The Kids are All Right: Trends in Family Instability and Union Length

Abstract
Conventional wisdom suggests that family instability (e.g., entrances and exits from two-parent unions) has grown, as parents increasingly choose cohabitation over marriage. This study tests this hypothesis by examining changes in the type, intensity, and duration of family instability over the past 25 years. Data were first births observed in the 1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2013 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth. Contrary to expectations, we find that instability has not increased, in large part because cohabiting unions have become more stable over time. We find that cohabitating, relative to marital, transitions account for a larger fraction of family change. Yet by some very important markers – the fraction of time children spend within a two-parent union and the duration of unions – very little has changed over the past quarter century. We conclude that the replacement of marriage with cohabitation has not increased family instability because cohabitation has stabilized.

Keywords: Family Instability; Family Transitions; Cohabitation; Union Duration; Over-time Trends
The swift rise of cohabitation has vastly changed the American familial landscape. In the early 1980s, only 6% of births were to cohabiting mothers; by the early 2010s, that percentage had risen to 25% (Manning, Brown and Stykes 2015). The growth in cohabiting families is noteworthy because cohabitation is more transitory than marriage (Rackin and Gibson-Davis 2012), raising concerns about the well-being of children who experience such transitions (Manning 2015).

Given the fragile nature of cohabitation, and its growing pervasiveness, children may be experiencing more familial instability than they were even twenty years ago. Family instability (defined here as entrances into, and exits from, unions) may have risen in both breadth and depth. First, as more children experience cohabitation, and fewer experience marriage (Manning et al. 2015), the number of children who have experienced any instability may have risen. Second, among children who experience cohabitation, the likelihood of that cohabiting relationship dissolving may have increased, as adults with multiple premarital cohabitations has risen over time (Guzzo 2014; Lichter, Sassler and Turner 2014). The growth in both the incidence of, and the number of cohabiting relationships, suggests that parental relationship instability is a more common occurrence for children than it once was.

An increase in both the breadth and depth of cohabiting instability has several likely implications. First, instability has been negatively correlated with child well-being (Brown 2006; Lee and McLanahan 2015; Osborne and McLanahan 2007); therefore, relative to previous cohorts, an increased fraction of children may be at risk of adverse outcomes. Second, presupposing a rise in instability, children will be spending less time in two-parent households, the presumed optimal family-form for child development. Third and finally, assuming that increases in instability are disproportionately concentrated among socioeconomically
disadvantaged families (Manning 2015), then changes in instability could be yet another factor that contributes to the growing social and economic gap among households with children.

We add to a burgeoning literature on instability by providing the first estimates of how family instability, including entries and exits from both marriage and cohabitation, have changed over the past 25 years for young children. Data come from first births observed in the 1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2013 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). We measure exits and entries and total time spent in unions over the first five years of children’s lives, and then analyze trends in transitions and union length over our observation period to understand how children’s early life experiences may have changed as the family formation landscape has changed. Trends in instability and union-length are presented for all unions combined, and then separately for cohabiting and marital relationships. We concentrated on young children, in part to maximize the number of children for whom we observe complete data, but also because preschool-age children may be particularly vulnerable to changes in family composition, resources, and dynamics (Ryan and Claessens 2013; Ryan, Claessens and Markowitz 2015). Subgroup analyses also examined results separately by maternal education and race and ethnicity.

This study advances our knowledge of trends in family instability by addressing the following unanswered questions. First, has there been a rise, over the past 25 years, in family instability? Second, are changes in overall instability because of changes in the breadth and/or depth of cohabiting instability? Third, how have changes in instability affected the amount of time that a child spends in a two-parent union during the first five years of life? Fourth, are these changes in instability disproportionately concentrated among less advantaged groups? By
answering these questions, we further our understanding of the evolution of both family instability and an increasingly common family context for young children.

**Background**

The Importance of Family Instability

Concerns about family instability first arose during the 1970s and 80s as a consequence of the increasing American divorce rate (Amato 1986; Hetherington 1979; Jacobson 1978). At that time, family instability was primarily measured as a marital dissolution (or, occasionally, entrance into a higher-order marriage) (Amato 1987; Bane 1976). The spread of cohabitation, however, and the ease with which these unions can be formed and dissolved, has led to instability’s redefinition. Family instability now refers to entrances and exits from a two-parent union, regardless of whether the union is marital (Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007) (some scholars prefer the term “family transitions” to “family instability”, as the word “instability” seems misplaced in describing union formation; we prefer the term transitions but use both terms interchangeably). This redefinition was necessary because cohabitations are more transitory than marriages, and to exclude them from definitions of instability would vastly undercount the amount of relationship change children are experiencing (Raley and Wildsmith 2004).

Contemporary children are experiencing relatively high levels of parental relationship change. Between 25 to 40% of children experience at least one transition before their fifth birthday, with exposure to transitions rising marginally as they age (Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Lee and McLanahan 2015; Magnuson and Berger 2009; Meadows, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn 2008). Children born to unmarried mothers are at higher risk of experiencing instability;
within the first three years, 13% of children born to married mothers will experience one relationship transition, relative to 50% for children born to cohabiting mothers and 75% born to unpartnered mothers (Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, including children born to non-white women and those without any post-secondary training, experience instability at a higher rate than other groups (Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Osborne, Manning and Smock 2007). The majority of children who experience familial instability will experience only one family change; however, a non-trivial minority – between 10 and 20% – will likely experience multiple transitions (Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Lee and McLanahan 2015). Most instability can be accounted for by changes in cohabitation, rather than changes in marital, status (Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Raley and Wildsmith 2004).

The relative high rates of family transitions, and its concentration among disadvantaged groups, is of concern because of how family instability affects family functioning and child well-being (Amato 2005; Brown 2006; Wu and Thomson 2001). Research has found that family instability, in general, adversely affects child-parent routines, disrupts family dynamics, and increases parent-child conflict (Beck et al. 2010; Coleman, Ganong and Fine 2000; Cooper et al. 2009). Importantly, family instability is directly related to how much time a child spends within a two-parent union (Raley and Wildsmith 2004). Two-parent households, particularly if the parents are married, are considered the most beneficial family type for children, in part because two-parent households have more financial and emotional resources than one-parent households (Carlson and Corcoran 2001; Gennetian 2005; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Thus, any rise in the average time spent outside of a two-parent home is of concern because children have less exposure to the presumed-optimal family form.
Family instability, in general, does appear to be negatively correlated with child well-being, though the association exhibits considerable heterogeneity across population subgroups. Early work that included both marital and cohabiting instability found that family transitions were negatively correlated with material well-being, child behavior, academic achievement, and premarital births (Kurdek, Fine and Sinclair 1995; Ram and Hou 2003; Wu and Martinson 1993). More recent research has shown how child gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the nature of the transition (entrance or exit) can all modify effects (Cooper et al. 2011; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Magnuson and Berger 2009; Osborne, Berger and Magnuson 2012; Ryan et al. 2015; Wu and Thomson 2001). Family instability has also been found to be more negatively related to behavioral, rather than cognitive, outcomes (Ryan et al. 2015; Waldfogel, Craigie and Brooks-Gunn 2010 but for an exception, see Fomby and Cherlin 2007) but these associations may also be moderated by child race and ethnicity and the nature of the transition (Lee and McLanahan 2015). In sum, given considerable heterogeneity in outcomes, summarizing the correlates of family instability is difficult. Nevertheless, a reasonable hypothesis is that select subgroups of children – those born to less educated mothers, those that experience relationship dissolutions, or are non-white – are at heightened risk when their families experience change (Beck et al. 2010; Lee and McLanahan 2015; Meadows et al. 2008).

General consensus does exist, however, that child age and the number of transitions experienced are important moderator’s of family instability’s effects. Children who are preschool age, relative to those who are older, may be at increased risk when families change composition (Cavanagh and Huston 2008; Ryan and Claessens 2013; Ryan et al. 2015). The first five years of life are a critical developmental period for socioemotional and physical development (Elder 1998; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000) and young children may be particularly vulnerable to changes
in family composition, resources, and dynamics. Multiple transitions, not surprisingly, may present particular risks for children (Raley and Wildsmith 2004); it is unclear if this effect is linear (e.g., if four transitions have more negative associations than three), but research has found that children with two or more transitions are at increased risk of adverse outcomes relative to children who experience just one (Lee and McLanahan 2015; Osborne and McLanahan 2007; Wu and Thomson 2001).

In conclusion, scholarship on family instability suggests that many of the adverse associations found for marital instability hold for non-marital instability as well. Effects of family instability are no doubt heterogeneous, with some children being more at risk than others. Nevertheless, because family instability is important for children’s lives and outcomes, it is imperative to consider if trends in instability have shifted over a period of rapid family change.

Changes in Family Instability Over Time

Mechanically, the level of family instability could rise over time because of changes in a number of factors. The breadth of instability would rise if a higher proportion of parents are entering into unions, a higher proportion of parents are choosing a less stable (e.g., cohabitation) over a more stable (e.g., marriage) union, or unions are decreasing in length. The depth of instability (the likelihood of experiencing a transition, conditional on experiencing a union) could increase if parents are having more higher-order unions (an increase in higher-order unions would presumably also suggest a decrease in union length).

Evidence suggests that the primary drivers of a rise in instability are likely to be the choice of cohabitation over marriage and an increase in the number of higher-order cohabiting partners. Evidence does not suggest that increases in instability are likely to be driven by a
higher percentage of parents forming unions, as the percentage of parents who are unpartnered has remained relatively flat (Manning et al. 2015). Nor does evidence indicate that unions are decreasing in duration; if anything, marriages and cohabiting relationships are becoming more stable over time.

Rather, increases in instability are likely driven, in large part, by the increasing predominance of cohabitation over marriage as a childrearing context. Between 1980-1984 and 2009-2013, births to married mothers declined by 28% (from 79% to 57%), whereas births to cohabiting mothers increased by over 300% (from 6% to 25%) (Manning et al. 2015).

Non-marital unions are shorter and more unstable than marriages (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Manning, Smock and Majumdar 2004), as within three years of a birth, 40 to 50% of cohabiting parents will dissolve their relationship, relative to 10 to 15% of married parents (Osborne et al. 2007; Rackin and Gibson-Davis 2012). Almost by definition, then, an increase in the fraction of the children born to cohabiting parents, when coupled with a decrease in the fraction of children born to married parents, will likely lead to an increase in the number of parental union transitions children experience.

A secondary factor that may contribute to a rise in the depth of cohabitation transitions is an increase in the number of higher-order cohabitations that adults are having. Between 1995 and 2002, for example, the number of women who had multiple premarital cohabitations rose by 39% (Lichter, Turner and Sassler 2010). Demographic compositional changes appear to play only a small part in this so-called “serial cohabitation”; more likely, as cohabitation becomes more common, standards for forming a coresidential union have been lowered, leading to lower quality unions (Guzzo 2014). Whether relatively new parents have also seen an increase in serial
cohabitation is unknown, but if so, then serial cohabitation suggests increased relationship churning over time, leading to higher rates of instability among children whose parents cohabit.

It is important to note that the duration of cohabiting relationships among parents has increased over time (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Lamidi, Manning and Brown 2015), but this increased length does not necessarily mean fewer transitions from a child’s perspective. The duration of cohabiting relationships could be increasing without increasing the length of the parental union. Cohabitating relationships are lasting longer because fewer cohabiting parents are marrying, and are therefore spending a higher fraction of their romantic union as a cohabiting, rather than a married, couple (Guzzo 2014; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). The likelihood of the couple’s union dissolving, as well as the relative time point when the dissolution occurs, has not significantly increased over time (Manning et al. 2015). A child born to cohabiting parents may be therefore less likely to experience her parents marrying; but she is just as likely to experience her parents’ relationship dissolving and at the same relative time point; the difference is that she will experience a cohabitation rather than a marital dissolution.

From a young child’s perspective, changes from parental cohabitation to parental marriage may not seem like transitions (assuming the same people are involved). Therefore, the increased duration of cohabiting relationships does not translate (necessarily) into fewer transitions.

Why Cohabiting Unions are More Transitory

Cohabiting unions have been found to be more transitory than marriages for three primary reasons. First, cohabiting parents are negatively selected relative to married parents (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004; DeKlyen et al. 2006; Wu and Musick 2008). These factors have been inversely correlated both with union formation and union stability (Smock and
Greenland 2010). Second, cohabiting partners have lower quality relationships, which, in turn, leads to increased dissolution (though lower quality relationships could also be attributed to the demographic factors of those who cohabit) (Berger and McLanahan 2015; Brown 2010). Third, cohabitation’s so-called “incomplete institutionalism” may contribute to its transitory nature (Nock 1995). Cohabiting relationships, relative to married relationships, face fewer external social and legal norms governing individuals’ behavior. The ambiguity about how a cohabiting family should operate means that cohabiting relationships are not encouraged and reinforced in the same way that marriages are, and this lack of “stickiness” makes it possible for parents to enter into and exit from cohabiting relationships (relatively) easily.

Theoretically, then, a rise in the fraction of children experiencing cohabitation should lead, ipso facto, to a rise in the fraction of children experiencing instability. Cohabitation’s positive association with instability, however, may not be constant over time. One reason is that the pool of cohabiting parents has likely changed in demographic composition and relationship quality (Lamidi et al. 2015; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006). As cohabitation has become more prevalent, then the cohabiting pool likely contains some parents who would have married had they been forming unions a few decades ago. These cohabiting parents may be demographically and relationally similar to yesterday’s pool of married parents, with relationships that are more stable. Increasing heterogeneity among cohabiting couples could also render the comparison between married parents and cohabiting parents less distinct, thereby muting any differences in relationship stability (conversely, increasingly positive selection into marriage could widen the instability gap).

A second reason cohabitation’s association with instability may have weakened is that, over the past few decades, cohabiting households have lost much of their social ambiguity, in
part because the term “family” is no longer defined by, or solely applied to, married parents. Parents in cohabiting relationships are socially and legally expected to behave in much the same way as are married parents; their behavior and actions are determined by their status as parents, and not by their status as married individuals. Thus, while cohabitation may still be an incomplete institution, it has made considerable progress.

Whether the increase in cohabitation has led to an increase in family instability, then, largely depends on the demographic and cultural constancy of cohabitation. If today’s cohabiting parents resemble (yesterday’s) married parents, or if cohabitation has become indistinguishable from marriage, then levels of instability will not have increased. If, on the other hand, cohabitation, both in terms of its sample composition and societal acceptability, remains distinct from marriage, then cohabitation’s increasing prevalence should lead to higher levels of instability.

Data and Methods

Data

We used data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a nationally representative survey that collects information on marriage, cohabitation, fertility, and health. The NSFG’s sampling frame includes individuals age 15-44; response rates have been high (NSFG 2015).

Our data come from the 1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2013 waves of the NSFG (prior waves were not included because they did not collect complete cohabitation histories). We restrict the analysis to women because data on men was not collected until the 2002 wave. Data used here include retrospective histories of cohabitation, marriage, and fertility and allow us to
construct family transitions, number of unions, and length of time within unions from the time of first birth until the child’s fifth birthday.

Our sample includes women whose first birth occurred between the ages of 15-34 and within 5-10 years of the survey date. We restricted our sample to first births so that each mother was only observed in one time period (e.g., results are not biased by higher parity mothers). Moreover, the first birth is an important time in the family formation process. The child had to be born at least five years before the survey to ensure a consistent five-year period of observation (i.e., observations were not right censored). The age and date restrictions address truncation bias, and recall bias. If truncation bias is not addressed the sample will be skewed toward younger mothers at earlier time periods; for example, the only births observed in 1975 would be to mothers younger than 24, as a mother who was 25 in 1975 would be 45 in 1995 and thus would be too old to be included in the 1995 NSFG’s sampling frame. Recall bias is due to mother’s being unable to recall dates of cohabitation long after those cohabitations occurred; we limited the influence of recall bias by excluding unions formed more than 10 years prior to the survey.

These restrictions give a uniform age distribution of mother’s in all time periods with full cohabitation and marriage histories five years after their first birth. Recall bias may still have been a problem, but we have no reason to suspect that recall bias would shift over time. Furthermore, results were substantively similar when we restricted births to those within six, seven, eight, or nine years prior to the survey date.

Of the 15,823 women who had first births between 1985 and 2008, 92 were excluded because they had births before age 15 and 513 were excluded because they were older than 34. Of these women, 8,874 were excluded because they either had their first birth more than 10 years prior to the survey or less than five years prior to the survey. Of the remaining 6,344 mothers,
less than 1% were excluded because they had missing information on cohabitation or marital start or end dates. Our final analytical sample included 6,282 mothers’ who had their first birth between ages 15-34 within 5-10 years of the survey and whose cohabitation and marital histories were observed for five years after the birth of the child.

Measures

Four types of stability measures were constructed: number of transitions, number of unions, total years within unions, and average duration of unions. All four measures were calculated over the first 60 months of the child’s life. They were constructed using dates on marriages, cohabitations, and first births. For each of the measures, we calculated the measure for all union statuses combined (i.e., marriage, cohabitation, and unpartnered), and then separately for marriage and cohabitation. Below, we explain the measures in terms of unions, but used similar procedures for marriages and cohabitations.

Number of transitions measured exits and entries into unions. Number of unions referred to the total number of unions experienced. Years within unions was a count of the total number of months spent in unions divided by 12. Average duration was the number of years in unions divided by the total number of unions experienced. Children who did not experience unions were not included in the average duration measure, as an average cannot be calculated when the denominator is zero.

Note that because we were interested in the child’s early life experiences, variables were only measured from the time of the birth until the child’s fifth birthday. Therefore, data were neither right or left censored from the child’s perspective because all children were observed until their fifth birthday (no right censoring) and observation started when the child was born (no
left censoring). Thus, when we discuss duration of unions and transitions, we do not mean overall union duration or number of transitions over the mother’s life course, rather we mean duration of unions and number of transitions between the first child’s birth and five years later.

Also, because we were interested in instability from the child’s perspective, we only counted transitions and unions if they involved the introduction of a new partner. Thus, we measured union length from the date the union started (or date of birth if the union began prior to birth), even if the union transitioned at some point from cohabitation to marriage. We also considered marital unions to predominate over cohabitations, such that a union that transitioned from cohabitation to marriage would be classified as marital (as long as the cohabitation and marriage involved the same couple).

Some examples illustrate how these definitions operated. If a child was born to an unpartnered mother, and the mother subsequently cohabited and then married the same man, that child would experience one transition and one union. Both the transition and the union would be classified as marital. The duration of the union would be calculated from the month the cohabiting relationship began. If, on the other hand, the child was born to an unpartnered mother, the mother cohabited with one man, but then ended that cohabiting relationship and married another, the child would have experienced three transitions: two cohabiting (one entry and one exit) and one marital. The child would have experienced two unions (one marital, one cohabiting), and the duration of each of the unions would be calculated separately.

Other covariates included year of the child’s birth and mother’s educational attainment. Year of birth was divided into five cohorts: 1985-1989; 1990-1994; 1995-1999; 2000-2003; and 2004-2008. Cohorts were defined such that each had roughly the same number of years (we removed one year from the 2000-2003 cohort and included this year in the 2004-2008 cohort to
ensure that sample sizes were comparable across cohorts). The year 2008 was the last year that
could be used to still observe the first five years of the child’s life (e.g., children born in 2008
could be observed until 2013, the last year that data were available). Results were not sensitive to
other cohort groupings such as using 1985-1994, 1995-2003, and 2004-2008 or changing cohorts
by one year (e.g., 1985-1990).

Educational attainment referred to the mother’s education at the time of the survey and
was used to stratify analyses (detailed educational measures at the time of the birth were not
collected). Given prior work demonstrating that women with a 4-year college degree are distinct
from women with lower levels of education, we divided educational attainment into three
categories: (a) women with a high school degree or less (termed low educated), (b) women with
some college (moderately educated), and (c) women with at least a bachelor’s degree (highly
educated). The low educated group included women without a high school diploma as well as
those with a terminal high school degree because too few cases existed of women without a high
school diploma to produce reliable estimates.

Analytic Strategy

In the following, we first show weighted counts of the number of family transitions, years
within unions, and number of unions divided by child’s year of birth. We examined if these
measures have changed compared to the first time period (i.e., children born between 1985 and
1989) using adjusted Wald tests and weighted regression (we did not use t-tests because all
analyses were weighted). We examined if the overall number of transitions, years in unions, or
number of unions significantly changed over time and if the number of transitions, years in
unions, or number of unions due to cohabitation or marriage also significantly changed. To
consider instability among those children who experienced cohabitation or marriage, we calculated the same measures as just described, except that they were conditional on experiencing either marriage or cohabitation. All of our findings were weighted to be representative of US mothers 15-34 at the time of first birth.

To test if demographic shifts were driving our results, we also computed results predicting transitions and duration using regression models controlling for mother’s education (if results were not already stratified by educational status), mother’s race and ethnicity, mother’s age, if the mother was born to a teen mother, and the mother’s mother’s educational attainment. Results from these regressions were substantively similar to findings presented here, suggesting that demographic changes (at least as we could observe them) in the sample did not account for our results (results available upon request).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

We first present descriptive statistics, divided by the child’s year of birth (Table 1). Bolded numbers show significant differences from the 1985-1989 time period at the 5% level.

<<<Table 1 about here>>>

Trends in marriage and cohabitation were as expected: married births decreased, increasingly replaced by cohabiting births. In the earliest time period, 69% of births were to married mothers, whereas only 5% were to cohabiting mothers. By 2005-2009, marriage had declined by 15%, to 58% of births, and cohabitation was up by 320%. Over time, children were also less likely to experience a marital union, and more likely to experience a cohabiting one. By the last time period, one-third of first-born children experienced a maternal cohabitation
(including those whose mothers were cohabiting at birth) had their mother cohabit within five years, a near tripling of the experience of cohabitation unions in just 23 years.

Reflecting the secular trend of increasing education, mothers of children born in the later years were more likely to be moderately educated at the time of the survey than mothers of children born in the earliest time periods. Over time, mothers were less likely to be White and more likely to be Hispanic. The age at first birth is constant across time periods, reflecting sample restrictions to address truncation and recall bias.

Transitions for Children

The next set of results in Table 2 presents results on the number and type of transition (married or cohabiting), divided by year of child’s birth. Results are presented for three groups: the first group is all children (Panel A); the second group is children who experienced marriage (Panel B); the third group is children who experienced cohabitation (Panel C). Placement of children in Panel B and C, was assigned based on cumulative experience (i.e., if the mother ever married or cohabited at birth or at anytime until the child’s fifth birthday). Therefore, children can be in both Panel B and C if, for example, their mother cohabited with one man but then married another. Because of this the percentage of children who experienced at least one transition will not be the sum of percentage of children who experienced either one cohabiting or one marital transition because children can be in both categories.

Surprisingly, across all children, the total number of transitions rose only modestly, with the only increase coming in the last time period (Table 2, Panel A). The average number of transitions remained relatively constant at 0.50 for all birth cohorts except for the 2004-2008
cohort, when it marginally increased to 0.59 ($p < .10$). Additionally, across birth cohorts, about one-third of children experienced at least one transition, Results suggest relative constancy in the breadth of relationship instability.

Levels of instability remained relatively constant because increases in the prevalence of cohabiting transitions were offset by declines in the prevalence of marital transitions. From the first birth cohort to the last, the number of cohabiting transitions increased by 118%, from .19 to .42, whereas the number of marital transitions decreased by 42% (.30 to .17). A similar offsetting occurred for the proportion of children who ever experienced instability. In the 1985-1989 birth cohort, 32% of children experienced at least one transition, with 24% experiencing a marital transition and 12% experiencing a cohabiting transition. In the 2004-2008 birth cohort, a similar fraction of children experienced at least one transition (34%), but with a reversal in type: 15% experiencing marital, 24% experiencing cohabiting. Thus, as the prevalence of marital instability declined, the prevalence of cohabiting instability increased, resulting in very little net change in instability.

Evidence also suggests that, conditional on experiencing a union, both marriage and cohabitation became more stable over time (Panels B and C respectively). As expected, children who ever experienced a marriage, relative to those who ever experienced a cohabitation, had fewer average transitions. Moreover, cohabitation was much more unstable than marriage. Children exposed to cohabitation consistently experienced about four times as much instability as children exposed to marriage (e.g., 1.87/.45=4.20 for births in 1985-1989 and 1.43/.36=3.98 for births in 2004-2008). For both relationship types, however, the average number of transitions decreased over time. For children whose mother married, the total number of transitions declined by 19%; for children whose mother cohabited, the total number of transitions declined by 24%.
The increase in the stability of cohabitation was particularly intriguing. Children who experienced maternal cohabitation had a decrease in the total number of transitions: 1.87 for children born in 1985-1989, dropping by a quarter to 1.43 for those born in 2004-2008. Notably, this decline occurred not only because of fewer cohabitation transitions, but also because of fewer marital transitions. Of the .44 decline in total number of transitions, (e.g., 1.43-1.87), half was attributable to fewer marital transitions (.17-.39=.22) and half was due to declines in cohabitation transitions (1.26-1.48=.22).

The increase in stability of marriage and cohabitation was most apparent for children that were born into that union rather than those who later transitioned into it (results not shown but available upon request). Of children born into cohabiting unions, the proportion of children who experienced a dissolution declined by nearly a quarter from 74% to 56%. Likewise, children born into marital unions experienced a significant decline in the proportion that dissolved (17% in the 80s cohort, 12% in the late 2000s cohort). Children born to unpartnered mothers, who then either cohabited or married, did not see a significant increase in the proportion of those relationships that dissolved within five years, but did see an increase in the number of transitions suggesting that children born to unpartnered mothers were more likely to enter a union.

In sum, results suggest that children born in later cohorts were only marginally more likely to experience transitions than children born in earlier cohorts. The type of transition did change significantly; not unexpectedly, transitions into and out of cohabitation supplanted transitions into and out of marriage. Importantly, the marginal increase in transitions was driven by an increase in children experiencing cohabitation (as evidenced by Panel A) but not by increased instability for those who experienced cohabitation (see Panel C). Notably, cohabitation, though remaining less stable than marriage, has become more stable over time,
primarily for children born into cohabiting unions. Thus, over time, while the breadth of cohabiting transitions has increased (with more children experiencing cohabiting transitions), the depth of cohabiting transitions has decreased (as fewer children exposed to cohabitation experience instability).

Time Spent in Unions

We also expected that children should be spending less time in unions because of increases in less stable unions (cohabitations) and decreases in more stable unions (marriages). Contrary to our expectation, Panel A in Table 3 shows children are spending slightly more time in unions. Children born between 1985 and 1989 spent 3.68 years in unions; this average increased steadily over time, peaking at 3.98 years for children born between 2000-2003, and then declined to 3.90 years for children born during the last cohort. Overall, though, time spent in unions increased by only 6%.

Paralleling the instability results presented above, the increase in time spent in unions was driven mostly by time spent in cohabiting unions rather than time spent in marriage. Changes in time spent in cohabiting unions was dramatic: over our observed time period, the average time spent in a cohabiting union increased by 261%, with the average child spending nearly one of the first five years of life in a cohabiting union. In contrast, the average time spent in a marital union decreased by only 14%. In addition, though the total number of unions experienced rose between the earliest birth cohort and the last, those unions were increasingly less likely to be marriages and increasingly more likely to be cohabitations. Overall, then,
children were spending more time within unions, and more time within the context of a cohabiting union rather than a marital one.

Findings also indicated that, because of these compositional changes in the types of unions experienced, the gap between years spent in marriage and years spent in cohabitation narrowed considerably. Children born between 1985 and 1989 spent nearly 13 times (i.e., 3.41/.27) more years within marriages than cohabitations, but children born between 2004 and 2008 only spent 3 times (i.e., 2.93/.97) more years in marriages. As indicated by the large change in the denominator, ratios make clear, the gap has narrowed more because of an increase in the years spent in cohabitations rather than a major decline in years spent in marriage.

Time spent in unions could be increasing because mothers transition into and out of unions more quickly (fewer months outside unions with more unions) or because conditional on experiencing a union, that union lasts longer. As our results have thus far suggested, and as presented in Panel B and C, time spent in unions has increased because unions are lasting longer. Conditional on experiencing a marriage (Panel B) or a cohabitation (Panel C), average spell length has increased, whereas the average number of unions either stayed the same or declined. For children whose mother married, the average time in each marriage increased, from the earliest birth cohort to the last, from 4.18 years to 4.50 years, while the average number of unions stayed the same. For children whose mothers cohabited, the increase was more dramatic, from 1.90 years to 2.75 years, and the number of unions declined by 11%. The decline in total number of unions for children whose mothers cohabited occurred because of a decline in the number of marital unions; the number of cohabiting unions did not change over our observation period.
One notable aspect of increased stability is that, conditional on their mothers cohabiting, children now spend a majority of the first five years of their lives in cohabitation. For children whose mothers married, marriage has been, and continues to be, a “majority experience”; less than one year out of the first five was spent outside a marriage (Panel B). For children whose mothers cohabited, however, it is only in the past 20 years, that children’s time spent in cohabiting unions outweighed the time spent out of one (Panel C).

Interestingly, when examining children by relationship status at birth, children whose parents were married or cohabiting at birth saw the duration of their parents unions become more similar (results available upon request). For children born into either a cohabitation or marriage, the duration of that two-parent relationship increased, with a relatively larger increase for children born into cohabiting unions. The duration of a marital union increased significantly but only by a small amount, (4.45 to 4.62 years). Cohabitations, however, increased from 2.47 years to 3.15 years. Because of the relatively larger increase in the duration of cohabitation, the gap in duration between marital and cohabiting unions shrank from 1.97 years in the first cohort to only 1.46 years for the last birth cohort. Importantly, this gap narrowed more because of an increase in the durability of two-parent cohabitations, rather than a large change in the durability of two-parent marriages.

Taken together, contrary to our expectation of increasing instability for children, we find relative stability. Neither the breadth nor depth of instability appears to have substantially changed. Transitions in and out of unions have only marginally increased, while cohabitations and marriages have become more stable over time. The swapping of marriage for cohabitation perhaps had led to slightly more transitions, but the increasing stability of cohabitation led to increased time within unions. Notably, though, the changing union context at first birth and
increases in stability within these unions generates only marginal change in the overall number of transitions and an increase in the time spent in unions. The replacement of marriage by cohabitations that were increasingly like marriage in duration lends to stability over time in family transitions.

Transitions for Children by Subgroup

We next examine transitions by socioeconomic status, as proxied by maternal education. We performed transition and union length analysis, identical to the above, but divided children into three maternal educational groups (low, moderate, and high). Given the findings thus far of increased stability in union contexts, we were particularly interested if these findings would hold for the less well educated, a group that has tended to have higher levels of instability and unions of shorter durations than women with more education. Below, we discuss trends by education group, but given the number of analyses involved (e.g., the six panels of Tables 2 and 3 times three education groups), we do not present these findings (results are available upon request). Analyses for children born to highly educated mothers who cohabited were not possible because of small sample sizes (n = 78 across all birth cohorts out of 1,213 highly educated mothers).

As expected, children born to low and moderately educated mothers were more likely to experience any transition, and experienced more transitions, than children born to highly educated mothers. Children born in 2004 to 2008 to low educated mothers experienced .79 transitions and 41% ever experienced a transition, as compared to .18 and 14% for children born in the same time period to highly educated mothers. Also consistent with expectations, children born to mothers with less education, compared to children born to highly educated mothers,
spent less time within unions, with a higher proportion of time spent in cohabiting, rather than, marital unions. This differential was present in all time periods.

Overall, though levels of instability and union duration differed across education groups, no group experienced increased instability, suggesting that stability found for the full sample held across education groups. Within each education group, relative levels of instability did not change significantly when comparing the earliest birth cohort to the last. For the majority of indicators we examined—total number of transitions, the percent of children experiencing at least one transition, the total years in union, and the total number of unions—very few showed significantly increased instability for any educational group across the observed birth cohorts. The only exceptions were that: children in the 2004-2008 cohort born to moderately educated mothers experienced more unions compared to the 1985-1989 cohort, but only marginally more transitions; and children born in 1995-1999 to low educated mothers experienced marginally more transitions than children in the first cohort. As with the full sample, the null increase in the overall levels of instability and duration occurred for children born to low and moderately educated mothers because of the offsetting effects of marriage and cohabitation. Children born to these mothers, over time, experienced fewer marital transitions and fewer years within marriage, and more cohabiting transitions and increased years within cohabitation.

Notably, for children born to low and moderately educated mothers, the average duration of cohabitation, conditional on experiencing cohabitation, increased over time: for children born to low educated mothers, average duration increased from 1.94 years in the earliest cohort to 3.05 years in the last. Moreover, for children born into cohabiting unions and born to low educated mothers, average duration of their parental cohabitation increased from 2.55 years in the earliest cohort to 3.40 years in the last. Conditional on parental cohabitation, then, even
children born to the mothers most at risk of instability saw a marked increase in the length of that parental relationship.

We also examined if these trends were present across racial and ethnic groups (available upon request). These results, however, did not suggest a high degree of racial and ethnic variation in results, as the pattern of results for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics was substantively similar. All groups have experienced increases in transitions due to cohabitation and decreases in marital transitions. Over time, within each racial and ethnic group, the proportion of children experiencing at least one transition remained relatively constant (but increased in the last period for Blacks) and years spent within any union increased.

Discussion

Our study was motivated to investigate over-time changes in instability out of concern that increased exposure to instability may be consequential for society. If instability increased, then younger cohorts may have lower well-being in childhood and may be less likely to successfully transition to adult roles.

Contrary to our expectations, however, we did not find an increase in either the breadth or depth of instability. Our results did suggest that family formation shifted from more stable marriage to less stable cohabitation. Nevertheless, results indicated that, overall, children experienced relative stability in the number and duration of unions. Children only had marginal increases in the number of transitions they experienced and the proportion of children that experienced one or more transitions was stable. Moreover, the average number of unions remained relatively constant at about one, and the proportion of children who experienced only one union remained flat at 80%. It seems that while cohabitation was less stable than marriage,
the swapping of marriage for increasingly more stable cohabitation translated into stability for children. Notably, this stability in instability was present across all education groups.

It is likely that this stability was because of substantial changes in cohabitation over time that made it functionally more like marriage. In the first time period, less than a tenth of children who experienced cohabitation were born and raised for the first five years of their lives with both parents, but by the last time period this increased to over a quarter. While this was still much less than marriage (70% of children exposed to marriage in the first time period and 78% in the last time period experienced one stable marriage), cohabitation increasingly functioned more like marriage—as a stable two-parent union to bear and raise children.

One explanation for the increased stability of cohabitation and marriage is a demographic shift in who cohabits or marries. Yet, we found little evidence that a demographic shift is responsible for these changes; we replicated our results controlling on factors that may have been responsible for a demographic shift (e.g., race, education, age at birth, mother’s education, if the grandmother had a teen birth, and grandmother’s education) and found similar results. While, we could not control on factors that are likely important for making a decision to marry, cohabit, or dissolve a relationship (e.g., relationship quality), there is little evidence that the factors we measured accounted for the patterns we observed.

Findings regarding the increasing stability of cohabitation likely speak to the continuing acceptance of cohabitation as a childrearing context. If society and parents increasingly view cohabitation as an acceptable alternative to marriage, then some parents who may have married in the past would cohabit, making cohabitation more like marriage in terms of stability and duration. Our results are consistent with the evolving role of cohabitation as a socially acceptable alternative to marriage as we found that cohabitation has become increasingly more like
marriage with more children being born into and raised within cohabitation and that the duration of cohabitation has become more similar to marriage.

The increase in the stability of cohabitation, however, mainly applies to children born to low socioeconomic status mothers. Children born into a cohabitation to a mother with low levels of education experienced more time within that two-parent cohabitation, yet very few children born to high socioeconomic status mothers ever experienced cohabitation ($n=78$) and even fewer were born into a cohabitation ($n=39$). While these changes may be beneficial for children born to low educated mothers, they do not resolve the persistent inequality in the experiences of marriage and cohabitation for children born to high versus low socioeconomic status mothers.

Some limitations should be noted. First, we could not examine a longer time frame because the NSFG’s 1988 wave did not include complete cohabitation histories. This wave did not allow for examination of higher order cohabitations that were not on-going at the survey and cohabitations that did not end in marriage.

Second, cohabitations may not have been perfectly dated. Research has suggested that it may be difficult for respondents to know exactly when cohabitations began as they may not have a clear starting date (Manning and Smock 2005). We attempted to address recall bias by only examining unions within 10 years of the survey, but could not address an unclear starting point. Recall bias may be less of a problem for transition results, as women presumably remember if they cohabited, but may be more of a problem for union duration. Any error from recall bias should be constant over time and therefore not confound estimates.

Overall, though, our results suggest that our concerns about instability were exaggerated. Children only experienced marginally more family transitions and the proportion of children exposed to at least one family transition was stable. Children experienced more time within
unions and the proportion born into two-parent families was stable as was the proportion with both parents until their fifth birthday. Marriages and cohabitations lasted longer and the swapping of marriage for cohabitation did not lead to substantially more family instability because of the increased stability of cohabitation. If family instability and less time within two-parent unions are associated with poor outcomes for children, then even given the rapid rise in cohabitation, our results suggest that the kids may, indeed, be all right.
References


### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Sample, By Year of Child's Birth

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within 5 years, percent:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabited</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Race and ethnicity**

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Age at 1st birth**

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at 1st birth</td>
<td>24.05</td>
<td>24.06</td>
<td>24.38</td>
<td>24.22</td>
<td>24.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.70)</td>
<td>(4.92)</td>
<td>(5.04)</td>
<td>(4.77)</td>
<td>(4.82)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample size**

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>1,580</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>1,344</td>
<td>1,527</td>
<td>889</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Measured at time of survey. Low: Mother has a high school diploma or less; Moderate: Mother has some post-secondary training; High: Mother has a Bachelor's degree or more.

Note: Bolded estimates shows significant differences (p<.05) and italicized shows marginal differences (p<.10) from the 1985-1989 period.

Standard deviation for age is in parentheses. Estimates are weighted.
Table 2. Number and Type of Transitions within 5 Years after Birth, By Year of Birth

Panel A: All Children \((n=6,282)\)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of transitions</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>118%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with 1 or more transition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more marital</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more cohabiting</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>105%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Panel B: Children who experienced marriage \((n=4,182)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of transitions</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with 1 or more transition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more marital</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>-25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more cohabiting</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2 (con't)

**Panel C: Children who experienced cohabitation \((n=1,564)\)**

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of transitions</strong></td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>-24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>-15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Percent with 1 or more transition**

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 or more marital transition</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>-61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more cohabiting transition</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Bolded estimates indicates significant differences \((p<.05)\) and italicized shows marginal differences \((p<.10)\) from the 1985-1989 period. Estimates were weighted.
Table 3. Years in Unions within 5 Years after Birth, By Year of Birth

Panel A: All Children (n=6,282)

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total years in union</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total marital</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cohabiting</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>261%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Unions</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number marital</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number cohabiting</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>159%</td>
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</table>

Panel B: Children Who Experienced Marriage (n=4,168)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total years in union</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Unions</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</table>

Average time spent in:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (con't)

Panel C: Children Who Experienced Cohabitation ($n=1,564$)

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total years in union</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td><strong>3.04</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.09</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.35</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.15</strong></td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td><strong>0.31</strong></td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td><strong>2.59</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.59</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.04</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.96</strong></td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Unions</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>-11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td><strong>0.15</strong></td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time spent in:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitation</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td><strong>2.38</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.83</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.75</strong></td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Bolded estimates indicates significant differences ($p<.05$) and italicized shows marginal differences ($p<.10$) from the 1985-1989 period. Estimates were weighted.