

Population & Societies

Being together, living apart: A more frequent arrangement after a separation

Version
française

Arnaud Régnier-Loilier*

While most couples have separate homes at the start of their relationship, some prefer to continue living apart for many months or years. Analysing data from the EPIC survey of individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux) conducted in 2013–2014, Arnaud Régnier-Loilier examines the prevalence of non-cohabiting relationships and the characteristics of the people who choose this living arrangement over the long term.

In metropolitan France, around one in three adults do not have a live-in partner. Living alone, however, does not imply the absence of any romantic attachment. In France, as in other European countries, around a quarter of people living alone report being in a “stable intimate relationship” with someone who lives elsewhere [1].

Various reasons are given for not living with one’s partner. For some people, living apart is a long-term way of life, whereas for others it is a “test period” for a new relationship, which may end in a break-up or in a decision to move in together [1]. Nine out of ten cohabiting relationships are preceded by a period in which the partners live in separate homes [2]. Its duration may vary, depending on the partners’ ages when they meet or on their personal histories (previous relationships, presence of children, etc.). Data from the EPIC survey of individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux) (Box; [3]) can be used to estimate not only the share of people in non-cohabiting unions in France at different ages but also the probability of moving in together as the relationship progresses.

Non-cohabiting relationships are more frequent at young ages

In the EPIC survey, 22% of respondents aged 26–65 did not have a partner, 72% had a live-in partner, and 6% reported being “in a relationship with someone who does not live in the same dwelling”. This represents around 1.8 million people in France. As a proportion of the population of partnered individuals only, non-cohabiters thus represent around 7% of all couples. They are more typical of the under-30 age group (Figure 1). The higher proportion of men than women in non-cohabiting relationships at these ages is explained by the fact that women in different-sex relationships are 2.5 years younger, on average, than their male partner [4]. At young ages, unions where the partners live separately are most often first relationships (among the 26–30 age group, seven in ten people have never lived with a partner), and certain conditions must be met before cohabitation can be envisaged. These include, for example, confidence in the relationship’s stability, no longer being in school, or having a steady job. But most young people in this situation are planning to cohabit with their partner: 68% intend to do so within two years, 12% some time later, and 13% are undecided (Table 1). Only 7% have no plans to live together,

* French Institute for Demographic Studies.

Table 1. Duration of non-cohabiting union, intention to live together, and union history, by age

Age	Mean duration of relationship (years)	Intend to live together within 2 years (%)	Already cohabited with a partner (%)
26–30	2.5	68	33
31–40	3.6	55	62
41–50	5.5	31	70
51–65	10.9	22	75
Overall	6.1	41	62

Interpretation: Individuals aged 26–30 in a non-cohabiting union have been together for 2.5 years on average; 68% intend to live with their partner within the next two years; 33% have already lived with a partner in the past.
 Coverage: Respondents aged 26–65 in a non-cohabiting union.
 Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).

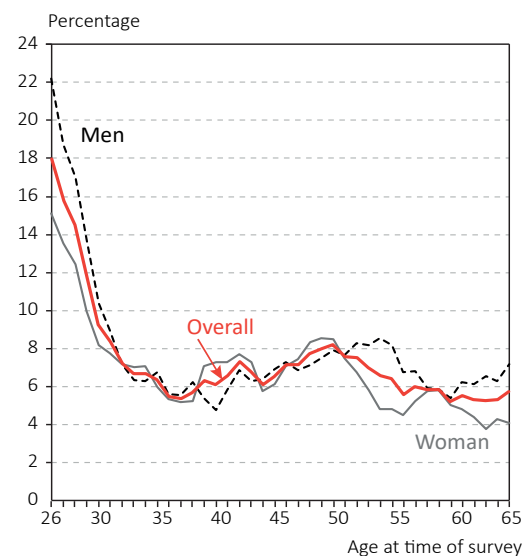
although this does not necessarily reflect a preference for living apart; some people may simply not envisage a long-term future for their relationship. At young ages, non-cohabitation can thus be seen as a “stage” in the process of union formation rather than a form of union per se.

Living apart is less frequent beyond age 30, but a slight upturn is observed at ages 45–55, perhaps corresponding to new relationships formed by individuals who have separated from a previous partner. Above age 30, the reasons for not living together are different from those given by the younger age group. For older people, non-cohabitation is a longer-term arrangement, and the proportion who intend to live with their partner decreases with age. Among 31–40-year-olds, the relationship has lasted 3.6 years on average, and 55% intend to live together within the next two years. In the 51–65 age group, it has lasted 11 years, and only 22% plan to share a home. At these ages, many non-cohabiters have already lived with a partner (Table 1) and may no longer wish to repeat the experience.

Distinct timing of cohabiting union formation at different stages of life

Complementing the information on union status observed at the time of the survey, Figure 2 illustrates the process that leads (or does not lead) to cohabitation. It shows the probability of having moved in together at each month of union duration by age at the start of the relationship. Unions initiated at ages 15–20 tend to remain non-cohabiting for longer. After two years, only 48% of these unions are cohabiting (versus 76% of those that began at ages 21–29). When they first met their partner, most of the young people concerned

Figure 1. Share of people in a non-cohabiting union among all people in a union, by age



A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* no. 566, INED, May 2019.

Interpretation: Of men aged 26 in a union, 22.2% do not live with their partner.

Note: The proportion at a given age corresponds to the weighted mean of the proportions observed at ages $a - 2$, $a - 1$, a , $a + 1$, $a + 2$.

Coverage: Respondents aged 26–65 in a cohabiting or non-cohabiting union.

Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).

had never previously cohabited (90%). In six in ten cases, at least one partner was a student—a status generally incompatible with cohabitation—and in nine in ten cases, at least one partner was still living with his or her parents. However, for young people whose relationship began at age 20 or younger, the probability of still living apart after eight years is very low (only 4% do not live together).

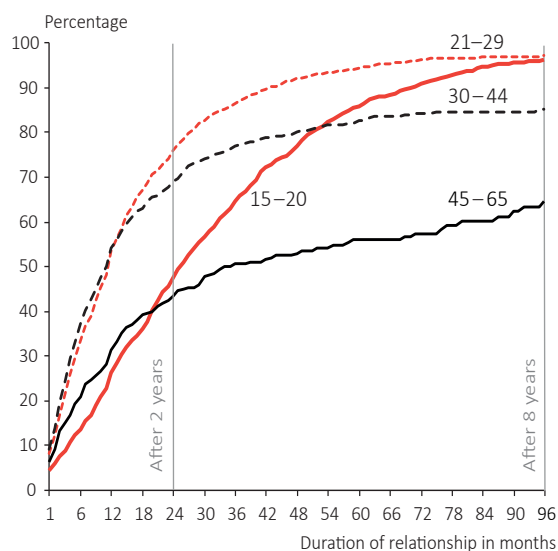
At ages 30–44, on the other hand, newly formed couples tend to move in together more rapidly (at the start of the relationship, the majority of partners at these ages are no longer in education and have left the parental home). A substantial share, however, continues to live separately after eight years: 15% of partners do not live together. The proportion reaches 35% for relationships initiated at ages 45–65 (Figure 2). In many cases, these are new relationships formed after a separation.

A lesser propensity to cohabit among divorcees...

Among people who repartner after a separation,⁽¹⁾ certain characteristics of the previous union influence the propensity to cohabit (Table 2). First, if one or

(1) From a cohabiting partner.

Figure 2. Probability of moving in together at each month of union duration by age at start of the relationship



A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* no. 566, INED, May 2019.

Interpretation: Twenty-four months after the start of the relationship, 76% of people who met their partner between ages 21 and 29 had moved in with him or her (Kaplan–Meier method). Coverage: Respondents aged 26–65 in a non-cohabiting union. Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).

both partners have been married, the probability of living apart increases. Two years after the start of the relationship, this probability is 42% if one or the other partner was previously married, compared with 23% when neither has ever been married. This difference is still visible after five years as a couple. While previous marital status is partly linked to age (older people are more likely to have been married and have a lesser tendency to live with their partner when they form a new relationship), the effect of a previous marriage persists, independently of age, for women especially.⁽²⁾ People with a long conjugal history marked by marriage and a possibly traumatic divorce may be cautious about engaging in a new cohabiting relationship. For fear of another painful separation [5], they may prefer to postpone cohabitation until they are certain that the relationship will last or may even wish to avoid shared living altogether.

...linked to the presence of children from a previous union

Beyond marital status per se, this finding is explained above all by the presence of children, as married couples more frequently have children (79% of cases)

(2) Tendency confirmed by the duration model taking account of age, among other factors.

Table 2. Probability (%) of still living separately 2 and 5 years after the start of the relationship by marital and parental histories of both partners

	Probability of still living separately (%)	
	After 2 years	After 5 years
Marital history		
Both never-married	23	9
Only man ever-married	30	22
Only woman ever-married	38	24
Both ever-married	42	28
Presence of children from a previous union		
Neither partner has children	19	6
Only man has children	26	16
Only woman has children	33	19
Both have children	47	34
Marital history and presence of children		
Both never-married and childless	19	4
One (at least) ever-married and both childless	17	8
Both never-married and one (at least) has children	33	22
One (at least) ever-married and one (at least) has children	41	27
Interpretation: Two years after the start of their relationship, 23% of respondents in a union where neither partner has ever been married are still living apart (Kaplan–Meier survival function). Coverage: Respondents aged 26–65 who had previously been in a cohabiting union and who were in a new relationship, cohabiting or otherwise, at the time of the survey. Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).		

than unmarried couples (25%). For partners with no children from a previous union, the probability of still living apart two years after the start of the relationship varies little, whether one or both partners have been previously married (17%) or neither partner has been married (19%) (Table 2). Likewise, for partners with children from a previous relationship, the effect of marriage is small.

It is not so much the form of the previous union as the presence of children that holds back the partners’ decision to move in together. The probability of still living separately after two years is 47% for partners who both have children, versus 19% for couples where neither partner has children.⁽³⁾ The effect of having children is smaller for men than for women, perhaps in part because children live more often with their mother after a separation. Certain mothers with custody of their children may thus “choose” to live separately from their new partner to avoid disrupting

(3) Tendency confirmed by a duration model (see note 2).

**Box. The EPIC survey
(Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux)***

The EPIC survey was conducted by INED and INSEE in 2013–2014 on a sample of 7,825 men and women aged 26–65 living in ordinary dwellings (excluding collective dwellings) in metropolitan France. The following question was asked to determine the respondents' union status at the time of the survey: "Are you currently in an intimate relationship? Yes, with a person living in this dwelling / Yes, with a person not living in this dwelling / No". The retrospective dimension of the questionnaire is an important component of the survey. Each union or serious intimate relationship over the life course is described. The dates of certain key life events are recorded, including start of relationship, start of cohabitation, marriage, civil partnership (PACS), birth of children, separation, divorce (see [3] for a detailed presentation). Given the very small number of same-sex couples in the EPIC sample, the analysis does not consider sexual orientation.

* This survey was conducted with the support of CNAF (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales), DREES (Direction de la recherche, de l'évaluation, des études et des statistiques), ANR (Agence nationale de la recherche, CECHIC project: Corpus pour l'étude de cent ans d'histoire du couple en France), and iPOPs (Individus, Populations, Sociétés).

the children's lives [5]. Living separately avoids the risks of conflict linked to step-parenthood that may occur on several levels—either between the children and the step-parent if they do not get along, or between the partners in case of disagreement about the children's education or about the step-parent's role. To safeguard the children's well-being, some separated parents may not allow themselves to form a new cohabiting union.

Many partners who are already parents are also less inclined to live together because they do not wish to have any more children. While few couples imagine starting a family without sharing the same home, there is less imperative to cohabit for partners who do not plan to have children.

A greater tendency to cohabit among the least educated

Alongside the presence of children, socioeconomic status—educational level in particular—also influences the choice of living arrangement. For people with a lower secondary education entering a

new relationship, the probability of moving in together is 30% higher than for those with an upper secondary education.⁽⁴⁾ For the most highly educated, the propensity is lower [6].

These differences may reflect socially differentiated conceptions of life as a couple, with the alternatives to the "traditional" union holding less appeal for the least educated than for the most highly educated. Financial constraints are also stronger at the lower end of the social scale. Couples may decide to live together as a means to save money (by making only one instead of two rent payments, etc.). Keeping two separate dwellings would therefore require the means to do so.

References

- [1] Régnier-Loilier A., 2016, "Partnership trajectories of people in stable non-cohabiting relationships in France", *Demographic Research*, 35(40), pp. 1169–1212.
- [2] Costemalle V., 2015, "Parcours conjugaux et familiaux des hommes et des femmes selon les générations et les milieux sociaux", in Bodier M., Buisson G., Lapinte A., Robert-Bobée I. (coord.), *Couples et familles, Édition 2015*, Paris, INSEE, pp. 63–76.
- [3] Rault W., Régnier-Loilier A., 2019, "Studying individual and conjugal trajectories in France: Scientific and methodological choices in the EPIC survey", *Population, English Edition*, 74(1–2), forthcoming.
- [4] Daguet F., 2016, "De plus en plus de couples dans lesquels l'homme est plus jeune que la femme", *Insee Première*, 1613, September.
- [5] Duncan S., Carter J., Phillips M., Roseneil S., Stoilova M., 2013, "Why do people live apart together?", *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 2(3), pp. 323–338.
- [6] Régnier-Loilier A., 2019, "New partner, new living arrangements? The process of repartnering after separation", *Population, English Edition*, 74(1–2), forthcoming.

Abstract

In France, being in a relationship without living together most often corresponds to a stage in the process of union formation rather than a distaste for shared living, especially among young people. On the other hand, for people previously in a union and who already have children, living separately from their new partner may be seen as an "alternative" to cohabitation, enabling them to enjoy a new intimate relationship while maintaining their autonomy and avoiding the constraints of shared living.

Keywords

union, marriage, cohabitation, separation, divorce, EPIC survey, France

(4) After correcting for structural effects, notably age and the partners' previous marital and parental status (Cox model).