



Marriage and Divorce Decline during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Five States

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Abstract

The decline in marriage and divorce was evident prior to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, but it remains unknown whether these patterns have persisted during the pandemic. The authors compared monthly marriage and divorce counts for two years prior to the pandemic (2018 and 2019) and during the pandemic for the five states that published monthly vital statistics data for 2020 (Arizona, Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon). All five states witnessed initial declines in marriage. Counts of marriages in Arizona and New Hampshire rebounded. In contrast, marriage shortfalls occurred in Florida, Missouri, and Oregon. In the early pandemic months, divorces initially declined in all five states and rebounded in Arizona. In the remaining four states, divorce shortfalls have occurred. As more data become available, it will be important to acknowledge these state variations in response to the pandemic.

Keywords

marriage, divorce, pandemic, COVID-19

The U.S. marriage and divorce rates have been on a declining trajectory (Reynolds 2020a, 2020b), but there is limited empirical evidence about levels during the pandemic. One study revealed marriage declines from March through July using administrative data in two states and two metropolitan areas (Wagner, Choi, and Cohen 2020). We expand on their work and present monthly numbers of marriages and divorces in 2018, 2019, and 2020 on the basis of provisional marriage and divorce data from the five states (Arizona, Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon) that published 2020 monthly vital statistics data. Our approach takes into account the state-specific declining rates of marriage and divorce observed between 2018 and 2019 to estimate expected numbers of marriages and divorces. The *P* score represents the rate of change in marriages and divorces (observed minus expected) relative to what would have been expected on the basis of prior declines in marriages and divorces (see Supplement). Negative values indicate shortfalls in marriages and divorces, and positive values indicate excesses.

Marriage

Panel 1 in Figure 1 shows that in each of the five states between 2018 and 2019, there were small declines in the number of marriages. In 2020 starting in March (Florida) and April

(Arizona, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon), there were initial decreases in the number of marriages compared with 2018 or 2019. In Florida, Missouri, and Oregon, the numbers of marriages during the pandemic (measured from March to the last month of observation) were lower in 2020 than would have been expected on the basis of the same rate of decline observed between 2018 and 2019. The *P* scores in these states indicate at least a 20 percent shortfall in marriages. For example, in Florida there were 28,960 (33.1 percent) fewer marriages than would have been expected if marriage had followed the typical pattern. In contrast, Arizona and New Hampshire witnessed initial declines that were then compensated by increases in marriage, reflected in their low *P* scores.

Divorce

Panel 2 in Figure 1 shows that in 2018 and 2019, the divorce pattern across these five states was one of slight declines

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Figure I. Marriage and divorce declines during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic: a case study of five states. Note: P score = (observed March to end month 2020 – expected March to end month 2020)/expected March to end month 2020. Positive values indicate excess marriages and divorces, and negative values indicate shortfalls.

mirroring the national trend. On the basis of the 2020 data across all five states, there were fewer divorces during the initial pandemic months (March, April, and May) than during the same months in 2018 or 2019. Arizona appeared to have recovered, with an uptick in divorces and a P score of

2.0 percent, indicating that there were slightly more divorces during the pandemic than expected on the basis of the prior year. Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon have not experienced the same rebound in divorces during the months observed in 2020. On the basis of expected divorce

declines, the P scores for the available months indicated shortfalls ranging from 21.6 percent in Missouri to 36.4 percent in New Hampshire.

Implications

Although these findings represent the experiences of only five states, they provide our first opportunity to assess how the pandemic may have influenced both marriage and divorce levels. The overall pattern from March through June (data available for all five states) indicates shortfalls in marriages and divorces amounting to about 21,000 fewer marriages and 16,000 fewer divorces in these five states than would have been expected on the basis of state-level counts in March through June the prior two years. Our findings regarding decline in marriage are consistent with those of Wagner et al. (2020), but Arizona stands out as a state that entered a nearly full marriage and divorce recovery. Although variation across states in marriage and divorce patterns is evident, the explanations are less clear. On the basis of further analysis, the state-level marriage and divorce response to the pandemic does not appear to align with political affiliation of the governor, timing of state stay-at-home or reopening policies, unemployment rates, or divorce residency requirements. More refined state-level analysis of administrative record office responses to COVID-19, gender-specific unemployment rates and economic uncertainty, or state mobility may move forward our understanding of state trends and variability. In addition, further analysis of more states will provide greater leverage on assessments of the underlying explanations for state variation in response to the pandemic. There are too few states to make firm conclusions about national trends, but if these patterns persisted across the nation, there may have been up to 339,000 fewer marriages and 190,000 fewer divorces in the United States during 2020 than expected. The larger question is whether these numbers represent marriages and divorces that were merely postponed (resulting in a recovery) or will never occur (resulting in continued declining rates). Marriage and divorce recoveries are possible in the later months of 2020 and into 2021; however, there will certainly be ripple effects of the pandemic on future marriage and divorce patterns.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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