

Divorce Rates Around the World: A Love Story

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In four decades, divorce rates around the world have more than doubled.

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What do we know about the rates of divorce all around the world, and how they have been changing over time? Thanks to a recently published study, we now know a whole lot more than we did before.

University of California at Irvine sociologists Cheng-Tong Lir Wang and Evan Schofer analyzed nearly four decades of divorce data (1970-2008) from 84 countries around the world. They looked at changes in rates of divorce over time and different rates of divorce in different places. Their report, "Coming out of the penumbras: World culture and cross-national variation in divorce rates," was published in the December 2018 issue of *Social Forces*.

The approach that psychologists use to understand whether someone is likely to divorce is to look at individual life experiences and choices, such as a person's education, employment, income, and the age at which they marry. The sociologists Wang and Schofer were interested in societal factors that might be relevant to rates of divorce, such as a nation's level of economic development and the proportion of their women who are in the workforce. They also wanted to learn about global norms and values, such as the belief in human rights and gender equality, and whether they had anything to do with rates of divorce.

Their measure of the rate of divorce was the number of legally registered divorces for every 1,000 married people. The researchers were interested in other measures, such as the number of divorces per married couples (instead of individuals) but more countries had data relevant to the measure they used. (They did not address a different question that is often of great interest: what proportion of marriages will end in divorce?)

Here is what they found.

Worldwide Growth in Rates of Divorce

Globally, in the nearly four decades between 1970 and 2008, the divorce rate has more than doubled, from 2.6 divorces for every 1,000 married people to 5.5. Those results are averaged across all the regions of the world that they studied.

Different Rates of Divorce in Different Regions of the World

The average rate of divorce across all years and all regions was 4.08 divorces for every 1,000 married people. Divorce rates ranged from lows of .45 and .46 for Sri Lanka and Peru to highs of 19.01, 11.49, and 11.03 for Kazakhstan, Russia, and Cuba, respectively. (The divorce rates for 83 of the 84 nations are at the end of this article. The authors left out the US because the country is “an extreme outlier.” I’ve emailed them asking for the divorce rate for the US and if I hear back from them, I will add it.)

The divorce rates for Northern Europe and Western Europe, including the Scandinavian countries, are all fairly high, ranging from 4.03 for France to 6.22 for Denmark and 6.55 for the UK. The exception is Ireland, with just 1.94 divorces for every 1,000 married people. Canada (5.25), Australia (5.61) and New Zealand (6.29) also have high rates of divorce.

Rates are fairly low for Southern Europe, ranging from .93 for Italy to 2.57 for Slovenia. They are mostly low in Latin American and Caribbean countries, with the big exceptions of Cuba (11.03), Puerto Rico (9.43), and the Dominican Republic (9.33).

Eastern Asia and Pacific nations are also on the low side, with divorce rates ranging from 1.13 for China to 3.97 for Hong Kong.

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In the Middle Eastern and North African nations, rates range from 1.80 and 1.98 for Iran and Syria to 4.27 and 4.68 for Egypt and Kuwait.

Rates for the Eastern European and Central Asian nations are quite variable.

What Is Different about the Nations that Have Higher Rates of Divorce

They have a higher level of economic development. One of the most powerful predictors of the rate of divorce is a country’s gross national income (per capita). In wealthier countries (as measured by gross national income), a greater proportion of people get divorced.

More of their women are in the workforce. Countries with a greater percentage of women (ages 15 and older) in the labor force have higher rates of divorce.

They are more highly educated. Nations with more people enrolled in secondary education have higher divorce rates.

They have lower proportions of Catholics. Nations with proportionately more Catholics have lower rates of divorce. Nations with greater proportions of Muslims also have lower divorce rates, but the results are not always statistically significant.

They are more likely to be part of international organizations and treaties. The authors believe that when nations sign onto international non-governmental organizations and treaties, they are more likely to be influenced by global norms and ideas such as individual rights, the importance of consent, and the freedom to choose one's own destiny. An example is the Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The authors see a country's ratification of CEDAW as an indication of its "commitment to the cultural principles of individualism and gender equality." Nations with higher rates of membership in international non-governmental organizations and treaties have higher rates of divorce.

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Why Divorce Stories Can Be Love Stories

Divorce can be a devastating experience for the adults who are splitting as well as their children. But it can be an empowering, and sometimes even life-saving, choice when the alternative of staying in the marriage is even worse.

Some marriages are abusive, posing risks to the emotional and physical well-being, and even the survival, of adults and children. It can be an act of love for yourself and your children (if you have any) to leave such marriages, especially in the face of an uncertain life outside of marriage and threats from the abusive spouse.

Divorce can be a love story when people love themselves enough to walk away from a bad situation.

Divorce can be a love story when people believe that they can find romantic love once again.

Divorce can be a love story when people realize that they already have love, in the biggest, broadest sense of the word. Maybe they have friends they love and family they love. Maybe they realize that the romantic version of love is just one version, and a rather narrow one at that. Maybe those friends and family who are so important to them have been in their lives a whole lot longer than their former spouse.

Divorce can be a love story when people realize that they love their life outside of marriage. Maybe they love their single life more than any other life. Maybe they especially love living alone.

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Because of economic development, the growing numbers of women in the workforce, and higher rates of education, more and more people around the world can afford to divorce. They have the skills, the knowledge, and the resources to support themselves outside of marriage. Because of the world-wide dissemination of norms and values that maintain that

humans should have rights and choices, and that men and women should have equal control over their own destinies, more and more people take seriously the option to divorce.

The next step in this process is for more and more people to have the option—and to realize they have the option—not to marry at all. Once single life loses its stigma, then people who like living single can more readily choose to do so. People who want to marry will be advantaged, too. They can pursue marriage from a position of strength, as something they are running towards and not just a place where they end up because they are running away from being single. When single life is affordable and respected, and recognized as meaningful and fulfilling, then people who want to be coupled won't be in such a rush to get there. They won't lunge at risky romantic partners out of desperation.

People who want to marry might make better choices, and consequently be less likely to divorce. They (and their children, if they have any) will get to avoid the pain of divorce while enjoying the individual rights, choices, freedoms, and individualistic values and practices that are increasingly a part of everyday life in many nations all around the world.

Divorce Rates for 83 Countries, 1970-2008

(Number of divorces for every 1,000 married people)

Country, Divorce Rate, Region of World

01, Kazakhstan, 19.01, EE

02, Russia, 11.49, EE

03, Cuba, 11.03, LA

04, Puerto Rico, 9.43, LA

05, Dominican Republic, 9.33, LA

06, Estonia, 8.43, EE

07, Belarus, 8.31, EE

08, Ukraine, 8.02, EE

09, Lithuania, 7.64, EE

10, Latvia, 7.13, EE

11, Moldova, 6.81, EE

- 12, United Kingdom, 6.55, WE
- 13, Czech Republic, 6.45, EE
- 14, New Zealand, 6.29, OC
- 15, Denmark, 6.22, NE
- 16 Sweden, 6.02, NE
- 17, Finland, 5.62, NE
- 18, Australia, 5.61, OC
- 19, Canada, 5.25, NA
- 20, Hungary, 5.17, EE
- 21, Germany, 5.05, WE
- 22, Iceland, 5.01, NE
- 23, Kuwait, 4.68, ME
- 24, Switzerland, 4.57, WE
- 25, Norway, 4.54, NE
- 26, Belgium, 4.28, WE
- 27, Egypt, 4.27, ME
- 28, Slovak Republic, 4.22, EE
- 29, Austria, 4.22, WE
- 30, Netherlands, 4.07, WE
- 31, Uruguay, 4.07, LA
- 32, France, 4.03, WE
- 33, Israel, 4.03, ME
- 34, Hong Kong, 3.97, EA
- 35, Costa Rica, 3.97, LA

36, Paraguay, 3.95, LA
37, Jamaica, 3.79, LA
38, Venezuela, 3.60, LA
39, Trinidad & Tobago, 3.58, LA
40, Kyrgyz Republic, 3.52, EE
41, Panama, 3.38, LA
42, Luxembourg, 3.36, WE
43, Tunisia, 3.10, ME
44, Jordan, 3.09, ME
45, Romania, 3.07, EE
46, Japan, 3.01, EA
47, Indonesia, 3.00, EA
48, Korea, Rep., 2.99, EA
49, El Salvador, 2.76, LA
50, South Africa, 2.69, SSA
51, Bulgaria, 2.60, EE
52, Slovenia, 2.57, SE
53, Portugal, 2.47, SE
54, Poland, 2.26, EE
55, Macao, 2.16, EA
56, Cyprus, 2.08, EE
57, Nepal, 1.99, SA
58, Syria, 1.98, ME
59, Mauritius, 1.97, SSA

60, Ireland, 1.94, WE
61, Mongolia, 1.87, EA
62, Croatia, 1.83, SE
63, Nicaragua, 1.83, LA
64, Azerbaijan, 1.81, EE
65, Iran, 1.80, ME
66, Albania, 1.73, SE
67, Turkey, 1.66, EE
68, Honduras, 1.55, LA
69, Armenia, 1.54, EE
70, Spain, 1.49, SE
71, Mexico, 1.48, LA
72, Thailand, 1.35, EA
73, Greece, 1.31, SE
74, Brazil, 1.27, LA
75, Tajikistan, 1.21, EE
76, China, 1.13, EA
77, Ecuador, 1.09, LA
78, Macedonia, .99, SE
79, Italy, .93, SE
80, Guatemala, .92, LA
81, Chile, .91, LA
82, Peru, .46, LA
83, Sri Lanka, .45, SA

Regions:

EA Eastern Asia and Pacific

EE Eastern Europe and Central Asia

LA Latin America and Caribbean

ME Middle East and North Africa

NA North America

NE Northern Europe

OC Oceania

SA South Asia

SE Southern Europe

SSA Sub-Saharan Africa

WE Western Europe