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‘REPARTNERING’: LIVING WITH A NEW PARTNER AFTER BREAKING UP

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Abstract

The number of cohabiting couples in the Netherlands has strongly increased in the 1990s. Because cohabiting couples run a higher risk of breaking up than married couples, this trend has attributed to the increase in the number of singles. How strong this increase is, also depends on how soon formerly cohabiting persons find a new partner.

The chance of ever entering into a new consensual union again depends, among other things, on sex, age and the presence of children. The vast majority of persons who experience a separation are cohabiting again within four years. The increase in the number of singles as a result of separation is for the major part made up of persons who live alone for just a relatively short period.

1. Introduction

In addition to the increasing number of young persons who, after leaving the parental home, live on their own for a while, separation is an important reason for the growing number of singles. The strong increase in the number of cohabiting couples plays an important role, as cohabiting couples run a higher risk of breaking up than married couples (De Graaf and Steenhof, 1999).

In order to answer the question to what extent separations of cohabiting couples have caused the increase in the number of singles, it is of course important to measure how many persons who experience a separation live alone and how many enter into a new consensual union after a while. This paper aims to answer this last question on the basis of data on the Dutch municipal population registers (GBA).

The GBA allows a straightforward count of the number of married couples in the Netherlands. For cohabiting couples this is much more complicated, since cohabitation is not, unlike marriage, recorded in the registers. On the basis of various assumptions, the number of cohabiting couples on 1 January 1995 was estimated.

Subsequently the number of separations after one year has been determined. The formerly cohabiting persons without a partner were followed for four successive years, in order to determine whether or not they entered into a new consensual union. 'Living apart together' relationships cannot be observed. Hence it is only certain that a formerly cohabiting person has a new partner, if he or she has established a new consensual union. The technical explanation gives further information on the assumptions made.

2. Cohabiting and breaking up

Based on the GBA of 1 January 1995 and several assumptions it is estimated that there were, at that moment, 461 thousand cohabiting couples consisting of a man and a woman. There were furthermore about 50 thousand couples of the same sex. These same sex couples are not included in this analysis. The estimated number of cohabiting couples is very close to that of the Dutch household statistics. The slight difference is caused by the fact that the household statistics are also based on survey results, while only data from the GBA are used in this paper. The technical explanation gives an outline of assumptions on which the estimation of the number of cohabiting couples is based.

On 1 January 1996 54 thousand of the 461 thousand cohabiting couples of one year earlier had broken up. Earlier research shows that in 1992 about 40 thousand cohabiting couples fell apart (Manting, 1994). This estimate was based on the Family and Fertility Survey 1993. The increase in the number of separations is in line with the strong increase in the number of cohabiting couples.

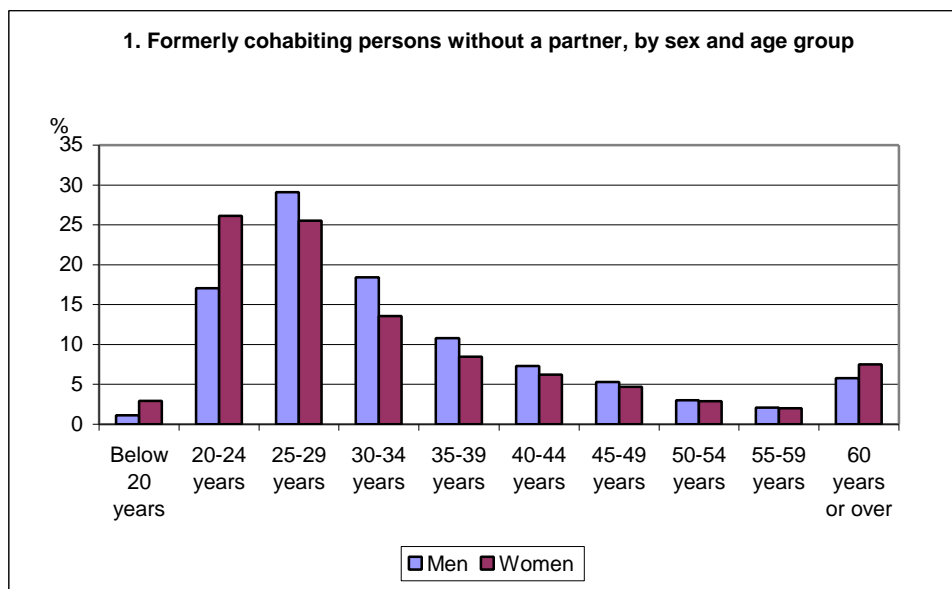
The 54 thousand separations resulted in 87 thousand formerly cohabiting persons without a partner. That this doesn't lead to 108 thousand persons is due to the fact that some already lived together with a new partner on 1 January 1996, and that a smaller number became single due to the death or emigration of the partner. One fifth of the 108 thousand persons who separated already cohabited with a new partner on 1 January 1996. For men (22%) this proportion is higher than for women (17%). The other 80 percent who cohabited on 1 January 1995 and separated that year lived without a partner on 1 January 1996. In the following paragraphs it will be examined how many of them entered into a new consensual union within four years.

3. Formerly cohabiting persons without a partner

3.1 Sex and age

Immediately after breaking up 52 percent of the formerly cohabiting persons without a partner are women. This implies that more men than women have directly entered into a new consensual union.

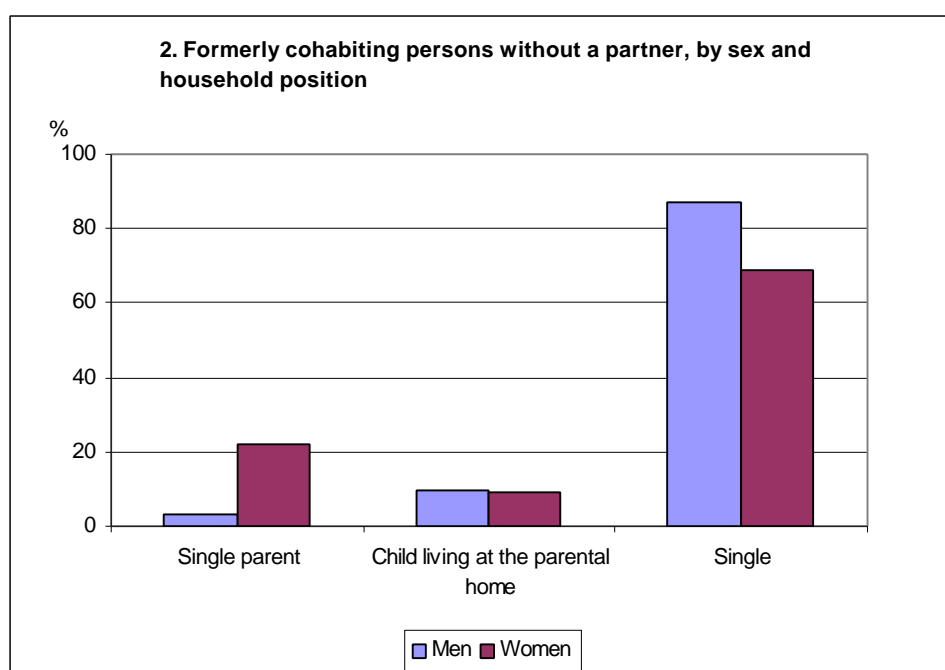
Almost half of the formerly cohabiting persons without a partner are in the age bracket 20-29 years (*figure 1*). This is more or less expected, as cohabiting couples are mostly in this age group. Formerly cohabiting women without a partner are on average of about the same age as the men. There are however relatively more young women (18-24 years) and more women of 60 years or over, whereas men are more often in their thirties.



It is likely that there are slightly more young women who have cohabited, as they have separated from men who are, on average, a bit older. That there are somewhat more women of 60 years or over is most likely caused by the fact that the separation is more often caused by death of the partner.

3.2 Household position

More than three-quarters of formerly cohabiting persons without a partner are single (*figure 2*). A further 13 percent are parents in a single-parent family. The remaining persons have moved in again with their parent(s) after breaking up. They are, on average, about ten years younger than the singles and parents in single-parent families.



There are considerable differences in household position between men and women. The majority of men (87 percent) are single. For women this portion is much smaller (69 percent). Only 3 percent of men are parents in a single-parent family. In the majority of cases the reason for this lone parenthood is the death of the partner. Among women about one fifth are parent in a single-parent family. After a break up, just like after a divorce (De Jong, 2000), children usually stay with the mother.

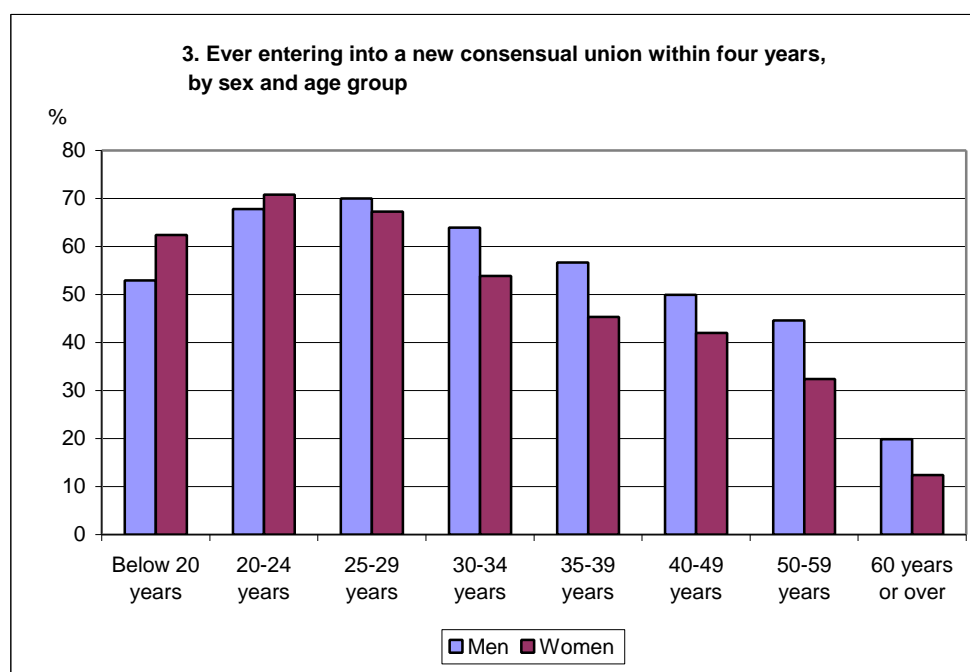
4. Ever entering into a consensual union again

Not many people prefer to live alone. Most singles only live alone for a specific period in their lives. However, the Family and Fertility Survey 1998 shows that the wish to stay single is strongly related to age. At age 20 hardly anyone would like to stay single, whereas of the singles aged 40-49 more than half would like to stay alone (Van Hoorn, 2000). This last group is rather small however: four-fifth of those aged 40-49 are living together with a partner.

After breaking up, the 87 thousand formerly cohabiting persons that lived without a partner on 1 January 1996 were followed for four successive years (always taking stock on 1 January), in order to determine whether or not they had entered into a new consensual union. If they have apparently entered into a new consensual union they will not be followed any further. In this manner it will be estimated how many formerly cohabiting persons without a partner have ever entered into a new consensual union.

4.1 Sex and age

After four years, 60 percent of the men who lived alone on 1 January 1996 had entered into a new consensual union and 56 percent of the women. On average 58 percent of formerly cohabiting persons without a partner had entered into a new consensual union. If also the persons who already had a new partner on 1 January 1996 are counted, it turns out that 66 percent of all persons who split up in 1995 had entered into a new consensual union. The majority of cohabiting persons who separate live alone for just a few years.



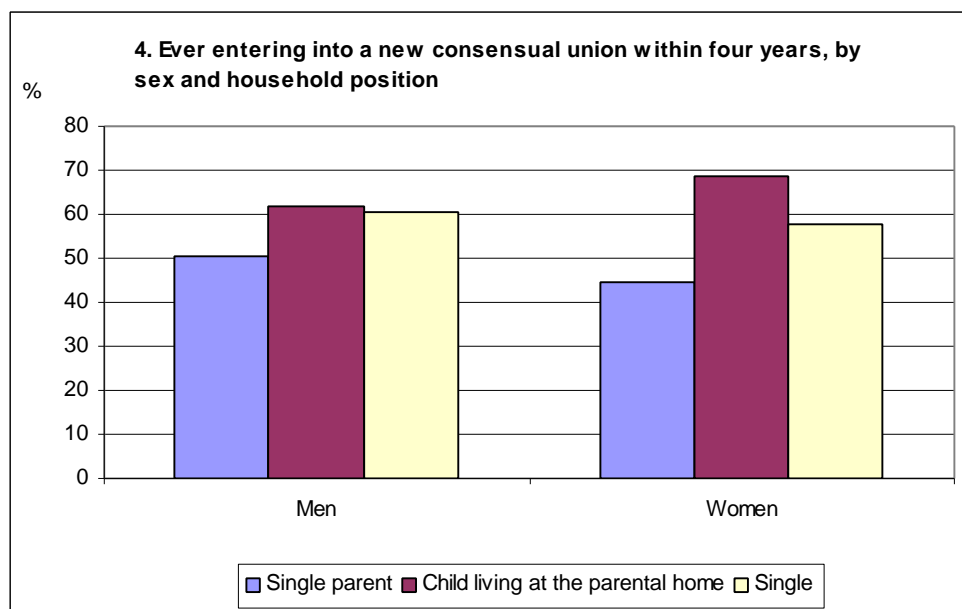
Those who are 20-29 years old most often entered into a new consensual union (*figure 3*). The vast majority (75 to 80 percent) of the men and women would like to have children in the future, and such persons obviously wouldn't object to living with a partner (Van Hoorn, 2000). It is therefore not surprising that 20-29 year olds more often enter into a new consensual union.

The youngest age group (below 20) had much less often entered into a new consensual union. They are still young and clearly not in a hurry to live together again. After four years young women (below 25) had entered into a new consensual union more often than young men. Earlier research has shown that young women start to cohabit earlier than young men (De Graaf and Steenhof, 1999).

Of the formerly cohabiting persons without a partner in the oldest age group (60 years and over) only 16 percent had entered into a new consensual union after four years. Some of them had no intention (yet) to find a new partner.

4.2 Household position

Those who moved in with their parents again after separation, were most likely to enter into a new consensual union (*figure 4*). This happened in two-thirds of the cases, followed by the singles (59 percent). Of the parents in single-parent families only 45 percent had entered into a new consensual union after four years.



The differences in entering a new consensual union between male and female singles are not large, respectively 60 and 58 percent. For parents in single-parent families the differences between the sexes are slightly bigger. After four years half of the men had entered into a new consensual union, against 45 percent of the women.

That single fathers more often enter into a new consensual union than single mothers might to some extent be related to the age of the children. The fathers are on average nine years older, so their children are also likely to be older and to need less care. Fathers are therefore in a better position to have social contacts. Research shows that single parents enter into a new consensual union less often, because the care for their children allows them less opportunity to meet potential partners (Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2000). Another reason why single fathers have more often entered into a new consensual union might be that they search earlier and more actively for a new partner (and mother). Of all the young women that lived at the parental home again, 69 percent had entered into a new consensual union, against only 62 percent of all young men. Age plays a crucial role: formerly

cohabiting persons without a partner who live at the parental home are mostly young, and young women tend to cohabit earlier than young men.

4.3 Conclusion

The vast majority of cohabiting persons who separate have entered into a new consensual union again within four years. The chance is highest for persons aged 20-29. Almost 70 percent have entered into a new consensual union within four years. Men and women who became single parents after the separation have entered into a new consensual union less often (less than 50 percent). The increase in the number of singles due to separation consist mostly of persons who live alone for just a short period.

Technical explanation

Defining cohabiting persons

For every address in the Netherlands it has been determined whether it is home to two persons who are not married, who are not a child living at the parental home and who have not been attributed the household position of '(wo)man in a married couple without children' or '(wo)man in a married couple with children'. The variable 'marital status' has not been selected. It is therefore possible that a person in a cohabiting couple is married, but not to the person with whom he/she is living.

Two persons who are defined as a cohabiting couple in this manner may not actually be cohabiting. They may also be two persons who are just sharing the same address (for example, two students who share a flat to save expenses but maintain separate households). It is also possible that two persons have a joint household, yet cannot be regarded as a cohabiting couple (for example, two brothers). It is impossible to select only those cohabiting couples who think of themselves as 'two persons living together and having a sexual relationship'. To reduce the number of incorrectly selected cohabiting couples several groups have been removed. The following decisions were made:

- Only adult persons are selected.
- Only couples with an age difference of less than 20 years are selected (in accordance to the article on cohabiting couples of the same sex by Croes, 1996).
- Only heterosexual couples are selected.
- All couples consisting of brothers or sisters are removed.
- All couples consisting of parents and children are removed.

Not considered as cohabiting couples are two persons who actually live at the same address but share this address with a third, single, person. This may lead to an underestimate of the number of cohabiting couples.

This may, however, be partly or wholly compensated by the opposite effect mentioned above (e.g. two students only sharing a flat).

Defining separations

Of all persons belonging to a cohabiting couple on 1 January 1995 it is, one year later, examined which ones are still cohabiting, either with their 'old' partner or with a new partner. The data on these persons are excluded from further analysis. Included in the analysis are persons who are no longer living with a partner. The exclusion of cohabiting couples is done by linking for two consecutive years the files containing addresses at which two persons are living who are not regarded as 'a child living at the parental home'. These persons may be married. It is after all possible that cohabiting couples in the meantime have married one another. Persons who emigrated or died in 1995 are removed.

Consequently only formerly cohabiting persons without a partner remain.

Defining new consensual union

For every formerly cohabiting person without a partner it has been examined, by means of the GBA counts on 1 January 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000, if he/she entered a new consensual union. Once someone becomes member of such a union he/she will not be followed any further. Hence the chance was estimated of ever entering again into a consensual union. If a formerly cohabiting man starts a relationship with a woman and then starts to live with her and her mother on one address this is not seen as a new consensual union. Such a situation will seldom occur, so the error will not be large. Of all formerly cohabiting persons without a partner who entered into a new consensual union, a small part is cohabiting again with the former partner. It is doubtful whether this is really 'repartnering', or whether one of the partners was just living elsewhere for some time.

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