

Study: One in four divorces 'inefficient'

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(Phys.org)—Many people divorce with hope of finding greater happiness than they did in a "bad" marriage. But a new national study by an Iowa State University economics professor found that in approximately one in four divorces, the individuals involved might have been happier staying married—producing what he calls "inefficient" divorces.

Oleksandr (Alex) Zhylyevskyy, an assistant professor of economics at Iowa State, analyzed the [economic benefits](#) of marriage from self-reported data collected from nearly 3,900 couples who participated in the National Survey of Families and Households between the 1980s and early 2000s. The study is published in the October issue of the [Journal of Labor Economics](#), which is available [online](#).

The ISU researcher is one of the first [economists](#) to explore why some couples have intense disputes but keep living together, while other couples cooperate and the rest [divorce](#). He emphasizes that his results are model specific.

"What the paper actually does is look at the impact of spousal cooperation, conflict and divorce in marriage on the happiness of the spouses," Zhylyevskyy said. "Effectively, I'm trying to get a measure of how happy people are in a particular marital state and analyze factors impacting that across individuals. I can use this model to look at relevant variables and see how changes might affect the incidence of [cooperation](#), conflict and divorce among [married couples](#) in the United States."

"Among several measures that can be quantified with this model is the incidence of cases in which people who divorced could have been better off had they stayed married," he continued.

Calculating inefficiency in divorce

Zhylyevskyy calculated the inefficiency of divorce given the characteristics of the couples—age, education, race, etc.—as they relate to happiness in marriage, separation and divorce. He also investigated variables that the government has control over—separation period requirements and child support enforcement.

The ISU researcher found that eliminating separation period requirements may decrease the conflict rate between spouses by 9.2 percent of its baseline level and increase the divorce rate by 4.0 percent. He also calculated that perfect child support enforcement may decrease the frequency of conflict by 2.7 percent and divorce by 21.2 percent. It also reduces the incidence of "inefficient" divorces.

Zhylyevskyy says that longer separation periods are likely to increase financial divorce costs because the spouse may need to retain a lawyer for a longer period of time, and there could also be increased psychological cost from being left in marital "limbo" for a longer period of time.

"But the effects of the separation periods do not seem that strong," he said. "What is more interesting is the policy of how effectively child support payments are enforced. What I have seen is that states have some variation as to how well child support is enforced. In some states, you're more likely to be caught if you're a 'deadbeat parent.' The state can locate you and force you to pay. In other states, that doesn't work that well. So the strength of child support enforcement affects what you think about your divorce opportunities and may also impact bargaining

between spouses in marriage."

Child support enforcement is a key factor

If all child support payment rulings were enforced, Zhylyevskyy's model predicts that the likelihood of an inefficient divorce goes down.

Zhylyevskyy says his research suggests that the government could indirectly induce people to reconcile their differences and work toward a more successful marriage.

"What I see is some indication that public policy may help decrease inefficiency in divorce," he said. "Inefficient outcomes are bad and are something that should be avoided."

The ISU researcher notes that he did not directly look at the impact of spousal [conflict](#) and divorce on the children, which may be an interesting topic to explore in future research.

Provided by Iowa State University

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