

Why rural coal families are less likely to divorce

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Rural coal-mining families show resilience against divorce when faced with the economic downturns common in the industry, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that rural counties with higher levels of [coal](#) jobs had lower [divorce](#) rates compared with similar counties with fewer coal jobs during the 1990s, when the coal industry was losing jobs.

The results suggest that rural coal families may do better than others in dealing with the stress of an economic downturn in the coal industry.

"Coal families in [rural areas](#) have significant experience with the boom-bust cycle," said Michael Betz, lead author of the study and assistant professor of human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"People go about their lives when times get tough, knowing things will get better. They are less likely than others to resort to divorce when there's a downturn in the coal industry."

Betz conducted the study with Anastasia Snyder, associate professor of human sciences at Ohio State. Their results appear in the November 2017 issue of the Journal of Rural Studies.

The researchers compared data from 1990 to 2000, when the coal industry was losing jobs, to 2000 to 2010, when employment in the industry was growing. They used public data from the U.S. Census

Bureau and proprietary data purchased from Economic Modeling Specialists International.

They examined how the proportion of a county's jobs in the coal industry was related to marriage and divorce during the two decades studied. They also compared rural counties with those that were within a metropolitan area.

While [coal mining](#) is generally seen as a rural industry, some metro areas in Appalachia do include counties that have significant numbers of coal jobs, Betz said.

Results showed that there were significant differences in marriage and divorce in metro coal communities compared to those in rural areas.

One example was how coal families responded to the coal boom of the 2000s.

The study found that while people in rural coal counties are more likely to marry in boom periods compared to bust periods, the rate of increase was not as large as it was in metro counties.

"In the rural areas, they still held back some," Betz said. "They may have been more aware that the good times would not last and are more cautious about entering into marriage."

The study also found that divorce rates in metro coal counties were higher than in the rural areas during the 1990s coal bust.

Betz said that may be because, despite the downturn in coal jobs, the overall U.S. economy was booming in the 1990s, especially in cities. People in unhappy marriages living near cities may have been more confident they could find a job to support themselves if they got

divorced from a spouse who worked in the coal industry.

The picture for cohabitation is unclear, because data weren't available for the 1990 to 2000 bust period in the coal industry. However, results showed that from 2000 to 2010, when the coal [industry](#) was doing better, cohabitation was declining in coal families as more chose to get married.

"It appears that economic stability is allowing people to move from cohabitation to marriage," he said.

These results suggest that government policies that increase or decrease the demand for coal have effects that aren't always considered, according to Betz.

"Government policies regarding coal not only impact employment outcomes, but also affect family behavior, he said.

But regardless of what government does, Betz said coal [jobs](#) will never return to numbers seen in past decades.

"The [coal industry](#) has changed and is continuing to change in a fundamental way," he said.

"The bust period may now be a perpetual bust. There will no longer be huge expansions. And that is going to impact marriage and divorce in these communities."

More information: Michael R. Betz et al. Coal and family through the boom and bust: A look at the coal Industry's impact on marriage and divorce, *Journal of Rural Studies* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.09.011](#)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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