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

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Marriage, Divorce, Pandemic, COVID-19

The U.S. marriage and divorce rates have been on a declining trajectory (Reynolds 2020a, 2020b), but there is limited empirical evidence about levels during the pandemic. We present monthly numbers of marriages and divorces in 2018, 2019, and 2020 based on provisional marriage and divorce data from the five states (Arizona, Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon) that published 2020 monthly vital statistics data. The P-score represents the rate of shortfalls in marriages and divorces (observed minus expected) relative to what would have been expected based on the prior, more typical, year.

Marriage

In each of the five states between 2018 and 2019 there were declines in the number of marriages. In 2020 starting in March (Florida) and April (Arizona, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon) there was an initial dip in the number of marriages compared to 2018 or 2019. In Florida, Missouri, and Oregon the number of marriages during the pandemic (measured from March to last month of observation) were lower in 2020 than would have been expected based on the same

rate of decline observed between 2018 and 2019. The P-scores in these states indicate at least a 20% shortfall in marriages. For example, in Florida there were 28,960 or 33.1% fewer marriages than would have been expected if marriage had followed the typical pattern. In contrast, Arizona and New Hampshire witnessed an initial decline that was then compensated by a rise in marriage, reflected in their P-scores.

Divorce

In 2018 and 2019 the divorce pattern across these five states was one of decline mirroring the national trend. Based on the 2020 data across all five states there were fewer divorces during the initial pandemic months (March, April and May) than during the same months in 2018 or 2019. Arizona appeared to have recovered with an uptick in divorces and a P-score of -2.0% indicating there were slightly more divorces during the pandemic than expected based on the prior year. Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon have not experienced the same rebound in divorces during the months observed in 2020. Based on expected divorce declines the P-scores for the available months ranged from 21.6% in Missouri to 36.4% New Hampshire.

Implications

While these findings represent the experiences of only five states, it provides our first opportunity to assess how the pandemic may have influenced marriage and divorce levels. The overall pattern from March forward indicates shortfalls in marriages and divorces amounting to over 21,000 fewer marriages and 16,000 fewer divorces in these five states than would have been expected based on March through June counts in the prior two years. The marriage and divorce response to the pandemic does not appear to align with political affiliation of the governor or timing of state stay at home or reopening policies. There are too few states to make firm conclusions about national trends, but if these patterns persisted across the nation there may be

up to 339,000 fewer marriages and 190,000 fewer divorces in the United States during 2020 than expected. A marriage and divorce recovery are possible in the later months of 2020 and into 2021; however, there will be some ripple effects of the pandemic on future marriage and divorce rates.

References

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Panel 1. Number of Marriages by State and Month, 2018-2020

2018 2019 2020

Panel 2. Number of Divorces by State and Month, 2018-2020

2018 2019 2020

Figure 1. State-level Monthly Numbers of Marriages and Divorces in 2018, 2019 and 2020 and P-scores.

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Supplemental Material

The monthly counts of marriage and divorce data for 2018, 2019, and 2020 were drawn from publicly available data from each state's vital statistics system. The monthly data are required to estimate marriage and divorce changes during the pandemic, starting in March. The data availability varied with 2020 data available through June for Missouri, through September for Arizona, Florida, and Oregon and through November for New Hampshire. Table 1 presents the expected decline in marriage and divorce for each state was estimated by applying the actual percentage decline that occurred between 2018 and 2019 (from March through the month last observed in 2020) to the 2019 count. The P-score is an estimate used to assess excess mortality in the pandemic and is a measure of the difference in the observed and expected relative to what would have been expected in a typical year.

We estimated the national shortfall of marriages and divorces during 2020 starting with the percentage declines in numbers of marriages and divorces between 2018 and 2019 and used them to estimate counts of marriages and divorces in 2020 (expected 2.19 million marriages and 1.03 million divorces). The 2020 expected number of marriages and divorces during the pandemic months was based on a more typical March to December period in 2019 and calculated by multiplying the share of marriages and divorces that occurred between March and December in 2019 in these five states (87% and 84%, respectively) by the 2020 yearly expected estimates. We determined the expected decline in number of marriages and divorces based the average P-scores for the five states (17.8 % and 22.2%, respectively). The estimated shortfall of marriages was 339,917 and divorces is 191,053. We acknowledge these estimates rest on a number of assumptions about the patterning of marriage and divorce, most basically that the patterns observed in these five states will be mirrored across the nation..

Table 1. Observed and Expected Levels of Marriage and Divorce in 2020

State	Marriages Observed	Marriages Expected	Marriage P-score		Divorces Observed	Divorces Expected	Divorce P-Score
Arizona (Mar- Sept)	19,276	20,183	4.5%		12,010	11,775	-2.0%
Florida (Mar-Sept)	58,484	87,444	33.1%		31,264	43,567	28.2%
Missouri (Mar-June)	11,717	14,870	21.2%		5,876	7,496	21.6%
New Hampshire (Mar-Nov)	6,937	7,718	10.1%		2,025	3,180	36.3%
Oregon (Mar-Sept)	13,434	16,789	20.0%		5,640	7,783	27.0%

The sources for the data from each state are presented below and all retrieved on December 20, 2020.

<https://pub.azdhs.gov/health-stats/mu/index.php>

<http://www.flpublichealth.com/Vsprov/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=ProvReports&radReport=T9&drpYear=2020>

<https://health.mo.gov/data/vitalstatistics/data.php>

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<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/BirthDeathCertificates/VitalStatistics/MarriageData/marr20.pdf>