

# Serious Physical Illness or Injury and Relationship Transitions for Cohabiting Couples

Julia A. Drew and Risa Griffin, University of Minnesota

## Introduction

- As cohabitation becomes more common across Americans of all ages and across the life course, it is increasingly likely that persons will experience serious health events within cohabiting unions.
- Some research suggests that the onset of serious physical illness or injury would act as a barrier to marriage, highlighting consistent findings of positive health selection into marriage.
- Other research suggests that cohabiting couples may be more likely to marry in order to facilitate resource sharing – like health insurance – to care for the ill partner. Already-cohabiting couples may have shared assets and children, mutual affection, and time invested in the relationship that lead them to choose to pool resources through marriage.
- Prior research suggests important gender and age differences.

## Research Question and Expectations

Is serious physical illness or injury onset a barrier or catalyst to marriage for cohabiting couples?

### Hypotheses

- Health selection into marriage.** Serious illness or injury will be associated with an increase in the risk of union dissolution.
- Gender.** Illness or injury of the female partner is associated with an increased risk of relationship dissolution; illness or injury of the male partner is not associated with the risk of relationship transition. (Based on studies of illness onset among married.)
- Resource pooling.** Employer-sponsored health insurance for one partner but not the other will be positively associated with the risk of marriage in the event of serious illness or injury.
- Age of couple.**
  - Illness or injury will be associated with relationship transitions in younger couples but not older couples. (Precursor to marriage for younger, alternative for older couples.)
  - Whether the gender of who is ill or is injured is associated with an increased risk of marital dissolution will matter for older couples and less or not at all for younger couples. (Changing gender expectations/roles across time.)

## Measures

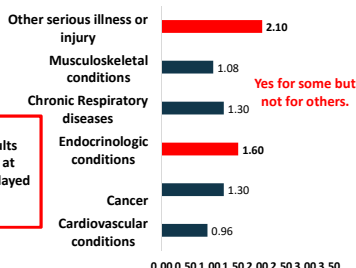
- Dependent Variable.** Reported relationship status in each round: married (same partner), cohabiting (same partner), or separated/single.
- Key Independent Variable.** Serious physical illness or injury, including chronic conditions and injuries associated with intermediate or adverse consequences for physical functioning and social and emotional wellbeing (Sprangers et al. 2000).
- Other Independent Variables.** Female partner age, male college-educated, male race/ethnicity, region, discordant employer-sponsored health insurance, male-female age difference, dependent child parentage.

## Results

Table 1. Descriptive Weighted Percentages for Analysis Sample

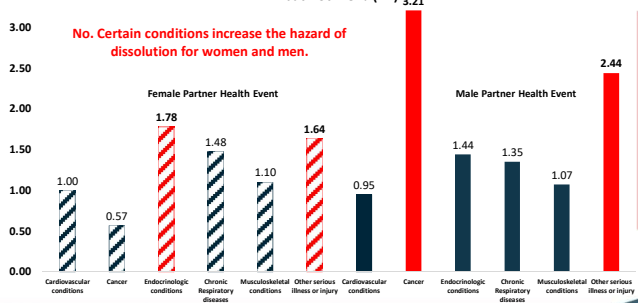
Analysis Variable	Percentage (95% CI) (# of couples: 3,332)
<b>Relationship Status at Final Round</b>	
Cohabiting with same partner	52.7 (50.5, 54.9)
Married to partner cohabiting with at baseline	35.9 (33.7, 38.0)
Cohabiting relationship dissolved	11.5 (10.1, 13.0)
Cohabiting Couples Aged 50 and Older	20.4 (18.7, 22.1)
Couples with One Partner with ESI and the Other Partner with No Insurance	15.8 (14.4, 17.3)
<b>Any Serious Condition</b>	
Cardiovascular condition	10.6 (9.3, 12.1)
Cancer	1.7 (1.2, 2.4)
Endocrinologic condition	3.6 (2.9, 4.4)
Chronic respiratory disease	4.8 (3.9, 5.7)
Musculoskeletal condition	14.0 (12.5, 15.6)
All other serious physical health events	6.2 (5.3, 7.2)

Figure 1. Is Serious Physical Illness or Injury Associated with Increased Hazard of Dissolution? (H1)



Model results significant at  $p < 0.05$  displayed in red.

Figure 2. Is Serious Physical Illness or Injury Associated with the Hazard of Dissolution for Women but Not Men? (H2)



No. Certain conditions increase the hazard of dissolution for women and men.

3. Is one partner's Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance associated with an increase in the hazard of marrying their ill or injured, uninsured partner? No.

4a. Does the association between serious physical illness and injury and union dissolution hazard vary by age of couple? No.

4b. Does the gender of who is ill or injured change the association between illness/injury and the hazard of dissolution for older couples but not younger couples? No.

## Data and Sample

- Data.** Linked NHIS-MEPS data, pooled across the 1999-2011 NHIS and the 2000-2012 MEPS via IPUMS NHIS and IPUMS MEPS.
- Sample.** Couples cohabiting at time of the NHIS interview with both partners aged 18+ who are also in MEPS: N=3,332 couples.

## Methods

Competing risks Cox proportional hazard models.

## Discussion & Next Steps

- Preliminary results indicate the association between serious physical illness and injury among cohabiting couples and relationship transitions differ from published findings of studies of the association for married couples.
- Some conditions increase the hazard of relationship dissolution, notably endocrinologic conditions and other serious illness or injury increase the hazard.
- When gender differences are considered, other serious illness or injury increases the hazard of dissolution for both men and women, while endocrinologic conditions increase it only for women and cancer, only for men.
- Model results to evaluate Hypotheses 3 and 4 showed no support for the hypothesized associations.

### Next Steps:

- Look at new onset of serious illness or injury rather than presence
- Add additional panels of data

## References

Sprangers, M.A.G., de Regt, E.B., Andries, F., et al. 2000. "Which Chronic Conditions are Associated with Better or Poorer Quality of Life?" *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 53: 895-907.