



Splitting? 79% of marital separations end in divorce

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

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(Bob Laird/USA TODAY)

SAN FRANCISCO — About 79% of married couples who separate end up getting divorced, suggest new estimates of the incidence and length of separations.

"Separation is very common and is more common than immediate divorce," said researcher Dmitry Tumin of Ohio State University at a presentation at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, which ended Sunday. "Most separations last one year or less, but a few drag on a decade or more before ending in divorce. Other separations stay unresolved."

"The decision to separate is driven by time spent in the first marriage, and for women, by the presence of young children," Tumin said. He co-authored the research with sociologist Zhenchao Qian, also of Ohio State.

When women have children younger than age 5, their likelihood of separating rather than divorcing right away is increased, Tumin says.

The analysis was based on data from 7,272 individuals who were ages 14-22 in 1979 and had ever married. Of those, 51% were still married. Among the rest, 60% report having gone through a marital separation, with most (79%) ultimately divorcing.

The research found that the average length of a first separation is about four years. For respondents who divorce after separating, it's three years. And for the small number who reunite, the average separation is two years, the study found.

"In fact, we don't observe any separations that end with the couple getting back together after a three-year period, so three years is the point of no return," Tumin said. "After three years, the only outcomes observed are ongoing separation or divorce."

The research found that about 7% of separations lasted 10 or more years. Among different races and ethnic groups, he says Hispanics and blacks are more likely to be separated than are whites, and once separated, they are more likely to stay separated than divorce.

Almost 2,000 demographers, sociologists, economists, public health officials and others attended the population group's three-day meeting.

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