

Marital separations an alternative to divorce for poor couples

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(Medical Xpress) -- Married couples who undergo long-term separations generally appear to be those who can't afford to divorce, a new nationwide study suggests.

Researchers found that about 80 percent of all respondents who went through a marital separation ultimately divorced, most within three years.

About five percent attempted to reconcile. But, 15 percent of separations didn't lead to divorce or reconciliation within 10 years. Couples in these long-term separations tended to be racial and ethnic minorities, have low family income and education, and have young children.

"Long-term separation seems to be the low-cost, do-it-yourself alternative to divorce for many disadvantaged couples," said Dmitry Tumin, co-author of the study and a doctoral student in sociology at Ohio State University. "Separation may not be their first choice, but they may feel it is their best choice."

Tumin conducted the study with Zhenchao Qian, a professor of sociology at Ohio State. They will present their results at the 107th Annual Meeting of the [American Sociological Association](#).

The study involved 7,272 people from across the country who participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), and who were married at some point. The NLSY79 is a

nationally representative sample of men and women aged 14 to 22 in 1979. The same people were surveyed every year up to 1994 and every other year since then. The Tumin/Qian study followed the respondents through 2008.

The NLSY79 is conducted by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research for the U.S. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

The results of this study showed that 49 percent of participants left their first marriage during the course of the NLSY79 interviews, with 60 percent of that group having gone through a marital separation. About 80 percent of these separations ended in divorce.

The average length of a first separation was three years for those who ended up divorcing, nine years for respondents who were still separated as of the most recent interview, and two years for those who reunited with their spouse.

Reconciliation after separation is often unsuccessful, the study found -- half of the respondents that reconciled were no longer married as of 2008.

People who divorced immediately were similar to people who separated first before divorcing, but people who separated and did not divorce had very different profiles, the researchers found.

Almost 75 percent of those who remained separated, or who separated and then reunited, were black or Hispanic. Those who remained separated were more likely than those who divorced to have a high school or lower education.

"In every measure we had, including family background, income and education, those who remain separated are more disadvantaged than

those who end up divorcing," Qian said.

Compared to people who divorced, those who separated without divorcing also tended to have more children, the study found.

"Those with young children may find it difficult to support themselves and their children if they divorce. Divorce may not protect them because their spouse may be unwilling or unable to provide financial support," Qian said.

One surprising finding was that study participants' religious background was not associated with whether they chose separation or divorce, or whether they reunited after a separation.

"We thought that people with certain religious backgrounds that discourage divorce, like Catholicism, might be more likely to separate rather than divorce, but we did not find that after other factors are taken into account," Tumin said.

When the results of this study are compared to previous research, some trends emerge, Tumin said.

The number of people who choose separation seems to be declining, but the time spent in separation seems to be increasing.

Both of these trends may be explained by the increasing availability of "no-fault" divorces for the generation of young adults in this study.

No-fault divorces reduced or eliminated separation as a prerequisite for [divorce](#). That means people who have long-term separations now may not have the financial or social resources to [divorce](#), according to Qian.

"Tough economic times are likely to make these trends continue," Qian

said.

"Long-term separation may continue to be the norm for the disadvantaged unless they can see a better alternative, both in terms of spousal availabilities and economic independence."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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