

Hidden Instability: Is What We Know about Same-Sex Couples' Union Stability True?

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Previous research has consistently shown that same-sex couples—particularly female couples—face higher divorce risks than different-sex couples, while male same-sex couples appear closer to the stability patterns of different-sex couples (Aarskaug Wiik, Seierstad, & Noack, 2014; Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Evertsson, Moberg & Van der Vleuten 2025, Kolk & Andersson, 2020). Register data are invaluable for studying these families, as they cover entire populations and thus allow for the analysis of relatively small groups such as same-sex couples. A key limitation, however, is that most register-based studies restrict their focus to officially registered partnerships and marriages. By design, they overlook the large share of couples—both different- and same-sex—who begin or remain in cohabitation without ever formalizing their union. In the Netherlands, where cohabitation is widespread and often functions as a long-term alternative to marriage, ignoring cohabitation risks producing a distorted picture of union stability and the life course of same-sex couples.

The main aim of this paper is to provide the first population-level evidence on same-sex union stability that includes both marriage and cohabitation. And it turns out that once cohabitation is taken into account, overall instability patterns differ from what previous studies have suggested. In this abstract, we will refer to divorce as the ending of formalized unions (i.e., marriage & registered partnerships), whereas we will refer to separation as the ending of a cohabiting union.

Data and Method

Our analyses draw on large-scale Dutch population register data provided by Statistics Netherlands (Bakker, van Rooijen, & van Toor, 2014). The Netherlands is an excellent case for studying same-sex separation, as it has a long history of legal recognition: Registered partnerships were introduced in 1998, and it became the first country worldwide to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001. A unique advantage of the Dutch population registers is that they allow us to identify couples not only through legal marriage or registered partnership, but also through administrative indicators of cohabitation. We construct a Cohabitation History File that links individuals over time based on a combination of: (1) joint residential moves (both partners moving from the same address A to the same address B), (2) fiscal partnership, (3) receipt of joint benefits, and (4) shared legal parenthood. Unlike many register systems, this makes it possible to capture cohabiting unions at the population level, including couples who never formalize their relationship.

In our preliminary analyses, we examined around 3,617 male and 4,329 female same-sex couples who formed a union between 2007 and 2011 and were followed for 10 years. The final dataset—currently under preparation—extends the observation window from 2000 to 2024, greatly expanding the number of unions, and will constitute one of the largest population-based samples of same-sex unions to date.

Separation risks are estimated using discrete-time logistic regression models with time-varying covariates (Tekle & Vermunt, 2012), controlling for factors such as age, age gap, and household income differences. We apply sequence analysis to classify union trajectories over a 10-year window. Starting with the moment of union entry (cohabitation, registered partnership, or marriage), each couple’s trajectory is categorized as: remaining intact, dissolving (cohabitation dissolution or divorce), or censored (e.g., migration, death, or right-censoring).

Results

Figure 1 shows the probability of union dissolution over the first ten years for different-sex couples (left panel), female same-sex couples (middle panel), and male same-sex couples (right panel). The red lines capture dissolutions after cohabitations, while the blue lines capture divorces among unions that transitioned into marriage or registered partnership.

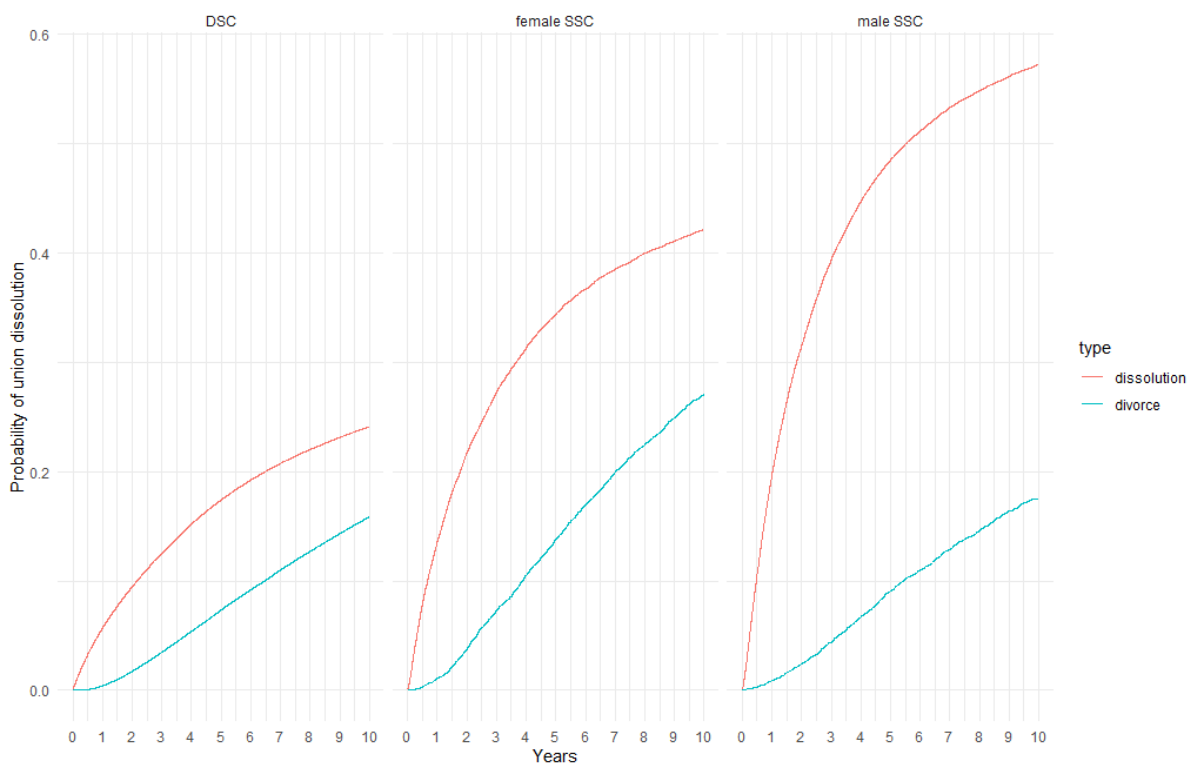


Figure 1. Separation Risks by Divorce and Cohabitation.

The figure illustrates two important findings. First, consistent with previous studies based on marriages and registered partnerships, female same-sex couples are the most unstable in terms of divorce (27% after 10 years), followed by male same-sex couples (17% after 10 years), with different-sex couples showing the lowest divorce risks, but very similar to those of male same-sex couples (15% after 10 years).

Second, when we consider cohabiting unions, the picture changes dramatically: dissolution risks rise sharply across all couple types, and especially for same-sex couples. Importantly, the pattern between groups also shifts. Whereas female same-sex couples had the highest divorce risks (27% after 10 years), once cohabitation is included, it is male same-

sex couples who experience the greatest instability, with nearly 60% of unions dissolving within a decade.

Taken together, the figure demonstrates that focusing exclusively on legal unions underestimates the true extent of instability, and that the gap between same-sex and different-sex couples is even wider once cohabitation is considered.

Although Statistics Netherlands provides reliable indicators of cohabitation, we test the validity of our findings through a series of sensitivity analyses. These include restricting the sample by age (over 35, first cohabitation after 25), excluding students, large age-gap couples, and very short unions (<6 months), and assessing potential selection effects (e.g., geographic clustering, Dutch-born only, or unions lasting at least four years). We are still in the middle of the analyses, and the results should be considered preliminarily, but thus far, these do not seem to affect our main patterns.

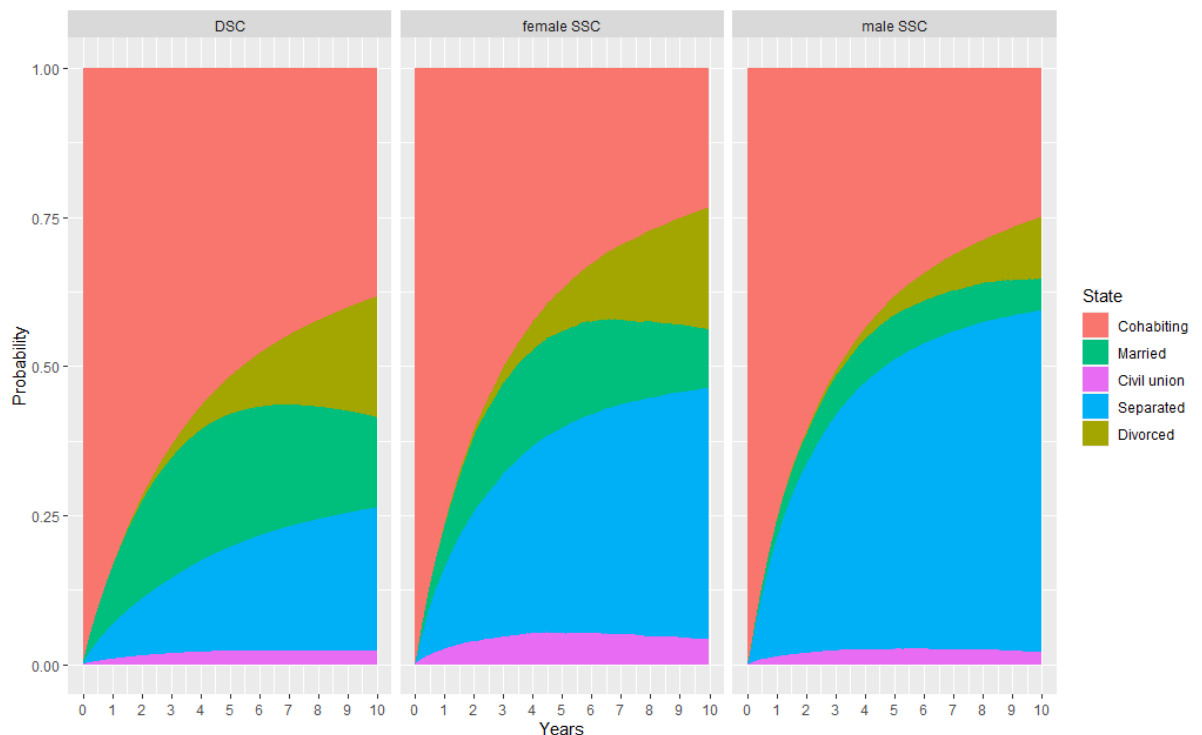


Figure 2. Distribution of Union States in the First 10 Years after Cohabitation Entry.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of union states during the first ten years after cohabitation entry, based on sequence analyses, and provides further explanation for the patterns observed in Figure 1. All unions start with 100% cohabitation, but the subsequent pathways differ sharply across couple types.

Different-sex couples are the most likely to transition into marriage or registered partnership and to remain in that state; compared with both same-sex groups. Female same-sex couples, by contrast, display elevated instability on both dimensions: They separate more often than different-sex couples, and once they formalize their unions, they also have a much higher likelihood of divorce. Male same-sex couples stand out in yet another way: fewer of

their unions transition into marriage or registered partnership, and separation dominates their trajectories. Divorce is less common among male couples in absolute terms, but only because fewer unions ever become formalized; their overall instability is nonetheless high due to the prevalence of cohabiting break-ups.

In sum, these trajectories reveal that the apparent stability of male same-sex unions is largely an artifact of lower rates of formalization: their instability occurs earlier, during cohabitation, and thus remains hidden in traditional register-based analyses. Including cohabitation exposes this ‘hidden instability’ and alters our understanding of gendered patterns in same-sex union stability.

Conclusion

This study provides some of the first population-level evidence on the stability of both cohabiting and formally registered same-sex unions in the Netherlands. By integrating cohabitation into population register analyses, we reveal that differences in separation risks between same-sex and different-sex couples are larger than previously assumed. Female same-sex couples show the highest divorce risks among formalized unions. However, when cohabiting unions are included, male same-sex couples appear more unstable overall, as much of their separation occurs before any legal registration. These findings demonstrate that official divorce statistics underestimate the instability of same-sex couples and underscore the importance of including all union forms in demographic analyses.

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