

**CHANGE IN YOUNG ADULT UNION FORMATION AND DISSOLUTION OVER TWENTY YEARS:
A COHORT COMPARISON USING THE NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS**

Claire M. Kamp Dush
Assistant Professor
Department of Human Development and Family Science
The Ohio State University
171A Campbell Hall
1787 Neil Ave.
Columbus, OH 43210
kamp-dush.1@osu.edu

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Abstract

Using data from the 1979 and 1997 cohorts of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, I compare union experiences in young adulthood for two cohorts, approximately twenty years apart. I find that the NLSY79 sample was less likely to survive to age 29 without having entered a union, compared to the NLSY97 sample. The magnitude of the difference was about 0.06. However, I find that the NLSY97 are much more likely to enter a cohabiting union, while the NLSY79 was more likely to enter a marital union. For the conference, I plan to compare the duration of first unions by cohort, and specifically for cohabitation, I plan to examine the duration and outcomes (marriage or breakup) for cohabitation. Race and social class differences will be discussed.

Change in Young Adult Union Formation and Dissolution over Twenty Years: A Cohort Comparison Using the National Longitudinal Surveys

The nonmarital childbearing rate in the United States is at its highest level ever (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2010). More adults than ever before are unmarried in the United States (Kreider & Elliott, 2009). Young adults are waiting longer to marry (Peters & Kamp Dush, 2009). However, just because marriage patterns in the US are changing, that does not mean that *union* patterns in the US are changing. It has been estimated that 44% of non-marital births in the US are to cohabiting couples (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002). Further, though more adults than ever are unmarried, the number of households in the United States characterized by two cohabiting adults is at an all time high (Fields & Casper, 2001). And, despite the fact that young adults are waiting to marry, anecdotal evidence is that they are not waiting to have unions (Jayson, 2010). I propose to examine first union experiences in the US using the NLSY97 data, and further, I propose to compare the NLSY97 data to the NLSY79 data to examine how union experiences in early adulthood have changed over the past 20 years.

Method

Data

The National Longitudinal Surveys provide data designed primarily to analyze sources of variation in labor market behavior and experience however rich information on the structure of the household has also been collected. This study utilized data from two NLSY cohorts. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) data was first collected from 12,686 young men and women ages 14-21 in 1979. Data were collected yearly from 1979 through 1994 and biennially from 1994 to present. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) data was a nationally representative sample of approximately 9,000 youths who were

12 to 17 years old. Youths were then interviewed on an annual basis, and currently, data from rounds 1 (1997) through 12 (2008) are publicly available. I will use the latest round of the NLSY97 available for PAA 2011.

Measures

Union formation and dissolution. In the NLSY79, union status at each wave was coded. Non-marital cohabitation was defined as “living with an opposite sex adult as partner”. At each wave, respondents reported on their household roster whether they were living with a spouse or cohabiting partner. Data on marital changes, but not cohabitation changes, between waves were also collected. An approximate date of cohabitation dissolution can be ascertained given the relatively short intervals between waves for the early years of the NLSY79 used in this study.

In the NLSY97, cohabitation was defined as a sexual relationship in which partners of the opposite sex establish one household and live together. Exact dates of union entrance and exits were recorded from the NLSY97 respondents for both cohabitation and marriage

Gender. Males were coded 0 and females were coded 1.

Race. The NLSY79 and NLSY97 over-sampled blacks and Hispanics. Race was coded non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, and Hispanic.

Preliminary Results

I begin by presenting preliminary results on the duration to first union by cohort, and separately by type of union. I find that about 23% of the NLSY79 sample survived to age 29 having never had a union, while about 30% of the NLSY97 sample survived to age 29 having never had a union (see Figure 1). Further, consistent with previous research, I find that marriage without premarital cohabitation is a much more common first union among the NLSY79 sample. I find that about 80% of the NLSY97 survived to age 29 not directly entering a marriage, while

only 38% did so in the NLSY79 (see Figure 3). Finally, I find that cohabitation is a much more common

For PAA 2011, I plan to expand upon these analyses in several ways. First, I plan adjust for oversamples in both dataset. Next, I plan to examine the duration of first unions by cohort, as well as the proportion having had a union dissolution by age 29. I also plan to examine the outcome of first cohabitations by cohort, examining whether cohabitations in the NLSY79 cohort were more likely to end in marriage as compared to the NLSY97 cohort. I also plan to examine differences in the average number of unions, as well as the average age at first union, by cohort. I also plan to examine differences by race/ethnicity and social class. I plan to explore different ways to define social class, including highest achieved education of the respondent as well as the level of parental education. Overall, though these analyses are preliminary, I believe they have merit, and I plan to exploit the richness of the NLSY79 and NLSY97 cohorts to do a demographic analysis of how union experiences in emerging adulthood have changed across time.

Figure 1. Life table estimates of survival to first union by cohort.

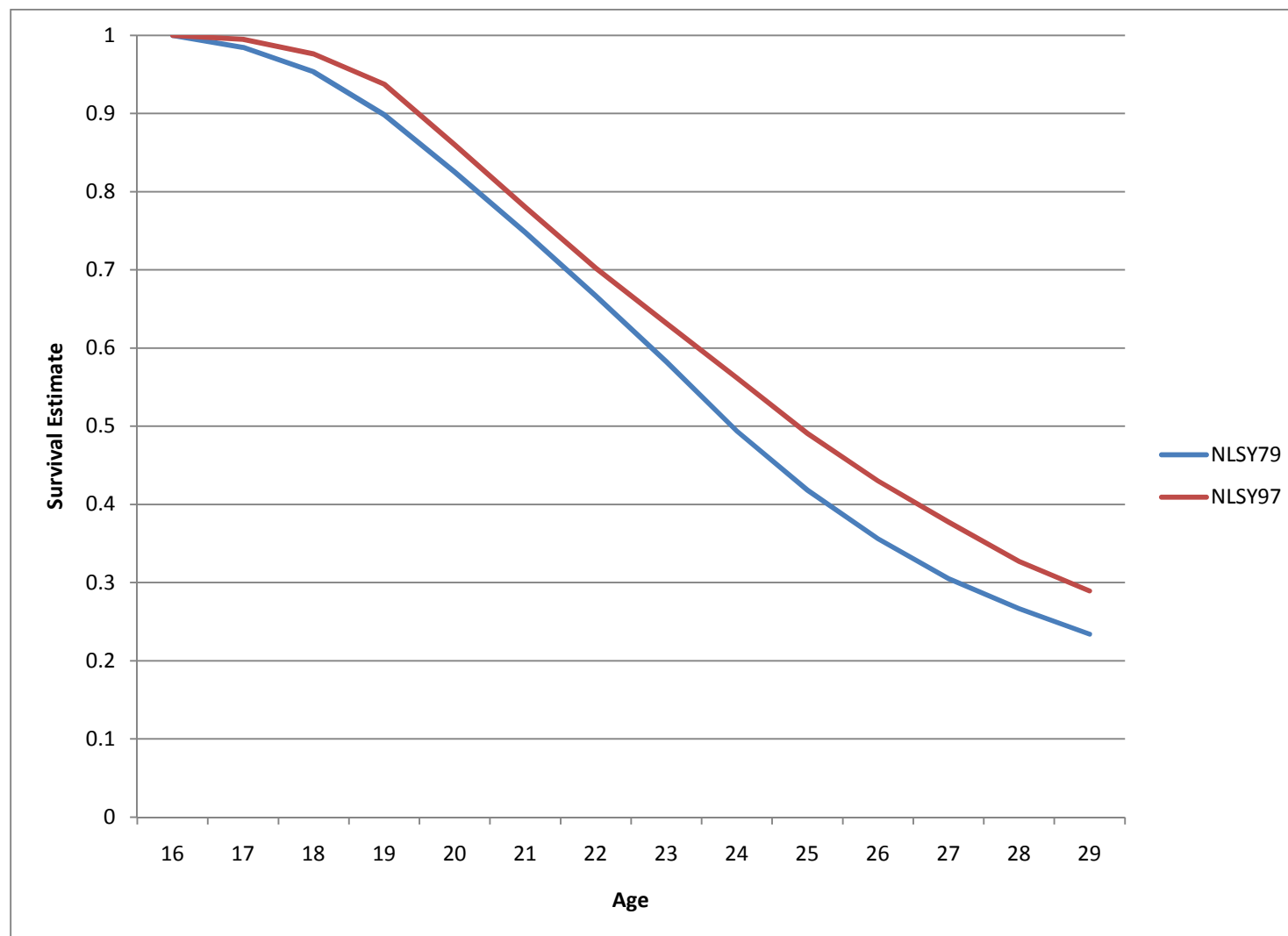


Figure 2. Life table estimates of survival to first cohabiting union by cohort.

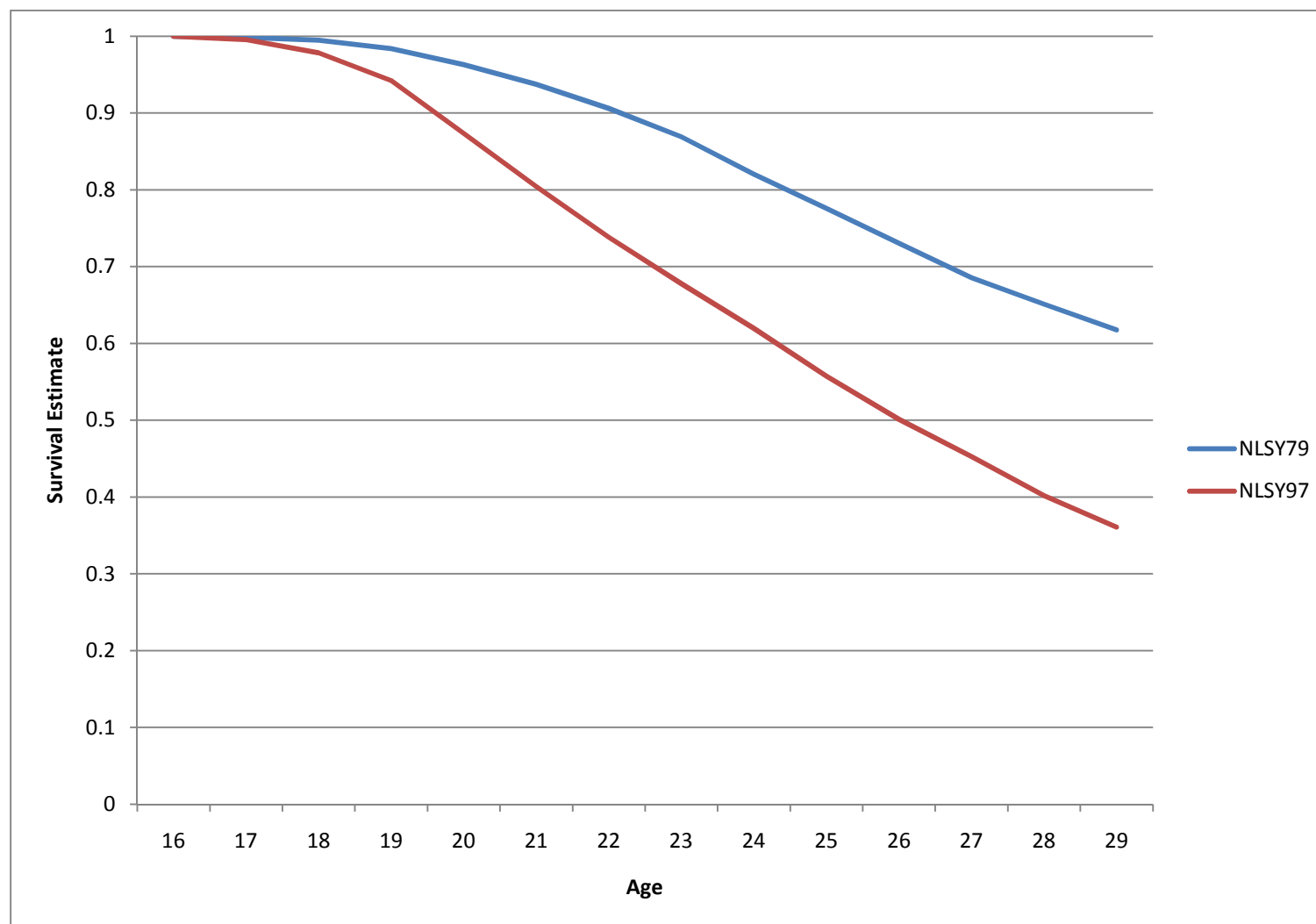


Figure 3. Life table estimates of survival to first marital union by cohort.

