recent years; and Denmark, which in 1995 regained the level seen in the

period 1970-74, following a resumption of the upward trend in the 1980s. In Canada and Japan the trends are similar to those in Europe, although the levels in those two countries are higher.

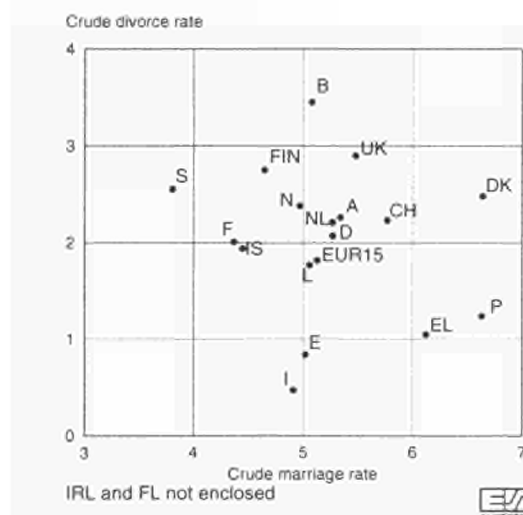
The converging general trends disguise a diversity produced by legal reforms. In those countries where the crude divorce rates were already relatively high, the increase has marked time. This is the case in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Finland, Germany and Denmark. In fact, the rate in Denmark has slipped back to its earlier, lower level of 2.5‰. The southern countries, some of which only legalised divorce during the period under consideration, continue to record lower rates than the Union as a whole.

In 1995, 1.9 million marriages were contracted and 678 000 dissolved in the EU (Table 1). Figure 2 illustrates the relative situation in the various countries in terms of marriage and divorce.

Belgium has the highest divorce rate, owing to the reform

Figure 2
Marriages and divorces in the EU, 1995

Number of marriages/divorces per 1 000 inhabitants



introduced in 1995, which widened the grounds for divorce and simplified the divorce procedure. It is followed by the countries of northern Europe, including Denmark and Sweden, which have widely differing marriage rates. Finally, all the countries of southern Europe have low divorce rates, but show wide variations in terms of marriage rates.

Table 1
Marriages and divorces in selected countries, 1970-1995

	Crude marriage rate				Crude divorce rate				Marriages	Divorces
	Number of marriage per 1 000 inhabitants				Number of divorces per 1 000 inhabitants				(1000)	(1000)
	1970-74	1980-84	1990-94	1995	1970-74	1980-84	1990-94	1995	1995	1995
EUR 15	7.6	6.1	5.5	5.1^p	1.0	1.6	1.7	1.8^p	1901.5^p	677.6^p
B	7.6	6.3	5.8	5.1	0.8	1.7	2.1	3.5	51.4	35.0
DK	6.6	5.2	6.3	6.6	2.5	2.8	2.6	2.5	34.7	13.0
D	7.0	6.3	5.7	5.3	1.5	2.1	1.9	2.1	430.5	169.4
EL	7.7	6.7	5.7	6.1	0.4	0.7	0.7	1.1	64.0	11.0
E	7.6	5.3	5.4	5.0 ^p	-	0.4	0.7	0.8 ^p	196.9 ^p	33.1 ^p
F	7.8	5.7	4.7	4.4 ^p	0.9	1.7	1.9	2.0 ^p	254.7 ^p	117.0 ^p
IRL	7.3	5.8	4.7	4.4 ^p	-	-	-	-	15.6 ^p	-
I	7.5	5.5	5.4	4.9 ^p	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.5	283.0 ^p	27.0
L	6.3	5.6	6.2	5.1	0.7	1.6	1.9	1.8	2.1	0.7
NL	8.7	5.9	6.0	5.3	1.1	2.1	2.0	2.2	81.5	34.2
A	6.8	6.4	5.7	5.3	1.4	1.9	2.1	2.3	42.9	18.2
P	9.4	7.4	7.0	6.6	0.1	0.7	1.2	1.2	65.8	12.3
FIN	7.9	6.1	4.9	4.6	1.7	2.0	2.6	2.7	23.7	14.0
S	5.1	4.5	4.2	3.8	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.6	33.6	22.5
UK	8.2	7.1	6.0	5.5 ^p	1.8	2.8	3.0	2.9 ^p	321.0 ^p	170.1 ^p
IS	8.2	5.8	4.7	4.5	1.5	1.9	2.0	1.9	1.2	0.5
FL	6.2	6.8	9.3	13.2	-	0.8	1.2	1.2	0.4	0.0
N	7.3	5.2	4.7	5.0	1.1	1.8	2.5	2.4	21.7	10.4
EEA	7.6	6.1	5.5	5.1	1.0	1.6	1.7	1.8	1924.9^p	688.5^p
CH	7.6	6.0	5.5	5.1	1.0	1.6	1.7	1.8	40.8	15.7
CDN	9.0	7.6	5.9	5.4	1.6	2.7	2.8	2.6	160.3	77.6
USA	10.6	10.5	9.3	8.9 ^p	4.0	5.1	4.7	4.4 ^p	2336.0 ^p	1169.0 ^p
J	9.9	6.5	6.1	6.4 ^p	1.0	1.4	1.4	1.6 ^p	791.9 ^p	199.0 ^p

^p provisional data

Sources: Eurostat, Statistics Canada, United Nations Statistical Division, US National Center for Health Statistics, Japan Statistics Bureau



Divorce law reforms

Since 1970, divorce has been legalised in Italy (1970), Liechtenstein (1975), Spain (1981) and Ireland (1995). In Portugal, in 1975, divorce for couples who married in church became possible.

Parallel to the above reforms, almost all the countries under consideration have made radical amendments to their divorce law. Major reforms have been adopted which make divorce easier by reducing the number of years of prior separation and simplifying the procedure.

Almost everywhere in the Union, divorce is now obtainable "by mutual consent". It is no longer a penalty for misconduct, but the free choice of the couple concerned. As a result, the state confines itself to intervening only after the decision has been taken and no longer has any responsibility for managing the divorce (e.g. by imposing a clause requiring an extended period of separation).

Separation

Any comparison between countries is obviously impaired by differences in national legislation, particularly the requirement in certain countries of a period of separation prior to the granting of a divorce. The periods vary from country to country and sometimes depend on the grounds for divorce. It should also be pointed out that separated couples often do not get divorced until many years after they have separated, mainly with a view to remarrying.

DIVORCE PER CALENDAR YEAR

In 1970, the total divorce rate in the European Union was 0.11 (Figure 3). This means that, if the propensity to divorce had remained unchanged over time, 11% of marriages in the EU would have ended in divorce (see glossary, page 8). In 1995, the same indicator stood at 0.30. If the present rate is maintained, nearly one third of marriages in the EU would be dissolved. This is a similar level to Japan's (26%) but lower than in Canada (44%) and the United States, where the figure has been above 50% since the late 1970s.

In the EU, the mean duration of marriages which end in divorce has been on an upward trend recently (Figure 4) and now exceeds 12 years. It is longer than in the three countries just mentioned, and three to four years longer than in the United States.

The trends followed by these indicators over time (Figures 3 and 4) reflect the new legislation adopted by the larger European countries. In England and Wales, for example, there were significant increases in the number of divorces in 1971-72 and 1985, following reforms which in the first case made it easier to obtain a divorce in general, in the second made it easier for young couples. Similarly, legislation introduced in Germany in 1977 (the Federal Republic prior to unification) interrupted the upward trend in divorce. Reunification in 1990 also ushered in a temporary decline.

Figure 3
Total divorce rate, 1970-1995

Mean number of divorces per marriage

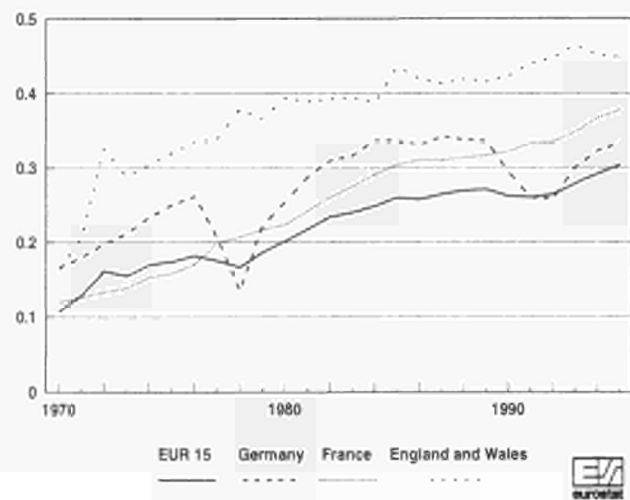
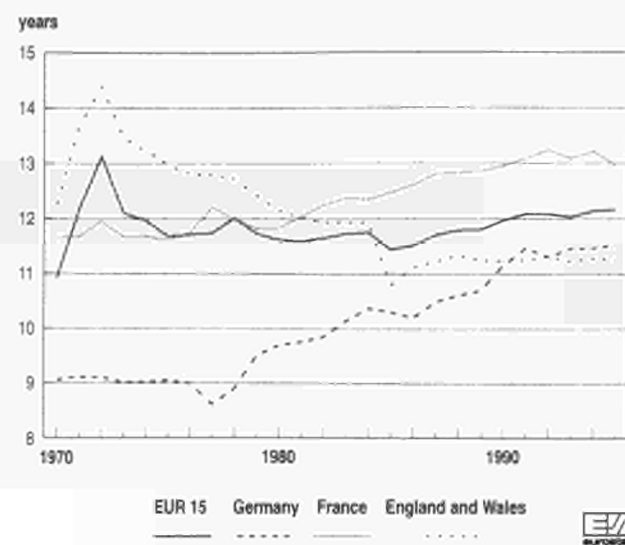


Figure 4
Mean duration of marriage at divorce, 1970-1995



Three major geographic areas

Since the period 1970-74, the total divorce rate has risen significantly in all European countries, particularly in the first period (Figure 5). The biggest increases have been recorded in France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Greece, Portugal and Norway, while the smallest rises have been in Denmark and Italy. In 1995, there was a particularly large increase in Belgium, owing to the divorce-law reform referred to above.

According to this indicator, the most vulnerable marriages are in Belgium, while the most stable are in Italy (0.55 compared with 0.08).

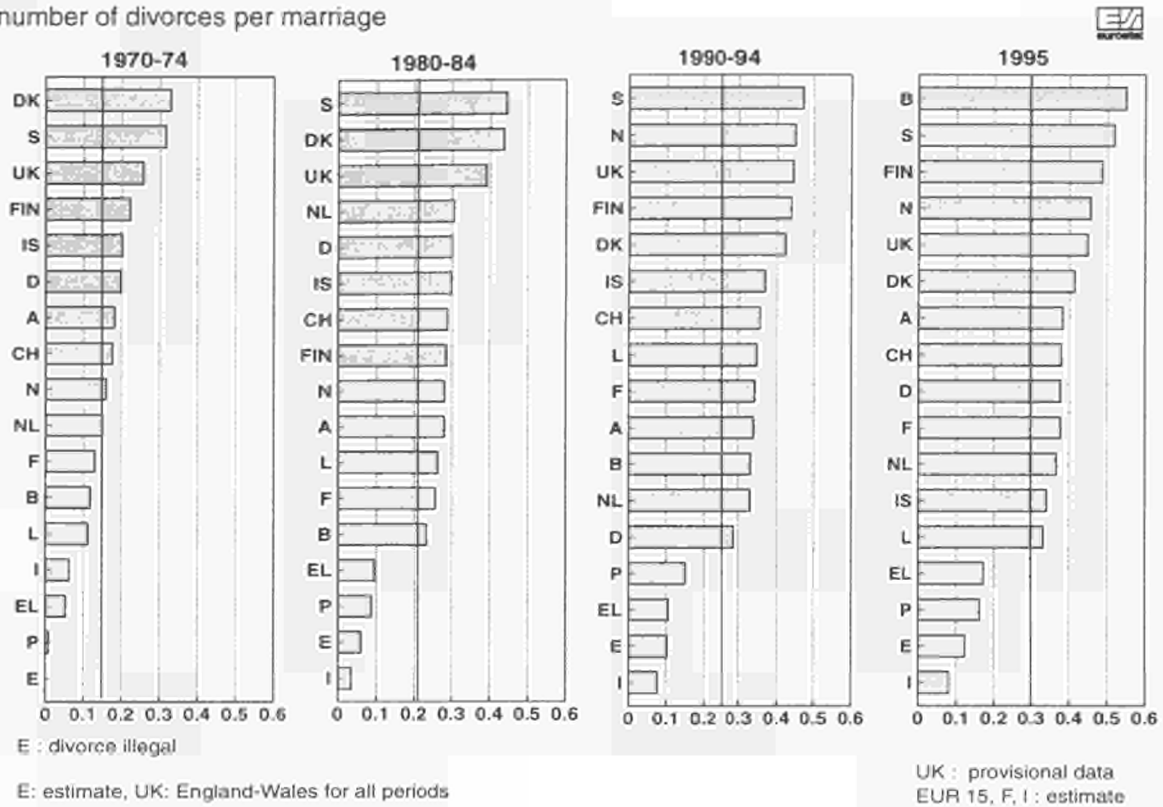
The figures for the years since 1990 reveal three distinct geographical groups:

- the Scandinavian countries and England and Wales, where the indicator is consistently above 0.40;
- the countries of central Europe, where the indicator is between 0.30 and 0.40;
- the southern countries, where it is below 0.20.

Within each of these groups, the situations in individual countries have become increasingly similar: trends in Norway and Finland, for example, have progressively converged with the rest of northern Europe. The differences between the three groups, by contrast, have become more pronounced since 1970-74.

Figure 5
Total divorce rate in selected countries, 1970-1995

Mean number of divorces per marriage



DIVORCE PER MARRIAGE COHORT

The total divorce rate synthesises the situation in the year of observation, lumping together divorces relating to marriages entered into in the course of each of the previous years. For example, marriages dissolved in 1995 within an average of less than one year, after one year, two years, and so on. were contracted in 1995, 1994, 1993 and so on..

From another point of view, it is interesting to know how many marriages entered into a given year - the marriage cohort - have ended in divorce, and after what mean duration (see glossary, page 8). In this case, the information is applied to successive years following the year of marriage (e.g. the years 1960, 1961 etc. for the 1960 cohort).

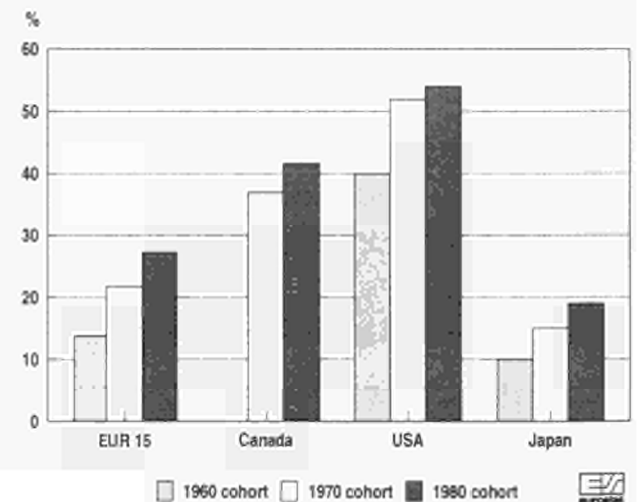
About one marriage in four ends in divorce ...

14% of marriages entered into in the EU in 1960 have ended or will end in divorce. It is estimated that 22% of marriages entered into in 1970 and 27% of those entered into in 1980 have had or will have a similar fate.

The dissolution of marriages contracted in those same years is less common in Japan but more common in

Canada and, especially, the United States, where more than half the marital unions dating from 1970 and 1980 seem destined to end in divorce (Figure 6).

Figure 6
Proportion of marriages ending in divorce per cohort



Canada, USA, Japan: Eurostat estimate

For the EU as a whole, divorce rates by marriage duration of the cohorts under consideration are lower than those observed in 1995, although the curve for 1980 cohort approaches that for 1995 (Figure 7). This explains why the proportion of divorces for the various cohorts is lower than the total divorce rate in 1995, which was 30%.

... and is ending earlier and earlier

The most recent marriage cohorts are notable for the increased frequency of divorces within a few years of marriage, most often those which take place four years after the marriage was entered into.

The proportion of marriages ending in divorce within 10 years has risen from 8% for the 1970 cohort to 14% for the 1980 cohort (Figure 8).

As a result, the mean duration of marriage at divorce declined by one-and-a-half years between the two cohorts (Table 2).

Figure 7
Divorce rate by duration of marriage, EUR 15

Number of divorces per 10 000 marriages

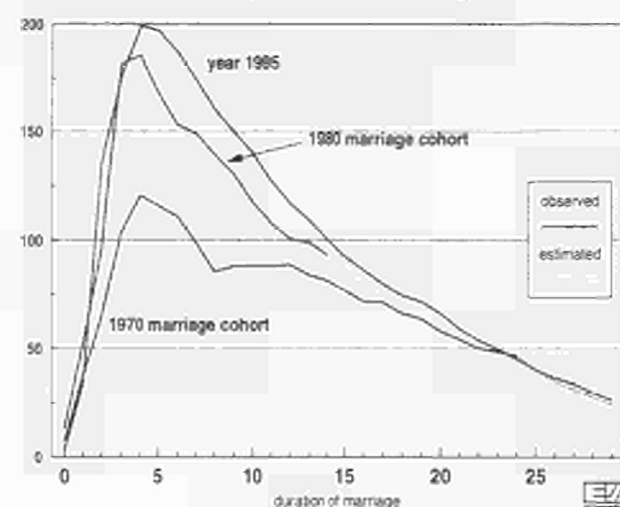


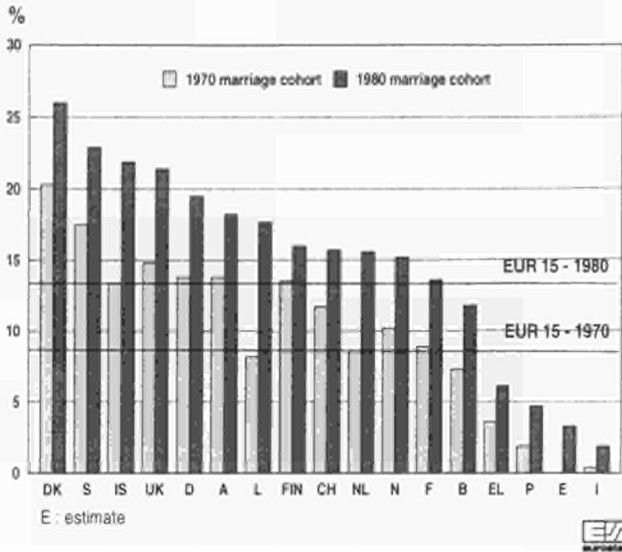
Table 2
Divorce indicators per marriage cohort in selected countries

	Proportion of marriages ending in divorce			Mean duration of marriage at divorce		
	marriage cohort			marriage cohort		
	1960	1970	1980	1960	1970	1980
EUR 15	0.14	0.22	0.27	..	13.8	12.3
B	..	0.26	0.34	..	16.3	14.7
DK	0.29	0.40	0.44	14.2	12.0	10.8
D	0.18	0.27	0.33	12.8	11.5	10.5
EL	..	0.08	0.12	..	13.6	11.5
E	0.02	0.05	0.09	29.0	22.0	15.0
F	0.16	0.27	0.33	17.0	15.2	13.7
IRL	..	..	..	..	..	..
I	0.03	0.05	0.07	22.1	19.6	16.3
L	0.14	0.25	0.36	17.0	15.0	12.4
NL	0.17	0.25	0.31	17.4	14.6	12.2
A	0.18	0.26	0.32	11.8	11.4	10.5
P	0.05	0.09	0.14	23.1	18.2	14.9
FIN	0.23	0.31	0.38	15.8	14.0	13.5
S	..	0.38	0.46	..	13.1	12.0
UK ¹	0.23	0.34	0.42	16.7	13.4	12.0
IS	0.21	0.31	0.41	15.9	14.1	11.9
FL	..	..	..	..	..	..
N	0.20	0.30	0.39	16.8	15.4	14.1
EEA	0.14	0.22	0.27	..	13.8	12.3
CH	0.19	0.28	0.33	16.8	15.4	14.1

¹ estimate
1 England-Wales
Source: Eurostat



Figure 8
Proportion of marriages ending in divorce within 10 years, 1970 and 1980 marriage cohorts



dating from 1980 were dissolved within 10 years (Figure 8); a total of 40% of marriages of this cohort will end in divorce (Table 2).

The increase in the indicators has gone hand in hand with a reduction in mean marriage duration in every country under consideration. The reduction is more than two years in the southern countries, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Iceland.

The geographical distinction drawn above for the total divorce rate, especially the gulf between the northern and southern Member States of the EU, retains its relevance in the "cohort" approach. However, each group has its own national variations, particularly in terms of mean marriage duration at divorce.

Thus, for the 1970 cohort (Figure 9), all the Nordic countries are in a band between two extremes, with 40% of divorces taking place after a mean duration of marriage of 12 years in Denmark and 30% of divorces after an average of 15 years in Norway, where the situation is similar to Switzerland and France.

In the middle group, the divorce rates are very similar, at around 26%. On the other hand, the figures for Germany and Austria are significantly different from those for the other countries: a marriage duration of 11.5 years, compared with over 15 years in the Benelux countries, France and Switzerland.

Of the southern European countries, Greece contrasts with Portugal, Italy (where divorce is only granted after an extended period of separation) and, obviously, Spain, where divorce has only been legal since 1981.

National differences

The increase in the frequency of divorce between the 1970 and 1980 marriage cohorts is of the same order in most countries (about one quarter). It is most marked in the countries of southern Europe, followed by Luxembourg and Belgium. In Denmark, Sweden, England and Wales and Iceland, more than 20% of marital unions

Figure 9
Divorce indicators, 1970 marriage cohort



CONSTRAINTS ON THE ANALYSIS

In the last twenty years or so, conjugal life in many countries has increasingly taken the form of cohabitation, which makes it increasingly difficult to study trends in the number of people living together and separating. Although there is a growing trend towards cohabitation which never leads to marriage, the separation of cohabiting couples is never recorded as a divorce. How should one record marriages which have followed what is sometimes a very long period of cohabitation and have then been dissolved? How should one record persons who separate from their spouse and cohabit with another person without getting divorced? Traditional data on the marital status of the population are becoming increasingly inadequate as a means of analysing modern social trends.

GLOSSARY

Crude marriage rate: the ratio of the number of marriages to the mean population in a given year.

Crude divorce rate: the ratio of the number of divorces to the mean population in a given year.

Marriage cohort: the number of marriages contracted in a given year.

Divorce rate by duration of marriage reached during the year: the ratio of the number of divorces taking place after any marriage duration to the initial number of marriages in the corresponding cohort. The sum of the rates by duration in a given calendar year gives the **total divorce rate**, the sum by marriage cohort gives the **proportion of marriages ending in by divorce** in that cohort.

Calculating divorce rates per marriage duration eliminates the effects of different cohort sizes, but not the effects of death or migration. The death of one spouse or the emigration of a married couple to another country removes the marriage from the numerator, but does not affect the denominator, resulting in an under-estimate of the divorce rate. Conversely, the immigration of existing married couples can lead to an over-estimate.

Total divorce rate: the mean number of divorces per marriage for a notional cohort which would be subject, for each marriage duration, to current divorce rates.

Proportion of marriages dissolved by divorce per marriage cohort: the number of divorces as a proportion of the marriage cohort.

This longitudinal measure is the more "correct" in that it corresponds to real cohorts, but it is not known until after a long time lag. Assuming that the most recent divorce rates (which, for purposes of this publication, are the mean for the last five years) are unchanged, one can obtain a measure for cohorts whose marital histories are incomplete but which have been married for at least 15-20 years.

Mean duration of marriage at divorce: the mean duration of all marriages dissolved by divorce. It is calculated on the basis of the rates per marriage duration, for a given calendar year or for a marriage cohort.

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