

Delaware Healthy Marriage Coalition

Delmarva Regional Healthy Marriage Initiative

FACT SHEET

What is the status of marriage in Delaware and in Maryland?

The State of Delaware does not have a particularly high divorce rate. According to the Delaware Health Statistics Center, in the five year period 1998-2002, the Delaware divorce rate of 4.0 (4 per 1,000 population) was exactly the same as the national rate. But the marriage rate was significantly lower. In the same period, the Delaware marriage rate was only 6.6, as compared with the national rate of 8.2.

In 2002, there were 5,171 marriages in Delaware, as opposed to 2,792 divorces. Unfortunately, these divorces affected 2,514 children (persons less than 18 years of age). Based on what has been learned about children living with single parents, it has to be assumed that, for most of these children, the risk of poverty has been increased. It is encouraging that the divorce rate now appears to be declining, down to 4.0 (current) from a high of 4.9 in 1990-1994 that affected 3,551 couples. But the marriage rate is similarly declining, down to 6.6 (current) from a high of 8.7 in both 1983-1987 and 1985-1989, uniting 5,946 couples. Unfortunately, based on the most recent five-year data from the Delaware and National Health Statistics Centers, the marriage rate is declining more rapidly than the divorce rate.

For the five year period 1996-2000, 32.8 percent of the births in the United States were to unmarried, including cohabiting, parents. By the five year period 1998-2002, this percentage had risen to 33.3. But in Delaware, it rose from 37.1 to 38.9. In Delaware in the most recent period, 28.5 percent of births to European Americans were to single, including cohabiting, parents. But 71.8 percent of the births to African Americans and 52.9 percent of the births to Hispanics were to single, including cohabiting, parents. All of these percentages are rising.

Maryland statistics also suggest problems in the area of family strengthening. The Free State has one of the lowest divorce rates in the nation. However, there were 17,642 divorces in 2003, an increase from 16,930 divorces in 1996. Nationally, the divorce rate has declined 13.6 percent while that in Maryland has risen by 4 percent. At 3.2 per 1,000 residents in 2003, it is below that year's national rate of 3.8; however, 14,500 children were affected by these divorces.

The marriage rate in Maryland has fallen by 9 percent since 1996, even though the population has increased by 10 percent from 1996 to 2004. There were 41,909 marriages in 1996 but only 38,040 in 2003. Maryland's marriage rate, like that of Delaware, is significantly below that of the nation as a whole.

The number and rate of births out-of-wedlock in Maryland has risen since 1996. They rose from 33.6 births per 1,000 people in 1996 to 34.8 in 2003. This is actually higher than the national rates over the same period, from 32.4 in 1996 to 34.6 in 2003. Almost all authorities agree that in Maryland, as in Delaware, the driving force behind the increase in out-of-wedlock births is the nation's soaring cohabitation rate.

Why care? What are the benefits of marriage?

Beyond statistics, problems such as cohabitation and divorce exact a serious toll on parents, children and families. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase the risk of poverty for both children and the mothers (Smock et al, 1999; McLanahan, 2000). Similarly, divorce by parents increases the risk that their children will fail in school (Amato, 2001) and reduces the likelihood that the children will graduate from college (Ross and Mirowsky, 1999).

At the same time, the benefits of marriage are similarly identifiable and describable {Doherty et al, 2002}. Married people live longer, enjoy better health--physical and mental--and have fewer injuries. Married parents are less likely to lose a child to infant mortality. Children who live with two married parents are less likely than others to become the victims of child abuse or neglect (Daly et al, 1985).

Also, divorce, like other family problems (e.g., alcoholism and other chemical dependency, interpersonal violence) appears to be cyclical. That is, children of divorce are themselves more likely to divorce than are children of healthy or sustained marriages. They are also more likely to have children outside of marriage (Cherlin et al, 1995).

For some couples, cohabitation--living together but not in a committed relationship--appears to be a viable alternative. However, despite the fact that it is an increasingly popular lifestyle for many persons including parents, there is no research indicating that cohabitators enjoy any of the benefits of marriage.

What can be done?

All across the country, clergy, other helping professionals, consumers and advocates have formed *healthy marriage coalitions* to promote the importance of traditional marriage and to address the problems of cohabitation and divorce. Of particular concern is the impact of these relationships on children.

Many of these coalitions develop and implement what are generally called *community marriage policies*. These policies are covenants by which pastors and others who can solemnize marriages agree not to officiate at weddings unless the couples have been provided with appropriate pre-marital counseling and other preparation.

Along with premarital counseling and education, healthy marriage coalitions promote or operate marriage education and training programs, marriage support groups, and other post marital marriage enrichment services. They recruit and train mentor married couples to help clergy prepare and support marriages. In some communities, there are relationship education programs for adolescents and young adults.

These coalitions also provide training and support services in related fields, including budget management and financial literacy services, domestic violence prevention, employment and job training, and housing assistance.

What is the Delaware Healthy Marriage Coalition? What is the Delmarva Regional Healthy Marriage Initiative?

The Delaware Healthy Marriage Coalition began in 2003. It includes faith-based organizations, such as the Delaware Ecumenical Council on Children and Families and Catholic Charities, the Cooperative Extension programs from the University of Delaware and Delaware State University, First State Community Action Agency, specialized domestic violence and substance abuse prevention organizations, key State agencies, and local congregations. The purpose of this coalition is to give couples who choose marriage for themselves the skills and abilities needed to form and sustain healthy marriages.

The coalition is now utilizing the skills and abilities gained from this experience, and the skills and abilities of its partner agencies and organizations, to provide training and technical assistance on healthy marriage and family strengthening to other faith-based and community services entities in its catchment area. The project is beginning with a data gathering, planning and model development phase. The applicant will map both assets and needs through mail and internet surveys, key informant interviews and focus group meetings. Based on the information gained through this phase, the Delaware Ecumenical Council on Children and Families and its partners will identify and catalog appropriate program service models that strengthen families and promote healthy marriages. This will include not only specific marriage preparation and support programs but also related prevention and intervention services addressing domestic violence, substance abuse, parenting, family caregiving, etc.

There will also be extensive training and technical assistance activities throughout the catchment area to develop local healthy marriage coalitions and family strengthening programs. This training and technical assistance will include local and regional workshops, mentoring for local and regional coalition leaders, and project-related publications and web sites. These activities will include assistance with organizational development as well as program development.

The result of this project will be a regional, multistate network of effective and sustainable healthy marriage and family strengthening coalitions.

