

Remarriage Rates Plunge as Divorced Americans Have Doubts

The invitations are in the mail. Jennifer Beltz and T.J. Gurski of Commerce Township, Mich., are defying the odds—they're taking the plunge a second time.

"When I got divorced, I said, 'I'm never getting married again,'" says Beltz, 41, who works in marketing.

That sentiment seems to be quite common among those jaded by a failed first union: A new analysis of federal data provided exclusively to *USA Today* shows the USA's remarriage rate has dropped 40 percent over the past 20 years.

"Pretty much everyone, regardless of age, is less likely to get remarried than in the past," said sociologist Susan Brown, lead author of the analysis, by the National Center for Family & Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio.

The analysis of data comparing 2011 with 1990 shows that in 2011, just 29 of every 1,000 divorced or widowed Americans remarried, down from 50 per 1,000 in 1990; 2011 was the most recent year available for the review.

The remarriage rate has dipped for all ages, with the greatest drops among those younger than 35: a 54 percent decline among ages 20-24, and 40 percent for ages 25-34. Much of the drop is due to the rise of cohabitation and older ages for first marriage—almost age 27 for women and almost 29 for men.

"Cohabitation has opened up options for people that weren't there 20 years ago," Brown said. "It affords the benefits of marriage without the legal constraints."

A generation ago, cohabitation was often called “living in sin,” but that social taboo has faded. Unmarried couples of all ages are moving in together—7.8 million, according to 2012 Census data. And 37 percent of cohabiters have been married before. Between 1990 and 2012, the percentage of unmarried couples living together more than doubled, from 5.1 percent to 11.3 percent.

Even so, it’s not as if everyone previously married is forgoing the institution; almost one-third of all marriages in 2010 were remarriages, according to an earlier analysis by the Bowling Green center.

Many divorced people are hesitant to risk tying another knot.

“Marriage wasn’t even in the discussion,” said David Smith, 58, who works in Internet marketing and Web design. He and partner Sue Stebbins, a business consultant, have lived together in Norwalk, Conn., for five years. Both are divorced; he has three grown kids.

“We really wanted to be liberated from anything that reminded us of our past,” she said. “Rather than something outside of you giving you that commitment, it’s a choice daily to form that commitment.”

The decision to remarry isn’t an easy one, but after 11 years of living together, Kathye Guccione, 50, of Ontario, Calif., and her fiance Larry Lindsley, 46, are getting married on Nov. 12.

“We actually didn’t want to get married again,” said Guccione, whose two sons are 18 and 21. “We decided to live together and the boys live with us and we were content to stay that way.”

But earlier this year, they started “talking about it back and forth” and decided to take the leap. Her sons will escort her down the aisle at the county courthouse; they’ll have a party to celebrate Nov. 16.

Some couples worry about the odds of a successful remarriage, but long-term data is relatively non-existent because of federal cutbacks that stopped data collection. "There is no good, recent data on divorce among remarried couples that I know of," said marriage researcher Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

However, new research does suggest those who have been divorced once are less likely to stay in an unsatisfying marriage a second time.

"It's not that the couples are less happy with each other and it's not that they're fighting more than first-married couples," said psychologist Sarah Whitton of the University of Cincinnati. "It seems that if a relationship starts deteriorating, they're quicker to move towards divorce."

Her study of 1,931 married individuals was published this spring in the Journal of Marriage and Family.

Remarriage is "difficult and different" from first marriage, said relationship expert Maggie Scarf, a Yale University fellow who outlines the hazards in her new book, "The Remarriage Blueprint." Scarf conducted lengthy, face-to-face interviews with 80 remarried individuals to see how their marriages fared.

"In the first marriage, the couple has time alone to set up their own culture—the way they do things," Scarf said. "But in the second marriage, you have a single parent who has been living alone with his or her children and they are deeply, deeply bonded and have a culture of their own. The stepparent walks into that and doesn't know the first thing about it."

Krissy and David Coleman of Lebanon, Va., ages 37 and 38, were well aware of the relationship troubles that can happen because of the kids. That's why before they married recently—both for the second time—the five kids they have between them, ages 7 to 18, were an integral part of the

courtship.

"We dated the kids, too," she said. "When we went out, our children went with us. It was very important that if somebody was going to be in my life, they have to accept my children."

Experts say the two biggest factors complicating remarriage are money and children—even if the kids are adults.

"It's much, much harder than a first marriage," said David Olson of Minneapolis, a professor emeritus of family social science at the University of Minnesota. "You see this cobweb of relationships. Just one little decision impacts that whole system. It's not only more people, but it's more decisions, and they're more difficult. People are bringing a lot of bad history with them."

Olson is co-author of the 2011 book "The Remarriage Checkup," which surveyed 50,000 couples taking a class to prepare for remarriage. Two-thirds were age 41 and older, and half said they were living together.

"Cohabiting isn't going to make it easier," Olson says. "In many ways, it makes it more complicated. ... It doesn't signal to the kids 'this is permanent.' "

Sending that signal is one reason Amber Fortune, 25, of Logan, Utah, says she and fiancé Dixon Buttars are getting married this fall.

Buttars, 28, was married for a year and had no children. Fortune separated after five years and divorced; her daughter from that marriage just turned 4.

"I want her to know that no matter what, we're promising to stick it out," she said. "When you promise something you make it work."