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Divorce Rates in U.S. Rise Slightly



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It's easy to see why bookkeeper Linda Mortimer moved to the Florida Keys 20 years ago: the impossibly blue water, the year-round sunshine, a lifestyle so laid-back that every day is like a Jimmy Buffett lyric.

What Mortimer didn't anticipate was falling in love - and then getting divorced less than two years after taking her wedding vows.

"I discovered after we got married that my husband had been divorced four times," said Mortimer, as she finished a noontime burger while sitting at the bar at the Ocean View, a local party spot and Mortimer's place of employment.

"I was his No. 5. He didn't understand why I got so upset."

Divorce is as common in the Florida Keys as fresh grouper and cold beer. Census statistics released this week show that Monroe County - which includes the cluster of 1,700 islands floating off South Florida - has the second-highest proportion of divorced residents. A little more than 18 percent of the people living in Monroe County are divorced, second only to Indiana's Wayne County, which had 19 percent. Nationwide, 10.7 percent of people over 15 are divorced.

Three of the top 10 counties the divorced call home are in Florida - rural Putnam County in Northeast Florida and urban Pinellas County on the Gulf Coast are the other two. Indiana had a total of three counties in the top 10 as well. Along with Wayne County, Floyd and Madison counties made the list.



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Newly released census figures show that while the number of unmarried people continued its 10-year climb, the ranks of married people in the United States rose by nearly 6 million last year, bucking a decade-long decline. The number of divorced people rose, but only slightly.

Among the other marriage- and divorce-related findings from the census data:

- The number of unmarried people climbed to about one-third of all Americans over 15.
- Oklahoma has the highest rate of people who have been married three times or more.
- Utah and Idaho tied for the youngest median bride age, at 23.5 years old.

Residents of Wayne County, Ind., don't see why their home should be the divorce capital of America. The water tower in Richmond, Ind., the county's largest city, welcomes visitors to "A Great All-American City."

"It just doesn't make all that much sense," said Michael Jackson, an associate professor of psychology at Earlham College, a private university in Richmond. "We find it really questionable. It just sounds funny."

Indiana is one of a handful of states that don't track divorce statistics. So it's hard to tell if the percentage is caused by a large number of divorces or a large number of young single people moving out of the county to attend college, or if it's just a statistical anomaly.

Divorce counselors say the economy could be partly to blame for adding more stress to marriages. Indiana has been hit hard by the collapse of the auto and manufacturing industries. Wayne County had an average annual unemployment rate of 6.8 percent in 2008 - when the census data was collected - a rate above the state average at the time but still below many other areas of the state and country.

Tom Amyx, who owns a deli along Richmond's main street, said bad financial times shouldn't be a reason for married couples to split. He just celebrated his 40th wedding anniversary with his wife, Sherry, and says couples should tough out hard times. He said attitudes have changed about marriage, with some younger people considering it a less-than-permanent relationship that they can escape if they aren't happy.

"It's not ever about the other person anymore; it's about me, me, me," he said. "People need to make a commitment and stick to the commitment. It's not just a promise - it's a covenant. That's a very serious thing."

Amyx, who has lived in several other states, sees no reason Wayne County would top the list.

"We don't have that many people in the county," he said, "but evidently they get around."

Some folks in the Florida Keys are quick to say that it's not that people are actually divorcing in droves there - it's that divorced people come to the area to start new lives.



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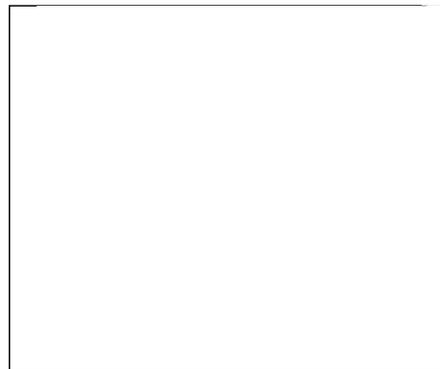
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"The IRS. The CIA. Family," he said.

Others say that the party lifestyle - and a high cost of living - stresses families to the breaking point.

"This is a place of escape. A place of hedonistic abandon," said Dr. Fred Covan, a Key West therapist. "We have a condition here, we say people get Key Wasted. People come down here and do really, really stupid stuff."

Alcohol was named as a frequent culprit. People in Nevada, which at 14 percent had the highest divorce rate of any state, gave similar reasons.

Frank Lin, a divorce attorney whose firm, Lin & Associates, uses the phone number 702-DIVORCE, said Nevada laws, a 24/7 Sin City environment rich in temptation and other marriage hurdles probably combine to lead to more divorces.

"One of our clients was a bartender at the Palms and he started seeing a cocktail waitress at the Playboy Club. When I go to work, I don't have cocktail waitresses in high heels showing cleavage," Lin said. "He does - that's part of sort of his daily environment."

The most popular ad campaign in recent years promoting Las Vegas to tourists is "What happens here, stays here," and several party planners sell special divorce parties, offering the recently unmarried a guys' or girls' night out on the town.

But casino and nightclub employees aren't the only ones feeling marriage pressures, Lin said, because the rest of Las Vegas works a 24-hour cycle, too. Affairs aren't the only reason people get divorced here, he said.

"If both parties work 9-to-5 jobs, you see each other. But if one party works 9-to-5 and the other party works swing or graveyard, it's not an environment conducive to a marriage," Lin said.

Nevada's laws make it easier to get divorced compared with other states. Couples need only live in the Silver State six weeks before their marriage can be dissolved, while other states require longer residency and a cooling-off period.

Key West divorce lawyer Giulio Margalli has noticed another trend among couples who are divorcing on the island paradise.

"What we have now is people getting divorced and fighting over who is going to take over the debt. Who's going to be saddled with the \$800K mortgage that neither one could pay?" he said. "It used to be that we saw people get divorced and fight over the home. Now it's, 'Oh, my God, not only are we getting divorced, our credit is going down the tubes and we're going into foreclosure.'"

Regardless of the cause, having nearly 20 percent of the population divorced is cause for concern, said Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

"It's basically a social and environmental toxin," Wilcox said of divorce.

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