

# **The Role of Premarital Cohabitation and Childbearing in Divorce Risk among Same-Sex Couples – Insights from the Finnish Register Data**

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## **Introduction**

Despite the expanding legalization of same-sex marriages in the 21st century, studies on union stability continue to focus on different-sex couples (Karney & Bradbury 2020). When scholars have considered union stability among same-sex couples, few studies have included same-sex couples who are married (Raley & Sweeney 2020). This is likely due to a lack of available data and small sample sizes of same-sex couples, as a sufficient number of couples needs to be followed over several years to get an accurate picture of their divorce risk (Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022).

The studies that have investigated same-sex couples' divorce risk have found that same-sex couples have a higher divorce risk than different-sex couples, with the highest divorce risk among female couples across several countries (e.g., Allen & Price 2020; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014; Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022). A few recent studies have shown some convergence of divorce risks across union types, and the divorce risk of male couples has even reached the divorce risk levels of different-sex couples in Sweden (Kolk & Andersson 2020) and Norway (Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022).

So far, the reasons for the elevated risk of divorce in female couples have not been fully understood. Prior studies have speculated, but never tested, that shorter periods of premarital cohabitation could be associated with female couples' increased divorce risk (Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). In addition, prior studies have shown that women in same-sex unions are more likely than men to have prior children from earlier relationships (Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014) and a child together (Kolk & Andersson 2020). Wiik et al. (2014) have previously found that having prior children increases divorce risk in same-sex couples and having a child together reduces divorce risk in female couples in Norway. A child born within a previous relationship may complicate subsequent relationships and increase conflicts between family members, whereas a common child has been suggested to constitute union-specific capital (Becker et al. 1977).

We use internationally unique longitudinal population register data to assess how the length of premarital cohabitation, having prior children from previous relationships, and having a child together are associated with same-sex couples' divorce risk. To our knowledge, this study is the first to assess same-sex couples' divorce risk by the length of their premarital cohabitation. Finland provides an interesting context for this study as it has been one of the forerunners in witnessing rising divorce rates and increased prevalence of non-marital cohabitation, and also the legal recognition of same-sex couples' family rights (Evertsson et al. 2020; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008).

## **Data and Methods**

Our analyses are based on Finnish administrative register data provided by Statistics Finland. Our dataset includes all same-sex couples who registered their partnerships in 1.3.2002–28.2.2017 or got married in 1.3.2017–31.12.2021 in Finland, following the national legislative development with the introduction of same-sex registered partnerships on March 1, 2002, and gender-neutral marriage legislation on March 1, 2017. A total of 6,125 couples were identified in the data. Our analyses cover couples who have entered their first legal same-sex unions by the end of 2018 to have a follow-up

period of at least three years for all couples. After excluding couples who entered a legal union after 2018 and for whom the union was a second or higher-order same-sex union, our analytical dataset consists of 4,588 same-sex couples, 2,791 (60.8%) female couples and 1,797 (39.2%) male couples.

We compare same-sex couples' divorce risk to the corresponding risk among different-sex couples who got married in 1.3.2002–31.12.2021. To be able to compare family transitions preceding same-sex unions to those of different-sex couples, we included also second or higher-order different-sex unions in our analyses. First legal same-sex unions are more comparable to all different-sex unions than only to the first ones in terms of partners' ages, prior unions, and childbearing. Our analytical dataset includes 443,175 different-sex couples. Of these marriages, 73.9% were first for both partners.

We use discrete-time event history analysis to assess divorce risk in female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples. Our data includes one record for every year at risk of divorce from the time of entering a legal union until divorce, death of either partner, or the end of 2021. We present results from unadjusted and fully adjusted models.

In the unadjusted model, the divorce risk is assessed separately for the interaction effects of the couple type and each independent variable, i.e., the duration of premarital cohabitation, a prior child of either partner and a common child. The duration of premarital cohabitation is counted by using information on individuals' residences by dwelling units from the last date of each calendar year since 1987. Having a child together is incorporated in the analysis as a time-varying variable, based on the birth year of the first child. Due to the low number of male couples who have a child together, they are not included in this part of the analysis. The fully adjusted model is mutually adjusted with the interaction effects for the couple type and all independent variables as well as the control variables of the mean age of the partners at the time of entering a legal union, partners' nationalities at birth, educational level, and the year of entering a legal union.

### Preliminary findings

Table 1 shows the lengths of premarital cohabitation and the prevalence of childbearing among the couples in our data. The majority of male couples (31.9%) have lived together for seven or more years before formalizing their union. In contrast, most female couples (29.3%) have cohabited for only 1–2 years before entering a legal union. For different-sex couples, it is most common to move in together for 3–6 years before entering a legal union (30.5%). Women entering same-sex unions are more likely than men entering same-sex unions, but less likely than individuals entering different-sex unions, to have prior children whose other parents are not their marriage partners. The couples differ from each other even more in terms of common children: While 67.0% of different-sex couples have had a child together, the corresponding share among female couples is 28.5% and too low to be reported for male couples (N less than five).

Table 1. *Characteristics of female same-sex couples (N=2,791), male same-sex couples (N=1,797), and different-sex couples (N=443,175) who entered legal unions in Finland in 2002–2018.*

	Female couples	Male couples	Different-sex couples
The length of premarital cohabitation (%)			
7+ years	19.8	31.9	21.0
3–6 years	26.9	18.0	30.5
1–2 years	29.3	15.1	25.8
Moved together in the year of entering a legal union	11.0	8.3	14.1
No premarital coresidence	7.0	8.0	3.1
Unknown duration	6.0	18.6	5.5
At least one partner has a prior child (%)			
Couple has had a child together by the end of 2021 (%)	22.8	11.4	33.9
	28.5		67.0

Figure 1. *The odds of divorce by the length of premarital cohabitation.*

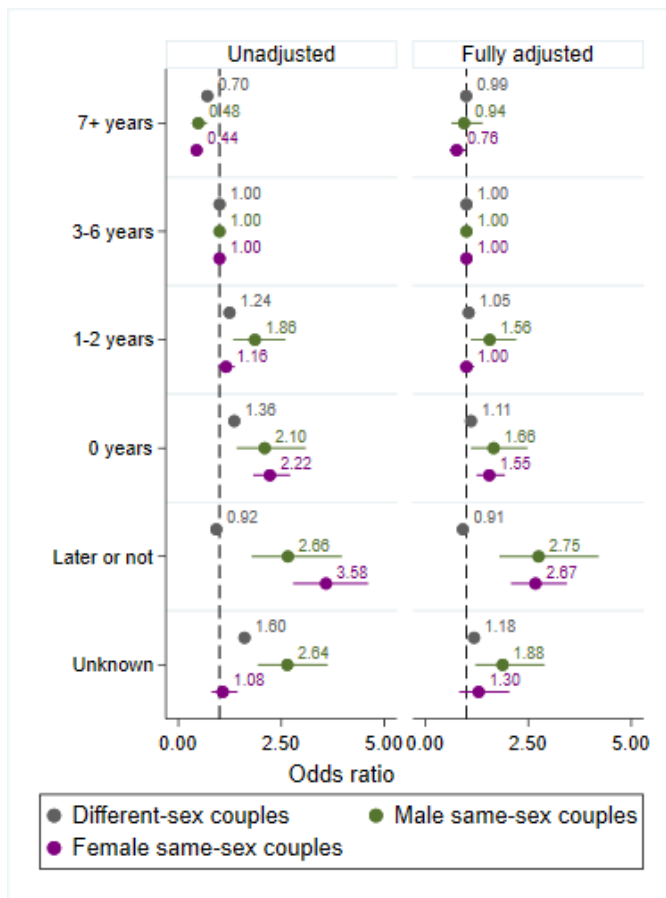


Figure 1 shows our preliminary findings on the association between the length of premarital cohabitation and divorce risk when couples who have moved together 3–6 years before entering a legal union are the reference group. The odds of divorce decrease with a longer duration of premarital cohabitation independently of the couple type. This association is stronger for same-sex couples than for different-sex couples. In the fully adjusted model, couples who have entered a legal union without living together first are the most likely to divorce among same-sex couples, whereas corresponding different-sex couples are the least likely to do so.

Furthermore, we find interesting differences between female and male couples in the unknown group, i.e., among couples who have moved to Finland in the year of entering a legal union and we do not know of their possible premarital coresidence abroad. Female couples' divorce risk in this group does not differ from the reference group in either model, but male couples have significantly higher odds of divorce than their reference group in both models.

Figure 2. *The odds of divorce by the existence of prior children and common children.*

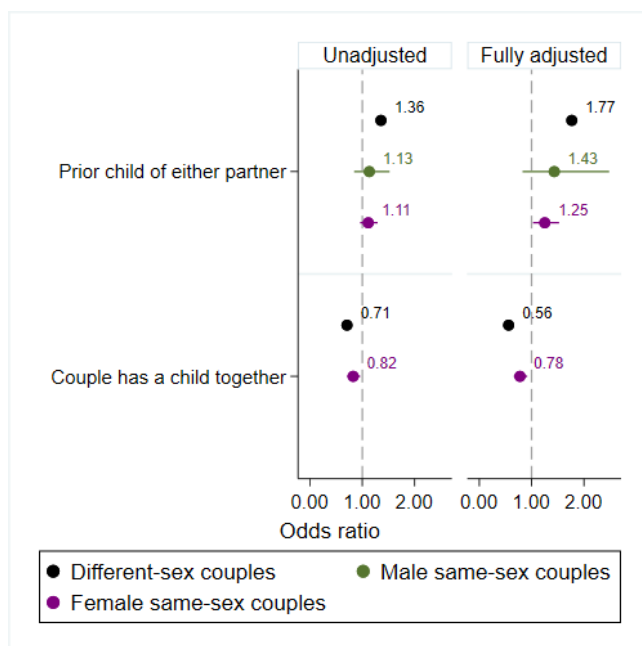


Figure 2 shows the odds of divorce for couples who have a prior child of either partner or a common child relative to couples who have not. Same-sex couples who have a prior child of either partner seem to have larger odds of divorce than couples with no prior children, but the results are not significant in either model. Different-sex couples with prior children of either partner have significantly higher odds of divorce than couples with no prior children in both models.

Female couples who have a child together are less divorce-prone than couples who do not have a child together, and it occurs independently of the adjustments. The difference in the divorce risk between childless couples and couples who have a child together is larger among different-sex couples than female couples.

## Conclusions

Using internationally unique population-level register data, we found that entering a legal union without living together first, a short duration of premarital coresidence, and having children born within previous relationships are associated with increased divorce risk in same-sex marriages in Finland. On the other hand, having a child together reduces divorce risk in female couples. Our study is the first to assess same-sex couples' divorce risk by the length of their premarital cohabitation and to show that prior children constitute a smaller threat to the union stability of same-sex couples than different-sex couples whereas having a child together does not prevent female couples from divorcing as much as it does for different-sex couples.

It seems that female couples experience higher divorce risk as compared to male and different-sex couples independently of their premarital coresidence and childbearing. Other factors not directly observable in our data may explain the differences in union stability by couple types. Previous research has also suggested that gender may play a large role in union-dissolution behavior as women are generally more prone than men to initiate divorce (Amato & Previti 2003). Even if many people may regard union dissolution as a means to improve their life situation, it is important to identify couples who might be at increased risk of divorce and in need of external support to be able to deal with the short- and long-term negative consequences of divorce.

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