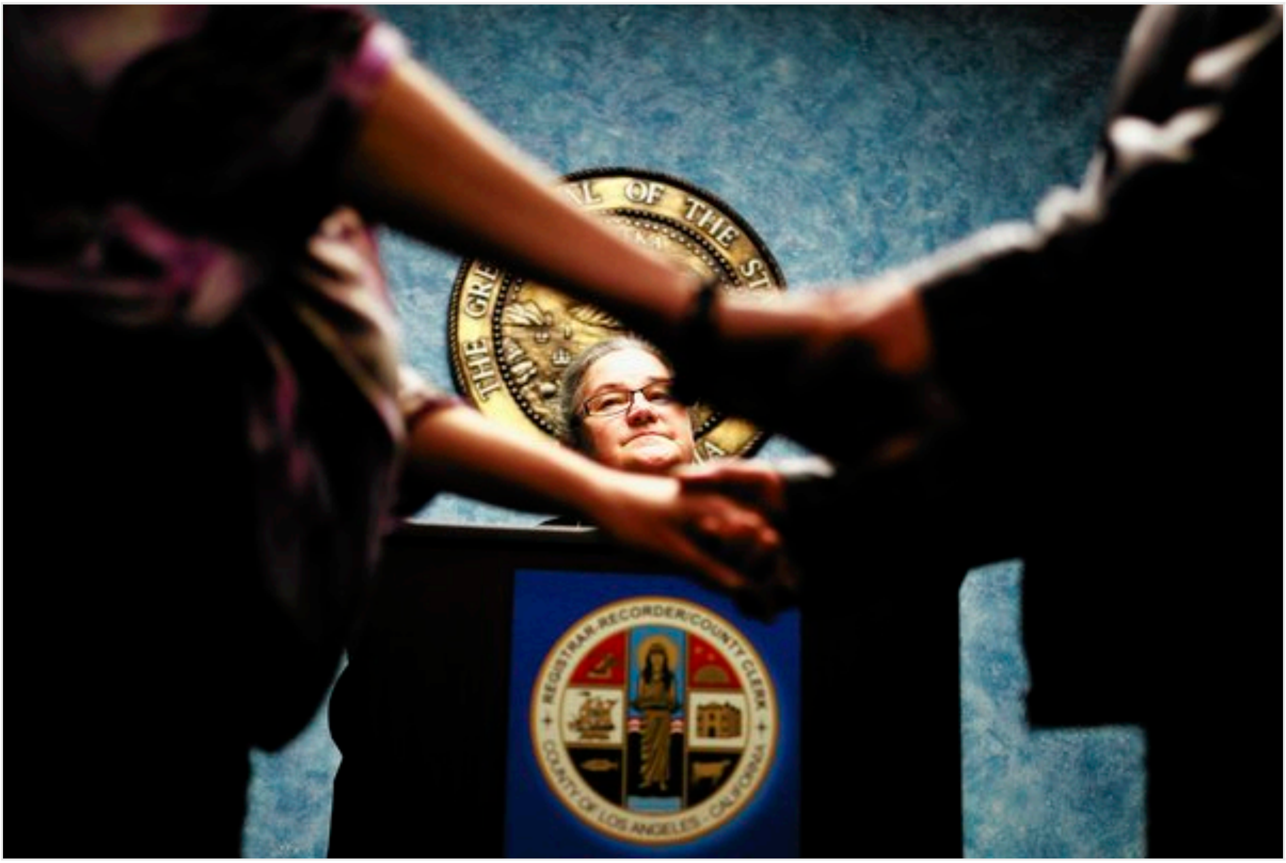
Divorces rise as economy recovers, study finds



Married couples promise to stick together for better or worse. But as the economy started to rebound, so did the divorce rate.

Divorces plunged when the recession struck and slowly started to rise as the recovery began, according to a study to be published in Population Research and Policy Review.

From 2009 to 2011, about 150,000 fewer divorces occurred than would otherwise have been expected, University of Maryland sociologist Philip N. Cohen estimated. Across the country, the divorce rate among married women dropped from 2.09% to 1.95% from 2008 to 2009, then crept back up to 1.98% in both 2010 and 2011.

The National Marriage Project earlier dubbed the drop in divorce "a silver lining" to the Great Recession, arguing that tough times were pulling many husbands and wives closer together. But some couples may have simply put off divorce until they could afford to part, researchers say. The economic uptick may have finally given them the freedom to split.

"This is exactly what happened in the 1930s," said Johns Hopkins University sociologist Andrew Cherlin. "The divorce rate dropped during the Great Depression not because people were happier with their marriages, but because they couldn't afford to get divorced."

Cohen cautioned that the exact reasons behind the economic ebb and flow of divorce were still murky. His study found that unemployment, state by state, had no apparent effect on divorce rates; other research examining earlier periods has found the opposite. Cohen did find that joblessness seemed to cut down divorce for college graduates — but statewide foreclosures pushed up divorce rates for the same group. More research is needed to understand why, he wrote.

"There still is a mystery," Pew Research Center senior writer D'Vera Cohn wrote in an email to The Times. "It is enormously tempting to say that bad economic times made that happen, but this new paper concludes that the jury is still out."

Whatever its roots, the phenomenon might seem puzzling in light of other research: Marriages end more often among Americans with less education and less income, other studies have shown. If money troubles put strain on marriages, why would couples break up more often when the economy is on the upswing?

Cherlin said downturns seemed to affect divorce timing, not whether couples divorced at all. While economic woes might sway a couple to put off divorce during a recession, spouses might not bother waiting if they don't see their financial problems as temporary, he said.

In Los Angeles, far fewer people have sought divorces with Levitt & Quinn Family Law Center after the downturn, executive director Tai Glenn said. Even a "friendly" divorce with no complications costs $800 to $1,000 for clients with low incomes, she said. Any sparring in court pushes the price higher.

When unhappy husbands or wives stop into their offices to run through their options, "many, many people walk away simply based on the cost of the case," Glenn said. "The people we see here are those that live on the margins, from paycheck to paycheck. For them, the recovery hasn't really hit."

Divorce lawyers say that in some cases, even divorced or soon-to-be-divorced couples have kept sharing a home to save money.

"They get to the point where they just can't handle it anymore and file for divorce," said Kendall L. Evans, a family law attorney based in Long Beach. "But that doesn't mean they can afford to set up a separate household."

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