



Fact Sheet

Understanding Distinct Marital Separation Patterns Among Black Couples

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Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, married black adults experience more challenges in their efforts to maintain long-lasting unions and are more likely to report being unhappy and rate the quality of their marriages as poor. Black couples are also at an increased risk of separation due to discord; not only are wedded blacks more likely to break up, but they are prone to remain separated considerably longer than other couples without filing for a divorce.¹ These separation patterns for black marriages are distinct and complex compared to other racial and ethnic groups.²

Married black couples are more likely to separate and remain separated considerably longer than other couples without filing for a divorce.

Safety-net service providers should be aware that couples often experience great stress during separation and this stress can significantly affect clients experiencing a lengthy marital separation. Long periods of separation have the potential to undermine individual well-being, child welfare, and family stability.³ This fact sheet describes unique patterns in marital separation among black couples, highlights factors linked to marital separation, outlines consequences of marital separation, and offers strategies that safety-net service providers can use to empower clients experiencing marital separation.



Unique Patterns in Marital Separation Among Black Couples

Black marriages are more fragile than other racial and ethnic unions. Even after accounting for education, income, and premarital cohabitation, black couples experience lower marital satisfaction and more separation and divorce.⁴ Recent estimates indicate that among adults married for seven years, 49% of black couples divorced as compared to 41% of white, 34% of Hispanic, and 22% of Asian couples.⁵

Many separations among black couples can be characterized as informal arrangements. The nature of these break-ups mirror casual separations, which were common in the past.⁶ Black couples separate for longer durations without ever divorcing, when compared to other married adults.⁷ In some cases, black husbands and wives use separation as a means to end a marriage rather than divorce.⁸ This is similar to de facto divorces,* which were attributable to extended periods of separation.⁹

*De facto divorces have been documented in historical accounts about black marriages.

The prevalence of marital separation is based on self-reported data, which may be unreliable and underreported. Thus, occurrences of marital separation may be even higher than current estimates. Moreover, among black couples who do separate, there is considerable diversity. Binstock and Thornton describe the patterns among separated black couples as “dynamic and [involving] a heterogeneous and multidirectional array of transitions.”¹⁰

There is considerable diversity among married black couples who separate.

Research shows that separated couples may proceed along several pathways:

- Permanently separate from spouse (i.e., divorce, never reconcile, or form new union).
- Permanently separate then divorce.
- Permanently separate and cohabit with a new partner, either divorcing or never divorcing.
- Separate yet still co-reside in the same household until the divorce is finalized.
- Separate then reconcile, either reuniting permanently or separating again.¹¹

Consider separating then reconciling, this pathway could be used as a means to control a spouse or as a conflict management strategy for adults who are not skilled in other communication techniques or coping methods. Also, adults who live in households that do not have sufficient space to allow individuals to distance themselves from one another could use a separation period to get space from a spouse.¹²

Research has found that reconciliation attempts vary by race, age, education, and timing of parenthood. Though black adults are prone to experience more than one period of temporary separation, they are more likely to try to heal

their marriages, as compared to whites.¹³ Husbands and wives who are younger, experience a nonmarital birth, and achieve less education are more likely to pursue reunification.¹⁴

Couples may try to stay together for reasons including that they enjoy the benefits of marriage, want to raise their children together, and wish to avoid the costs of divorce.¹⁵ Spouses commonly attempt to reunite in the first year of separation. Unfortunately, their efforts to reconcile are not likely to be successful.¹⁶ For instance, although 45% of black wives seek to reconcile with their husbands, only 25% are successful. Relative to age, black wives who are older than 23 years of age have been more successful at reconciliation than wives younger than age 23.

Factors Linked to Marital Separation

Researchers are studying the connection between individual and family factors and the likelihood of marital separation. Age at marriage is regarded as the single best predictor of divorce.¹⁸ Young adults who marry have had less time to develop as individuals, complete an education, and secure well-paying jobs, which could stabilize their marriages. Young husbands and wives are also less likely to have cultivated the relationship skills needed to be successful in marriage.¹⁹

Economic stress also destabilizes marriages.²⁰ Couples who separate for long periods of time were found to be disadvantaged relative to family income, education, number of children, and minority status.²¹ Relative to white women, black women have been found to be more dissatisfied with the money available in their marriages. These same black women were also found to be more likely to have experienced a lengthy separation and seriously considered divorce for a shorter period of time.²² Thus, the same factors (such as life stress, employment

instability, strained financial resources) that challenge black spouses' ability to stay together likely explain why they select to separate for longer durations and delay divorcing.²³ Couples may be simply unable to devote resources to the financial, psychological, and time costs necessary to formally end the marriage.²⁴

Black marriage trends may also increase social acceptance of separation and divorce for adults.²⁵ For example, adults whose parents were divorced or not in a committed relationship are more likely to divorce and less likely to believe divorce will result in stigmatization.²⁶ In response to the prevalence of marital instability in the black community, black women have been socialized to excel in nontraditional gender roles and rely on extended family members, rather than a spouse, for support. Black women are taught different coping strategies to promote survival in case they should experience broken marriages.²⁷

Evidence is mixed on whether marriage and childbearing are related to black married couples' chances of separating. For example, some research has found that marriage and childbearing are separate and unrelated processes for black couples,²⁸ while other research shows that births—before or after marriage—offer less protection against married black couples separating as compared to other racial and ethnic groups.²⁹ Other recent research has linked marital instability to premarital births and births occurring in the first two years of marriage.³⁰

Black couples may have different experiences between first marriages and second marriages. Remarriage is less common among blacks relative to whites, yet blacks take more time to remarry and are less

likely to separate and divorce again after they do.³¹ This is different for whites, who are more likely to separate and divorce again after remarrying.³²

Consequences of Marital Separation

Couples experiencing long separation periods are at greater risk of psychological, emotional, and physical stress. This stress is caused by adjusting to relationship loss and a new reality, allocating property, and delegating responsibilities. Negative effects of long-term separation tend to cascade through the family system, affecting children and creating instability in custody arrangements and child support.³³ For example, couples must communicate about how they will jointly raise their children and work together to meet the children's daily needs (e.g., visitation, parenting decisions, discipline).

Long periods of separation have the potential to undermine individual well being, child welfare, and family stability.

Couples also face financial challenges after they separate. Both spouses are likely to experience a lower standard of living.³⁴ Couples are often linked financially and share responsibility for assets and other liabilities, such as housing, cars, debts, and living

expenses. They must outline who will meet these obligations during a separation. If one spouse is willing to assume responsibility for property or a resource that he or she does not legally own, the other spouse may consider transferring ownership to guard



against the possibility that the responsible party would not be able to make a necessary decision in the future under extenuating circumstances.

Couples who rely on strong social support networks to help stabilize themselves and their children are better off than those who do not.³⁵ Safety-net service providers can help minimize the harmful impacts associated with marital separation for their clients by offering services to stabilize the family, encouraging clients to retain open communication with their spouses (if safe to do so), and referring clients for professional help and counseling to cope with psychological, emotional, and physical stresses when needed.

Tips for Safety Net Service Providers

1. Discuss the main points in this fact sheet with your clients who are separated, but still married. Find out if they are facing some of the challenges outlined. Recognize that they are particularly vulnerable and need continued support and services.
2. Encourage clients to enroll in programs that teach healthy marriage and relationship education skills or obtain other needed professional services. Stress the benefits of participating in these activities to proactively prepare for common relationship challenges and stresses to build stronger relationships and enhance quality of life.
3. Contact the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families for additional research based resources, as well as training and technical assistance, to help you integrate relationship education skills into social service delivery systems. Learn more at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org.

Conclusion

Separation among black married couples can create significant challenges for individual well-being, child welfare, and family stability. Safety-net service providers should recognize that black couples may opt to remain separated and delay divorcing. Providers can help connect clients who are coping with the challenges associated with marital separation to needed supports and professional services. Social service workers can also encourage clients to delay marriage and childbearing in order to pursue educational goals and secure stable jobs. Research indicates that marriages have the best chance of succeeding when individuals have the resources they need to provide for their families.

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