



Marriage in Oklahoma

2001 Baseline Statewide Survey
on Marriage and Divorce

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A very special thank you is given to Governor Frank Keating, who had the vision and the courage to take the bold steps necessary to address the critical need to strengthen families, support marriage and reduce divorce for the well being of Oklahoma's future—our children. Governor Keating blazed an unprecedented trail for the country to follow as policy makers seek ways to implement proposed changes in welfare reform. Governor Keating and First Lady Cathy Keating were instrumental in launching the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, and we appreciate their strength and dedication to this program.

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Foreword

by

Howard Hendrick

Cabinet Secretary Health and Human Services And
Director of the Department of Human Services

In 1999, Governor Frank Keating launched the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce in the State. The initial impetus was an economic study that linked various negative social indicators, including high divorce rates, to the State's poorly performing economy. The Governor's decision to help strengthen marriages and reduce divorce is reinforced by the consensus of social science research, which finds that children reared in single parent families are at higher risk of poverty, difficulties in the labor market and becoming teen parents and high school dropouts. Generally, children do better when reared by their married parents, but the quality of the parents' relationship matters. Therefore, helping more couples develop and maintain stable and healthy marriages is sound public policy.

The overarching goal of the OMI is to improve the wellbeing of children by *strengthening* marriages. Reducing the divorce rate by one third by 2010 is a specific target and this multi-sector initiative has already accomplished a variety of aims. One strategy is to provide services that help couples that choose marriage learn the skills they need to form and sustain healthy marriages.

From the outset, the Governor insisted that the OMI be grounded in the best available research. A statewide survey was commissioned to learn more about Oklahomans' attitudes and behavior related to marriage, divorce and family formation. This report shares the highlights of the OMI statewide baseline survey conducted by the Bureau for Social Research at Oklahoma State University. Dr. Christine Johnson and Dr. Scott Stanley have ably led the project, with the advice and assistance of a team of nationally known scholars and analysts. This is the first state survey to collect comprehensive data on attitudes, behaviors and opinions related to marriage and divorce and marital quality. The survey is also unique in that it provides a first time look at how low income families regard these issues that are currently a matter of public debate.

We believe the survey findings are important and useful for the following reasons:

- **The survey data helps us understand more about marriage and divorce in the State and will help us tailor our strategies to the needs of Oklahomans.** For example, we have definitive evidence for the first time that Oklahomans marry very young—about two years younger than the national average. This is undoubtedly a major factor in Oklahoma's high divorce rate since people who marry young are at considerably higher risk of divorce. This finding suggests that we need to think seriously about helping our young people make wise marriage choices, understand the commitment of marriage, and learn the skills to have successful marriages.
- **The baseline survey will help us monitor and assess the progress and impact of our initiative over time since we plan to repeat the survey in future years.** For example, we have learned from the survey that Oklahomans believe that marriage and relationship education programs are a good idea, yet few realize that this kind of course is beginning to be offered across the state, ultimately in every county. We've come to understand that sometimes policy makers mistakenly regard a lack of available services as evidence of a lack of interest.
- **The survey should be of interest to the growing number of states beginning to launch efforts to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce.** There is a paucity of state specific information on marriage and divorce. Most available information is based on national surveys or small clinical samples. We encourage other states to conduct similar scientific surveys to help guide future efforts, and we offer our survey design and instruments to those who choose to use them.

There is both good and bad news in this survey. The bad news is that Oklahomans share the country's high prevalence of divorce and beliefs that undermine marriage. The good news is that Oklahomans highly value marriage, express interest in services to support stronger and healthier marriages, and believe that a statewide initiative to strengthen marriage is a good idea. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of, and the public support for, the complex task we have before us: to seek new and effective ways to help build stronger marriages and families throughout Oklahoma.

Oklahoma City
July 2002

About the Bureau for Social Research

Oklahoma State University's Bureau for Social Research (BSR) is designed to provide resources and technical assistance to the OSU community, public and private organizations for social and behavioral science studies.

Established in 1997, the BSR provides services for a variety of research methodologies, including self-administered questionnaires, telephone surveys, focus group analyses and Web-based surveys. BSR's highly qualified team offers a wide range of services including: consulting on research and sampling design; constructing questionnaires and interview scripts; collecting, coding and entering data; analyzing, managing and interpreting data; writing reports and archiving data and records.

Dr. Christine Johnson, BSR Director, leads a team of more than 30 analysts, interviewers and surveyor staff. Dr. Johnson has a Ph.D. in Sociology with a concentration in the areas of research methodology and family, life-course and aging. Dr. Johnson is a member of the National Council on Family Relations and the American Association of Public Opinion Research.

The Bureau for Social Research prides itself on being client-centered. Working closely with clients and paying careful attention to detail allows the team to design a research project that meets the client's specific needs. For more information about the BSR, please call 405-744-6701 or visit www.okstate.edu/hes/bsr.

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Scott Stanley, Ph.D.—Senior program consultant to the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. Dr. Stanley specializes in research on commitment and the prevention of marital distress and divorce.

Under Governor Keating's leadership we have made it the public policy of this State to strengthen, promote, and encourage marriage and to reduce divorce.

For more information, call 405-848-2171 or visit www.okmarriage.org.

Marriage in Oklahoma

Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce

Executive Summary of Key Findings

Marriage and Divorce:

- Oklahoma is a marrying state, with 82% of adults having been married at some point compared to 73% nationally.
- Oklahoma is a divorcing state:
 - Thirty-two percent (32%) of all adults have divorced compared to 21% nationally.
 - A higher percentage of currently married Oklahomans have thought about divorce (56%) than married persons in the country as a whole (42%). Therefore, not only are Oklahomans more likely to have divorced, married Oklahomans are more likely to have thought about divorcing.
 - Those marrying under the age of 20 are the most likely to have gotten a divorce.
 - Whether male or female, low-income or not, those who have been divorced are most likely to give these two reasons for their divorces:
 - A lack of commitment (85%)
 - Too much conflict and arguing (61%)
- Oklahomans marry an average of 2.5 years younger than the national median age at first marriage.

Marital Quality:

- Despite higher divorce rates, married Oklahomans are more likely to say they are very happily married than couples nationally.
 - Among married persons, those who were most satisfied and least likely to have thought or talked about divorce reported:
 - Less frequent negative communication and conflicts
 - Higher levels of commitment to their partners
 - More frequent talking as friends and more frequent going out on dates
 - Negative interaction was, by far, the most potent discriminator of who was satisfied or not in marriage.
- Those who reported being more religious—and especially those who were most frequent in attending religious services—reported higher average levels of marital satisfaction, less frequent conflicts, and a lower likelihood of having thought about divorce.
- Women and men were not found to differ in their ratings of marital satisfaction, commitment, or in feelings of being trapped in their marriages.

- Thirty-four percent (34%) of the married respondents considered their marriage to be in serious trouble at some point. Of these people, 92% said that they were glad they were still together.

Nonmarital or Premarital Cohabitation:

- Cohabitation outside of marriage is accepted by many Oklahomans:
 - Thirty-eight percent (38%) believe it is acceptable for a man and woman who are not married to live together, with men (44%) more likely than women (33%) to approve.
 - While the majority of Oklahomans (54%) reject the notion that living together outside of marriage has all the advantages of marriage without the legal details, 36% believe nonmarital cohabitation has all the benefits of marriage.
 - Fifty-nine percent (59%) of those who are cohabiting outside of marriage believe that their parents approve of their living together, and only 14% believe that their parents disapprove.
- Those who lived with their spouses before marriage reported, on average, lower levels of satisfaction, lower levels of commitment, higher levels of negative interaction, and a greater average tendency to think about divorcing, compared to those who did not live together prior to marriage.

Attitudes About Marriage and Divorce:

- Ninety-three percent (93%) of Oklahomans view divorce as a very serious or somewhat serious national problem.
- Younger persons express less confidence in the institution of marriage than older persons. They are less positive about marriage and its benefits over cohabitation, are more accepting of divorce, and are less likely than older persons to think that couples who have children together ought to be married.

Fathers, Mothers, and Children of Divorce:

- Seventy-eight percent (78%) of ever-divorced Oklahomans have a child from a previous marriage that ended in divorce.
- Most divorced nonresident parents feel close to their children, but they also tend to be dissatisfied with these relationships.
 - Only 35% of nonresident parents are “very satisfied” with their relationships with their children, 26% are “somewhat satisfied,” and 39% are “not satisfied.”

Low-Income Oklahomans:

- Low-income persons (defined here as recipients of government assistance) hold different views about marriage, divorce, and cohabitation than non-low-income persons.

- They hold less positive views of marriage and are more accepting of cohabitation.
- They see fewer advantages to marriage, and fewer (49%) said they someday would like to be married than those who have never received government assistance (78%).
- Forty percent (40%) of low-income Oklahomans reject the notion that people who have children together ought to be married, whereas only 23% of non-low-income persons reject this notion.
- Those who have ever received government assistance are less likely to be married (41%) than persons who have never received government assistance (61%); and they are more likely never to have been married (25% compared to 18%).
- Sixty-three percent (63%) believe that, if they were to marry, they would lose some or all of their assistance.
- As with the non-low-income sample, those who have been divorced were most likely to cite low commitment and too much arguing as the major reasons for their divorces, but they were more likely than others to also report financial problems and/or domestic violence as reasons they became divorced.

Views on Policies and Programs:

- Sixty-six percent (66%) of Oklahomans say they would consider using relationship education to strengthen their relationship or marriage, with a higher percentage of younger respondents saying they would (77%), and an equally high percentage of those receiving government financial assistance (72%) saying they would consider such services.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) say that a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce is a good or very good idea. (Forty-three percent (43%) of Oklahomans said it is a very good idea, and another 42% said it is a good idea.)
- Sixty-nine percent (69%) believe society would be better off if divorces were harder to get, though those who are younger or who have been through divorce were less likely to believe this.
- Sixty-one percent (61%) believe it is very important (and another 27% believe it is somewhat important) for couples to prepare for marriage through educational classes, workshops, or counseling designed to help them get off to a good start.
- Oklahomans are relatively likely, compared to national figures, to have participated in some form of premarital preparation, with 43% of those more recently married reporting doing so.

Marriage in Oklahoma

Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce

Introduction

Why Oklahoma? Why now?

Oklahoma has launched a groundbreaking effort to strengthen marriage. Specifically, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) is a large-scale attempt in public and private sectors to increase access to a healthy marriage for more people—that is, for those who choose marriage for themselves. The Initiative in Oklahoma has received considerable national attention because of its unprecedented scope. This report describes research that impacts practices and policies in Oklahoma as well as the nation.

The leadership of the OMI concluded early on that it would be difficult to rely solely on government recorded vital statistics as a way to know both the current conditions in the state as well as changes that may occur on a broad scale over time. Not only are there inherent difficulties in government systems for collecting vital statistics, the types of data most often collected with regard to marriage and family are not ideally suited to the needs of the Initiative. Information on relationship quality is rarely collected, nor is it common to gather information about attitudes and beliefs related to marriage and family. Further, leaders of the Initiative desired specific information that could inform and refine the steps that are undertaken.

This is the first statewide survey of its kind designed to collect comprehensive information about attitudes and behavior related to marriage, divorce, and marital quality. It is also noteworthy that this effort includes a strong attempt to have the experiences and beliefs of low-income persons well represented in the findings. Survey research such as this provides a method of assessing and tracking trends that is cost effective and relatively immune to the kinds of changes in priorities, budgets, and systems that affect record keeping in government.

It is not surprising, looking at the data presented in this report, how Oklahoma came to launch a sweeping effort to transform its culture. Oklahoma has one of the highest divorce rates of any state in the U.S. Further, like the rest of the nation, the out-of-wedlock birthrate in Oklahoma has soared over the past few decades. Although rates of divorce and nonmarital births have declined slightly in recent years, both trends will continue to have implications for families, schools, the economy, faith groups, and government policies for decades.

Consider what may be the simplest finding reported here:

Thirty-nine (39%) of the adults sampled in Oklahoma who have ever been married have been divorced.

About half of young people marrying today in the U.S. are *projected* to divorce, given current societal trends¹. However, in Oklahoma, 39% is no projection. It represents the degree to which the lives of adults and children have already been touched by divorce.

It is important to note that the OMI is not about denigrating divorced people or single parents, many of whom are doing a marvelous job of raising children in what are sometimes difficult circumstances. Yet, the high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births are worrisome to many, both inside and outside of government circles. There are many reasons for concern, but none simpler to understand than the fact that more children than ever before are being raised in settings other than one where their natural or adoptive parents are securely involved in their lives on a daily basis.

To chart a new course, Governor Frank Keating set several broad goals when launching the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. They were to:

- Reduce the divorce rate
- Reduce out-of-wedlock births
- Reduce alcohol and drug addiction
- Reduce child abuse and neglect

The efforts in Oklahoma to accomplish these goals, and other goals in promotion of marital and family health, include attempts both to reduce barriers and to increase access to healthy and stable marriage through changes in policies and services. These efforts reach beyond governmental systems, including efforts by those in community based settings, such as in the faith community, not-for-profits, businesses, and the educational sector.

This survey is designed to establish a baseline that can be useful in assessing changes in attitudes and behaviors relevant to marriage that may occur in this state as a result of the efforts of the Initiative. The intention is to repeat these methods using the same questions at intervals so that comparisons can be made. This survey research is not designed to replace detailed process and program evaluations of services and policy changes that will occur over time. Various other research projects will unfold that can address different kinds of questions with the appropriate depth and methods.

What follows is the first report on the survey data that has been collected in Oklahoma. The focus of this report is to provide a broad understanding of the state of marriage and family in Oklahoma, including implications for the nation. Subsequent reports on specific subjects are planned. Although the survey findings have policy implications, this report is preliminary, and we do not make policy conclusions or recommendations. Rather, our purpose is to inform policy discussions with the story the data tell about marriage and family life in Oklahoma.

¹ Krieder, R. M., & Fields, J. M. (2002, February). Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996. Current Population Reports, P70-80. U.S. Census Bureau: Washington DC.

About the Study

Purpose of the Study:

This research project was conducted to assess key attitudes and behaviors relevant to marriage and divorce in Oklahoma and use this information to inform the OMI. One aim of the OMI is to change the culture of support for marriage in Oklahoma. Therefore, an essential component in studying marriage and divorce in Oklahoma involves assessing the “culture of marriage” and the “culture of divorce.” To accomplish this task, this study gathered data on a broad range of social indicators related to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and other family relationships in Oklahoma.

Specific aims of the study included the following: 1) assess attitudes about intimate relationships, marriage, divorce, and cohabitation; 2) gather data on couples' relationship quality; 3) assess knowledge and acceptance of relationship education, 4) collect demographic data on patterns of cohabitation, intent to marry, marriage, divorce, and remarriage among Oklahomans; and 5) collect data on other variables of interest, such as religious involvement, utilization of government services, and other demographic data.

Findings for this report are based on telephone interviews conducted with a statewide sample of 2,323 adults. The sample consisted of 2,020 adults from randomly selected households and 303 randomly selected current Medicaid clients². Based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2.02 percentage points.

Definition of “Low-Income ” As Used in This Report:

For the purposes of this report, low-income individuals are defined as persons who either currently or in the past have received government assistance. Three forms of government assistance were considered: Food Stamps, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (or Aid to Families with Dependent Children). This definition was chosen because it clearly identifies economically disadvantaged individuals, and it also defines a group that is of particular interest when it comes to considerations of government policies.

Understanding the Meaning of “On Average:”

When reading summaries of research findings, it is useful to bear in mind that many important differences between groups are differences that are observed, on average. This means, while there is a significant difference in the likelihood of one person of one group (such as young persons under the age of 25) differing on the finding being discussed from a person in another group (such as those over age 25), there will be many exceptions to the “on average” finding. Differences in averages are very important when it comes to

² Data were also collected from 1,000 adult residents of random households in neighboring states (Kansas, Arkansas and Texas). The data presented in this report focus only on the 2,323 Oklahoma respondents.

understanding trends and when considering policies that affect peoples' lives. But it is also worthwhile to bear in mind that many individuals will not fit the pattern suggested by the group differences that exist.

Organization of This Report:

The remainder of this report is organized into five sections. "Oklahomans' Attitudes about Marriage, Divorce, and Cohabitation" includes a descriptive analysis of Oklahomans' attitudes and opinions on issues of marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. "Marital Status, Divorce Reasons, and Quality of Relationships in Oklahoma" includes an in-depth examination of the quality of relationships in Oklahoma. This section contains three main topical areas: 1) a description of marriage and relationship behaviors, including current marital status and marital history (ever married, age at marriage, ever divorced, etc.), 2) a description of how divorced Oklahomans view their own divorce, and 3) a series of detailed analyses regarding the quality of relationships in Oklahoma. "Policies and Programs: Oklahomans' Opinions, Use, and Interest" describes the attitudes and opinions of Oklahomans on policies and programs pertaining to marriage, divorce, and prevention education. This section also contains a description of Oklahomans' awareness of and use of existing prevention services and educational programs. "Low-Income Adults in Oklahoma" is devoted to the attitudes, behaviors, and needs of low-income families. The report concludes with a summary of findings and implications.

Oklahomans' Attitudes about Marriage, Divorce, and Cohabitation

While many Oklahomans place a high value on marriage, they also show they have adopted views accepting of divorce and cohabitation.

Most Oklahomans think divorce is a serious problem.

Most people in Oklahoma view the high rate of divorce as a serious national problem. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of people see it as a very serious problem, and another 26% of people see it as a somewhat serious problem.

Sexual fidelity continues to be a central belief regarding marriage.

The great majority of Oklahomans (97%) believe that married couples should not have sex with persons other than their spouses.

Spouses are considered more reliable than live-in partners.

Most persons in Oklahoma (75%) believe one can count on a partner to be there for you more in marriage than when living with someone outside of marriage.

Oklahomans think divorce is better than a bad marriage.

Seven in ten adults in Oklahoma (69%) believe that a lousy marriage is worse than a divorce. In other words, most Oklahomans would prefer a divorce to a bad marriage.

Oklahomans have mixed views on whether parents with children should divorce.

Most Oklahomans (60%) agree/strongly agree that parents who no longer love each other should stay together, but at the same time most persons (62%) agree/strongly agree that parents who do not get along should divorce (see Table 1). Women are more likely than men to believe that parents who don't get along should divorce, which may be among the reasons that women are usually found to be more likely to file for divorce than men³.

Table 1. Responses to two items pertaining to whether parents with children should divorce.

	When married people realize they no longer love each other, they should get a divorce even if they have children.	When there are children in the family, parents should stay married even if they don't get along.
Strongly agree	6%	4%
Agree	25%	24%
Neither agree/disagree	10%	11%
Disagree	41%	50%
Strongly disagree	19%	12%

A notable number of Oklahomans reject the idea that people who have children together ought to be married.

While the majority of Oklahomans (66%) agree/strongly agree that children should be raised by married parents, about one in four adults in Oklahoma (26%) disagree/strongly disagree with the statement that people who have children together ought to be married. (Eight percent (8%) of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.)

A notable number of Oklahomans find nonmarital cohabitation acceptable.

While the majority of adults in Oklahoma (54%) believe nonmarital cohabitation is unacceptable, a sizable number, 38%, believe it is acceptable for a man and woman who are not married to live together. Men are more likely (44%) than women (33%) to find this arrangement acceptable.

Similarly, while the majority of Oklahomans (54%) reject the notion that living together outside of marriage has all the advantages of marriage without the legal details, 36% believe nonmarital cohabitation has all the benefits of marriage. Therefore, a fairly sizeable group in Oklahoma does not believe that marriage has clear benefits over cohabiting without marriage.

Furthermore, although the majority of Oklahomans (54%) do not believe cohabitation improves the chances for a good marriage, 36% do believe cohabitation will improve the chances for a good marriage (10% neither agreed nor disagreed to this statement). Men are more likely than women to believe that cohabitation improves the chances for a good marriage. Forty-one percent (41%) of men compared to 30% of women believe that cohabitation has a potential benefit.

³ Kitson, G. C. (1992). Portrait of divorce: Adjustments to marital breakdown. New York: Guilford Press.

Youth are less positive about marriage and more accepting of divorce and cohabitation than older persons.

Young people in Oklahoma express greater reservations about marriage than do older people. They are more accepting of most alternatives to marriage, including unmarried childbearing and cohabitation, and the majority of youth think that living together will lead to a stronger marriage.

Young people, under the age of 25, are less likely to think divorce is a very serious problem compared to people 25 years old and older. Young people are likely to view divorce as a “somewhat” serious problem, but not a “very” serious problem.

Compared to persons 25 years old and older, Oklahomans under the age of 25 are less likely to believe that spouses can be counted on more so than a cohabiting partner. Among persons under the age of 25, 66% agree/strongly agree that in marriage you can count on your spouse being there for you more than you can when you are living with someone outside of marriage, whereas 76% of persons 25 years old and older agree/strongly agree.

Younger people are more likely to disagree with the statement that people who have children together ought to be married (see Table 2).

Table 2. Percent of respondents who disagree or strongly disagree that people who have children together ought to be married, by age categories.

	Age categories			
People who have children together ought to be married	18-24 years old	25-44 years old	45-64 years old	65 and over
Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	42%	36%	18%	6%

The younger people are, the more likely they are to believe it is acceptable for a man and woman who are not married to live together: 65% of those age 18-24, 44% of those 25-44, 33% of those age 45-64, and 13% of those age 65 and over believe this arrangement is acceptable. Similarly, the younger people are, the more likely they are to believe that nonmarital cohabitation has all the benefits of marriage without the legal details. And the younger people are, the more likely they are to believe that cohabitation improves the chances for a good marriage: 61% of those age 18-24, 41% of those 25-44, 26% of those age 45-64 and 15% of those age 65 and over believe cohabitation will improve the chances for a good marriage (see Table 3).

Table 3. Percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree that cohabitation will improve the chances for a good marriage, by age categories.

People who live together before marriage are likely to improve their chances for a good marriage.	Age categories			
	18-24 years old	25-44 years old	45-64 years old	65 and over
Agree/Strongly Agree	61%	41%	26%	15%

Summary of Oklahomans’ Attitudes about Marriage, Divorce, and Cohabitation:

Although most Oklahomans view divorce as a problem, some also appear to believe that certain conditions make divorce acceptable. These circumstances include having a “bad” marriage, not being in love anymore, or exposing children to marital discord. One could surmise that as far as Oklahomans are concerned, the real problem is not so much divorce, but the difficulties in forming and maintaining satisfying marriages.

Most Oklahomans believe that parents who no longer are in love should remain married. At the same time, most Oklahomans believe that it is better for children to experience divorce than to live in a home in which parents do not get along. Oklahomans appear to think that parents should stay married for the sake of the children, but only up to a point. If “not getting along” means frequent and overt conflict, then these views are consistent with recent national studies⁴. National data suggest that although divorce places children at risk for many problems, exposure to chronic hostility between parents places children at even greater risk. National studies also indicate, however, that most marriages that end in divorce are not characterized by chronically high levels of destructive conflict. For most children of divorce, the gains associated with a decrease in marital discord are more than offset by the losses associated with marital dissolution.

Men and women expressed views that differ, at times, in interesting ways. While men are more likely than women to believe that living together prior to marriage is beneficial, they are less likely than women to believe that parents who do not get along should divorce. This finding may derive more from fathers' concerns about losing contact with their children than from males being more conservative in their views of divorce.

Young Oklahomans are more accepting of divorce and alternatives to marriage. As these young people mature and move through the life-course, their attitudes are likely to affect their decisions about union formation and childbearing. All things being equal, we might anticipate more cohabitation, more children being born to cohabiting couples, and perhaps no reduction in rates of divorce if current trends continue.

⁴ Amato, P. R., Loomis, L. S., & Booth, A. (1995). Parental divorce, marital conflict, and offspring well-being during early adulthood. *Social Forces*, 73, 895-915.

Marital Status, Divorce Reasons, and Quality of Relationships in Oklahoma

Marriage and Relationship Behaviors:

The majority of Oklahoma adults are currently married.

When asked to report their current marital status, most Oklahomans (58%) were currently married, 9% were widowed, 13% were divorced, 3% were separated, and 18% reported never being married. The marital status of Oklahoma adults is compared to the marital status of all U.S. citizens, 15 years and older, in Table 4.

Table 4. Marital status of Oklahomans compared to all U.S. citizens.

Marital status	Oklahoma	United States ⁵
Married	58%	54%
Widowed	9%	7%
Divorced	13%	10%
Separated	3%	3%
Never married	18%	27%

Most Oklahomans (82%) have been married at least once.

Among adults in Oklahoma, 82% report having been married at least once. The comparable national estimate is 73%⁶. Table 5 shows the number of marriages reported by the respondents. As can be seen from the table, 26% of Oklahomans have been married more than once.

Table 5. Number of marriages for all adults, in percent.

Number of marriages	Percent of Oklahomans
0	18%
1	56%
2	18%
3	6%
more than 3	2%

Among Oklahomans who have divorced and remarried, 5% have married the same person more than once.

To explore an Oklahoma “wives tale” that Oklahomans divorce and then marry the same spouse again, we asked people who had been married more than once whether or not they had ever married the same person more than once – not including renewing wedding vows. Five percent (5%) indicated they had married the same person more than once.

⁵ Krieder, R. M., & Fields, J. M. (2002, February). Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996. Current Population Reports, P70-80. U.S. Census Bureau: Washington DC.

⁶ Kreider, R. M., & Fields, J. M. (2002, February). Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996. Current Population Reports, P70-80. U.S. Census Bureau: Washington, D.C.

Oklahomans marry younger than the national average.

For Oklahomans married 10 or less years, the median age at first marriage for men was 24 years old, while the median age for women was 22 years old. This is about two and one-half years younger than the national median age at first marriage. Table 6 shows the median age at first marriage from the Oklahoma survey data and comparable national data from the U.S. Census⁷.

Table 6. Median age at first marriage, by gender.

Median age at first marriage – Oklahoma survey data		
	Men	Women
Married 3 years or less	24	22
Married 5 years or less	24	22
Married 10 years or less	24	22
Median age at first marriage – U.S. data		
	Men	Women
Married in 2000	26.8	25.1
Married in 1995	26.9	24.5
Married in 1990	26.1	23.9

Among ever-married persons, the distributions of percent married by age at first marriage for Oklahomans are compared to persons in the U.S., using data taken from the General Social Survey, as presented in Table 7. Compared to the nation, more Oklahomans are married by age 20, and fewer Oklahomans marry after age 20.

Table 7. Age at first marriage, ever married persons age 18 and older, in percent.

Age at first marriage	Oklahoma, 2001	U.S., 1990-1994
<20	44%	28%
20-23	35%	38%
24-27	12%	21%
28+	8%	13%

Of all adult Oklahomans, 32% have gotten a divorce.

Nearly one-third (32%) of all adult Oklahomans have been divorced at least once. This is not a projection of the likelihood of a given couple eventually divorcing; this is an estimate of the percentage of all adults in Oklahoma who have already experienced divorce. The comparable national estimate is 21%⁸ (see Table 8). Among Oklahomans who have ever been married, 39% have been divorced at least once.

⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-514, Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1998 (Update), and earlier reports.

⁸ Kreider, R. M., & Fields, J. M. (2002, February). Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996. Current Population Reports, P70-80. U.S. Census Bureau: Washington, D.C.

Table 8. Percent of all adults ever divorced, Oklahomans compared to U.S. citizens.

	Oklahoma	U.S.
Percent of all adults who have been divorced	32%	21%

Table 9 shows the number of divorces reported by the respondents. As noted in the table, 10% of all Oklahomans have been divorced more than once. These figures mean that divorce has touched a high percentage of Oklahomans. Further, more than three-fourths (78%) of ever-divorced individuals have children from a previous marriage, making it clear that a great many children are touched directly by divorce as well.

Table 9. Number of divorces for all adults, in percent.

Number of divorces	Percent of Oklahomans
0	68%
1	22%
2	7%
3	3%
more than 3	about 1%

Marriages that end in divorce last longer than the national average.

Among persons who have been married once and are currently divorced, these failed marriages last an average of 11.18 years, and the median length is 10 years. For the nation as a whole, the median length of marriages that end in divorce is 7.85 years⁹.

Among persons who are not married but who are involved in a romantic relationship, 37% are living together.

Among non-married Oklahomans, 16% (n = 377) are currently involved in a romantic relationship. Of that group, 37% (n = 141) are living together and 63% (n = 236) are not. This means that 6% of all adults in the sample are both unmarried and living with their partner. Among only non-married Oklahomans who are currently involved in a romantic relationship, Table 10 shows the percentage currently cohabiting by age category.

Table 10. Percent of non-married Oklahomans currently involved in a romantic relationship *and* cohabiting (total n = 141), by age categories.

	Age categories			
	18-24 years old	25-44 years old	45-64 years old	65 and over
Non-married, romantically involved, and currently cohabiting	25%	55%	33%	37%

⁹ Kreider, R. M., & Fields, J. M. (2002, February). Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996. Current Population Reports, P70-80. U.S. Census Bureau: Washington, D.C.

Among never married persons, 32% (n = 68) are currently involved in a romantic relationship *and* cohabiting with their partner, while 68% (n = 145) are currently involved in a romantic relationship and *not* cohabiting with their partner. Among ever-divorced persons, 45% (n = 65) are currently involved in a romantic relationship *and* cohabiting with their partner, while 55% (n = 79) are currently involved in a romantic relationship and *not* cohabiting with their partner.

Among all currently cohabiting persons, 15% were engaged when they started living together, and 85% were not engaged. The majority (59%) of these currently cohabiting persons believe their parents approve of their cohabitation, 21% believe their parents are neutral or have mixed feelings, and 14% believe their parents disapprove of their living situation.

Among currently married persons, 33% lived together with their spouse before they were married. Forty-five percent (45%) were engaged when they started living together. Thirty-eight percent (38%) believe their parents approved of their premarital cohabitation, 22% believe their parents were neutral or had mixed feelings, and 39% believe their parents disapproved of their nonmarital cohabitation.

Table 11 shows the percentage of married persons who lived with their current spouse prior to marriage by age category. As can be seen from the table, persons who are younger are substantially more likely to have cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage.

Table 11. Percent of married persons who lived with their current spouse prior to marriage, by age categories.

	Age categories			
	18-24 years old	25-44 years old	45-64 years old	65 and over
Cohabited prior to current marriage	60%	46%	25%	4%

The findings highlight the fact that cohabitation prior to marriage or absent of marriage has become common in Oklahoma (as elsewhere). Further, individuals report that there is relatively little stigma from parents about living together outside of marriage, though there is more evidence of disapproval of premarital cohabitation among married individuals who report having done so.

Taken altogether, the findings in this section show that Oklahomans marry at a high rate but also that they divorce at a high rate. Interestingly, while Oklahomans are more likely to be divorced than national rates would estimate, their marriages that end in divorce last, on average, longer than those nationally.

Oklahomans' Opinions of Their Own Divorces:

Oklahomans most often cite lack of commitment as the reason for their own divorce.

Oklahomans who had been divorced were asked to indicate what factors most contributed to their divorces. Specifically, they were asked:

“There are many reasons why marriages fail. I'm going to read a list of possible reasons. Looking back at your most recent divorce, tell me whether or not each factor was a major contributor to your divorce. You can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each factor.”

The interviewers emphasized that they were asking respondents about “major” contributors to their divorces, not just any contributor at all. Table 12 lists the reasons in order from the most frequently endorsed to least frequently endorsed.

Table 12. Reasons for respondents' divorces given in percent indicating factor did contribute to divorce from most frequently endorsed to least frequently endorsed.

Reasons For Respondent's Prior Divorce	Percent Indicating “Yes”
Lack of commitment	85%
Too much conflict and arguing	61%
Infidelity or extramarital affairs	58%
Getting married too young	43%
Little or no helpful premarital preparation	42%
Financial problems or economic hardship	41%
Domestic violence	30%
Lack of support from family members	29%
Religious differences between partners	21%
Other reason	21%

This list shows in clear terms what people think led to their own divorce. While it may seem self-evident that issues of commitment come into play when one considers or acts on an intention to divorce, the finding of lack of commitment as the most highly endorsed item was unexpected. Of course, the respondents could have been thinking of many things when considering the concept of commitment. Commitment often involves making one's partner and relationship a priority, investing in the marriage, and having a long-term view of the relationship. Other research¹⁰ suggests that people are particularly likely to be thinking about the desire to have a future together, when thinking about commitment. As such, respondents here may be saying that they lacked a desire or vision for a future that was sufficient to overcome their difficulties.

Among the other reasons given for explaining their divorces, the Oklahomans' responses parallel the extensive empirical literature on risk factors for marital distress and divorce. For example, it is noteworthy that so many Oklahomans said that marrying young was a key contributor to their own divorces. The data presented elsewhere in this report clearly

¹⁰ Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage and The Family*, 54, 595-608.

support their assessment: Marrying young is a significant contributor to the risk of divorce in Oklahoma. Likewise, there is extensive literature documenting the potency of negative interaction and conflict to erode and destroy the bond between partners in marriage. Those findings, combined with the 30% who said domestic violence played a role in their getting divorced, suggest a considerable number of divorces in Oklahoma may occur in higher conflict marriages, though we cannot estimate precisely how many, or how high the level of conflict (and the level of dangerousness), from this data. There are differing kinds of domestic violence, and respondents were not asked questions that would differentiate between types.

A high percentage of respondents indicated infidelity was a cause of their divorce. Infidelity may be a very strong contributor to marital failure in Oklahoma. However, such responses are hard to evaluate in the absence of more precise questioning, because a significant amount of infidelity occurs after one or both partners have clearly decided to end the marriage.

Most of the reasons differed significantly by gender of the respondent. Only three reasons did not differ appreciably by gender: lack of commitment, lack of support from family members, and religious differences between partners. Women were more likely than men to indicate the following reasons had been major contributing factors to their divorce: too much conflict and arguing, infidelity or extramarital affairs, little or no helpful premarital preparation, financial problems or economic hardship, and domestic violence. Men were more likely than women to cite getting married too young. Table 13 breaks down the reasons cited by gender. For many, infidelity is also a sign of low commitment and a destructive way of handling the inevitable conflicts in marriage.

Table 13. Reasons for respondents’ divorces given in percent indicating factor did contribute to divorce, by gender.

Reasons For Respondent’s Prior Divorce	Percent Indicating “Yes”	
	Men	Women
Lack of commitment	85%	86%
Too much conflict and arguing	53%	65%*
Infidelity or extramarital affairs	53%	62%*
Getting married too young	64%	52%*
Little or no helpful premarital preparation	35%	45%*
Financial problems or economic hardship	31%	45%*
Domestic violence	8%	44%*
Lack of support from family members	27%	28%
Religious differences between partners	17%	23%

*Differences are statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Divorced persons wish their partners had worked harder to save their marriage.

The large majority of Oklahomans (73%) who have been divorced believe they, personally, worked hard enough to save their marriage. However, these same individuals do not believe their partners did enough. When asked if they wished their partner had worked harder to save the marriage the same large majority (74%) said, “Yes, I wish my

spouse had worked harder.” Husbands and wives, however, do not see things the same way. Men are more likely than women to believe that they didn’t work hard enough. A third of men (35%), but only one in five women (21%) state that they now wish they, personally, had worked harder to save their last marriage. On the other hand, equally large proportions of men (75%) and women (73%) wish their spouse had worked harder to save the marriage (see Table 14). These findings persist even when receipt of premarital education, marital counseling, age, and receipt of government services are controlled.

Table 14. Responses to two items pertaining to working harder to save the marriage, by gender.

Do you ever wish that you, yourself had worked harder to save your marriage?	<u>Husbands</u>	<u>Wives</u>
Yes, I wish I would have worked harder	35%	21%
No, I worked hard enough	65%	79%
Do you ever wish that your spouse had worked harder to save your marriage?		
Yes, I wish my spouse had worked harder	75%	73%
No, my spouse worked hard enough	25%	27%

With some exceptions, the data presented here indicate pretty similar responses, overall, in how men and women think about how their marriages ended. Both men and women now say they wish their partner had worked harder to save the marriage, but women are less likely than men to wish they, personally, had done more. In short, both sexes appear to accuse the other party of not working hard enough to save the marriage but men appear somewhat more likely to hold themselves responsible for not working as hard as they could have. Perhaps a strong belief that ‘my partner should be doing more’ – rather than focusing on ‘what I can do better’ – was a contributor to the distress in those marriages that ended in divorce. However, those who are currently married were not asked similar questions in order to see if they too are more likely to think their partners are the ones who should be making a greater effort.

Issues Surrounding Marital Quality and Divorce in Oklahoma:

The story of the quality of marriages in Oklahoma is a complex one. Most strikingly, Oklahomans are more divorce prone than the nation as a whole. However, those who are married are somewhat more likely, not less, to say that they are very happy with their marriages. For those who are married, the factors that are most strongly associated with happiness are how Oklahoma couples handle differences and conflicts. Couples who use more negative styles of interacting are more likely to be unhappy with their relationship¹¹.

¹¹ Gottman, J. M., & Notarius, C. I. (2000). Decade Review: Observing Marital Interaction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 927-947.

Markman, H.J., & Hahlweg, K. (1993). The prediction and prevention of marital distress: An international perspective. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 13, 29-43.

Oklahomans are more divorce prone than the nation as a whole.

Divorce proneness assesses the degree to which people are, or have been, thinking and talking about divorce. It is a strong indicator of the possibility of a divorce. The responses of Oklahomans on a series of questions on divorce proneness were compared to responses from a national sample of married individuals interviewed in 2000 in the Marriage and Family Life Survey. After controlling for some differences in the present sample and the national sample on age, the results show that 56% of Oklahomans have believed at some time that their marriage was in trouble compared with 42% of people in the U.S. Similarly, 25% of Oklahomans have thought about getting a divorce compared with 17% of people in the U.S. Further, 17% of Oklahomans have discussed divorce with their spouses compared with 8% of people in the U.S. These differences are presented in Table 15.

Table 15. Divorce proneness items, currently married persons, in percent.

Percent Reporting Divorce Proneness		Oklahoma	U.S.
Have thought marriage in trouble			
	Ever	56%	42%
	Last 3 years	33%	25%
	Recently	8%	5%
Thought about divorce			
	Last 3 years	25%	17%
	Recently	7%	2%
Discussed divorce with friend			
	Ever	19%	7%
Talked with spouse about divorce			
	Ever	17%	8%
	Last 3 years	11%	7%
	Recently	3%	3%
Consulted an attorney			
	Ever	5%	2%

This survey demonstrates that Oklahomans are both more likely to have already experienced divorce and also more likely than married people in the U.S. in general to think that their marriages are in trouble, to think about getting a divorce, to discuss divorce with friends, to talk with their spouses about divorce, and to consult with an attorney about divorce. Oklahoma is a state with significant divorce proneness.

Oklahomans are more likely to say they are very happy with their marriages than the nation as a whole.

Reports of marital happiness from the married Oklahoma respondents were compared to reports of marital happiness from a national sample of married respondents from the 2000

General Social Survey. What these data show seems inconsistent with the data on divorce proneness. Married Oklahomans are more likely, not less, to say that they are very happy in their marriages. It should be noted, however, that the difference in percentage reporting “very happy” is rather small: only 6% more Oklahomans report being “very happy” compared to others in the nation. These differences are reported in the Table 16.

Table 16. Ratings of marital happiness, currently married persons.

Would you say your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?	Oklahoma	U.S.
Very happy	68%	62%
Pretty happy	29%	34%
Not too happy	3%	3%

While there may be a very complex explanation for the seeming discrepancy between these data on happiness and the data on divorce, a simple explanation may account for it. Since divorce has become commonplace in Oklahoma, those who are most unhappy in their marriages are quite likely to end those marriages. That leaves the group remaining in their marriages to be a relatively happy group. The decision to end unsatisfactory marriages and try again is especially likely among those who marry at the youngest ages (e.g., before the age of 20).

Most divorced nonresident parents feel close to their children, but they also tend to be dissatisfied with these relationships.

As noted earlier, more than three-fourths (78%) of ever-divorced Oklahomans have a child from a previous marriage that ended in divorce. Because divorce is relatively common in Oklahoma, about one-fourth of all Oklahomans have a child from a previous marriage that ended in divorce. Among all divorced persons, 13% report having one or more nonresident children under age 18. (This figure seems low because most children of divorce already have entered adulthood.) It is clear that many parent-child relationships are affected by divorce.

Most divorced, nonresident parents with children under the age of 18 feel close to their children. The majority of nonresident parents (63%) describe their relationships as "very close," 31% describe their relationships as "somewhat close," and only 6% describe their relationships as "not close at all." Although most nonresident parents feel close to their children, this does not mean they are satisfied with their relationships. Overall, only 35% of nonresident parents are "very satisfied" with their relationships with their children, 26% are "somewhat satisfied," and 39% are "not satisfied." Nonresident fathers are more likely than nonresident mothers to be dissatisfied (46% versus 19%, respectively). Less than one-third of nonresident parents (31%) feel very close to their children *and* very satisfied with these relationships (see Table 17). It should be noted that these parent ratings of closeness and satisfaction do not vary with race, age, or education level of the respondent.

Table 17. Divorced parents' ratings of closeness to and satisfaction with relationship with nonresidential children.

Divorced parents' relationships with nonresident children			
<u>Closeness to children</u>		<u>Satisfied with relationship</u>	
Very close	63%	Very satisfied	35%
Somewhat close	31%	Somewhat satisfied	26%
Not close at all	6%	Not very satisfied	39%

Compared with divorced nonresident parents, never-married nonresident parents tend to feel less close to their children. Looking at nonresident parents with children under the age of 18, 43% feel very close to these children, 22% feel somewhat close, and 35% do not feel close. With respect to satisfaction, only 32% are very satisfied and nearly half (49%) are dissatisfied. The percentage of respondents who are dissatisfied is much higher among fathers (56%) than mothers (12%).

To summarize, the great majority of divorced, nonresident parents feel close to their children, but they also tend to be dissatisfied with these relationships. Nonresident fathers are especially dissatisfied following divorce. Presumably, this dissatisfaction stems from the limitations and difficulties that many divorced fathers experience with visitation arrangements. These results are congruent with other studies showing that divorce tends to undermine father-child relationships. This may explain, in part, why men were less likely than women to say that married couples who are not getting along should divorce. They could be quite aware of the decreases in access or quality of relationship with their children that often results.

The ties between nonresident parents and children from a nonmarital relationship are even more problematic, with relatively few of these parents (mostly fathers) feeling either very close or very satisfied with their relationships with these children. In other words, among parents who never married, the tie between children and a nonresident parent is particularly tenuous, and this is especially true for fathers.

Young age at first marriage is related to divorce in Oklahoma.

Knowing that Oklahomans marry, on average, 2.5 years below the national median age at first marriage, it is important to extensively examine how age of marriage and propensity for divorce are related in these data. A large body of evidence shows that persons who marry in their teens are much more likely to divorce than those who first marry when they are older. Most of the relevant studies show at least a weak negative relationship between age at first marriage and divorce proneness from the early through the late twenties. Nationally, the relationship between age at first marriage and divorce is equally strong for males and females, though the age beyond which further increments in age make little difference is lower for females than for males, reflecting perhaps the younger typical age at which females marry.

The pattern of divorce-proneness by age at first marriage among Oklahomans is similar to that shown by other studies. The percentage of ever-married persons who had ever

been divorced, by age at first marriage, is displayed along side U.S. national data (1990-1994 General Social Surveys) in Table 18.

Table 18. Age at first marriage, by percentage divorced.

Age at first marriage	Oklahoma, 2001	U.S., 1990-1994
<20	51%	48%
20-23	33%	32%
24-27	29%	25%
28+	17%	18%

As can be seen, the likelihood of divorcing is greater with earlier age at marriage in Oklahoma in a manner quite similar to national data. Using more sophisticated analyses that are not detailed here, we find that both the Oklahoma and national data show divorce to be less than half as likely for persons who first married at ages 20-23 as for those who married before age 20. Those who married at age 28 or older were only about one-fourth as likely to have divorced as those who married as teens.

Why are those who marry very young so much more likely to divorce? Much thought has been given to this by researchers over the years, with the following conclusions being most often made: Teenagers (especially males) are typically immature and not well equipped to assume the responsibilities of marriage, and their tastes and standards for a mate, and their own characteristics that determine their desirability as a spouse, have not yet stabilized¹².

Young age at first marriage is associated with high levels of marital happiness in Oklahoma.

One of the more interesting aspects of these data is that, while the relationship of age at first marriage to divorce is very similar for Oklahoma and the country as a whole, early age at marriage is associated with a relatively high level of marital happiness in Oklahoma. Those who have married young (before age 20), *and who have remained married*, are just as likely to report high levels of happiness and satisfaction than those who have married later (age 20 or later) (see Table 19).

Table 19. Ratings of marital happiness, by age at first marriage.

Would you say your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?	Age at first marriage			
	<20	20-23	24-27	28+
Very happy	70%	67%	70%	63%
Pretty happy	26%	31%	27%	34%
Not too happy	4%	2%	3%	3%

¹² Booth, A. & Edwards, J. (1985). Age at marriage and marital instability. *Journal of Marriage and The Family*, 47, 67-75.

These findings may be due in part to the same kind of process discussed earlier with regard to the paradox of Oklahomans being very divorce prone yet relatively likely to be very happy with their marriages. With divorce being chosen so often by Oklahomans, those who choose to remain in their marriage represent a group that is, on average, very maritally satisfied.

Measures Used in Upcoming Analyses

In a number of upcoming analyses, several measures reflecting quality of the respondents' relationships were utilized. A number of these measures were assessed by three or more survey items and combined to create a summary score.

- *Interpersonal Commitment*: These items asked respondents whether or not they make their relationship with their partner a high priority, whether or not they think of themselves and their partner as a team, and whether or not they desire to remain together into the future.

- *Negative Interaction*: These items asked how frequently respondents had conflicts that included four hallmarks of corrosive communication: escalation (arguments with rising emotional intensity), invalidation (put downs or disregarding of one's opinion), negative interpretations (the tendency to see motivations unfairly negatively), and withdrawal (the tendency for one or both partners to pull away from talking about issues and concerns).

- *Feeling Trapped*: One item asked respondents to what extent they agreed/disagreed with the statement, "I feel trapped in this marriage/relationship but I stay because I have too much to lose if I leave."

- *Divorce Proneness*: As mentioned earlier, a number of questions were asked to assess the degree to which people had thought about and/or talked about divorce.

- *Positive Bond*: Two items were asked that could be taken as evidence (or not) of having a positive bond: one having to do with whether or not the respondent said they could talk as good friends in their relationship, and the second having to do with how long it had been since they had gone out together as a couple on a date.

- *Overall Satisfaction*: Respondents were asked how happy they were in their marriages as well as how satisfied they were. Here, overall satisfaction is the composite of these two questions.

Men and women are more similar than different in rating marital quality.

The responses of men and women were compared on the various dimensions of marital quality just mentioned. In comparing married men and women, a variety of other factors were statistically controlled, including age, number of years married, income, and education. These analyses did not include persons who had ever received government assistance because those respondents are overwhelmingly women, younger, and poorer, and would therefore skew the results for the rest of the random sample when examining gender differences. The dimensions of marital quality were also examined by whether or not the respondents were married once or more than once.

The findings are consistent with other recent survey studies using similar questions, but they are in sharp contrast to conventional wisdom about men and women in marriage. Overall, women and men were not significantly different in their ratings on any of these

dimensions of marital quality¹³. Hence, women and men were found *not* to differ on their own ratings of commitment to their partners, negative interaction, thoughts and talk of divorce, positive bonding, and overall happiness. Women were also no more likely than men to report feeling trapped—that is, they were no more likely than men to say that they felt they had to stay in their marriages because they had too much to lose by leaving.

In Oklahoma, people who live together prior to marriage are less likely to be doing well in marriage.

In Oklahoma, people who live together prior to marriage are, on average, less likely, not more likely, to be doing well in marriage. Those who cohabited prior to marriage report lower levels of happiness in marriage, lower levels of commitment to their spouses, higher levels of negative interaction, and greater tendencies to be thinking and talking about divorce. More simply stated, persons who are now married who lived together prior to marriage are less happy, have more frequent nasty arguments, have a lower sense of devotion or dedication, and a greater tendency to consider divorce as a real possibility. It bears keeping in mind that such findings deal with broad average differences between couples who did and who did not cohabit prior to marriage, and therefore, there will be many exceptions to such trends among couples.

These differences were found regardless of whether or not the respondent was in a first or second marriage. However, two differences appear noteworthy. First, those most recently married in a first marriage were the least likely to show these differences based on premarital cohabitation history. Yet, in recent first marriages, there was a difference that has been found in other research, suggesting that married men who lived with their wives prior to marriage report lower levels of commitment to their wives than men who had not lived with their wives prior to marriage. Second, those in second marriages tended not to score lower on commitment to their spouses, even though they were more likely to report lower levels of happiness in marriage, higher levels of negative communication, and more thoughts or talk about divorce.

As is true nationally, it has become increasingly likely that a couple in Oklahoma will live together prior to marriage. As mentioned earlier (see Table 11), those who have been married more recently are substantially more likely to have lived together prior to marriage. Many studies examining various target populations have now concluded that couples who live together prior to marriage are less likely to report high quality marriages in comparison to those who do not. Many possible reasons have been put forth for such findings, including:

- Those who do not live together prior to marriage tend to be more conservative about marriage and commitment to marriage, and may therefore also work harder to get through difficult times.

¹³ It was only within some specific periods of married life where there were any tendencies for women and men to show differences, and these differences were slight and would have to be replicated in another sample for us to have confidence that they meant anything about men and women in Oklahoma. For example, there was a slight tendency for women who were married for many years to report higher levels of negative interaction, and also a slight tendency for men married 8 to 18 years to be more likely to report feeling trapped.

- Some premarital cohabitators may “buy” the argument that cohabitation is a good way to test out a relationship, and that would mean that some people are choosing to live together prior to marrying a partner precisely because they are not quite sure the match is right.
- Living together prior to marriage might, for some couples, erode the sense that marriage is a particularly important and different step of commitment in their relationship.

It is important to note that few experts believe that premarital cohabitation causes these negative outcomes as much as it reflects other things that are linked to both negative outcomes and premarital cohabitation. Most believe that those who choose to cohabit are different in ways from those who do not, and some of those differences make marital success less likely. However, it is also possible that for some couples, living together prior to marriage actually causes a greater likelihood of marital distress because they would not have gotten married if cohabitation had not made it harder to break up. With children being increasingly likely to be born (or conceived) to couples prior to marriage, there is a complex process of entanglement that may constrain the options of the individuals in those relationships during this crucial time of making major life-course altering decisions. At the very least, there is no evidence here that, for most couples, living together prior to marriage is protective of future marital quality, as is often believed or hoped for by young couples.

Oklahomans with higher religious faith and practice are more likely to report higher marital quality and are less likely to have experienced divorce.

In recent years, significant media attention has been focused on the association between religion and divorce. Much of this attention was sparked by findings from a large national poll that found persons belonging to more conservative religious denominations were more likely, not less, to have experienced a divorce¹⁴. Numerous news outlets picked up on this finding and cited other national data indicating that states in the “Bible Belt” had higher divorce rates than states outside the Bible Belt¹⁵. Oklahoma was included on the list of Bible Belt states. These news articles captured why the finding was so interesting: It just did not make sense that persons with conservative religious beliefs were also more likely to have been divorced. The interpretation was that people’s religious faith had no apparent effects on their marital behaviors.

Many family scholars were quick to note that they were hardly surprised by the finding because of two key factors. First, as noted earlier in this report, persons in the Bible Belt, including those who are more conservatively religious, tend to marry younger. Second, Bible Belt states have higher proportions of people experiencing economic hardship. As we noted earlier in this report, young age at marriage is a very significant part of understanding the high divorce rate in Oklahoma. Poverty and economic hardship are

¹⁴ Barna Research Group, December 1999.

¹⁵ An article in the January 2000 Salon.com’s online magazine is not atypical of the media attention. They wrote: “In fact, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics, four of the five states with the highest resident divorce rates in the country are in the Deep South, where families pray together but, apparently, can't stay together.”

also clearly part of the picture. Many family scholars who understood these factors better—including a number of the authors of this report—thought that the religious element was not very likely an explanation for the high divorce rate in the Bible Belt.

So, the question arises, is there evidence in the present data that sheds light on whether or not religious faith and practice are protective of marital quality and stability in Oklahoma? We looked at this question in two key ways. First, we looked at whether or not those who were more religious and who were more active in practicing their faith were any more likely to report higher quality marriages. Second, we looked at the degree to which these religious qualities could differentiate those who have experienced divorce from those who have not. In other words, is being religious likely to be something that is more or less associated with previous divorce in Oklahoma?

Two survey items that assessed religious faith and religious practice are the focus of this section. One item asked respondents about their global religiousness (religious faith): “All things considered, how religious would you say that you are?” The second item asked about their involvement in the form of frequency of attendance (religious practice): “How often do you attend religious services?”

Religious Faith and Practice and Current Marital Quality

Whether young or old, male or female, low-income or not, those who said that they were more religious reported higher average levels of commitment to their partners, higher levels of marital satisfaction, less thinking and talking about divorce, and lower levels of negative interaction. These patterns held when controlling for such important variables as income, education, and age at first marriage. The patterns are strongest when looking at frequency of attendance at religious services. This is not very surprising since church attendance is a behavioral indication of involvement in a faith community. While we conducted a variety of complex analyses to best understand these patterns, and the results we report are based on those complex analyses, the comparisons presented in Table 20 yield one relatively straightforward representation of the results, when looking at marital quality by frequency of attendance at religious services, focusing on the variable of marital happiness.

Table 20. Ratings of marital happiness, by frequency of attendance at religious services.

Would you say your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?	How often do you attend religious services?			
	Never or almost never	Occasionally, but less than once per month	One to three times per month	One or more times per week
Very happy	52%	66%	72%	73%
Pretty happy	44%	30%	25%	25%
Not too happy	5%	4%	3%	2%

While Oklahoma is a state that is conservatively religious and has a very high divorce rate, the analyses conducted strongly suggest that the religious faith and practice of

Oklahomans is *not* very likely to negatively impact marital quality—in fact, on average, quite the opposite. Religious involvement may be part of what contributes to the higher percentage of people being happily married in a state with a high divorce rate.

History of Divorce and Religious Involvement

Those who say they are more religious are less likely, not more, to have already experienced divorce. Likewise, those who report more frequent attendance at religious services were significantly less likely to have been divorced. This pattern of findings held using various analytic techniques that test which variables differentiate persons who have been divorced from persons who have not been divorced, while controlling for other variables that might affect the interpretation of the data, such as age, age of first marriage, income, and gender. When both the global rating of religiousness and the item assessing frequency of attendance at religious services are entered into the same analysis, the attendance item remains significantly associated with divorce history but the global religiousness item does not. This suggests that a key aspect of how religious faith affects marital relationships may be through involvement with a community of faith.

Taken together, these findings indicate that religious faith and Oklahomans are positive, not negative, influences on marriage. However, it is possible that conservative religious beliefs and involvement do play a role in the propensity to marry young, and therefore, have an indirect effect on the high divorce rate.

What affects marital happiness and thoughts of divorce among Oklahomans?

In general, three variables were found to be most strongly related to overall marital satisfaction and divorce proneness: negative interaction, interpersonal commitment, and positive bonding experiences, and generally in that order of potency. The factors that were most strongly associated with overall marital satisfaction as well as divorce proneness are listed in Table 21, and in the order of strength that most analyses suggest they relate to those outcomes.

Table 21. Variables measured that were most strongly related to overall marital satisfaction or divorce proneness, in order of strength of association¹⁶.

Negative Interaction (Frequent Conflict)
Commitment to One's Partner
Positive Bonding: Talking As Friends and More Frequently Going Out Together

¹⁶ Many variables that were not measured would also, no doubt, be strongly related to marital quality. What appears in this table are the top correlates of marital quality within this sample given the various measures available. Here, negative interaction explains slightly more variance in marital satisfaction than does commitment, and quite a bit more variance in marital satisfaction than does positive bonding experiences. Many studies have shown how negative interaction predicts marital distress and divorce more than positive interaction (e.g., Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). When it comes to associations with divorce proneness, negative interaction explains much more variance than any other variable in this data set, though again, it is important to remember that not everything that likely matters in understanding divorce proneness was measured.

The most consistent findings pertain to the influence of negative interaction. We found that people who reported more negative interaction in their marriages are significantly less likely to be satisfied in those marriages. Testing and statistically controlling for the influence of a variety of other variables did not lessen the conclusion that negative interaction is a generic and potent risk factor for marital unhappiness for all kinds of couples. No other variable was as consistently or strongly associated with overall marital satisfaction.

We conclude that negative patterns of interaction and commitment have potent effects on the quality of marriages in Oklahoma, even when accounting for the influence of income, religiosity, receipt of government services, and other important factors. In addition, this finding has broad support and frequent replication in the empirical literature on marital quality and divorce¹⁷.

As noted earlier in this report, currently divorced Oklahomans cite lack of commitment and negative patterns of interaction (too much conflict and arguing) as the top two factors contributing to their divorces. Taken together, the findings presented in this section along with those findings suggest that many couples can benefit from training in how to avoid destructive patterns of negative interaction and promote commitment. To be most useful to the average couple, relationship education curricula should, at the least, address such matters with skills-based strategies for helping couples better manage negative patterns of interaction.

A vast majority of Oklahomans who once thought their marriage was in serious trouble are glad they stayed married.

Currently married respondents were asked to indicate if they had thought at one time their marriage was in serious trouble, even to the point of thinking about divorce. Specifically, the question was stated, “Sometimes couples experience serious problems in their marriage and have thoughts of ending their marriage. Even people who get along quite well with their spouse sometimes wonder whether their marriage is working out. Have you ever thought your marriage might be in trouble?”

Thirty-four percent (34%) of currently married persons have, at some point, both considered their marriage to be in serious trouble and thought about divorce. As a follow up to those questions, respondents were asked, “Are you glad you are still together?” In other words, respondents were asked if they were “glad” they had stuck it out, if they were “unsure” (or had mixed feelings), or if they were “not glad” that they had stayed married to their spouse.

Among those who thought their marriage was in serious trouble at some point, 92% said they were glad that they were still together. Those married a fewer number of years (seven years or less) were the least likely to report they were glad to still be married to their spouse, yet even then, a substantial majority (79%) reported being glad that they had remained together (see Table 22). In contrast, people married longer (8 or more years)

¹⁷ Markman, H.J., & Hahlweg, K. (1993). The prediction and prevention of marital distress: An international perspective. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *13*, 29-43.

were the most likely to report being happy to be together still, with 96% reporting being glad.

Table 22. Responses to “Are you glad you are still together?” currently married persons who at some point thought marriage was in trouble and thought of divorce, by number of years married in categories.

Glad still together?	Number of years married in categories			
	< 1 year – 7 years	8-18 years	19-33 years	34 or more years
Not glad	6%	2%	0%	2%
Unsure/mixed feelings	15%	2%	5%	1%
Glad	79%	96%	95%	97%

Neither males nor females were any more or less likely to report having gone through a period where they thought their marriages were in serious trouble, and neither were any more or less likely to report being glad that they had stayed together. For people who have stuck it out through difficult times, happiness in marriage was unrelated to how religious they are, whether or not they have received government assistance, and income level.

Those persons married fewer years are probably, on average, closer to the events that have led them to a low point (which some of them are still in and may not recover from), and therefore, less likely to say that they are glad that they have stayed. Taken together, these data show that it is common for people to go through periods of intense unhappiness or concern about their marriages. Yet, a very high percentage of these people are glad that they have remained together. It appears that many couples reach a point where they are down for the count, but that does not mean they are out. These data suggest that many couples could benefit from relationship education programs that teach couples skills to reduce risk factors and increase commitment.

Summary of Quality of Relationships in Oklahoma:

To summarize the findings presented in this section, the data show that what Oklahomans report as the causes of their divorces are also factors that were found to be strongly associated with marital quality and thoughts of divorce. Specifically, the factors having to do with commitment to one’s partner as well as reports of negative interpersonal communication patterns were those most strongly associated with marital quality and divorce proneness. These same two dimensions that Oklahomans most frequently implicate in the ending of their own marriages, lack of commitment and negative communication patterns, also parallel findings in much of the current research literature on success or distress in marriages. Therefore, these reports by Oklahomans on the causes of their divorces, and the association of these dimensions with marital outcomes highlight the importance of these factors in consideration of what might be done to help more couples achieve success in marriage.

Policies and Programs: Oklahomans’ Opinions, Use, and Interest

Opinions about Policies Regarding Divorce, Premarital Preparation, and Pre-Divorce Counseling:

Most Oklahomans favor making divorces harder to obtain and long waiting periods.

All Oklahomans surveyed were asked their opinions on public policy related to divorce. A large majority (69%) believes society would be better off if divorces were harder to get. Younger people are less likely to believe this than older people, as were people who had experienced divorce.

Most Oklahomans, 76%, believe long waiting periods to get a divorce give people time to get over their anger, work out their problems and reconcile. Ever-divorced persons held less favorable views of long waiting periods compared to persons who have never been divorced.

Persons that had ever been divorced were asked to comment on the legal difficulty of obtaining the divorce. Only 23% of these persons wished it had been harder from a legal standpoint to get a divorce. Seventy-seven percent (77%) believed it was difficult enough from a legal standpoint to get a divorce. Males (29%) were more likely than females (19%) to wish it had been more difficult to obtain a divorce.

Most Oklahomans believe premarital preparation is important.

A large majority (88%) of Oklahomans believes it is very important or somewhat important for couples to prepare for marriage through educational classes, workshops, or counseling designed to help them get off to a good start. Sixty-one (61%) believe it is very important and another 27% believe it is somewhat important. Women (65%) are more likely than men (56%) to believe it is very important. Ever-married persons are more likely than never married persons to believe premarital preparation is “very important” (see Table 23). This finding suggests that persons who have experience with marriage recognize the value of preparing for marriage.

Table 23. Ratings of importance of premarital preparation, by marital history.

How important is it to prepare for marriage ...	Marital History	
	Never married	Ever married
Very important	47%	64%
Somewhat important	32%	26%
Not very important	13%	6%
Not important at all	7%	4%

Oklahomans have favorable opinions of required marital counseling before couples with children are granted a divorce.

All Oklahomans surveyed were asked their opinion on required marriage counseling for persons with children before a divorce is granted. A large majority (74%) believes it

would be a very good idea to require marriage counseling or therapy before granting a divorce for married couples with children in the home. Another 21% of Oklahomans believe it would be a good idea. Hence, about 95% of all Oklahomans believe that pre-divorce counseling for couples with children is a good or very good idea. It should be noted that people that have ever been divorced are less likely (67%) than never divorced individuals (77%) to believe required counseling would be a very good idea. However, as can be seen, regardless of variations in personal experience with divorce, the majority suggests this is a sound idea.

Use of Premarital Preparation and Pre-Divorce Counseling:

Oklahomans are relatively likely to have participated in premarital education.

Among currently married Oklahomans, 32% participated in premarital preparation of some sort prior to marrying. The percentage was higher among more recently married respondents, with 43% of those married within the past seven years having participated in premarital preparation. Of those persons in first marriages, 36% had premarital preparation, with 52% of those marrying within the past seven years having participated.

Oklahomans who are recently married are relatively more likely than the nation as a whole to have participated in some sort of premarital preparation: 43% of Oklahomans have participated, compared to national estimates of 36%¹⁸.

Almost all persons who participated in premarital preparation reported that it took place in a religious setting (e.g., church, synagogue, etc.). Of those married within the past seven years, the average number of hours reported being spent in premarital preparation classes or counseling was nine hours; however, the median number of hours spent in premarital preparation was six hours. Hence, six hours is a reasonable representation of what is typical in terms of the number of hours Oklahomans think they spend in preparation. It should be noted, however, that no information was collected on the content or format of the premarital preparation. For example, we do not know if the premarital preparation was done in meetings with clergy or in more formal classes with a specified curriculum. Similarly, we did not collect data on the topics covered during the sessions, so we have no way of comparing what was done to empirically identified risk factors for marital distress.

People who have taken part in premarital education are more likely to say they would be interested in relationship education classes at this point in time to strengthen their relationships (86%) than people who did not have premarital preparation (68%). This is true for both men and women and also across racial groups. This could reflect people being more willing to consider relationship education because they had experienced premarital education, or it may simply mean that people who were likely to have taken part in premarital preparation are also likely to take part in other services to keep their marriages strong and on track.

¹⁸ Stanley, S.M., & Markman, H.J. (1997). Marriage in the 90s: A Nationwide Random Phone Survey. Denver, Colorado: PREP, Inc.

Most Oklahomans have not used pre-divorce counseling or marital counseling.

Persons that had ever been divorced were asked if they sought counseling from a therapist or religious leader before getting their most recent divorce. Slightly more than one-third (37%) indicated they had sought counseling before getting their divorce, while 63% had not. Of those who did seek counseling, 34% received counseling from a marital or mental health therapist, 42% had counseling from a religious leader, and 24% reported receiving counseling from both a therapist and clergy leader. Persons who cohabited prior to marriage with their former spouse were more likely to go to a marital or mental health therapist for counseling, and persons who did not cohabit before marriage were more likely to go to a religious leader for counseling.

Currently married persons were asked if they had ever used counseling from a therapist or religious leader for their current marriage. Only 19% indicated they had sought counseling for their current marriage (81% had not sought counseling), with 32% going to a therapist, 47% going to a religious leader, and 21% receiving counseling from both sources.

Interest in Relationship Education, Awareness of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, and Attitudes Regarding a Statewide Initiative to Strengthen Marriages:

Most Oklahomans would use relationship education to strengthen their relationship.

Currently married persons and persons involved in a steady romantic relationship were asked, “Would you consider using relationship education, such as workshops or classes to strengthen your relationship?” Two-thirds (66%) of these persons said they would consider using such education. Several factors were related to greater interest in relationship education. Those who have never married, those who have ever received government assistance, younger people, those with children in the household, those with more education, and those who attend religious services more frequently expressed greater interest in relationship education.

Eight in ten (82%) never-married Oklahomans expressed interest in relationship education, a larger percentage than any other category of marital or relationship status. Women are slightly more interested than men (68% versus 63%). Persons that had been divorced were just as likely as persons who had never been divorced (both 66%) to say they would consider such workshops or classes to strengthen their relationships. Those who have ever received government assistance are marginally more interested (71%) than those who have never received such assistance (64%).

Although data presented earlier in this report indicated that younger people (under the age of 25) are less positive about marriage and more accepting of divorce and cohabitation, it is interesting that young people are relatively quite interested in at least the idea of relationship education (see Table 24).

Table 24. Interest in relationship education, by age in categories.

Would you consider relationship education...to strengthen your relationship?	Age in categories			
	18-24 years old	25-44 years old	45-64 years old	65 and over
Yes	77%	75%	60%	36%

Persons with one or more children under the age of 18 in the household are more likely to be interested than persons with no children in the household. People may be more motivated to improve their relationship if children are involved.

Education is also strongly related to interest. Only 54% of those who did not graduate high school are interested, compared with 64% of high school graduates, 69% of those with some college, 71% of those with college degrees, and 76% of those with post-graduate degrees. People who attend religious services more frequently are also more likely to say they would consider using relationship education services (66%) than those who do not attend services regularly (34%).

Interest in relationship education is high in Oklahoma, with most adults reporting they would consider using workshops or classes to strengthen their relationships. The greatest interest is among those who may have the greatest need: the young, those who have yet to marry, those with children, and those with low-incomes. (Highly educated persons are also very interested in relationship education.)

People are more aware of efforts by churches to strengthen marriages and reduce divorces than they are aware of such efforts by state agencies.

A majority of respondents (54%) said they are aware of efforts by churches and synagogues to strengthen marriages and reduce divorces in Oklahoma. This percentage was the same for persons who have been divorced and for persons who have never been divorced. People who regularly attend religious services are, not surprisingly, much more aware of such efforts within religious communities. This finding holds true across various age categories. Although many people are aware of efforts by religious communities, far fewer – only 18% of respondents – said they are aware of efforts by state agencies to strengthen marriages and reduce divorces within Oklahoma.

Most Oklahomans believe a statewide marriage initiative is a very good or good idea.

When asked how they feel about a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce, 85% of Oklahomans said it was a very good or good idea: 43% said it is a very good idea and another 42% said it is a good idea. By contrast only 11% said it is a bad idea, and 5% said it is a very bad idea.

Women, persons 25-44 years old, and currently married persons are more likely to feel very positive about a statewide marriage initiative. Marginally more women than men

believe it is a very good idea (46% of women, 39% of men). More people 25-44 years old believe it is a very good idea (49%) compared to 38% of persons 18-24 years old, 39% of persons 45-64 years old, and 38% of persons age 65 and over.

Support for an initiative did vary by race of respondent, though the strong majority of all groups supported the idea. African Americans showed very strong support, with 90% saying they thought the idea of an initiative was a very good or good idea, followed by 85% of Whites, and 78% of American Indians. Views of the statewide initiative are given by race in Table 25.

Table 25. Opinions of a statewide marriage initiative, by race.

How do you feel about a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce?	White	African American	American Indian
Very good idea	44%	40%	39%
Good idea	41%	50%	39%
Bad idea	11%	7%	15%
Very bad idea	4%	3%	6%

Views on an initiative did *not* vary by whether or not persons had ever been divorced, with 86% of never divorced persons saying it is a good or very good idea compared to 83% of ever-divorced persons.

Summary of Policies and Programs:

To summarize the findings presented in this section, most Oklahomans see value in premarital preparation and pre-divorce counseling. Many recently married Oklahomans have participated in premarital preparation of some sort; however, most Oklahomans have not used pre-divorce counseling or therapy. Many Oklahomans express interest in using relationship education, and most believe a statewide initiative to promote marriage is a very good/good idea.

Overall, there is substantial evidence here of interest in and support for some of the kinds of efforts that are, or will be, part of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. There is a solid base of acceptance upon which to build.

Low-Income Adults in Oklahoma

This section gives special attention to low-income adults in Oklahoma. Low-income adults are defined as persons who either currently or in the past have received government assistance. Three forms of government assistance were considered: Food Stamps, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (or Aid to Families with Dependent Children).

Respondents who either currently or in the past have received government assistance are at higher risk for poor relationship and marital outcomes due to a constellation of background factors that predispose them to poor relationships. They are less likely to have a high school education or to be working full-time. They are more likely to be younger, non-white, female, and unemployed. On average, they first married at a younger age and also had their first child at a younger age. They have more children and yet have lower total family income than people who have never received government assistance.

Low-income Oklahomans have generally less positive attitudes toward marriage and are more accepting of cohabitation than non-low-income Oklahomans.

As we discuss below, low-income adults in Oklahoma have poorer quality relationships than non-low-income adults. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that people who either currently or in the past have received government assistance showed generally less positive attitudes toward marriage and more acceptance of cohabitation than people who have never received government assistance. The fact that group differences remained significant even after controlling for age suggest that attitudes may be borne of experience (such as divorce or fear of losing benefits if they marry) rather than cultural attitudes often associated with youth.

Compared to non-low-income adults, low-income adults are less likely to believe that spouses can be counted on more so than a cohabiting partner; and therefore, they apparently are less likely to see advantages to marriage over non-marriage. They are also more likely to believe that a divorce is better than a bad marriage.

Compared to non-low-income adults, low-income adults are more likely to believe that parents who no longer love each other should get a divorce even if they have children. They are also more likely to believe that parents who do not get along should divorce.

Among low-income adults, 40% reject the notion that people who have children together ought to be married, whereas only 23% of non-low-income adults reject this notion.

Those individuals who have ever received government assistance have more favorable views of nonmarital cohabitation, with 50% believing this arrangement is acceptable compared to 35% of individuals who have never received government assistance. Furthermore, among adults who have ever received government assistance, 45% believe that nonmarital cohabitation has all the benefits of marriage without the legal details, while 33% of adults who have never received assistance hold this view. Similarly, individuals who have ever received government assistance are more likely to believe that cohabitation improves the chance for a good marriage (51%) than individuals who have never received government assistance (31%).

After controlling for age, fewer never married adults that have ever received government assistance said they would like to someday be married (49%), compared to adults who have never received government assistance (78%).

Of the group of respondents currently receiving government benefits, 63% say they think they would lose some of their benefits if they married. This may not be an attitude about marriage per se as much as it may be a belief that may to some extent be grounded in reality. It also likely reflects low-income families' greater neediness in terms of economic security.

Oklahoma's low-income adults are more likely to be currently divorced or never married, more likely to have been divorced, and more likely to be currently cohabiting.

Individuals who have ever received government assistance are less likely to be currently married (41%) compared to individuals who have never received government assistance (61%). Low-income adults are more likely to be currently divorced and not remarried (22%) compared to non-low-income adults (11%). And low-income adults are also more likely to have never been married (25%) compared to non-low-income adults (18%), although this difference can be explained by statistically controlling for respondent's age.

Oklahomans who have ever received government assistance are more likely than Oklahomans who have never received assistance to have ever been divorced (see Table 26).

Table 26. Percent ever-divorced, by receipt of government assistance.

	Never received assistance	Ever received assistance
% Ever-divorced	28%	43%

Oklahomans with a romantic partner who have ever received government assistance are more likely than Oklahomans with a romantic partner who have never received assistance to be currently cohabiting (see Table 27).

Table 27. Percent currently cohabiting, Oklahomans with a romantic partner, by receipt of government assistance.

	Never received assistance	Ever received assistance
% Currently cohabiting	32%	45%

Low-income Oklahomans cite reasons for their own divorces.

Oklahomans who have been divorced were asked to indicate what factors most contributed to their divorces. Most of the reasons differed significantly by whether or not the respondent had ever received government assistance. Individuals who had received government assistance were more likely than non-low-income respondents to indicate the following reasons were major contributors to their divorce: too much conflict and arguing, infidelity or extramarital affairs, financial problems or economic hardship, domestic violence, and lack of support from family members. But low-income persons did not differ significantly from non-low-income persons on the following reasons for divorce: lack of commitment, getting married too young, little or no helpful premarital preparation, and religious differences between partners. Table 28 breaks down the reasons cited by receipt of government assistance.

Table 28. Reasons for respondents' divorces given in percent indicating factor did contribute to divorce, by receipt of government assistance.

Reasons For Respondent's Prior Divorce	Percent Indicating "Yes"	
	Never received assistance	Ever received assistance
Lack of commitment	84%	87%
Too much conflict and arguing	54%	70%*
Infidelity or extramarital affairs	54%	64%*
Getting married too young	40%	47%
Little or no helpful premarital preparation	40%	44%
Financial problems or economic hardship	33%	51%*
Domestic violence	17%	47%*
Lack of support from family members	23%	37%*
Religious differences between partners	19%	24%

*Differences are statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Among low-income Oklahomans, divorce proneness is higher and marital quality is lower.

Divorce proneness is higher among people who either currently or in the past have received government assistance. Economic hardship is a major cause of divorce proneness. Individuals currently receiving government assistance, along with people who have received government assistance in the past, are more likely than non-low-income individuals to think about getting a divorce, to discuss divorce with friends, to talk with their spouses about divorce, and to consult with an attorney about divorce.

On every measure of relationship quality examined, people who either currently or in the past have received government assistance consistently scored less favorably than people who have never received assistance. Measures of relationship quality included the following: commitment to spouse/partner, negative interaction, marital happiness, marital satisfaction, feeling trapped in the relationship, having great conversations with spouse/partner, and number of weeks since the couple had an evening out. It should be noted that these differences remained significant after controlling for respondent's age.

Negative interaction and commitment are associated with marital happiness among low-income adults in much the same way as in non-low-income adults.

Those who have ever received government assistance showed virtually identical associations of negative interaction and commitment with marital happiness compared to the sample as a whole. It is important to be aware of this for the simple reason that, at least when it comes to internal relationship dynamics among those who are married, there are substantial similarities between low-income people and others in the state of Oklahoma. However, less is known from these data about those who are both low-income and not married. Things may work very differently for them. Further, even for those who are married, there are important and substantial differences related to financial hardship that put low-income couples at greater risk. Those differences might, for example, predispose them to even greater problems managing conflict than other couples because of the overall level of stress in their lives.

Low-income adults express high interest for relationship education.

Nearly three in four (72%) low-income individuals say they would consider using relationship education, such as workshops or classes, to strengthen their relationship. In fact, the percentage of low-income individuals who would consider using relationship education is greater than the percentage of non-low-income individuals who would consider relationship education (64%) (see Table 29).

Table 29. Interest in relationship education, by receipt of government assistance.

Would you consider using relationship education to strengthen your relationship?	Never received assistance	Ever received assistance
Yes	64%	72%
No	36%	28%

In addition, a somewhat greater proportion of individuals who currently or in the past have received government assistance (88%) than individuals who have never received government assistance (84%) say the idea of a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce is a very good or good idea. However, these group differences seem to be driven by respondent's age, since the differences are no longer statistically significant once age is statistically controlled in the analyses. Therefore, these data suggest that the low-income Oklahomans are just as interested in relationship education as the population as a whole.

Summary of Findings Regarding Low-Income Oklahomans:

Oklahomans who have received government assistance face greater obstacles in developing and sustaining healthy relationships and marriages. They are more likely to have troubled relationships and are much more likely to have been divorced. However, they are just as likely as the general population of Oklahomans to be open to receiving relationship education and to a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce.

Summary

This survey provides many useful findings for policy makers, scholars, and those who provide services designed to help couples achieve their goals in life. While there is much to learn from the unfolding process that is the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, the process of learning has begun in earnest. This report begins to paint a picture of Oklahoma with an admittedly broad brush. More detailed images will emerge over time from this and other data collected as part of the Initiative.

In brief, Oklahomans marry at high rates and are also relatively likely to have difficulties making their marriages work. Oklahoma has a significantly higher percentage of people who are already divorced relative to national rates, and those who are married are more

likely to report having thought about divorce. We know from state recorded data that Oklahomans are also quite likely to have children born out-of-wedlock. While the reasons that the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative grew to a large, statewide effort are doubtless varied and complex, it is not hard to fathom how concern over social trends in this state provided the soil from which the Initiative grew.

Although Oklahomans are especially divorce prone, factors that affect marital success and marital distress in Oklahoma are similar to those that affect couples in the rest of the country. Specifically, negative interaction is strongly associated with lower quality marriages, interpersonal commitment is associated with higher quality marriages, economic hardship puts people at greater risk for many relationship and marital difficulties, premarital cohabitation is associated with somewhat greater risks in marriage, and those who are more actively involved in practicing a faith tend to report somewhat more satisfying marriages. Further, the relationships between nonresident parents and their children are likely to be negatively impacted by divorce and/or the failure of family formation in the first place.

While most people are happy with their marriages, many currently married people report a time when they struggled greatly with their marriages. However, among those married people who thought their marriage was in serious trouble at some point, the overwhelming majority is glad that they remained together. These findings demonstrate that even happily married couples go through difficult periods. Although many couples manage to recover, preventive or therapeutic services might help an even greater percentage to navigate these stressful times successfully.

Oklahomans express strong support for statewide efforts to “promote marriages and reduce divorce”, and most Oklahomans say that they would consider using relationship education services to strengthen their own relationships. They also strongly support the practice of premarital education. However, while the number of people who have taken part in such educational efforts is substantial among recently married individuals, the number falls short of the percentage who believes such programs are important. Greater availability and access appear to be needed, and this may be particularly true among those who are less inclined to seek such services in a religious context.

The findings here suggest that effective relationship education programs will include both strategies for constructively managing negativity and ideas for promoting and protecting commitment between partners. Many other factors—beyond those measured here—are likely to be important in consideration of how to lower risks and raise protective factors for couples. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative has made decisions favoring relationship education strategies that are based on these and other kinds of empirical information. Further, such services are being augmented by input from experts in other areas, such as the Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

To our knowledge, there has been little research on the views of low-income people with regard to services that might help them build strong and healthy relationships and marriages. It is noteworthy that those who are younger and who have lower incomes are

just as interested in efforts to strengthen their relationships as are others. In fact, the economically disadvantaged were just as likely as anyone else to express support for the idea of a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce. These data are remarkable given that low-income adults were less positive, in general, about marriage. The strong interest they express in relationship education services is particularly important given that, on every measure of relationship quality used here, they were less likely to score favorably. Making services more available to those who both need them and who are interested is a classic aim of well implemented, community-based prevention efforts.

The fact that those who are disadvantaged have significant interest in such services demonstrates how important it is not to mistake what may be lower levels of availability of services in the community with a lack of interest. True interest cannot be properly gauged unless the services are readily available. In Oklahoma, the interest appears to exist even if access to services has been limited. In the context of the OMI, considerable thought has been given to who can best reach groups that are interested in relationship building and strengthening efforts, but for whom access has historically been limited. However, it is also clear that there are many complications in the lives of low-income families—complications that make it imperative that public or private sector efforts be thoughtful and creative. Such efforts should actively solicit input from low-income people, as has been done in this survey.

Young Oklahomans are less supportive of the institution of marriage and are more open to non-marital cohabitation as well as having children outside of marriage. Such findings may reflect the erosion of the value of marriage among young Oklahomans, or they may reflect views that will change for that group as they age. By using the same questions in a new sample at some point in the future, time will truly tell. Likewise, time will tell if the beliefs and attitudes, as well as practices, of Oklahomans are impacted through the efforts of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. In any event, despite increased skepticism about marriage, young adults are very interested in participating in relationship education programs.

The findings presented here point to a striking example of just how complex the questions are when it comes to what can be done to accomplish the goals of strengthening marriage and reducing divorce. While more complex analyses are being contemplated, we see evidence in these data that factors such as young age at marriage or lower levels of income and education are not sufficient to understand why Oklahoma is so divorce prone. While it is true that young age at marriage is associated with increased odds of divorce, and Oklahomans are relatively likely to marry young, we found evidence that simply encouraging those under 20 to marry later may not accomplish unambiguously positive results.

Encouraging couples to marry at later ages would lower the likelihood of divorce for some couples but at the risk of increasing non-marital childbirths. Some might argue that it is not so bad to marry very young and have a marriage fail, because one can still get back into line rather easily and choose to marry again. However, such a view under-

weighs concerns that a high frequency of divorce may undermine confidence in the institution of marriage. Perhaps even more importantly, those who marry very young are not only more likely to divorce, but also to have children who will experience divorce. Clearly, efforts to discourage teen marriages should be combined with efforts to discourage teen pregnancies, because the complexities of the problems cascade with non-marital pregnancies.

Overall, discouraging marriage prior to the age of 20 would be wise public policy. However, among teens who already have a child, or a child on the way, marriage may increase the stability of the connection between the father and the child regardless of the fact that such marriages are at relatively high risk for divorce. So, are such marriages desirable from the standpoint of the public good? Such marriages would be most appropriate and most likely to be beneficial when there is an emotional bond between the parents, the risk of domestic violence is very low, and the father does not have a substance abuse or mental health problem that would make the marriage a poor choice.

As one can see in this example, the questions are complex. Grappling with questions such as whether and when marriages might be preferred, even at younger ages when the risk of divorce is admittedly high, suggests that policy discussions may be most fruitful when they reach beyond ideological battles to consider how policies can improve the lives of more people. Ideology surely matters, but thinking through whether it is more or less desirable for society to encourage 18 year-old Mary and 19 year-old Bob, who have a child out-of-wedlock, to marry is a complex question with a very human face. The answers to such questions not only impact Bob's and Mary's lives, but the lives of their children and the culture in which we all live.

There is much to be encouraged about by the findings from this survey. While Oklahoma struggles significantly with issues of family formation and fragmentation, there is more consensus among Oklahomans on matters pertaining to marriage and divorce than not. It is striking that the greatest consensus appears on the question of the value of a statewide initiative to positively impact the culture on issues of marriage and family. Furthermore, across all groups¹⁹, there is interest in relationship education as one way to address the needs of Oklahomans who desire to make their marriages and family relationships happy, healthy, and stable.

Many of the findings reported here are relevant, not only for Oklahoma, but also for the nation as a whole. We live in a time when many policies and programs of governments are being scrutinized in efforts to help more families achieve their goals for stability, security, and happiness. At this time of vigorous policy debates about family formation and marriage, we are encouraged to be part of the process of bringing empirical information to impact such discussions. While there is more to learn and much to do, a process has begun in Oklahoma that will yield valuable information and insights for many years to come.

¹⁹ One exception may be long-term happily married couples. However, these couples are also less likely to need such help.

Appendix A. Methodology of the Study

Results for this study are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of the Bureau for Social Research at Oklahoma State University of a statewide sample of 2,323 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period September 2001 – January 2002. Based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2.02 percentage points.

Survey Instrument:

The questions on this survey were largely taken from other surveys that have been conducted around the U.S., allowing for direct comparisons, when useful, between findings in Oklahoma and findings in the nation. At the same time, some questions were added to specifically address the concerns of Oklahomans.

The survey instrument included questions on the following topics: 1) attitudes about intimate relationships, marriage, divorce, and cohabitation, 2) demographic data on marriage, divorce, remarriage, patterns of cohabitation, and intent to marry/remarry, 3) qualitative information on couples' relationship quality, 4) knowledge and acceptance of prevention education, 5) religious involvement, 6) utilization of government services, and 7) other demographic data.

Sampling Design:

Two samples are utilized in this report²⁰. Subjects in the first sample are adult residents of randomly selected households in Oklahoma. A random digit sampling frame of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in Oklahoma was acquired from a reputable research sampling company. The random digit aspect of the sampling frame is used to avoid bias that can come from using listed sampling frames and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers. Interviews were completed with residents of 2,020 Oklahoma households.

Subjects in the second sample are current Medicaid clients. This second sample was considered an “over-sample” of low-income families and was included to help ensure that the data would be representative of low-income families in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services drew the sample by selecting all active Medicaid cases. Only “categorically needy” cases were selected, leaving out cases that are “medically needy” (these “catastrophic” cases are not tested on income for eligibility). Deleted cases included cases without an adult listed on the case, cases associated with old age assistance, cases associated with aid to the blind, and cases associated with aid to the disabled. Duplicate case listings were also removed. Interviews were completed with 303 Oklahoma Medicaid clients.

²⁰ Data were also collected from 1,000 adult residents of random households in neighboring states (Kansas, Arkansas and Texas). The data presented in this report focus only on the Oklahoma respondents.

To decrease potential nonresponse bias from Medicaid clients without telephones, a prenotification letter was sent in the mail one week prior to the start of interviewing. This letter served as an alert that an interviewer would be calling to conduct the survey, it provided a toll-free number for the Medicaid client to call to complete the survey, and it told the client that they would be paid \$15 for completing the survey.

Non-response in telephone interviews can produce known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups may also vary on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in the analysis. The weighted data file adjusts the sample percentages to fit the Oklahoma population²¹ with respect to gender, age, education, race, and the percentage of people currently using Medicaid. The weighted data are underrepresented for Hispanic ethnicity. Population estimates for persons with Hispanic ethnicity are 5.2%, while the weighted sample percentage is 3.2%. Unless noted otherwise, the data presented in this report are from the full weighted sample of 2,323 respondents.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents:

Using the weighted data of 2,323 respondents, demographic characteristics are described here.

Gender: 48% of the respondents were male; 52% were female.

Age: 14% of the respondents were between 18 and 24 years old, 39% were between 25 and 44 years old, 29% were between 45 and 64 years old, and 17% were 65 years old or older.

Race: 80% of the respondents were White, 8% were African American, 9% were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 2% were Asian, and 1% were other races. Of the respondents, 3.3% indicated they were of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity.

There are areas of analysis in this report where there are not enough respondents to confidently look at some issues by racial groups. The reader should be cautioned that there may be some aspects of the findings that vary substantially by racial group, but there are not enough cases to statistically analyze these differences to determine if they are actual differences.

Education level: 17% of the sample had less than a high school degree; 26% had graduated high school; 25% had some college; 8% had trade, technical, or vocational training; 16% had graduated college; 9% had done postgraduate work or completed a postgraduate degree.

Work status: When asked to indicate their work status during the previous week, 51% of the respondents indicated they were working full time; 10% were working part time; 1%

²¹ Population estimates for Oklahoma are taken from the 2000 U.S. Census.

indicated they had a job but were out due to illness, leave, furlough or strike; less than 1% said they had seasonal work but were not currently working; 5% were unemployed, laid off, or looking for work; 9% were full time homemakers; 3% were only in school; 16% were retired; 4% were disabled for work.

Children in the home: 42% of the respondents indicated they had children under the age of 18 living in their home.

Income: When asked to report their total family income for all sources last year (before taxes and other deductions), 24% of the sample reported \$20,000 or less; 30% reported \$20,000 but less than \$40,000; 21% reported \$40,000 but less than \$60,000; 12% reported \$60,000 but less than \$80,000; 5% reported \$80,000 but less than \$100,000; and 7% reported \$100,000 or more.

Receipt of government assistance: Respondents were asked if they had ever received various forms of public assistance including Food Stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (or Aid for Families with Dependent Children), or Medicaid. Of the respondents, 25 % indicated that they currently or in the past had received some form of government assistance.

Receipt of government assistance and age are strongly related in Oklahoma, as elsewhere. Whereas 52% of those between 25-44 years of age have ever received government assistance, a much smaller percentage of younger persons and older persons have received government assistance (21% of those between 18-24 years of age; 20% of those between 45-64 years of age; 7% of those age 65 and older). Those using government assistance also tend to be disproportionately female, single, non-White, and have low earnings, little education, and children. They are less likely to ever have been married, and more likely to ever have been divorced.

Analytical Strategy:

When subsets of cases were used for a particular analysis, an effort was made to retain as many cases as possible. When analyses involved comparing groups of respondents, results are reported only if there were statistically significant differences between groups. In addition, given the relatively large sample size, an effort was made to only report differences between groups that had substantively important magnitude.