



PACIFIC ACADEMIC JOURNALS <https://www.pacadpub.com/index.php/ijass/> <https://doi.org/10.65186/ijass.v2.i1>

Received: 25.01.2026 | Accepted: 20.02.2026 | Published: 23.02.2026

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DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHTS INTO DIVORCE TRENDS: SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS ON FAMILY STRUCTURES

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Abstract

Divorce rates have shifted substantially across the globe since the mid-twentieth century, shaped by changes in economic conditions, educational attainment, urbanisation, and the legal frameworks governing marital dissolution. Drawing on peer-reviewed research and public demographic datasets, this review traces those trends, examines their socioeconomic determinants, and documents consequences for household composition and child wellbeing. Higher female labour-force participation is associated with increased union dissolution risk in contexts where marriage was historically held together by economic dependence, whereas educational expansion produces opposing effects depending on whether partners hold symmetrical or asymmetrical attainment levels. Children in post-divorce households face compounded disadvantages in income stability and educational outcomes, yet the magnitude of those effects is moderated substantially by the quality of co-parental cooperation and by the depth of social-safety-net provision. Persistent gaps remain in longitudinal evidence, especially in the Global South; targeted policy responses centred on income support, mediation services, and flexible custody legislation remain underbuilt in most contexts.

Keywords: *divorce rates, family structure, socioeconomic determinants, child wellbeing, marital dissolution, family policy*

1. Introduction

Marriage has long served as one of the primary organising institutions of human society, structuring economic cooperation, reproductive activity, and the transmission of resources across generations. That institution has come under considerable pressure throughout the past century. In Western Europe and North America, crude divorce rates roughly tripled between 1960 and 1990 before levelling off or declining modestly in the 2000s (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Other regions have followed at different paces and with different drivers, producing a globally uneven but broadly upward trajectory in marital dissolution.

What the data tell us about why this happened, and what those changes mean for the families living through them, is what this paper attempts to work out. Answering it requires moving across demography, sociology, economics, and public health. It also requires attention to measurement problems that tend to go unacknowledged: divorce statistics are collected differently across jurisdictions, definitional boundaries shift over time, and the absence of reliable records in many low-income countries creates substantial analytic blind spots.

A conceptual framework first situates divorce within its socioeconomic context. After describing search and inclusion procedures, the paper maps global and regional temporal trends, examines the major socioeconomic determinants, traces consequences for children and household structure, and reviews the policy environment, closing with recommendations for practice and priorities for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework and Scope

2.1. Definitions and Dimensions of Divorce

Divorce here refers to the legal dissolution of a formally registered marriage, a definition narrower than union dissolution, which also encompasses the ending of cohabiting partnerships. That omission introduces increasingly serious measurement problems as cohabitation has grown in prevalence throughout Europe and North America (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). Where reviewed studies address cohabitation dissolution explicitly, the paper notes that distinction; otherwise the default unit of analysis is legal divorce.

The process unfolds across legal, economic, and psychological dimensions. Legally, it produces

outputs: asset division, custody arrangements, maintenance obligations. Economically, it redistributes household income, assets, and liabilities. The psychological dimension (receiving extensive attention in clinical research but not the focus here) involves relational and identity transitions for all household members. These dimensions do not operate independently. Legal frameworks shape economic outcomes, which in turn affect the adjustment options available to family members (Härkönen, 2014).

2.2. Socioeconomic Indicators and Family Structure

The socioeconomic determinants examined here fall into four clusters: income and employment, including women's labour-force participation and relative earnings; educational attainment and associated social capital; urbanisation and the demographic transition toward lower fertility and later marriage; and legal and institutional context, including the liberalisation of divorce law and the reach of social safety nets. The clusters overlap in practice, as urbanisation correlates with education, education with employment, and all four shape and are shaped by the normative climate governing gender and family (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

Family structure, as used here, refers to the residential and relational configuration of household members following dissolution, including single-parent households, stepfamilies, and shared or split custody arrangements. These configurations carry downstream consequences for resource allocation, child socialisation, and intergenerational mobility. Figure 3 (Section 5) sets out the conceptual framework linking these elements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Literature Search Strategy

Systematic searches were conducted in PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, EconLit, and PubMed using the terms divorce, marital dissolution, union dissolution, family structure, and socioeconomic determinants in various Boolean combinations. Supplementary searches in Google Scholar used title-phrase queries for key theoretical constructs. Statistical and demographic data came from the OECD Family Database, the United Nations Demographic Yearbook, and the World Bank's World Development Indicators.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they reported quantitative estimates of divorce rates or risk, appeared in peer-reviewed outlets or were issued by established statistical agencies, and provided sufficient methodological detail for critical assessment. Research restricted to psychiatric clinical samples without broader generalisability was excluded, as were opinion pieces and commentary not containing original data or systematic synthesis. No publication date restriction was applied, though most cited literature falls between 1988 and 2023. Foundational studies, including McLanahan and Sandefur's (1994) single-parent household research and McLanahan and Bumpass's (1988) intergenerational analysis, are cited alongside more recent work that builds on or revises their findings.

3.3. Data Synthesis Techniques

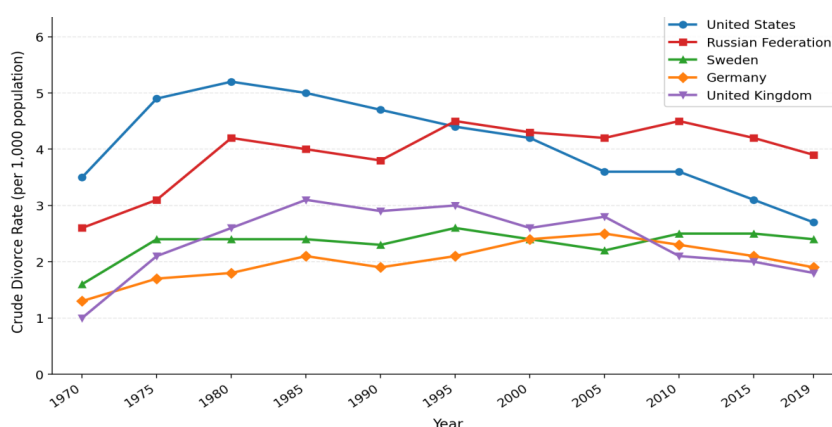
Given the diversity of designs, populations, and outcomes across the included literature, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted rather than a formal meta-analysis. Effect estimates are reported where available, but the primary goal is to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across studies rather than produce pooled quantitative estimates. Demographic trend data from international databases were used to construct the four figures presented below.

4. Global Trends in Divorce

4.1. Temporal Patterns

Divorce rates in industrialised countries moved through three recognisable phases over the past sixty years. From roughly 1960 to 1980, rates climbed steeply, driven largely by the spread of no-fault divorce legislation across Western Europe and North America. California enacted the first such law in the United States in 1969; comparable reforms followed in the United Kingdom, Australia, and most of continental Europe within a decade (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Rates then stabilised at historically elevated levels from the early 1980s to approximately 2000 before beginning a modest but persistent decline in most high-income countries, concentrated especially among college-educated couples (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014).

Figure 1 traces crude divorce rates (divorces per 1,000 mid-year population) across five countries spanning different cultural and institutional contexts. The United States shows the sharpest peak (around 5.2 per 1,000 in the early 1980s) followed by a marked decline to roughly 2.7 by 2019. Sweden, often cited as a case of high but stable dissolution risk, maintained rates near 2.4 throughout the 2000s. Russia registered among the highest rates in Europe for most of the period, reflecting both Soviet-era secularisation and a difficult post-transition economic environment.



Note. Data are approximated from OECD Family Database and Eurostat records. Rates represent divorces granted per 1,000 mid-year population.

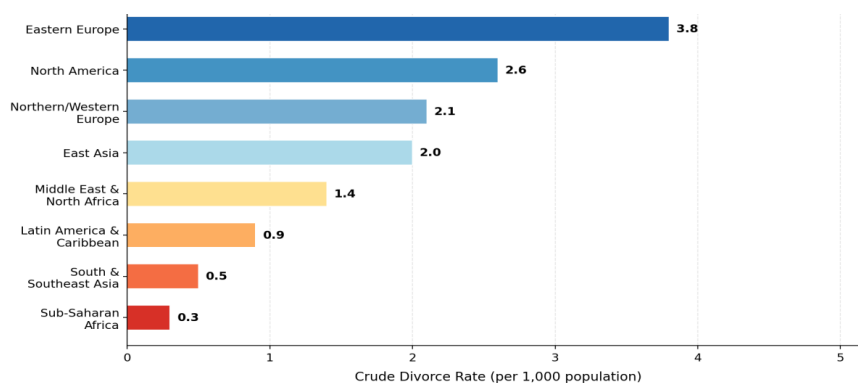
Figure 1. Crude Divorce Rates in Selected Countries, 1970–2019

The U.S. decline is not an artefact of administrative change. It reflects genuine behavioural shifts concentrated among highly educated couples, whose divorce rates fell substantially between 1980 and 2010 while rates among less-educated couples barely moved (Cherlin, 2010). Eastern European countries, meanwhile, exhibit persistently high rates despite improvements in living standards, a pattern suggesting institutional and cultural factors that income alone cannot account for.

4.2. Geographic Variations

Regional contrasts are sharp. Eastern European countries, led by Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic

states, consistently rank among the highest in crude divorce rates worldwide. High-income Western and Northern European nations cluster around 1.9 to 2.5 per 1,000. Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal show lower rates, partly attributable to stronger Catholic institutional influence and later legal liberalisation of divorce. Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa register the lowest formal divorce rates, though this partly reflects that formal legal registration is itself less universal in these regions (Härkönen, 2014).



Note. Regional averages are derived from United Nations Demographic Yearbook (2021) and World Bank Development Indicators. Values represent approximate means; country-level variation within regions is substantial.

Figure 2. Mean Crude Divorce Rates by World Region, circa 2019

The Eastern European mean of approximately 3.8 per 1,000 is nearly thirteen times the Sub-Saharan African mean of 0.3, but the comparison requires caution, as it conflates genuine behavioural differences with differences in the coverage and reliability of vital registration systems. In many low-

income countries, marriages are dissolved through informal social processes rather than formal legal proceedings, meaning official statistics substantially undercount actual union dissolution (United Nations, 2021).

5. Socioeconomic Determinants

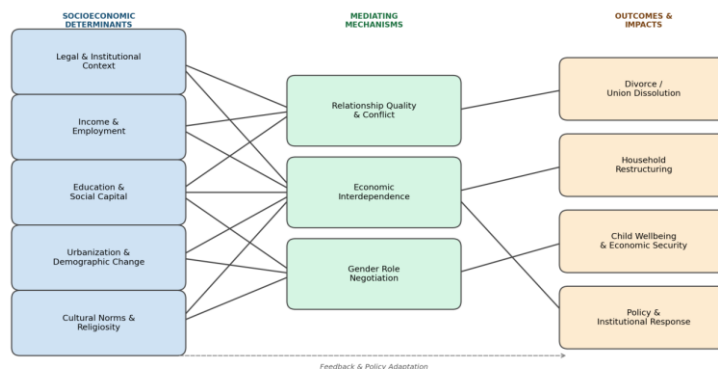


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework: Socioeconomic Determinants of Divorce and Consequences for Family Structure

5.1. Income and Employment

The relationship between income and divorce risk is neither linear nor uniform across gender. Low household income and unemployment consistently associate with elevated dissolution risk, operating through financial stress, conflict over resource allocation, and reduced capacity to manage relationship difficulties as they arise (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Jalovaara (2003) found in Finnish panel data that couples in which one or both partners experienced unemployment were significantly more likely to separate than continuously employed couples, even after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics.

Women's employment status has generated particular theoretical attention. An early interpretation, sometimes called the economic independence hypothesis, held that wives who earn their own income can more readily leave unsatisfying marriages (South, 2001). This found support in studies from the 1970s and 1980s, when female employment was still a marker of departure from traditional gender roles. More recent evidence complicates the picture: in societies where dual-earner households have become the norm, wives' employment no longer reliably predicts elevated dissolution risk and may even reduce it by easing financial strain (Poortman & Kalmijn, 2002). The direction and magnitude of effects shift with context.

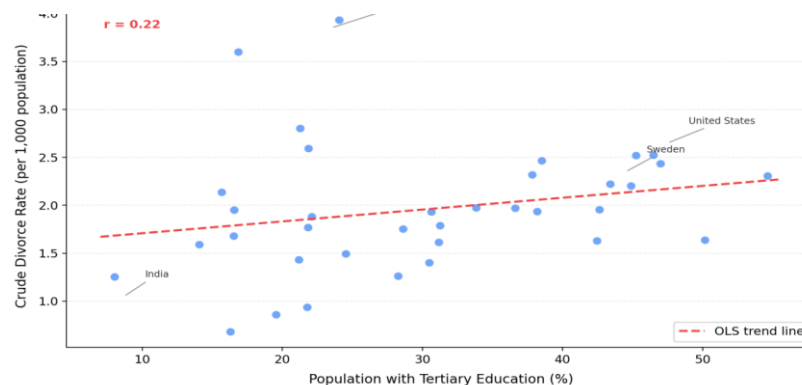
Income inequality at the societal level matters too. Greater inequality raises the economic stakes of marital matching, increases returns to assortative pairing, and potentially destabilises marriages where partners' economic fortunes diverge sharply. Cross-national data indicate that countries with

higher Gini coefficients tend to have higher divorce rates even after controlling for average income, though the causal mechanisms remain contested (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

5.2. Education and Social Capital

Education's effects on divorce run through competing pathways. Higher educational attainment is associated with better communication skills, more stable employment, and stronger social networks that buffer against relationship difficulties, all factors that should reduce dissolution risk. At the same time, education expands women's economic alternatives to marriage and correlates with attitudes favouring gender egalitarianism, which can generate conflict when partners hold asymmetric expectations (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006). Which pathway dominates depends substantially on when and where the measurement is taken.

The historical balance shifted markedly. In the United States through the 1970s, more-educated women had higher divorce rates than less-educated women, as the independence effect dominated. By the 1990s, that gradient had reversed: highly educated couples became less likely to divorce, partly because well-matched partners faced less tension over gender expectations, and partly because later marriage age and pre-marital cohabitation filtered out poor matches earlier (Cherlin, 2010). Figure 4 plots tertiary education attainment against crude divorce rates across selected countries and reveals a modest positive correlation ($r \approx 0.38$), with considerable scatter reflecting the heterogeneity of institutional contexts.



Note. Education data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021). Divorce rates from OECD Family Database and United Nations Demographic Yearbook (2021). Country-level values are approximate. The positive correlation reflects autonomy effects but does not imply causation.

Figure 4. Tertiary Education Attainment and Crude Divorce Rate Across Selected Countries, circa 2019

Countries with restrictive divorce laws show low formal rates regardless of education levels, a suppression that masks the underlying behavioural relationship. Social capital, proxied by church attendance, civic organisation membership, and community ties, moderates the education-divorce association as well, with greater social embeddedness offering some protection against dissolution even among otherwise at-risk couples (Amato, 2010).

5.3. Urbanisation and Demographic Transition

Urbanisation reshapes both the material and normative conditions governing marriage and divorce. Urban labour markets reduce economic dependence within couples, expose individuals to diverse relationship norms, and weaken the informal social controls that once discouraged divorce in close-knit rural communities (Raymo et al., 2015). The demographic transition accompanying urbanisation, with delayed marriage, reduced fertility, and extended periods of pre-marital partnership formation, increases the heterogeneity of relationship trajectories and raises the probability that poorly matched couples eventually dissolve their unions.

Japan's crude divorce rate, below 1.0 per 1,000 in 1970, exceeded 2.0 by the early 2000s before easing somewhat; South Korea experienced a still more pronounced increase over the same period. In East Asia, where marriage has historically been shaped by strong familial obligation norms and limited state support for single-parent households, urbanisation has contributed to sharp divorce rate increases over the past three decades. Raymo et al. (2015) argue these trends reflect tensions between modernising gender expectations and persistently traditional institutional frameworks, an incomplete gender revolution producing instability in its wake.

6. Impacts on Children and Households

6.1. Child Wellbeing and Economic Security

Children who experience parental divorce show, on average, lower academic achievement, more behavioural difficulties, and worse outcomes across multiple adult domains than children from continuously intact households (Amato & Keith,

1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Effect sizes are typically small to moderate: Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis found a mean d of around 0.14, but the directional consistency across many studies and populations is striking. McLanahan and Bumpass (1988) established that the intergenerational transmission of family disruption itself represents a meaningful pathway, with women raised in single-parent households more likely to experience their own marital dissolution.

Economic security is one of the most proximate mechanisms at work. Single-parent households, the dominant post-divorce residential arrangement in most high-income countries, have substantially lower median incomes than two-parent households. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) estimated that roughly half the outcomes gap between children of divorced and continuously married parents could be attributed to income differences. The remainder reflects disrupted parenting, residential instability, and the loss of the economies of scale that two-adult households provide.

Children in post-divorce households also face a higher probability of residential moves, school changes, and subsequent parental repartnering, transitions that compound over time. Fomby and Cherlin (2007) analysed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and found that family instability, measured by the number of parental partnership transitions, was associated with children's behavioural problems independently of the household's composition at any given point. Repeated transitions, not simply the absence of a second parent, account for much of the observed harm.

6.2. Custodial Arrangements and Parental Roles

Through the 1960s and 1970s, mother-sole-custody was the near-universal default in high-income countries, grounded in the "tender years" doctrine and gendered assumptions about primary caregiving. Legislative reforms from the 1980s onward introduced joint legal custody (shared decision-making authority) as the presumptive standard in many jurisdictions, and shared physical custody (alternating residence) has grown markedly in Sweden, Australia, and several U.S. states (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

The welfare implications of different custody arrangements for children remain contested. Shared physical custody is associated with better outcomes on several mental health and academic measures in observational data, though selection bias is a genuine concern: couples who choose shared custody may already be more cooperative and better resourced than those who do not, and these background characteristics could account for much of the observed advantage. Less contested is that high inter-parental conflict following divorce, regardless of custody arrangement, consistently predicts worse outcomes for children, placing the quality of the co-parental relationship at the centre of policy concern (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

7. Policy Contexts and Institutional Factors

7.1. Legal Frameworks and Access to Divorce

The spread of no-fault divorce legislation from the late 1960s removed fault attribution as a requirement for dissolution, reducing exit costs and, according to Stevenson and Wolfers (2007), producing a one-time upward shift in divorce rates of around 20–25 per cent in affected jurisdictions before rates returned to their prior trend. That the long-run effect appears modest suggests legal change accelerated existing behavioural trends rather than creating entirely new ones.

Beyond fault standards, legal frameworks govern mandatory waiting periods, mediation requirements, and asset division, all of which shape the economic position of divorced parties. Countries with mandatory mediation prior to litigation report lower rates of highly contested proceedings, and pilot evidence from the United Kingdom and Australia suggests early neutral assessment reduces the time and cost of resolution (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). Whether procedural reforms affect the ultimate rate of divorce, as opposed to how it unfolds, remains an open empirical question.

7.2. Social Safety Nets and Support Services

The strength of the social safety net shapes the economic consequences of divorce, particularly for custodial mothers. Countries with generous family allowances, subsidised childcare, and accessible housing assistance moderate the income drop that follows dissolution and reduce children's exposure to poverty. Nordic countries, which combine relatively high divorce rates with strong safety nets,

show smaller adverse effects of parental separation on child outcomes than the United States, where safety-net provision is less generous and more conditional (Härkönen, 2014). This comparison is observational and confounded by numerous institutional differences, but the pattern holds across several studies.

Child support enforcement, where courts actively pursue compliance with payment orders, reduces the income shortfall experienced by custodial-parent households and has been associated with modest improvements in child educational outcomes in studies of U.S. state-level variation (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Aggressive pursuit of arrears, however, can undermine post-divorce co-parental cooperation; policy designs combining firm enforcement with accessible mediation services may produce better child outcomes than enforcement alone.

8. Methodological Considerations and Gaps

8.1. Data Availability and Measurement Challenges

Several measurement problems recur in this literature. Divorce rates are typically expressed as crude rates per 1,000 population rather than rates per married couple, which inflates apparent declines when the married share of the population is itself falling, a problem documented by Kennedy and Ruggles (2014), who showed that refined divorce rates in the United States declined far less sharply after 1980 than crude rates implied. Administrative records capture only formal legal dissolutions, missing the growing universe of informally dissolved cohabiting unions. Vital registration coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America also remains incomplete, making regional comparisons unreliable.

Cross-country comparability is further limited by variation in how divorce is counted. Some jurisdictions record the date of final decree; others the date a petition is filed. Court backlogs can introduce artificial temporal swings. Different national statistical agencies publish crude rates, total counts, or cohort-based duration statistics with varying time lags, making trend comparisons more approximate than they sometimes appear.

8.2. Causal Inference and Longitudinal Analyses

Distinguishing the effects of divorce from those of the pre-divorce family environment is a persistent challenge. Children who experience parental divorce were often exposed, before the separation, to elevated conflict, economic stress, and disrupted parenting, what researchers call the selection problem. Sun and Li (2002) addressed this by comparing children's outcomes at multiple time points before and after parental separation, finding evidence of declining functioning that preceded the formal divorce. Much of the observed effect, their work suggests, traces to the conflict characterising the pre-separation period rather than to the act of separation itself.

Instrumental variable approaches, exploiting policy variation in divorce law as an exogenous shifter, have been used to estimate causal effects on adult outcomes (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007), but the instruments available are often weak or face questionable exclusion restrictions. Natural experiments such as the staggered introduction of no-fault laws across U.S. states provide useful variation but are too distal from individual-level outcomes to pin down mechanisms. Panel studies following individuals from childhood through adulthood remain the most informative design but are expensive and logistically demanding, and the handful that exist are concentrated in North America and Europe.

9. Implications for Practice and Policy

9.1. Designing Effective Support Mechanisms

Income support for custodial-parent households should phase out gradually as earned income rises, avoiding the sharp benefit cliffs that discourage labour-force re-entry by divorced mothers. Child support systems should pair reliable enforcement with accessible dispute resolution channels that reduce adversarial conflict and sustain co-parental communication. Housing instability, one of the most disruptive secondary consequences of divorce for children, calls for early intervention, including emergency housing assistance and priority consideration in affordable housing programmes for households with children undergoing family transition.

Mental health and family counselling services should be embedded within the divorce process rather than positioned as optional resources sought

only in crisis. Court-connected mediation programmes in several jurisdictions have found that structured early engagement between separating parties, even where it does not produce durable agreements, reduces subsequent adversarial litigation and is associated with more cooperative parenting over the medium term (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The downstream costs that poorly managed post-divorce conflict generates, including child welfare involvement, educational remediation and adult mental health treatment, make the economic case for funding such services difficult to dismiss.

9.2. Implications for Family-Centred Services

For practitioners in education, social services, and health care, family structure should be treated as a dynamic rather than static characteristic. School social workers, paediatricians, and housing case managers each regularly encounter families in the midst of or shortly following dissolution. Recognising the risk factors that divorce activates, namely income loss, residential instability, reduced parental availability and inter-parental conflict, enables targeted, proportionate responses rather than either neglect or over-intervention.

Schools occupy a particularly strategic position: they see children daily, can observe behavioural and academic changes signalling stress, and have institutional channels through which to connect families with support services. Training teachers and counsellors to identify post-divorce adjustment difficulties, and to respond without stigmatising the family form, is a relatively low-cost intervention with potentially broad reach. Curricula on social-emotional learning that equip children with coping skills for family transitions have shown promise in randomised trials, though effect sizes remain modest and most trials are short-term (Amato, 2010).

10. Conclusion

Divorce has become, across much of the world, a routine feature of the life course rather than an exceptional disruption. Its prevalence reflects genuine changes in economic structure, in gender relations, and in the normative frameworks through which individuals evaluate the obligations of marriage. These changes cannot simply be reversed by policy, and the evidence does not support treating marital dissolution as uniformly harmful. For households marked by severe conflict,

dissolution can improve the wellbeing of all members, including children. The relevant policy question is how to minimise the socioeconomic damage that dissolution often inflicts on its most vulnerable participants: children and primary caregivers with limited labour-market alternatives.

Socioeconomic context is central to both the likelihood and the consequences of divorce. Policies that reduce income insecurity, expand access to quality employment, and support educational attainment address root causes as well as symptoms. Legal frameworks matter too, not merely for the rate of dissolution but for its economic terms and for the post-divorce parenting arrangements that so heavily influence child outcomes. The evidence base, substantial for high-income countries, is thin for much of the Global South, where vital registration gaps and the prevalence of informal partnership forms severely limit generalisability. Investing in demographic data infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries is a prerequisite for evidence-based family policy in those contexts.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs capable of disentangling selection from causal effects, cross-national comparative work that exploits genuine policy variation, and the development of better measures of informal union dissolution. As cohabitation continues to spread globally, the boundary between marriage and less formal partnership will become an increasingly consequential site of inquiry. How societies choose to govern that boundary, whether legally, economically or culturally, will shape the structure and wellbeing of families for decades to come.

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