

## **Divorce**

**The divorce rate rose unevenly but substantially from 1900 to about 1967, when the introduction of no-fault divorce led to a doubling of the rate during the subsequent decade to a level that was sustained through the closing years of the century.**

The U.S. divorce rate (divorces per thousand married women in a given year) approximately doubled from 1900 to 1960, when the national divorce rate stood at nine. During that time, divorce typically required an innocent spouse as plaintiff and a guilty spouse as defendant, except in Nevada, which typically required the legal fiction of residence in that state. Then, between 1967 and 1975, no-fault divorce laws, which allowed divorce by mutual consent, were adopted throughout the United States. The divorce rate promptly rose to twenty in 1975 and, except for a slightly elevated rate from 1978 to 1985, remained at about the 1975 level for the subsequent two decades. The National Center for Health Statistics has not published this series for the years beyond 1996. If the 1996 level of divorce is maintained, however, approximately four of ten marriages contracted in 2000 will end in divorce.

The typical pattern of divorce did not change perceptibly after 1975. The median duration of marriages broken by divorce was about seven years; about half involved children. The propensity to remarry declined somewhat, but the large majority of divorced persons eventually remarried. Almost half of all marriages involved at least one previously divorced partner. Second and third divorces were not uncommon, and most of them were followed by remarriage as well.

American opinions about divorce were curiously divided. While many survey respondents—a majority in some surveys—disapproved of divorce in general and wanted the process to be made more difficult, those same respondents generally condoned particular divorces that involved their relatives and friends. By 1998, a number of states, beginning with Louisiana, were experimenting with “covenant marriages,” which gave couples the option to be married under a special statute whereby they gave up the right to an easy divorce.

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Divorces per thousand married women per year

