In some parts of the world, such as Latin America, cohabitation is a widespread and ancient tradition, but in the U.S. and other Western countries, it barely existed three decades ago. In America today, for every 100 married couples, there are 10 unmarried couples living together. But this statistic understates the prevalence of the practice, as a third of all married women younger than 45 have cohabited at some point in their lives.

Although an increasing number of older Americans do so, cohabitation takes place mostly among those 40 or younger and is generally short-lived, with two thirds of unions lasting two years or less. Those who cohabit tend to have less income and education, are less religious, and are more likely than non-cohabitants to come from broken homes. Living together, more so for whites than blacks, is usually a prelude to marriage, although their advantage over children living with cohabiting parents may reflect race, ethnicity and their parents’ education. The number of cohabiting couples with children is growing rapidly, and as things stand now, one in four children can expect to live in a cohabiting family sometime during childhood.

According to one theory, cohabitation thrives because women, with their growing financial independence, no longer feel the urgency of finding a husband to support them but nonetheless want to enjoy the benefits of a live-in partner. There is little evidence, however, that affluent women find marriage less desirable. Another possible explanation is that women, particularly young women, may be more inclined to cohabit because of a growing disenchantment with marriage, which they often see as a situation in which the wife takes on most of the domestic work. Still another explanation is that the need for an arrangement short of marriage was always there but remained unfulfilled until the 1970s, when feminism, oral contraception, more individualistic attitudes and social activism combined to loosen the bonds of convention.

The rise in cohabitation has only partially made up for the decline in marriage. Fewer than 60 percent of those who cohabit have never married, and thus the increase in the never-marrieds in the past three decades results only in part from rising cohabitation.

Little evidence supports the popular notion that cohabitation is good training for marriage. Indeed, some research shows that those who cohabit are more likely to suffer marital discord and divorce. Other research, however, suggests that cohabitation as such is not to blame; rather it is the behavior of cohabitants, some of whom are prone to violence and excessive drinking. Compared with those in married-couple families, children in cohabiting families tend to be poorer, are not as well fed and are not read to as frequently; they also have more behavioral problems. Children living with married parents fare better, although their advantage over children living with cohabiting parents may reflect race, ethnicity and their parents’ education. The number of cohabiting couples with children is growing rapidly, and as things stand now, one in four children can expect to live in a cohabiting family sometime during childhood.

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