

# The Diffusion of Cohabitation and Children's Risks of Family Dissolution

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## Background

### COHABITATION'S INSTABILITY

- As a general rule, cohabiting couples are less stable than married ones, but the gap between both union types varies with time and place.
- Liefbroer and Dourleijn\* found that the stability of cohabiting unions depends on the level of diffusion of cohabitation within the 16 European countries analysed.
- They estimated that the ratio of dissolution risk between cohabiting and married couples have a U-shaped pattern: It was larger in countries and generations with very high or very low proportions of cohabiters, and smaller when about half of couples started their union by cohabiting.

\* Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006. "Unmarried Cohabitation and Union Stability: Testing the Role of Diffusion Using Data from 16 European Countries", *Demography*, 43(2):203-221.

### COHABITATION IN CANADA

- The proportion of births to cohabiting couples has been increasing in each of the ten Canadian provinces, but remains much higher in Québec.
- Cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages in all provinces, but the stability gap is narrower in Québec.

## What we asked

- Is the diffusion of cohabitation as a family form associated with changes in children's risks of parental separation?
- Are these changes similar for children born to married or cohabiting parents?
- How does the cohabitation/marriage hazard ratio of family dissolution evolve with the diffusion of cohabitation?

## What we learned

- Globally, children's risks of family dissolution are not much influenced by the diffusion of cohabitation.
- For children born to married parents, the association is weak, but it is strong and negative for children born to cohabiting parents.
- The ratio of cohabitation to marriage dissolution hazards decreases non-linearly with the diffusion of cohabitation.

## Data

### INDIVIDUAL DATA

- Representative sample of children 4-5 years old from Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).
- A total of 24,267 children born between 1989 and 2004, with almost a quarter born to cohabiting parents.

### CONTEXTUAL DATA

- The proportion of births to cohabiting couples in each province and annual birth cohort.
- Derived from the proportion of 0-year-old children living with cohabiting parents in four national censuses (1991, 1996, 2001, and 2006).

## Method

### DISCRETE-TIME SURVIVAL MODEL

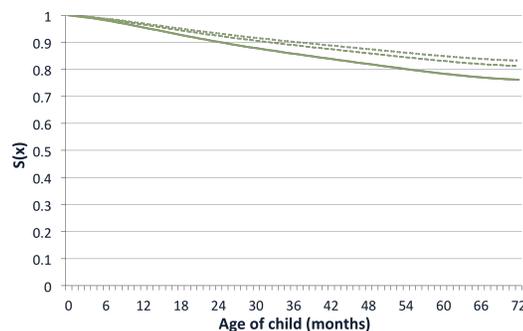
- Logistic models estimating the monthly risk of parental separation.
- Separate models for children born to married and cohabiting parents.
- Quadratic function of the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth.

## Results

### PARENTAL UNION SURVIVAL FOR ALL CHILDREN

Figure 1:

Predicted parental union survival functions according to the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth, all children combined



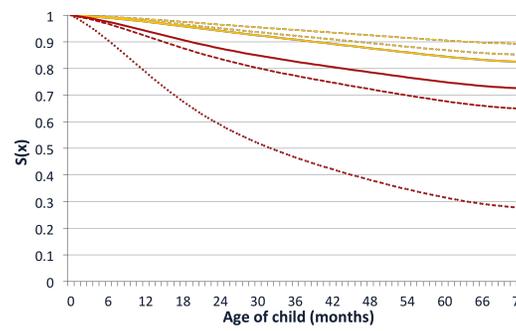
Proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth

0% 30% 60%

### PARENTAL UNION SURVIVAL BY UNION TYPE AT BIRTH

Figure 2:

Predicted parental union survival functions according to the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth, by parent's union type at child's birth



Proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth

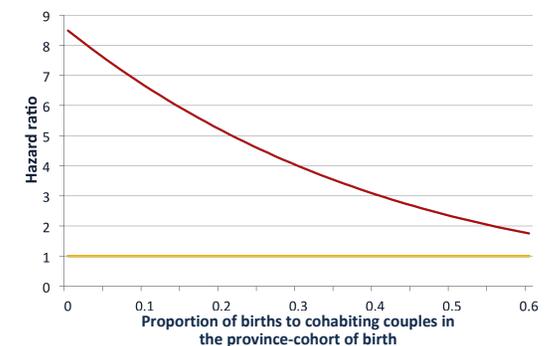
0% 30% 60%

Parent's union type at child's birth | Marriage Cohabitation

### UNION TYPE HAZARD RATIO

Figure 3:

Hazard ratio of parental separation for children born to cohabiting (vs. married) parents according to the proportion of births to cohabiting couples in the province-cohort of birth



Parent's union type at child's birth | Marriage Cohabitation

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