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**With This Key I Thee Wed?  
Change and Stability in the Outcomes of  
First Premarital Cohabitations and Risk Factors across Cohorts in Canada**

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Laura Wright<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

Cohabitation has become increasingly acceptable in Canada, especially as a first union. Yet little research has examined the outcomes of first cohabiting unions, the correlates of these outcomes, or how the determinants of these outcomes have changed over time. Using the 2011 Canadian GSS and discrete-time competing risks models, I examine cohabiting unions formed between 1947 and 2010 to explore differences over time in the risks of separation and risks of marriage. I also examine how five sociodemographic factors are associated with the risks of cohabitation outcome, and whether these factors have become more or less important across cohabitation cohorts. Results show that the stability of first cohabiting unions has not changed over time, but group differences in the propensity to transition to marriage have increased. Education, region of birth, and age at union formation have become more important determinants of marriage for unions formed since 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Alberta, 6-9 HM Tory Building  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T6G 2H4  
Email: ldwright@ualberta.ca

## Introduction

The institution of the family has undergone significant changes in Canada and other Western countries over the last century. The type of first unions that Canadians form and the age at which they form them are two ways in which family behaviours have changed. Marriage has been delayed and increasingly forgone, and nonmarital cohabitation has increasingly become an accepted and normalized part of the transition to partnership (Bumpass, 1990; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Nonmarital cohabitation has become the most common way to form a first union in Canada (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004) and women's median age at first marriage has increased from around 21 in 1961 to 27 in 2002 (Kerr, Moyser & Beaujot, 2006) but research suggests that cohabiting union formation has offset increases in median age at first partnering (Manning, Brown & Payne, 2014). Indeed, in another paper I show that Canadians' median age at first union has only increased by approximately two years across a 60-year period when both marriage and cohabitation are considered as possible types of first unions. Recent cohorts of Canadians continue to form committed coresidential partnerships in their early- to mid-20s despite delaying marriage until their late-20s and early-30s.

Despite the increased prevalence of cohabitation, as either a first or subsequent union, these unions have been found to be quite unstable and short-lived compared to marriages (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Brown, 2000; Kerr et al., 2006; Smock, 2000). American studies have shown that over time, fewer cohabiting unions are transitioning to marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and more Americans are forming multiple, successive cohabiting unions (Lichter, Turner & Sassler, 2010). A body of research has developed dedicated to investigating the factors that affect the likelihood that a cohabiting union dissolves, or conversely that it transitions into legal marriage. Some of these factors include age at start of the union (e.g. Guzzo, 2014; Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995), education of the partners (e.g. Guzzo, 2014; Kulik, 2005; Steele, Kallis & Joshi, 2006), and the structure of the partners' family of origin as a child (Duvander, 1999; Kulik, 2005; Lichter, Qian & Mellott, 2006). This body of work provides insights into why some cohabiting unions are more stable than others, but as others have noted, cohabitation is somewhat of a moving target (Coontz, 2000; Smock, 2000) because its meaning and characteristics have changed dramatically over just a few

decades (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). As Raley (2000) notes, “what we know about intimate sexual unions can quickly become outdated” (pg. 36).

Cohabitation has played a very different role in the partnership process at different times and in different places. Kiernan (2001) and Heuveline and Timberlake (2004) have developed typologies of the role and meaning that cohabitation has in the partnership process that range from cohabitation being used as a marginal form of partnership, to cohabitation as a stage or step in the marriage process, to cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Applying these formulations, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk (2004) argued that over time, cohabitation has developed from being a marginal phenomenon in all parts of Canada to being an alternative to marriage in the province of Quebec, and a prelude to marriage in other parts of Canada. As the role of cohabitation in the partnership trajectories of Canadians has changed, the outcomes of these unions, whether they dissolve or transition into legal marriage, have also changed (e.g. Guzzo 2014; Kulik, 2005; Lichter & Qian, 2008).

Cohabiting unions formed in different historical time periods have had different risks of both marriage and separation. For instance, Bumpass and Lu (1999) found that between 1987 and 1995, a larger proportion of cohabiting couples were dissolving their unions and fewer were entering into marriage compared to cohabiting unions formed before this period. More recent research in the U.S. has found that this trend towards decreased risks of transitioning to marriage has continued. In 1995, 58 percent of couples in first cohabiting union transitioned into marriage by their third anniversary (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002) and in 2002 this decreased to 51 percent (Goodwin, Mosher & Chandra, 2010). The most recent estimates are provided by Copen, Daniels and Mosher (2013), who draw on the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth to show that only 40 percent of first premarital cohabiting unions in the U.S. transition into marriage.

Past research has established that the likelihood that a cohabiting union end through separation or that it transitions to legal marriage has changed over time. Past research has also demonstrated that there is variation in cohabitation outcomes by some key sociodemographic factors such as education, age at union start, province of birth, and family structure during childhood. However, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no past studies examining changes in the importance of risk factors on the outcomes

of cohabiting unions over time. As the outcomes of premarital cohabiting unions have changed over time, assuming that the determinants of these outcomes have remained constant is to assume that changes in the role and meaning of cohabitation have occurred uniformly for all cohabiting unions. This is unlikely to be true for many of the determinants of cohabiting union outcomes. For instance, it has been well established that partnering behaviour in Quebec has diverged from partnering behaviour in the rest of Canada since the 1960s; the Quebecois are particularly and increasingly likely to use cohabiting unions as a long-term alternative to legal marriage (e.g. Kerr et al., 2006; Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). It is likely, therefore, that region has become a more important determinant of the outcomes of cohabiting unions over time as the role of cohabitation has changed more dramatically for Canadians born in Quebec than Canadians from other regions.

It is important to understand how first premarital cohabitations are ending for two reasons. First, examining the outcomes of first cohabiting unions among the never-married and the factors associated with the risks of these outcomes is one way to explore the role and meaning of cohabitation in the partnership process. If most first cohabiting unions transition into marriage it would mean that most Canadians are using cohabitation as a step in the marriage process. However, if most first premarital cohabiting unions end through separation, these unions would be better described as an alternative to being single or as a stage in the dating process. Finally, if many cohabiting unions persist without either transitioning to marriage or dissolving, it would be an indication that Canadians are using long-term, committed cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Examining how the outcomes of first cohabiting unions have changed across cohabitation cohorts also offers a way to explore the ways that the meaning and role of cohabitation has changed over time.

Second, if cohabiting unions are becoming more prone to dissolution over time, then it is an indication that early partnership trajectories are becoming more turbulent as young adults can expect to dissolve their first union and form one or more successive unions resulting in an increased number of unions formed in early adulthood. There is also ample evidence that experiences of premarital cohabitation are associated with greater marital instability (Amato, 2010; Lillard, Brien & Waite, 1995), although there is

some contradictory evidence, especially among more recent cohorts (e.g. Manning & Cohen, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009; Teachman, 2003). If first premarital cohabiting unions are becoming more prone to dissolution, then this may have implications for the risks of later divorce among previous cohabiters. More turbulent union trajectories in early adulthood may also result in worse outcomes for any children that are born into these unions since research has shown that children's experience of union transitions is detrimental (e.g. Amato, 2003; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007).

In this paper I examine how the risks that a first premarital cohabiting union ends in separation or transitions into legal marriage have changed over time in Canada, from first premarital cohabiting unions formed in 1947 to the most recent cohabiting unions formed between 2000 and 2010. I also examine five sociodemographic variables that may be associated with cohabitation outcomes, and how the associations between these variables and cohabitation outcomes have changed across cohabitation cohorts.

## **Background**

### *Review of Past Research on Risks Factors*

A large body of research has been devoted to examining the factors that are associated with entry to marriage (e.g. Manning et al., 2014; Manning, 1993; Oppenheimer et al., 1997; Turcotte & Goldschider, 1998), entry into cohabitation (e.g. Brown, 2000; Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004;), and marital dissolution (e.g. Jalovaara 2003; Lillard & Waite, 1993; Teachman 2002). There is also a growing literature on the factors associated with outcomes of cohabiting unions including separation and the transition to marriage in the U.S. (Brown, 2000; Guzzo, 2014; Lichter, Qian & Mellott, 2006; Manning & Smock, 2002; Smock, Manning & Porter, 2005), in Europe (Duvander, 1999; Kulik, 2005; Maenpaa & Jalovaara, 2013) and in Canada (Wu, 1995; Wu & Pollard, 2000; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). In this section I review past research on the five correlates of union dissolution and the transition to legal marriage that I consider in this paper. Of course, the covariates reviewed here and examined in this paper are not the only determinants of the outcomes of first premarital cohabiting unions. Other important correlates that are beyond the scope of this paper include the presence and birth of

children (e.g. Guzzo & Hayford, 2010; Guzzo, 2014a; Manning, 2004; Wu & Musick, 2008; Wu, 1995), employment and economic circumstances (e.g. Bohnert, 2011; Duvander, 1999; Lichter et al., 2006; Manning & Smock, 2002; Smock et al., 2005; Wu & Pollard, 2000), and relationship quality and marital intentions (e.g. Brown, 2000; Guzzo, 2009; Guzzo, 2014).

Age at union start has been repeatedly shown to be associated with marital and cohabiting union dissolution (e.g. Amato, 1996; Guzzo, 2014; Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). Individuals who form unions at younger ages are more likely to separate from their partners. Researchers have argued that this is because younger people have engaged in a shorter partner search before forming a union, which may result in a relatively poor match (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Some also argue that those who partnered at younger ages may also be more prone to separation because they have a larger pool of potential new partners after a separation than their older peers (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Age at union start may have a stronger association with dissolution for cohabiting unions than for legal marriages if younger people are using cohabitation as a less formal union, or as an alternative to being single. Guzzo (2014) argues that people in their early 20s are typically not considering marriage, but may choose to live with their romantic partners for economic reasons or for convenience. Older individuals on the other hand, are more likely to use cohabitation as a trial period before transitioning to legal marriage.

Educational attainment has also been shown to be negatively associated with risks of divorce in American, Nordic, and British studies (Amato, 2010; Teachman, 2002; Lyngstad, 2004). This is argued to be because higher education is associated with improved social and cognitive skills, and more economic resources that increase the stability of unions (Amato, 1996). Some studies have shown that the association between education and union dissolution has become more negative over time (Harkonen & Dronkers, 2006; Martin & Bumpass, 1989) and others have shown that the strength of the relationship has remained stable over time (Teachman, 2002). Educational attainment is also associated with the likelihood of marriage, although the relationship has reversed over time. For Canadian men born before 1951, higher education was associated with a higher likelihood of marriage, and for women in this cohort, higher education was

associated with a lower likelihood of marriage. The relationships reversed in subsequent cohorts and largely lost significance. For men born between 1961 and 1970, higher education was associated with decreased chances of marriage, and for women, higher education was associated with a higher likelihood of marriage (Turcotte & Goldschider, 1998). Guzzo's (2014) study of the outcomes of cohabiting unions in the U.S. also shows that individuals with less education have higher risks of separating from their partner and the more highly educated have higher risks of transitioning into legal marriage.

Parental divorce and experiences and family instability during childhood are also associated with increased risks of marital dissolution (Amato, 1995; Bumpass, Martin & Sweet, 1991; Korbin & Waite, 1984). This association appears to be due to differences in the socialization process experienced by individuals who experienced parental divorce or who lived with single parents (Amato, 1996; Teachman, 2003). Parental divorce is also argued to influence the risks of offspring divorce through its detrimental impact on their socioeconomic outcomes, their attitudes towards divorce and the permanency of marriage, and the development of problematic interpersonal behaviour (Levinger, 1976). Individuals who experienced parental divorce are more likely to develop problematic interpersonal traits such as a lack of trust, difficulty communicating, or jealousy due to a lack of exposure to a happy, successful, and healthy parental marital relationship (Amato, 1996). Adult children of divorce are also more likely to cohabit before marriage and tend to marry at younger ages, in some cases because of conflicts with stepparents or because of economic disadvantage (Amato, 1996). Experiences of family instability growing up may also lead individuals to use cohabitation as an alternative to marriage and decrease the risk that they enter into legal marriage with their cohabiting partner if they are disillusioned with the institution of marriage and hesitant because of the possibility of divorce.

The partnership behaviours in Quebec and in the rest of Canada differ greatly. Marriage rates and prevalence are lower, and risks of divorce are higher in Quebec than in the rest of Canada (Le Bourdias & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Pollard & Wu, 1988). Cohabitation as a first union and overall is also more prevalent and is more likely to be used as an alternative to marriage in Quebec compared to the rest of Canada (Hamplova, Le Bourdias & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2014; Kerr et al., 2006; Le Bourdais & Lapierre

Adamcyk, 2004). Past research has shown that cohabiting unions in Quebec are less likely to transition into legal marriage than cohabiting unions in other Canadian provinces and that they typically last longer than similar unions in other parts of Canada (Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 1996; Turcotte & Belanger, 1997; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Most importantly, past research finds that the differences in the partnering behaviours described above between Quebec and the rest of Canada have increased over time (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 1996).

Most of the research on the outcomes of cohabiting unions reviewed in this section has focused on cohabiting unions in general, not first premarital cohabiting unions specifically. One notable exception is the study conducted by Wu and Balakrishnan (1995), which examined the competing risks of dissolution and transition to marriage among first premarital cohabiting unions in Canada. They find that women are significantly more likely than men to marry their first premarital cohabiting partner, and that men are significantly more likely than women to dissolve their first premarital cohabiting union. They also find that beginning a cohabiting union at older ages is associated with decreased risks of both separating from the cohabiting partner, and transitioning to marriage (Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Cohabiting unions in Quebec were found to be more stable in this study, both in terms of having a lower likelihood of dissolution, but also a lower likelihood of transitioning into legal marriage (Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). This study included first premarital cohabitations formed before 1990 and found that the year the cohabitation formation was a strong predictor of the outcome of the union. More recent cohabiting unions had higher risks of separation but differences in the likelihood of legal marriage over cohabitation cohorts were less pronounced.

### *Changing Importance of Factors over Time*

Studies such as the one conducted by Wu and Balakrishnan (1995) on the outcomes of first premarital cohabiting unions provide insights into the factors that are associated with these cohabitation outcomes, however, they do not address whether these factors are gaining or losing importance as predictors of cohabitation outcomes over time. To do this, it is not enough to control for historical time because this assumes that historical



changes in the risks of marriage and separation affect all cohabitations equally and that group differences in cohabitation outcomes have remained constant over time. This assumes that the meaning of cohabitation and its place in the union formation process has changed uniformly across historical time among men and women, among different educational groups, in Quebec and the rest of Canada, among people from different family backgrounds, and among those who start their unions at different ages.

This assumption is tenuous for a variety of reasons. First, consider how differences in cohabitation outcomes by age at union formation might be expected to vary across historical time. If for instance, younger Canadians are becoming more likely to use cohabitation as an alternative to being single rather than a trial marriage compared to younger Canadians in the past, then we could expect that age differences in the risks of separation and marriage from these union would become greater over time. Alternatively, if Canadians who form their first premarital cohabiting union at relatively older ages are becoming less likely to use these unions as a step in the marriage process and are more likely to use these unions as a way to live in a long-term marriage alternative than they were in the past, then we could expect that age differences in the outcomes of these unions would decrease.

Second, educational differences in the risks of different first premarital cohabitation outcomes also likely differ over time, as educational attainment has become an increasingly important determinant of many family behaviours (McLanahan, 2004). Employment stability and economic security are commonly perceived as prerequisites for marriage (Sassler, 2004), and a completed postsecondary education is increasingly required to achieve financial independence (Boothby and Drewes, 2006). The less educated may be less likely to transition into marriage from their first cohabiting union in more recent cohorts than in past cohorts due to the increased financial barriers to marriage.

Is it possible that experiences of parental divorce and living in a non-nuclear family may be becoming less important determinants of adult children's partnering behaviours? If parental divorce is becoming less economically detrimental for children's economic circumstances then we may expect differences in first premarital cohabitation outcomes by the structure of the family of origin to decrease over time. However, this is not likely

to be the case. Teachman (2003) finds a very consistent relationship between parental divorce and adult children's risk of divorce over historical time. Moreover, since most of the explanations for this intergenerational transmission of union dissolution focus on social-psychological factors, including the transmission of unhealthy relationship behaviours (Levinger, 1976), it is less likely that this the relationship between family structure and cohabitation outcomes would change over time.

Cohabitation trends have taken a very different trajectory in Quebec compared to the rest of Canada (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Laplante, 2014), so differences in the risks of first premarital cohabitation outcomes between Quebec and the rest of Canada are very likely to depend on the historical period in which the union was formed. As marriage rates and prevalence have continued to decline in Quebec faster than in other parts of Canada, the risks of transitioning to marriage from a first cohabiting union have also likely decreased more rapidly.

Wu and Balakrishnan (1995) found that women are significantly more likely than men to marry their first premarital cohabiting partner, and that men are significantly more likely than women to dissolve their first premarital cohabiting union but it is possible that these gender differences have changed over time? It is possible that in past cohorts of Canadians, when cohabitation was less prevalent, women were less likely to enter into these unions unless they felt that there was a real possibility that the union would transition to marriage. This could be because there was more societal and parental pressure on women to conform to the ideals of the traditional family than there was on men in the post WWII era. As the normative expectations of women have become more like the expectations of men it is possible that gender differences in cohabiting union outcomes have diminished.

## **Contributions**

This paper makes two contributions to the literature on the partnering behaviours of Canadians in young adulthood. First, by examining the outcomes of the most recent first premarital unions, those formed since 2000, I contribute to our understanding of how the role and meaning of cohabitation has changed in Canada. I examine the risks of separation and the risks of transitioning to legal marriage for unions formed between

1947 and 2010 to determine if these first premarital unions have become more or less stable over time and whether they are more likely to serve as an alternative to marriage for more recent unions.

The second contribution of this paper is to add to our understanding of how the role and meaning of cohabitation in the partnership process has changed over time for different social groups, including different educational groups, people born in different regions of Canada, men and women, younger and older first-time cohabiters, and people from different family structures. I do this by analyzing whether the correlates of union dissolution and the transition to legal marriage depend on the when in historical time the cohabiting union was formed. This approach allows me to determine if cohabitation the outcomes of these unions are changing across time universally for all Canadians or whether some groups are becoming more or less likely to transition to marriage or dissolve their first cohabiting union over time.

## **Research Questions**

In this paper I address three research questions:

1. How have the risks of different transitions out of first cohabiting unions changed across historical time?
2. What factors are associated with the likelihood that a first cohabiting union ends in separation? What factors are associated with the likelihood that a first cohabiting union ends in marriage?
3. Are these risks factors stable across cohabitation cohorts or have they become more or less important determinants of first cohabitation outcome over time?

## **Data**

I use the 2011 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine the risks of first cohabiting unions ending in marriage or separation and changes in the importance of these factors over time. The Canadian GSS is a cross-sectional survey conducted by Statistics Canada every year since 1985 with a specific thematic focus each year. The data for this study come from Cycle 25, the fifth and most recent GSS to focus on families. The GSS uses a stratified sample and is representative of non-institutionalized people aged 15 or older living in the 10 Canadian provinces. It was conducted by computer assisted telephone

interviews between February and November 2011 and has a response rate of 65.8 percent. The 2011 GSS is ideal for this study because it includes detailed retrospective union histories for Canadians born between 1911 and 1996, which allows for an examination of the outcomes of first cohabiting unions over many cohabitation cohorts. The survey also provides information on many of the covariates found to be associated with union transitions out of cohabitation including year at start of the union, sex, age at union start, region of birth, educational attainment, structure of the family of origin, and religion. These data are the most recent available on Canadian families, allowing for examination of very recent cohabiting unions that have yet to be studied.

### **Sample**

I restrict my analyses to respondents whose first union was a non-marital cohabiting union resulting in a subsample of 6,112 respondents from the original GSS sample of 22,435. I focus solely on these unions because the risks for marriage and separation likely differ depending on whether individuals are in their first or subsequent cohabitation, and on whether they are in a cohabiting union following the dissolution of a marriage. I limit my analyses to respondents with valid data on age at the start of first cohabiting union, age at union dissolution (or current age if still in this union), and the type of union transition, which requires excluding 3.6 percent ( $n=228$ ) of respondents. I also exclude those whose first cohabiting union ended through the death of their partner ( $n=55$ ) because this outcome is too rare to analyze separately and the time of union dissolution through partner's death is not available in the data. I also exclude respondents who were born outside of Canada because all or part of their union histories may have occurred outside of Canada, which complicates the examination of changes in union formation in Canada. This results in a sample size of 5,490.

### **Measures**

The outcome of the respondents' first non-marital cohabiting union is the focus of the analyses and is coded into three categories: (a) transitioned into legal marriage, (b) union dissolved, and (c) the first cohabiting union is still intact at the time of the survey. A measure for the cohabitation cohort, or the year the union began is included as the key

explanatory variable. I group union start years into five cohorts: unions starting between 1947 and 1969, those starting in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and those starting between 2000 and 2010. Unions formed before 1970 are grouped all together because sample sizes by decade before this time are too small because premarital cohabitation before first marriage was relatively uncommon.

I examine the association of multiple factors on the outcomes of first cohabiting unions. I include a measure for age at start of the first cohabiting union by grouping these ages into quartiles which range from 15 to 19, 20 to 23, 24 to 26, and 27 and older. I use quartiles for two reasons. First, I do not expect there to be a linear relationship between age at start of union and the risks of each union outcome so a single continuous measure is not appropriate. I also do not want to make any assumptions about the functional form of these relationships so I prefer a piecewise specification of age. Second, including dummy variables for each age is far too cumbersome for the models and does not provide for a parsimonious interpretation. These categories also correspond nicely with typical categorizations of early, on time, and late union formation.

I include an indicator for sex of the respondent and for whether the respondent was born in Quebec or in another part of Canada. Educational attainment is coded as less than high school, high school, some postsecondary education (including a diploma from a two year community college, a trades or vocational certificate, and some undergraduate education), and a completed bachelor's degree or higher. The structure of the respondent's family of origin is coded as whether the respondent lived with two parents in the household up until age 15 or not.

## **Methods**

I use discrete time multinomial logistic regression models to examine the risks of separation and marriage among first cohabiting unions and changes to these risks over time. Event history models are appropriate for these data because they take right censoring, the fact that some current cohabiting relationships may transition into marriage or dissolve after the date of the survey, into account (Allison, 1984). I use discrete time event history techniques rather than continuous time because the most precise measurement of event times available in the data are tenths of years but many

respondents reported their age at the events of interest. This creates many tied survival times in the data. Treating these event data with many ties as continuous risks biasing the resulting regression coefficients (Kalbfleisch & Prentice, 1980; Scheike & Sun, 2007). I created a person-period data file in which the unit of analysis is tenths of years, which results in 256,656 person-period observations from 5,490 cohabiting unions. Cohabitors enter the risk set of union transition at the time of union formation and exit at the time of either (a) legal marriage, (b) union dissolution, or (c) survey date, whichever occurs first.

Unlike continuous time event history models, such as Cox-proportional hazards models, discrete time models require that the shape of the hazard (the duration dependence) be specified (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004; Jenkins, 2005). Rather than assume a theoretical shape of the hazard function I use a piecewise constant to model the duration dependence. I group the units of union duration into quartiles ranging from 0 to 1.3 years, 1.4 to 3.3 years, 3.4 years to 7.9 years, and 8 or longer using dummy variables. Within each category the hazard rate is assumed to be constant but is allowed to vary across these duration categories. This approach has the advantage of allowing the shape of the hazard function to be determined empirically without burdening the model with dummy variables for every unit of time. My piecewise approach is very similar to the one used by Kulik (2005) to model outcomes of cohabiting unions among Hungarian women.

### **Analytic Strategy**

First, I examine the characteristics of respondents whose first union was a nonmarital cohabitation compared to those who entered directly into marriage. I document the proportion of respondents who began their conjugal life through marriage and the proportion that formed cohabiting first unions across birth cohorts. I then examine sociodemographic differences between these two groups of respondents.

The rest of my analysis focuses solely on respondents whose first union was a nonmarital cohabitation. I chart the proportion of these respondents who end their first premarital cohabitation through union dissolution and through transition into legal marriage by year of cohabitation start. This descriptive analysis will show changes in whether these first cohabiting unions are ending and how they are ending.

Finally, I examine the how the risks of a first cohabiting union ending in separation and the risks of a first cohabiting union ending in marriage differs across historical time by estimating a bivariate discrete time multinomial logistic regression model. Next, I estimate a full additive model that includes some of the factors that have been shown in the literature to be associated with the risks of union dissolution and legal marriage including sex, age at start of union, region of birth, educational attainment, and whether the respondent grew up with two parents. Finally, I estimate a series of five models that include the full additive model from the previous analytical step plus an interaction term between each of the five risk factors and cohabitation cohort separately. These models test whether the risk factors for cohabiting union dissolution and transitioning to marriage have become more or less important over historical time. All analyses are weighted to be representative of the population and to account for the clustering of observations within respondents in the person-period data file.

## Results

### *Descriptive and Bivariate Results*

The proportion of respondents in each birth cohort who married or cohabited with their first partner, and the proportion who remained unpartnered at age 35 are shown in Table 1. Across birth cohorts marriage has become a less popular type of first union and cohabitation has become much more common. Among the earliest birth cohort of Canadians born in the 1930s who came of age in the 1950s, nearly 94 percent married their first partner and a near negligible 2 percent cohabited as their first union. Cohabiting as a first union became more common for Canadians born in the 1940s and 1950s (8.4 percent and 26.1 percent of first unions respectively), but marriage remained the modal way to start a first union for these birth cohorts (88.1 percent and 68.9 percent for the respective birth cohorts). By the 1960s birth cohort who came of age in the 1980s, roughly half of Canadians entered marriage directly before age 35, and nearly 43 percent chose to cohabit with their first partner. After this birth cohort, cohabitation became a more popular way to start conjugal life than direct marriage. Approximately 54 percent of Canadians born in the 1970s cohabited with their first partner compared to only 38 percent who entered directly into marriage. This trend towards forming cohabiting first

unions rather than marital first unions has also continued for the most recent birth cohorts.

[Table 1 here]

Table 2 displays the characteristics of the respondents separately by type of first union they formed in order to compare the characteristics of those who directly married, who are not the focus of this paper, and those who formed first cohabiting unions whose unions are analyzed. The characteristics of the sample who cohabited with their first partner who are used in the remainder of this paper are found in the right pane of Table 2 and the characteristics of their counterparts who married directly are found in the left pane. Roughly 48 percent of the respondents entered directly into marriage and approximately 30 percent formed a cohabiting partnership as their first union. However the decline of marriage and the rise of cohabitation as a first union type over time is apparent when considering the distribution of year of union start. Of the respondents who married directly, nearly 40 percent married between 1947 and 1969 and less than 10 percent married in the first decade of the 2000s. Conversely, a very small proportion of the respondents who formed their first union through cohabitation did so before the 1970s (1.5 percent) but 36 percent did so between 2000 and 2010.

There is a more even gender split among the focal sample that cohabited as their first union than there is among those who directly entered marriage. Forty-nine percent of those who cohabited with their first partner are men and 51 percent are women whereas only 46.6 percent of those who directed married are men and 53.4 percent are women. It is also clear that Canadians who cohabited with their first partner tended to so at younger ages than those who directly married their first partner. Only 9.7 percent of respondents who formed marriages as their first union did so before the age of 20 but nearly one quarter of those who formed cohabiting unions were partnered by this age. Regardless of type of first union, the modal age category for forming a first union was between 20 and 23 (40.3 and 37 percent of those who married directly and who cohabited with their first partner did so between these ages respectively).

Table 2 also shows that one third of the focal sample that formed first cohabiting unions was born in Quebec and the remaining two thirds were born in other Canadian provinces or territories. A larger proportion (74.6 percent) of the comparison sample who



married their first partner were born outside of Quebec than the focal sample and a smaller proportion (25.4 percent) were born in Quebec compared to the cohabiting sample. The sample of Canadians who formed first cohabiting unions tend to be more highly educated than those who married directly. Among the focal sample 76.3 percent held some sort of postsecondary credential compared to 63.2 percent of the direct marriage sample. Finally, a larger proportion of Canadians in the focal sample grew up outside of a traditional nuclear family form than those who entered into marriage directly (22.3 percent compared to 12.1 percent respectively).

Much of the difference between the focal sample of Canadians who formed first cohabiting unions and the comparison sample of Canadians who formed direct marriages is likely due to changes in partnership behaviour over time. Over time cohabitation has become a more common way to start conjugal life, and over the same span of time levels of educational attainment have increased and family structures have changed. It is not my intention in this paper to explore the compositional changes of these two samples over time. Rather, my intention is to exclusively examine the outcomes of nonmarital cohabiting first unions and how these outcomes have changed over time and I present the characteristics of these two groups of people in order to provide context for the ways in which my focal sample may differ from Canadians who chose to enter into marriage directly.

[Table 2 here]

Next, I examine the proportion of cohabitations that end in (a) separation, (b) marriage, or are (c) still intact at the time of the survey by cohabitation cohort by constructing a simple bivariate table that is displayed in Table 3. Across all cohabitation cohorts except for those formed in the most recent decade, marriage is a more likely outcome than separation. Reading across the rows of Table 3 also reveals that proportion of first premarital cohabitations that end in separation is quite similar regardless of the year the union was formed and ranges from 30 to 39 percent. The proportion transitioning to marriage, however, has decreased quite dramatically from 60 percent of first premarital cohabiting unions formed before 1970, to around 46 percent of unions formed in the 1990s, and 31 percent of unions formed between 2000 and 2010. It is clear from this

bivariate association that it is important to consider the year first premarital cohabitations are formed when considering how these unions are likely to end.

[Table 3 here]

I also examine how the *risks* of separation and marriage from first cohabiting unions have changed over cohabitation cohort while accounting for the right censoring in the data. Table 4 displays the relative risk ratios from a bivariate multinomial regression modeling the outcome of first cohabiting union by year of union start. I find that the risks of dissolving a first cohabiting union relative to continuing to cohabit have not changed across historical time. Cohabiting relationships that began in 1947 up until 2010 are equally likely to end in separation. The risks of marriage among cohabitators in their first union however, have decreased over time. Cohabiting unions that began after 1989 are significantly less likely to transition to marriage than unions that began in earlier periods. This indicates that among more recent cohabitation cohorts, couples who remain together are less likely to marry and more likely to continue as a cohabiting couple.

[Table 4 here]

### *Multivariate Results*

I examine how a variety of factors affect the risk of first cohabiting unions dissolving the risk of these unions transitioning to legal marriage. Table 5 shows relative risks ratios from a multivariate multinomial regression including year of union start, sex, age of the respondent at the beginning of the union, whether the respondent was born in Quebec or in another part of Canada, education, and family structure up until age 15. The patterns of separation and marriage by year of union start are the same even when controlling for other factors that affect the outcome of first cohabiting unions; the risks of separation have stayed constant and the risks of marriage have declined over time.

[Table 5 here]

Table 5 also shows that females are significantly more likely to marry their first premarital cohabiting partner compared to men. How old the respondent was at the time of their first cohabiting union is also an important factor in whether the union dissolves or transitions to marriage. The older the respondent at the start of the union the less likely it is that the union ends by dissolution. Respondents who began their first cohabiting union between the ages of 24 and 26 are more likely to marry their partner rather than continue

cohabiting but the relationship between age at start and the risk of marriage is not monotonic. Those who began their first cohabiting unions at age 27 or older are no more likely to marry their partners than those who started cohabiting between 20 and 23.

Cohabiting unions formed by respondents born in Quebec are equally likely as those formed by respondents born elsewhere in Canada to end in separation relative to remaining in the cohabiting relationship. The risks of marriage however, are much lower among those born in Quebec. This suggests that first cohabiting unions are equally stable across region of birth, but that among the Quebec-born these unions are more likely to continue as non-marital unions.

Educational attainment is also significantly related to the risks of marriage, but not related to the risks of separation, holding other variables in the model constant. Higher levels of education are associated with increased risk of transitioning into marriage from a first premarital cohabitation relative to continuing as a cohabiting union.

Respondents who grew up in household without two parents are significantly more likely to dissolve their first cohabiting union relative to continuing as cohabiting couple compared to those who had two parents in the home during their childhood. This group is also much less likely to transition to marriage from their first cohabiting union relative to continuing their relationship as a non-marital union.

### *Changes in Risk Factors over Time*

As the final step in the analysis I examine whether the factors that affect risks of marriage and separation from first premarital cohabitation have become more or less important over time. I do this by estimating five separate discrete-time multinomial logistic regression models. Each model includes additive terms for each the six factors included in the multivariate model, plus an interaction between one of these factors and year of cohabitation start. To illustrate the changing importance of each factor over time, I plot the relative log odds of (a) separation and (b) marriage at each time period for each category of the factor under consideration.

Figures 1 and 2 display changes in the relative log odds of separation and marriage respectively, for men and women across cohabitation cohorts. There is a significant interaction ( $p < 0.001$ ) between sex and the risk of separation and cohabitation cohort, and

between sex and the risks of marriage. This means that the association between sex and the risks of dissolving a first premarital cohabitation and the risks of transitioning into marriage depend on the year in which the union was formed. Figure 1 shows that among cohabiting unions formed in the earliest time period, men were significantly more likely than women to end their unions through separation. The significant interaction in this model, however translates into a reduction in the sex-based difference in risks of separation across cohabitation cohorts. Similarly, Figure 2 shows that the importance of sex for the risks of marriage among first premarital cohabitation has also declined over cohabitation cohorts. In past cohabitation cohorts, women were more likely to transition to marriage than men, but among the most recent cohabitation cohort, men and women experience the same log odds of marrying their first premarital cohabiting partner.

[Figures 1 & 2 here]

The next model includes an interaction between age at union formation and the decade the union began. Figure 3 displays relative log odds of separating across cohabitation cohorts by age at the start of the cohabiting union. There is not a significant interaction between age and year of cohabitation start meaning that the association between age at cohabitation formation and the risks of separation is constant across cohabitation cohorts, controlling for the other variables in the model. This is not true for the risks of marriage however as shown in Figure 4. The risks of marriage have generally declined across cohabitation cohorts among all age groups, but they have declined more dramatically among those who begin cohabiting before the age of 24. Age at union formation has, therefore, become a more important predictor of the transition to marriage from a first premarital cohabitating union over time.

[Figures 3 & 4 here]

Figures 5 and 6 display the results of the next model, which includes an interaction between cohabitation cohort and place of birth in addition to additive terms for the other risk factors. As seen in Figure 5, people born in Quebec and people born in other Canadian provinces or territories have similar risks of separating from their first premarital cohabiting union, and this does not vary over time. A significant interaction

between place of birth and cohabitation cohort on the risks of marriage, however, is very evident in Figure 6. The risks of marriage among those born outside of Quebec have declined slightly across year of cohabitation formation, while the risks of marriage among those born in Quebec have decreased dramatically over time. This strong and significant interaction means that place of birth has become an increasingly important predictor of the risks of marriage across cohabitation cohorts.

[Figures 5 & 6 here]

The interaction between educational attainment and year of cohabitation start is included in the next model and the results are displayed in Figures 7 and 8. The risks of separation among those with any postsecondary education have stayed stable over time but the general trend among the less educated is towards higher risks of separation over cohabitation cohort as shown in Figure 7. In fact, the association between having less education and risks of separation depends so heavily on when the cohabiting union formed that there is a reversal in the direction of the relationship in the most recent period. The less educated have similar or lower risks of separation compared to the more highly educated for cohabitations formed before 2000, but have higher risks of separation in cohabiting unions formed after this time. There is also a significant interaction between educational attainment and cohabitation cohort on risks of marriage. As with the other factors, the risks of transitioning to marriage from a first premarital cohabitation have generally declined for both educational groups. The risks of marriage, however, have declined more dramatically among the less educated than those with at least some postsecondary education. Educational attainment has become a more important predictor of separation and marriage in cohabiting unions formed more recently. First premarital cohabiting unions formed by the less educated in more recent years are less stable than those formed and are also less likely to transition to marriage.

[Figures 7 & 8 here]

The final factor I consider is the structure of the respondent's family of origin up to age 15. The results of the model that includes an interaction between origin family structure and cohabitation cohort can be found in Figures 9 and 10. Unlike the other risk factors included in this study, the association between family structure and the risks of separating from a first premarital cohabitation and the risks of transitioning into marriage does not vary significantly across cohabitation cohort as evidenced by the relatively parallel lines. Respondents who did not live with two parents until age 15 are slightly more likely to dissolve their first premarital cohabitation than those who lived with both parents, but this is the case regardless of when the cohabiting union was formed. Likewise, those who did not have two parents in their childhood home are less likely to marry their first premarital cohabiting partner than those who had two parents, but the difference between the two groups is consistent over cohabitation cohort.

[Figures 9 & 10 here]

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Canadians are becoming increasingly likely to form their first conjugal partnerships through nonmarital cohabitation rather than legal marriage. What does this continued trend mean for the early partnering transitions of Canadians? Are Canadians becoming more likely to use these first unions as short-term alternatives to being single? Are Canadians using these first unions as a stepping-stone to legal marriage, or are these unions becoming alternatives to marriage? In this paper I examined how the risks that a first premarital cohabiting union ends in dissolution, and the risks that it ends by transitioning to legal marriage have changed across cohabitation cohorts. I found that the risks of separating from these unions have not changed across historical time, but that cohabitations formed more recently are significantly less likely to transition to legal marriage relative to remaining as a cohabiting union. This holds true whether examining only the bivariate relationship between year of cohabitation start and union outcome, and when controlling for other factors that are associated with union outcome. First unions that are formed through cohabitation are therefore not becoming less stable over historical time and there is little evidence that more recent cohorts of Canadians are less

committed to their first partners than Canadians from previous cohorts. There is some evidence, however, that these newer cohorts of Canadians are more likely to remain living together outside marriage in long-term committed unions.

Are there group differences in the outcomes of first premarital cohabiting unions in Canada and what does this mean for the ways in which different social groups are using cohabitation in their early partnership transitions? To answer this question I tested whether five factors: (1) sex, (2) age at start of union, (3) province of birth, (4) education, and (5) the structure of the family of origin, were associated with the risks of separation or the risks of marriage among these unions. Only age at union formation, birth region, and origin family structure are significant predictors of the risks of separation in Canada. First premarital cohabitations formed at younger ages, those formed by Canadians born outside of Quebec, and those formed by people who did not live in a two parent home as a child are more likely to dissolve.

The significant differences in the risks of separating from a first premarital cohabiting union that I found in this paper are largely consistent with past research on union dissolution generally, and first premarital cohabiting union dissolution specifically. Past research has shown that unions formed at younger ages are more likely to dissolve (Amato, 1996; Guzzo, 2014; Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006), that cohabiting unions in Quebec tend to be more stable and last longer than elsewhere in Canada (Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 1996; Turcotte & Belanger, 1997; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995), and that children who experienced parental divorce are more likely to dissolve their own romantic unions in adulthood (Amato, 1995; Bumpass, Martin & Sweet, 1991; Korbin & Waite, 1984).

Past research has also shown, however that individuals with less education are more likely to divorce (Amato, 2010; Teachman, 2002; Lyngstad, 2004), but my results show that at least for first premarital cohabiting unions, education does not appear to have any significant effect on the risks of union dissolution. One of the explanations commonly used for the negative association between education and the risks of divorce is that the more highly educated have more economic resources, which increase the stability of marriages (Amato, 1996). It may be that economic resources are a less important determinant of the stability of first premarital cohabitations than for legal marriages

(Bohnert, 2011). Wu and Pollard (2000) examined the association between economic circumstances and the stability of cohabiting unions more closely and found that household economic disadvantage increased the risks of union dissolution, but that increases in one partner's income alone also increased these risks. The insignificant relationship between education and risks of union dissolution found in this study may be due to the countervailing trends identified by Wu and Pollard (2000). Educational homogamy may also play a more important role than either partner's level of education in explaining differences in cohabitation outcomes (Maenpaa & Jalovaara, 2013). Unfortunately, the 2011 GSS does not include detailed information on the characteristics of the partners of the respondents but future research should examine this more closely.

Although only three of the five factors I examined are significantly associated with the risks of separation from a first premarital cohabiting union, all five of the factors examined are significantly associated with the risks that a first union formed through cohabitation transitions to legal marriage. Overall, Canadian women are more likely to marry their first premarital cohabiting partners than Canadian men. Canadians born in Quebec, and those who did not live with both parents are less likely to transition to marriage, and those with higher educational attainment are more likely to transition to marriage. Age at union formation displays a U-shaped relationship with the risks of transitioning to marriage. For Canadians aged 26 or younger, increased age is associated with an increased risk of marriage. At age 27, however, the risks of marriage are no different from the risks experienced by Canadians in their early 20s.

These results are also consistent with past research on group differences in the transition to marriage. Cohabitation has become a near universal first union type in Quebec and marriage rates have also declined dramatically compared to other parts of Canada (Le Bourdias & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Pollard & Wu, 1988). Therefore it is not surprising that those born in Quebec whose first union was a nonmarital cohabitation were less likely to transition to marriage and more likely remain cohabiting outside of legal marriage than other Canadians. Past research has also shown that, overall, higher education is associated with higher risks of marriage (Guzzo, 2014), which is likely partly due the greater economic resources that higher education affords that facilitate the transition into marriage (Amato, 1996). Growing up in a family without two parents



present in the home has also been found in past research to reduce the likelihood of marriage, at least partly through the effect of parental divorce on adult children's attitudes towards marriage (Levinger, 1976). This is consistent with my findings that the risks of transitioning to marriage from a first cohabiting union are lower for adult children from non-intact families.

That unions formed at younger ages are less likely to transition to legal marriage than unions formed at older ages is also not surprising given the results of past research (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Younger people who form cohabiting unions appear to be less likely to be using these unions as a step towards marriage (Guzzo, 2014), and may make poorer matches than those who form their first union at older ages which would also decrease the risks that they enter into legal marriage with their first partner (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Data on the marital intentions and engagement status of the partners at the time of union formation would help to disentangle the effects of age at union start and the motivations of the partners on the outcomes of these unions but unfortunately this is not available using the current data source. Research using American data sources has shown that marital intentions and expectations are highly associated with cohabitation outcomes but that the relationship depends heavily on gender and race (Brown, 2000; Guzzo, 2009).

The second contribution of this paper was to explore whether the risk factors associated with different union outcomes have gained or lost importance over cohabitation cohorts as a way to examine whether changes in cohabitation are occurring uniformly for different social groups over time. I find that age at union start, region of birth, and origin family structure are stably associated with the risks of separating from a first premarital cohabiting union. Conversely, in past cohabitation cohorts, being female was significantly associated with a lower risk of separation from first premarital cohabiting unions, but this sex difference has disappeared for first cohabiting unions formed more recently. The association between educational attainment and risks of separation also depends on cohabitation cohort; in unions formed earlier the less educated were less likely to dissolve their unions compared to the more highly educated, but in more recent unions, the less educated have a higher risk of dissolution.

Changes in the importance of these factors on the risks of transitioning into legal marriage reveal a much different pattern. The only risk factor I found to be stable across cohabitation cohorts was growing up in a household without two parents. This group is less likely to marry their cohabiting partner, but the difference between the groups in the risks of marriage is the same regardless of when the cohabiting union was formed. Sex is the only risk factor I found to have lost all significant association with the risks of marriage over time. All other factors, including having less education, being born in Quebec, and forming the first cohabiting union at a young age, have become increasingly negatively associated with the risks of marriage. In other words, group differences in the propensity to marry a first premarital cohabitation partner have become more dramatic over time.

My findings that age at the start of a first premarital cohabitation has not become a stronger predictor of union dissolution over time but that age differences in the likelihood that a union transitions to marriage have increased across cohabitation cohort have several implications. First, it does not appear that cohabitation is becoming a short-term union type that Canadians in their early 20s use as an alternative to being single. If this were the case we would expect to see the risks of first premarital dissolution increasing more rapidly among younger Canadians in more recent cohabitation cohorts. First premarital cohabitations that are formed at young ages in more recent years however, are less likely to transition to marriage, which means that these unions formed at younger ages may be increasingly used as an alternative to marriage for this group.

Gender differences in the risks of both separation from a first premarital cohabiting union and of the transition to legal marriage have disappeared across cohabitation cohorts. In unions formed before 1970, when premarital cohabitation was still quite uncommon, men were more likely to separate from these unions and women were more likely to marry from these types of first unions. The women's liberation movement, and increased educational attainment of women, and the greater control over fertility that came with the widespread availability of the oral contraceptive pill in the 1970s likely contributed to the diminishing of gender differences in cohabitation outcomes as these changes gave women more freedom and control over when to form unions and the types of unions they choose to form (Goldin & Katz, 2002).

Like past research (e.g. Harkonen & Dronkers, 2006; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Turcotte & Goldschider, 1998), I find that educational differences in partnership behaviours have increased over time. Less education is more strongly associated with higher risks of separation and lower risks of marriage for first premarital cohabiting unions formed more recently than for those unions formed in the past. My findings are consistent with the theme of ‘diverging destinies’ (McLanahan, 2004) and show that lower levels of education may be increasingly likely to act as a barrier to marriage and union stability. In this paper I included only a binary measure of education in pursuit of parsimony and as a first step to examining changes in educational differences in first premarital cohabiting union outcomes across historical time. Given that the educational distribution of the Canadian population has changed across the period under study and that the economic outcomes of different types of postsecondary education vary (Boothby & Drewes, 2004), future research should interrogate these changes in educational differences in union outcomes with a finer measure of education.

It is not surprising that the risks of transitioning to marriage from a first premarital cohabiting union have become much lower over time in Quebec compared to the rest of Canada since many past studies have shown that regional differences in marital behaviours are increasing over time (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamecyk, 2004; Le Bourdais & Marci-Gratton, 1996). The results of this paper show that these regional differences have continued to increase for the most recent unions formed between 2000 and 2010 with cohabiting unions in Quebec being treated like alternatives to marriage even more so than they were in the past. Future research in this area should also consider language and religion as determinants of these union outcomes because these factors have been used in past research to interrogate and explain regional differences in partnering behaviours (e.g. Laplante, 2014).

In summary, the results of this paper show that cohabitation has moved towards being an alternative to marriage for all Canadians, but more so for the less educated, those born in Quebec, and for those who form their first cohabiting unions early. The more highly educated, those born in other parts of Canada, and those who delay their first cohabiting unions are more likely to use cohabitation as a step in the marriage process and the partnering patterns of these groups have been diverging over time.

This study has the advantage of using the most recently available data on union histories of Canadians, which includes rich retrospective information on unions formed between 1947 and 2010 through cohabitation rather than relying on information about a cross section of cohabiting and marital unions at one point in time. Although these retrospective union histories allow me to analyze first premarital cohabiting unions formed across a wide span of time, the retrospective nature of the data mean that the data may be adversely affected by recall bias (Hassan, 2005).

The threat of recall bias is also one of the reasons I chose not to include employment transitions in my analyses of the determinants of first premarital cohabitation outcomes. Past research has shown that gaining or losing employment is also an important correlate of union formation and dissolution (e.g. Lichter et al., 2006; Maenpaa & Jalovaara, 2013; Wu & Pollard, 2000). Future research should examine the changing importance of work and employment measures on the outcomes of first premarital cohabiting unions over time but should use either a different data source than that used in this paper or should pool retrospective data from previous GSS surveys taken in the 1990s and early 2000s so that analyses could be based on respondents recollections of more recent work events rather than events in the distant past.

Future research should also consider how the association between cohabitation outcomes and the presence of children within the union may depend on when in historical time the union was formed. Having a child within a cohabiting union has been shown in past research to increase the risks of transitioning to marriage and decrease the risks of separation (Manning, 2004; Wu, 1995) but this has also been shown to depend on whether the pregnancy was intended or not (Guzzo, 2010; Guzzo, 2014a; Manning, 2004). It is likely that the association between having children and the risks of each union outcome depend on the historical period in which the union was formed as the meaning of cohabitation has changed and as cohabitation becomes an increasingly popular context for fertility (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). For instance, a conception or birth of a child may have been a greater impetus to transition into legal marriage for first premarital cohabitations formed in the past when cohabiting was a more marginal family type than it may be in more recently formed unions as childbearing in nonmarital unions becomes increasingly common (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004).

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of how the role of cohabitation in the marriage process has shifted over time to different extents for different groups of people. Past research in the U.S. (Manning et al., 2014) and my own work on Canadian data, show that recent cohorts of young adults are continuing to form their first unions in their early to mid twenties, like generations before them, but the results of this paper show that there is little indication that the first pre marital cohabiting unions formed more recently are any less stable than those formed in the 1960s, 70s or 80s. What has changed is that these first unions are less likely to transition into legal marriage. This study provides further evidence that trends in the changing meaning of cohabitation, and trends in increasing cohabitation and declining marriage in Canada are not monolithic but require a more nuanced examination.

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**Table 1. First Union Type Across Birth Cohorts**

Type of first union across birth cohorts n=21,995

	First Union Type		
	Marriage	Cohabitation	Unpartnered
	%	%	%
<b>Birth Cohort</b>			
1930-39	93.8	2.2	4.0
1940-49	88.1	8.4	3.5
1950-59	68.9	26.1	5.0
1960-69	51.1	42.8	6.2
1970-79	38.1	53.7	8.2
1980-89	15.2	42.8	42.0
1990-96	/	5.4	94.2
<b>Overall</b>	48.4	29.7	21.9

Source: 2011 General Social Survey

Note: The unpartnered category includes respondents who had not formed a partnership by age 35 or at the time of the survey if the respondent was younger than 35.

**Table 2. Sample Characteristics**

Descriptive Statistics	n=16,894	
	Marriage	Cohabitation
	%	%
<b>Type of first union</b>	48.4	29.7
<b>Year of union start</b>		
1947-69	37.5	1.5
1970-79	23.7	12.1
1980-89	18.5	21.6
1990-99	11.1	28.3
2000-10	9.3	36.4
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	46.6	49.0
Female	53.4	51.0
<b>Age at union start</b>		
< 20	9.7	24.0
20-23	40.3	37.0
24-26	24.8	20.3
27+	25.1	18.7
<b>Region of Birth</b>		
Can, outside Que.	74.6	64.6
Quebec	25.4	35.4
<b>Education</b>		
High School or less	36.8	23.7
More than High School	63.2	76.3
<b>Family Structure until 15</b>		
Lived with 2 parents	87.9	77.8
Did not	12.1	22.3

Source: 2011 General Social Survey

Note: Type of first union does not add to 100 percent because 23.3 percent of the sample had not partnered at the time of the survey

**Table 3. Outcomes of First Cohabiting Unions by Year of Union Start**

Outcomes of First Cohabiting Unions by Year of Union Start

	Year Cohabitation Began				
	1947-69 (%)	1970-79 (%)	1980-89 (%)	1990-99 (%)	2000-10 (%)
<b>Separation</b>	37.1	34.3	36.0	39.4	30.1
<b>Marriage</b>	60.1	60.6	55.0	46.5	31.6
<b>Censored</b>	2.8	5.1	9.0	14.1	38.4
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 4. Risks of Separation and Marriage from First Cohabiting Union, Bivariate**

Relative Risk Ratios from Bivariate Discrete-Time Multinomial  
Logistic Regression Models Predicting First Cohabiting Union  
Outcome across Cohabitation Cohorts

	Separate (vs. Cohab)	Marry (vs. Cohab)
<b>Year of union start</b>		
1947-69	0.98	0.91
1970-79	ref.	ref.
1980-89	0.92	0.79 **
1990-99	0.99	0.63 ***
2000-10	1.05	0.56 ***

p<0.05 \* p<0.01 \*\* p<0.001 \*\*\*

Source: 2011 General Social Survey

**Table 5. Risks of Separation and Marriage from First Cohabiting Union, Multivariate**

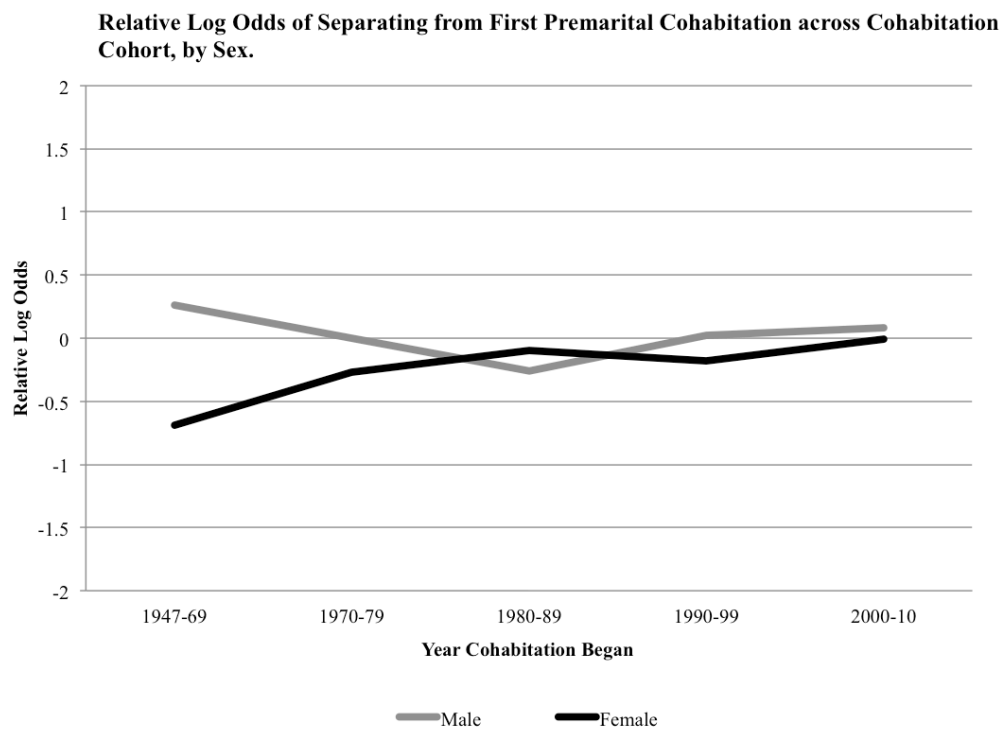
Relative Risk Ratios from Multivariate Discrete-Time Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Outcome of First Cohabiting Union

	Separate (vs. Cohab)	Marry (vs. Cohab)
<b>Year of union start</b>		
1947-69	0.96	0.89
1970-79	ref.	ref.
1980-89	0.95	0.79 **
1990-99	1.04	0.60 ***
2000-10	1.17	0.53 ***
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	ref.	ref.
Female	0.91	1.24 ***
<b>Age at union start</b>		
< 20	1.41 ***	0.74 ***
20-23	ref.	ref.
24-26	0.71 ***	1.19 **
27+	0.58 ***	0.98
<b>Region of Birth</b>		
Can, outside Que.	ref.	ref.
Quebec	0.86 *	0.43 ***
<b>Education</b>		
High School or less	ref.	ref.
More than High School	1.11	1.30 ***
<b>Family Structure until 15</b>		
Lived with 2 parents	ref.	ref.
Did not	1.23 **	0.75 ***

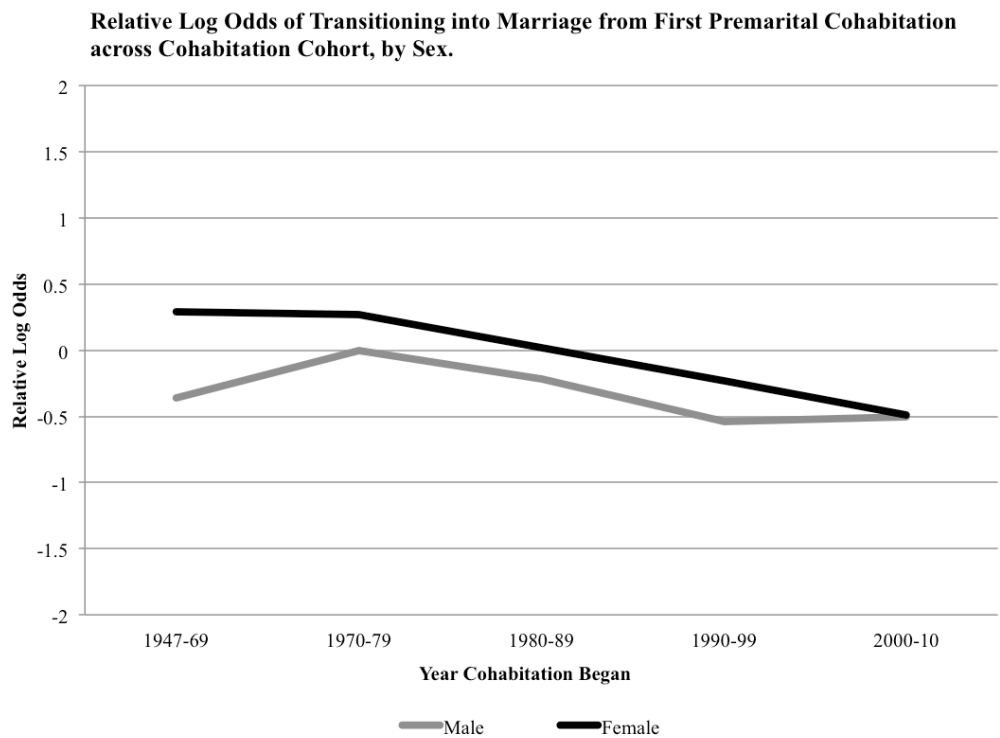
p<0.05 \* p<0.01 \*\* p<0.001 \*\*\*

Source: 2011 General Social Survey

**Figure 1. Relative Log Odds of Separation, by Sex, across Cohabitation Cohorts**

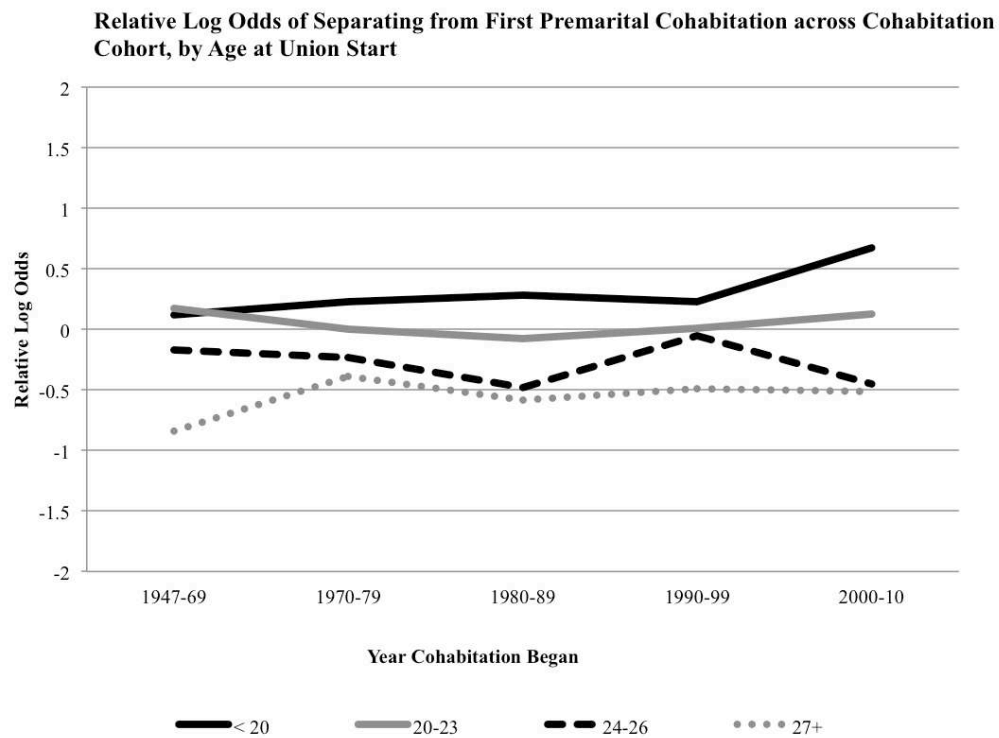


**Figure 2. Relative Log Odds of Marriage, by Sex, across Cohabitation Cohorts**

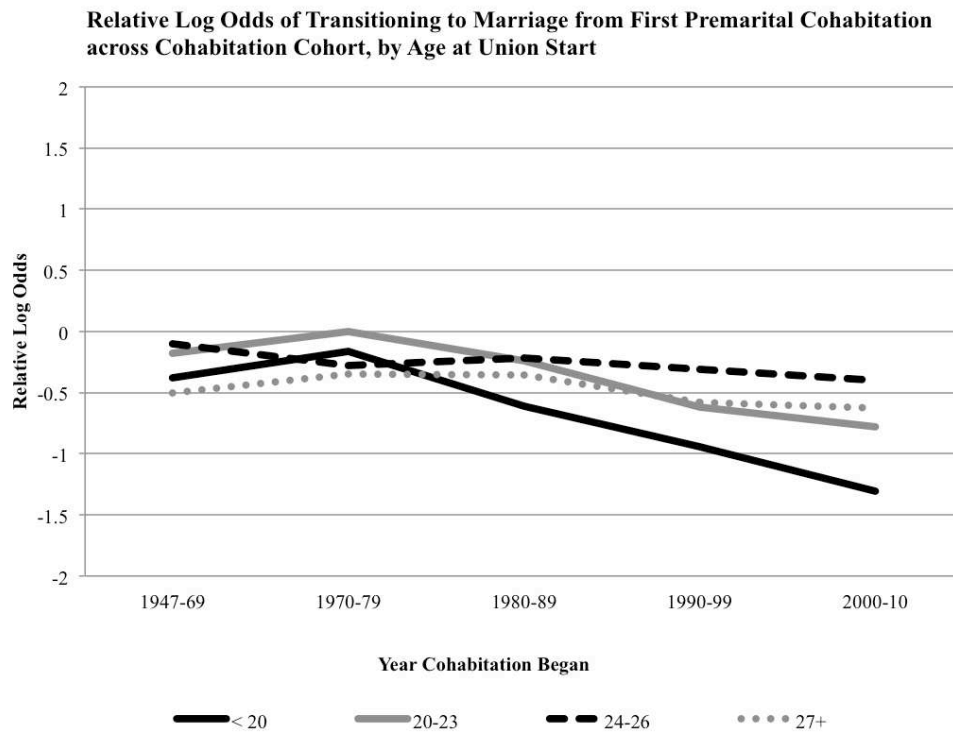




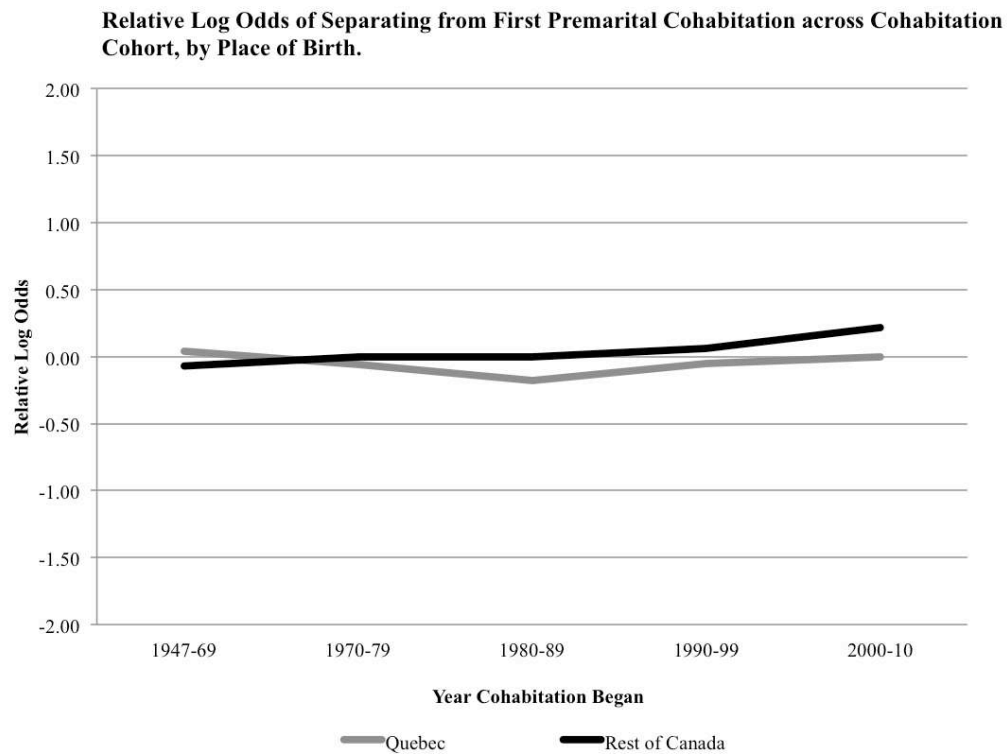
**Figure 3. Relative Log Odds of Separation, by Age at Union, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



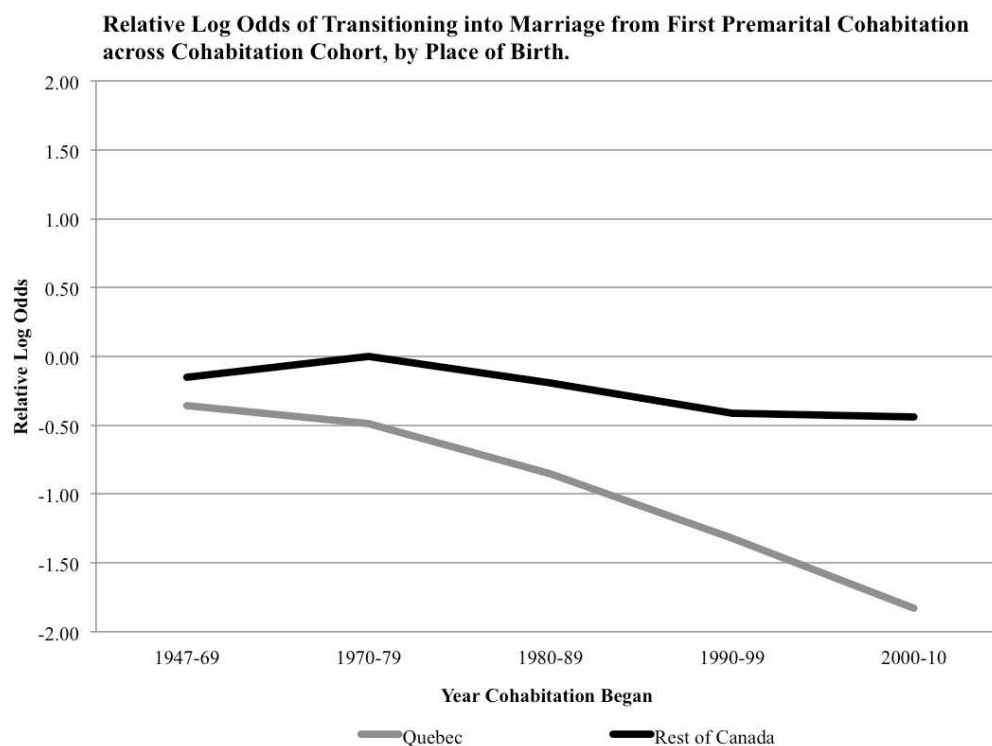
**Figure 4. Relative Log Odds of Marriage, by Age at Union, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



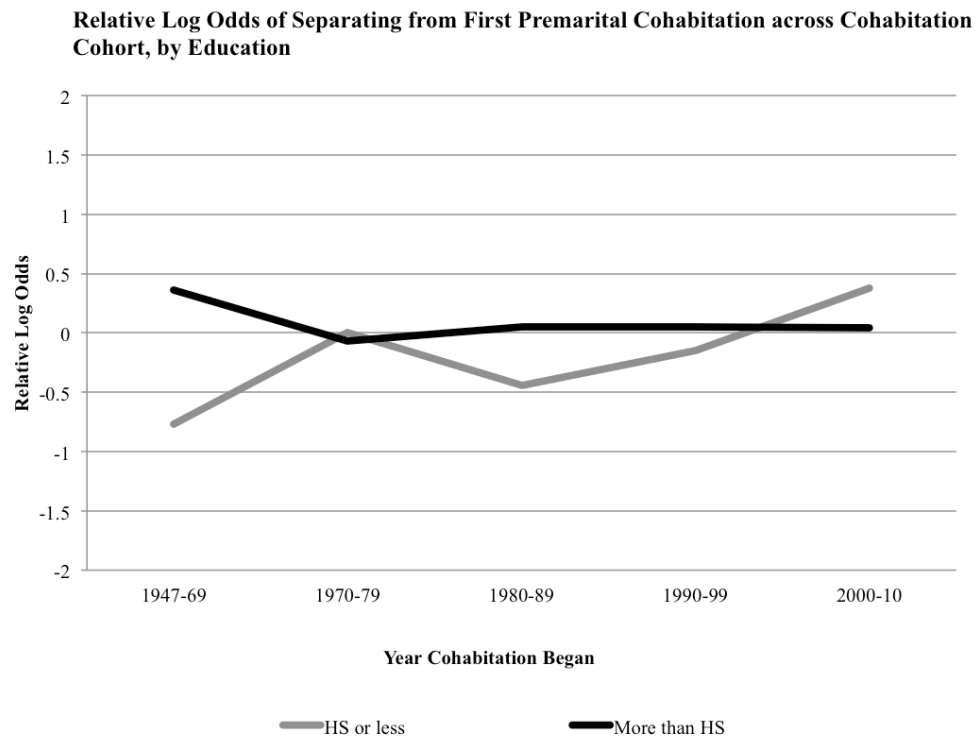
**Figure 5. Relative Log Odds of Separation, by Place of Birth, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



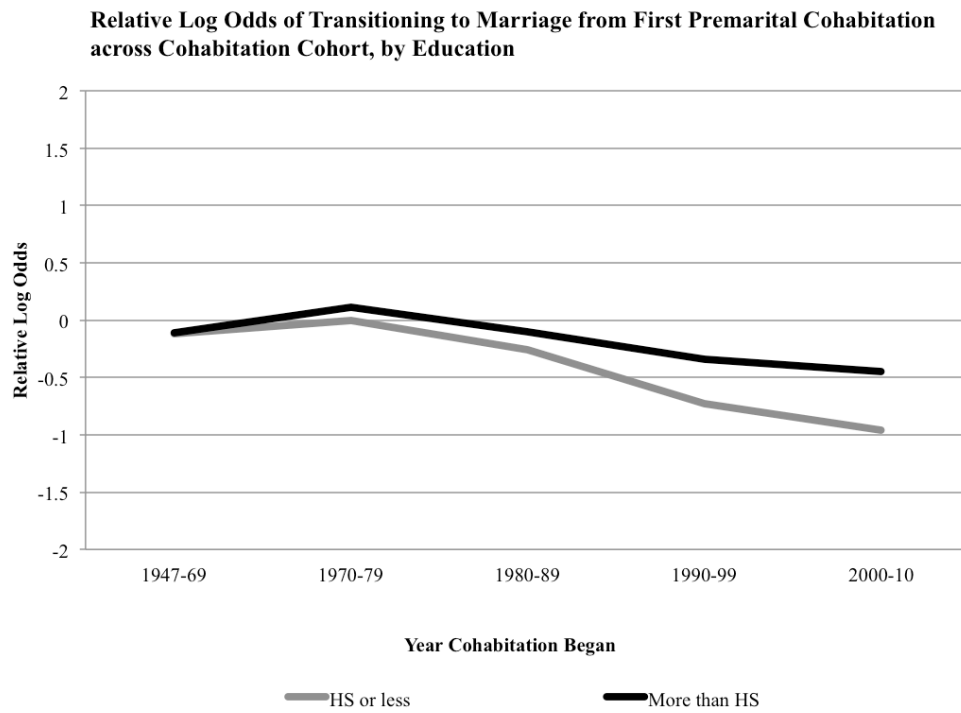
**Figure 6. Relative Log Odds of Marriage, by Place of Birth, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



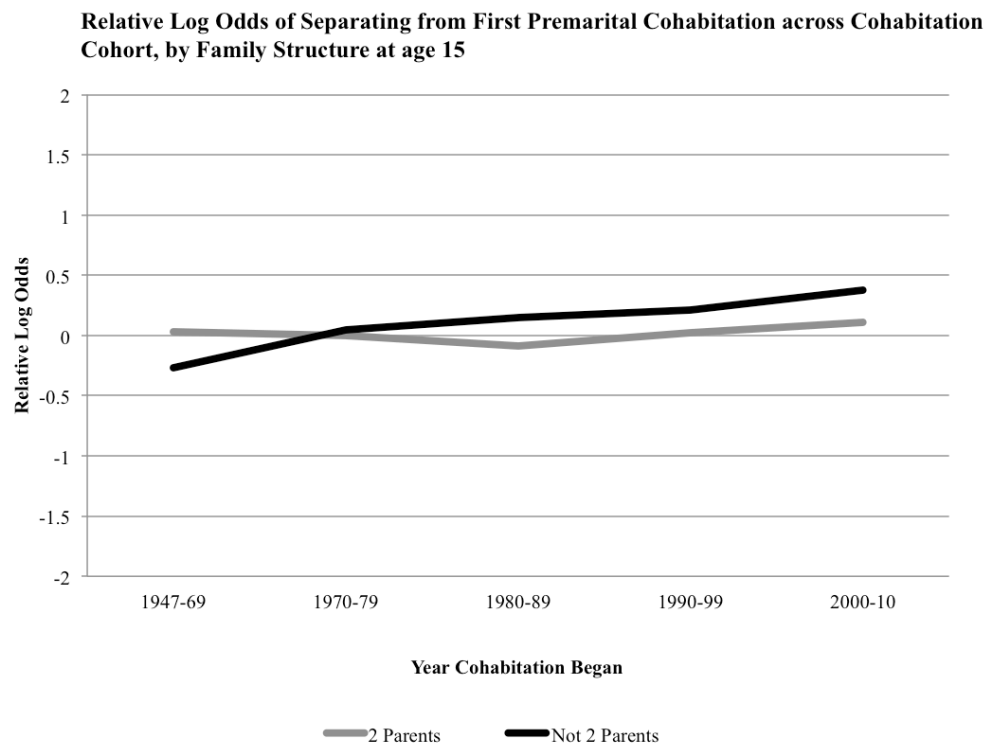
**Figure 7. Relative Log Odds of Separation, by Education, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



**Figure 8. Relative Log Odds of Marriage, by Education, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



**Figure 9. Relative Log Odds of Separation, by Family Structure, across Cohabitation Cohorts**



**Figure 10. Relative Log Odds of Marriage, by Education, across Cohabitation Cohorts**

