

Union Dissolution in Sweden: A Driver of Declining Fertility Rates?

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Background and research objectives

Despite a policy environment that continues to promote a strong work–family balance and support high levels of gender equity within couples, Sweden – like other Nordic countries – has experienced an “unexpected” decline in fertility rates since the 2010s (Comolli et al., 2021; Hellstrand et al., 2021). Previous studies suggest that this downturn was largely driven by a decreasing propensity among childless cohabiting individuals to become parents (Comolli et al., 2021; Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson, 2022). The fall in first-birth rates coincided with a parallel and independent decline in marriage formation, while propensities to enter new cohabiting unions remained stable (Cantalini, Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson, 2024). Taken together, these developments point to a reduced willingness among childless cohabiting women and men to engage in more long-term commitments, possibly reflecting heightened uncertainties about the future and in people’s lives (Neyer et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2021).

In this study, we take a closer look at the dynamics of married and cohabiting couples in Sweden, examining how their propensities to dissolve their unions have evolved during the period of shifting family patterns. If childless couples have indeed become less inclined to enter long-term commitments, they may instead have become increasingly likely to separate and thus exit the possibility of parenthood. Conversely, if union dissolution rates have remained stable, this may indicate that being in a childless cohabiting union has emerged as a new, more enduring family form within contemporary Swedish family dynamics.

Data, methods and analytical strategy

Our analyses are based on Swedish population and administrative registers, collected and organized by Statistics Sweden. These registers provide longitudinal information on family-demographic histories and socioeconomic characteristics for the entire resident population. In addition, we draw on a recently introduced register containing information on apartments and households, which allows us to examine trends in cohabitation dissolution at the population level.

We analyse two main events of union dissolution: divorce and the dissolution of unmarried cohabiting unions. The study population includes Swedish-born men and women aged 18–65, born between 1946 and 2006. Individuals are followed from 1991 to 2024 in the analysis of divorce, and from 2012 to 2024 in the analysis of cohabitation dissolution.

We apply event-history techniques in the form of piecewise constant baseline intensity models, estimated separately for women and men as well as at the couple level. Divorce is analysed with monthly precision, with the time at risk of divorce beginning in the month of marriage and ending at the month of divorce, emigration, death, age 65, or December 2024, whichever occurs first. The dissolution of unmarried cohabiting unions is analysed with yearly precision, as monthly data on informal unions are not readily available in the registers. Here, time at risk begins in the year the cohabitation starts and ends in the year of dissolution, marriage, emigration, death, age 65, or 2024, whichever comes first.

Our analytical strategy proceeds in three steps. First, we estimate the relative risks of divorce and cohabitation dissolution separately for women and men, focusing on how a set of individual-level characteristics are associated with these outcomes. Specifically, we estimate two models. Model 1 includes calendar year, age, union order (for divorce only, due to data limitations for cohabitations), union duration, number of children born within the current union, and presence of pre-union children. Model 2 additionally controls for region of residence, parental country of birth, educational attainment, and labour market activity.

In the second step, we examine time trends in union dissolution by presenting time series of the relative risks of divorce and cohabitation dissolution, controlling for both union-specific and partner-specific characteristics. Finally, in the third step, we analyse these trends by number of common children in the couple, introducing an interaction between this variable and calendar year.

Preliminary findings

Our findings on divorce risks indicate higher propensities of union dissolution among individuals with low educational attainment, those without children, and those with children born outside the current union, regardless of gender. Gender differences emerge in relation to labour market activity: while both inactive and unemployed individuals

display higher risks of divorce, income gradients operate in opposite directions for men and women – positively for women and negatively for men.

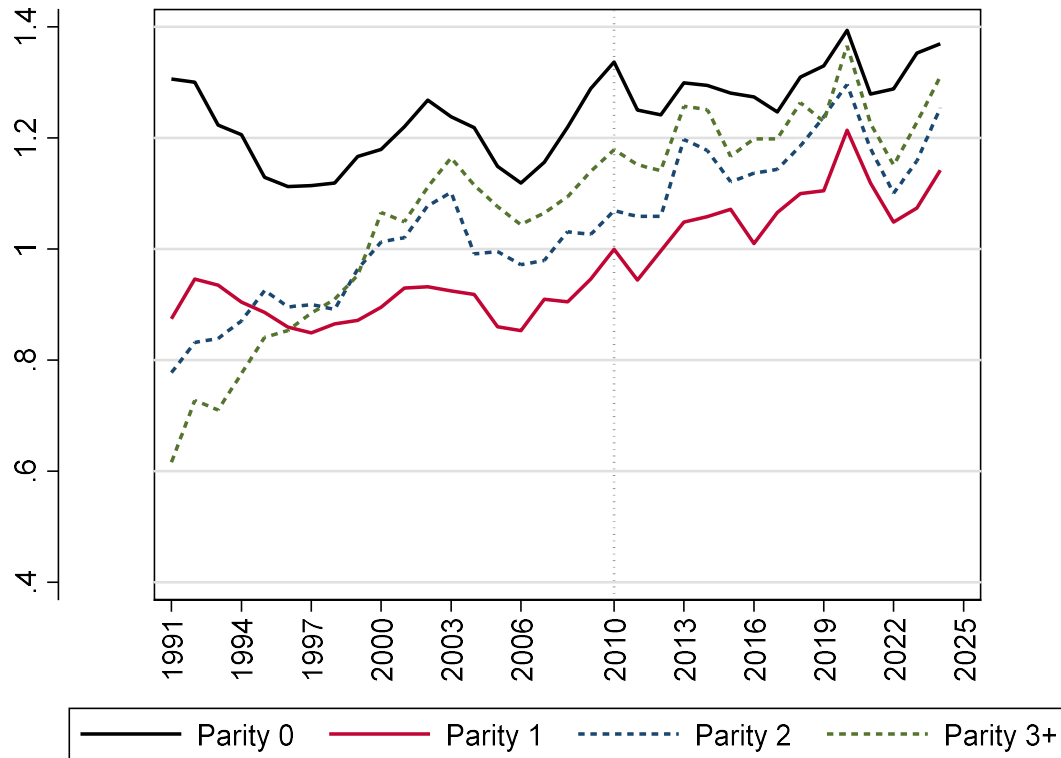
Regarding temporal developments, divorce risks slightly increased throughout the 2010s, declined markedly during the Covid-19 period, and subsequently rose again in the most recent years (Figure 1). However, this increase has been primarily driven by couples with common children. In contrast, among childless couples, divorce risks rose much less during the 2010s (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Relative risks of divorce, by calendar year. Piece-wise constant baseline intensity models for couples



Preliminary findings on cohabitation dissolution also reveal no increase in dissolution rates among childless couples during the period under study. Taken together, these results highlight developments in union (in)stability that are interesting in themselves, while also providing a more nuanced picture of the potential role of union dynamics for the recent decline in first-birth trends in Sweden. In particular, they suggest that remaining in a childless cohabiting union may have become an increasingly common and enduring feature of contemporary Swedish family life.

Figure 2. Relative risks of divorce, by calendar year and common parity. Piece-wise constant baseline intensity models for couples



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