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# Population & Societies

## Living under the same roof after a separation

Wilfried Rault\* and Arnaud Régnier-Loilier\*

After a separation, both partners may continue living together. How often does this happen? How long does it last? Why does it occur? Does having children or shared assets have any impact? Analysing data from the EPIC survey, Wilfried Rault and Arnaud Régnier-Loilier shed light on 'living together apart', a situation that until now has been largely unexplored.

In France, around 420,000 couples separate each year. In 2014, most of these couples were in a consensual union (260,000), and the others were either married (129,000) or in a civil partnership (32,000) known as a *pacte civil de solidarité*, or PACS [1]. While the drivers and consequences of separation have often been studied, little is known about the act of separation itself. Qualitative research in the 1980s showed that separation should be seen as a process rather than a one-off event [2]. In the same way as union formation now occurs in increasingly disconnected stages (first meeting, sexual relations, cohabitation, formalization), union 'de-formation' is often progressive and structured around different milestones (decision to separate, living separately [*décohabitation*], sharing of assets, divorce). As couples rarely separate abruptly, the process may involve periods when the former partners continue to live under the same roof [3]. For the first time, data collected in the EPIC survey (on individual and partnership trajectories; see Box) enables us to estimate the frequency of such situations and to analyse the associated factors.

### 1 in 4 separations followed by a period of 'living together apart'

One-third of respondents who separated between 1984 and 2013 reported continuing to share the same home after deciding to separate, sometimes for just a few weeks or even a few days. These short periods were reported more frequently for recent separations that

respondents remembered more clearly. Excluding periods of post-separation cohabitation lasting less than 2 months (the threshold used for this study), 1 in 4 former couples continued to live together after deciding to separate (23%). Women have a greater propensity than men to report continued cohabitation after separation (26% vs. 19%) because the initiators of the separation, more often women, tend to report an earlier separation date than their partner [2].

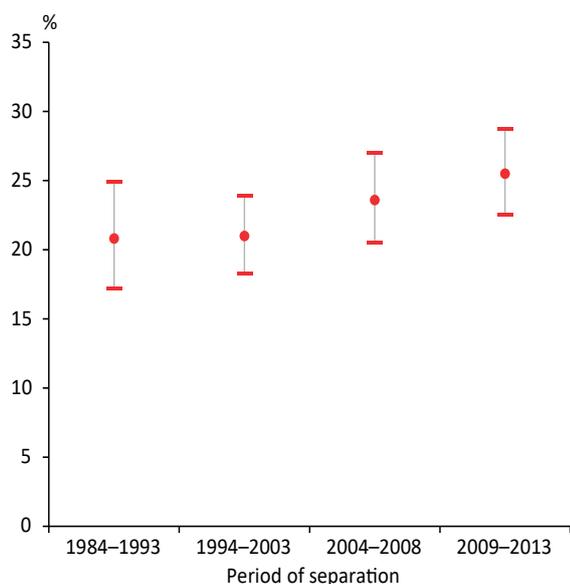
The proportion of separations followed by a period of living together apart has changed very little over the last 30 years (Figure 1), although the number of couples concerned has increased in line with the growing frequency of separation. No significant increase is observed for the cohorts of couples who separated after 2008, despite the economic crisis that began that year.<sup>(1)</sup> One might have expected the difficulties encountered by households to prolong the process of living separately, due to the prohibitive cost of moving into separate dwellings, for example.

While living together apart is most often temporary (between 2 and 6 months), 20% of couples did so for at least 1 year (Table 1). To what extent is continued cohabitation linked to the characteristics of the dissolved union, notably the type of union, the family situation (presence of children), and the existence of jointly owned assets? To measure the specific effect of each of these three factors, we estimated the probability of cohabiting for at least 2 months after deciding to separate (see Box).

\*French Institute for Demographic Studies.

(1) The slight non-significant increase is due to the more frequent reporting of short periods (under 6 months).

**Figure 1. Frequency of post-separation cohabitation by period of separation**



W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* no. 582, INED, October 2020.

Interpretation: 21% of unions dissolved between 1984 and 1993 were followed by a period of post-separation cohabitation lasting at least 2 months (the higher and lower values are the boundaries of the 95% confidence interval).

Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 who separated from a cohabiting partner between 1984 and 2013.

Source: INED-INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013-2014.

### Living together apart is more frequent when the couple has children...

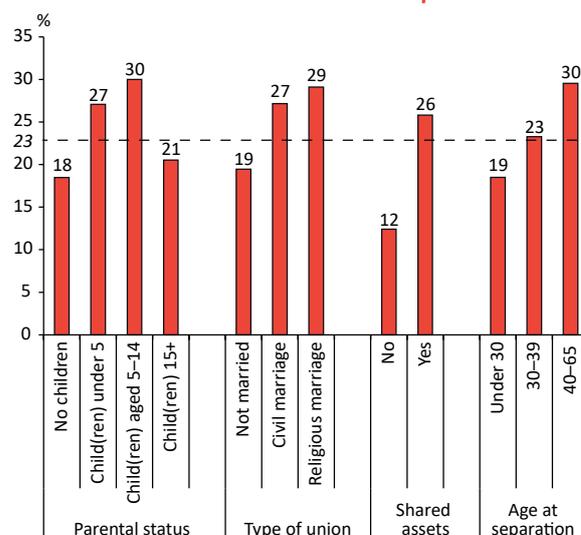
Continued cohabitation after separation is linked above all to the family situation (Figure 2) and especially the presence (or absence) of children and their age. The probability of continuing to live together for at least 2 months is higher when the former partners have at least one child aged under 15. When the children are young, continued cohabitation provides a means to preserve the parental couple,

**Table 1. Duration of post-separation cohabitation**

	%
<b>Living separately within 2 months of separation</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Continued cohabitation for at least 2 months</b>	<b>23</b>
Of which:	
2 to less than 6 months	54
6 months to less than 1 year	26
1 year or more	20

Interpretation: 23% of respondents continued to live together after deciding to separate, among whom 54% did so for 2 to less than 6 months.  
 Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 who separated from a cohabiting partner between 1984 and 2013.  
 Source: INED-INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013-2014.

**Figure 2. Probability of continued cohabitation for at least 2 months after separation**



W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* no. 582, INED, October 2020.

Interpretation: 23% of respondents continued to live together for at least 2 months after deciding to separate (dotted line). All other things being equal, the adjusted probability of continuing to cohabit for people who have jointly owned assets is 26% vs. 12% for those who have none.

Note: Adjusted probability, all other things being equal (parental status, type of union, age at separation, and control variables included in the model; see Box).

Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 who separated from a cohabiting partner between 1984 and 2013.

Source: INED-INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013-2014.

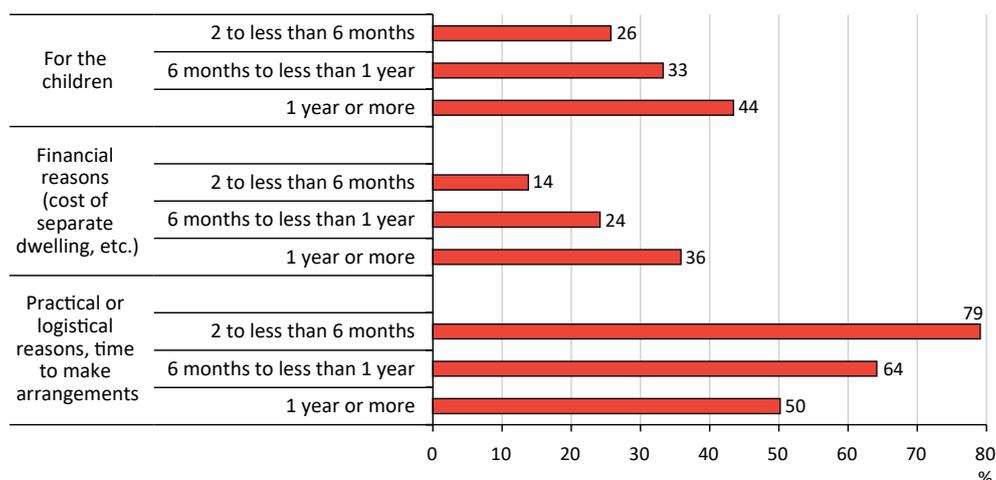
gradually prepare the children for separation, and redefine the organization of daily life (homes, schools, etc.). When the children are older and more independent, these issues are less crucial.

### ...when the union is formalized and the couple has jointly owned assets...

Independently of the presence of children, the type of union also has an effect in itself (Figure 2). People who are married (either civilly or religiously) are more inclined to continue living together than those in a consensual or PACS union. This may be linked to the procedures for obtaining a divorce. Unlike consensual unions or civil partnerships, which can be dissolved by a simple letter, divorcing couples consult a lawyer and might have to wait for a court decision.

Having jointly owned goods or property, as is the case for three-quarters of separated couples, is also an important factor. The probability of continued cohabitation is more than doubled with respect to couples without shared assets (26% vs. 12%). Deciding who should move out (one or both partners), selling the home, or dividing up the material goods are all factors liable to prolong the separation process and delay living separately (*décohabitation*).

**Figure 3. Reasons for continuing to live together after deciding to separate, by duration of post-separation cohabitation**



W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* no. 582, INED, October 2020.

Interpretation: 79% of respondents who continued living with their ex-partner for 2 to less than 6 months did so for ‘practical or logistical reasons, time to make the necessary arrangements’.

Coverage: Men and women aged 26–65 who separated from a cohabiting partner between 1984 and 2013 (coverage of ‘for the children’ is limited to couples with at least one child).

Source: INED–INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013–2014.

The EPIC survey does not provide detailed data on the financial situation of the former partners at the time of separation or on their financial dependence with respect to each other. However, comparing single- and dual-earner couples does not reveal any clear-cut effect. In particular, being in a single-earner couple does not increase the propensity to continue living together. Likewise, the respondent’s educational level is not a relevant factor [4].

### ... and after a long-standing relationship

Alongside family and material factors, living together apart is more frequent when couples separate after a long relationship. Only 11% of people whose relationship lasted less than 3 years continued to live together, compared to 38% among those whose union lasted at least 15 years. Age at separation also has a positive effect on the frequency of continued cohabitation: all other things being equal, the higher the age at separation, the greater the likelihood of continuing to live under the same roof (19% among those who separated before age 30 vs. 30% at age 40 or older) (Figure 2). Couples who have shared a daily routine for many years may find it difficult to make a clean break, and this difficulty may increase with age [5]. Fear of loneliness may favour continued cohabitation at older ages.

### Financial constraints or norm of a stable parental couple?

Respondents who continued to cohabit after deciding to separate were asked why they did so (several

reasons could be given). They most often mentioned ‘practical or logistical reasons, time to make the necessary arrangements’ (70%). ‘For the children’ came next (24% of all separated couples, 33% of those who had at least one common child) ahead of ‘financial’ reasons (21%).

The reasons for continued cohabitation and its duration are closely linked (Figure 3). In most cases, logistical and practical reasons are given for short periods (between 2 and less than 6 months), whereas the presence of children, but also financial considerations such as the difficulty and/or cost of finding two separate dwellings, are mentioned increasingly as the duration of continued cohabitation increases.

\*\*\*

There is no single reason for continuing to live together after separation; each couple’s experience is different. The choice may stem from a desire to maintain their role as a parental couple despite the breakdown of their relationship, or to organize their separation in a particular way, but it may also reflect the obstacles to living separately (material constraints in particular) that they confront. This period may also be a time of experimentation and of uncertainty about separation, interspersed with attempts to mend the relationship. This hypothesis also deserves to be examined in future surveys of couples and families in France.

**Box. The EPIC survey\***

**Data and scope of the study**

The EPIC survey of individual and partnership trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux) was conducted in France in 2013–2014 by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) (Rault and Régnier-Loilier, 2019\*\*). A total of 7,825 respondents aged 26–65 were interviewed.

Among the various themes covered by the survey, respondents were invited to describe all of their ‘intimate partnerships or serious romantic relationships’. Respondents who had been in a union but had separated at least once ( $n = 3,015$ ) were questioned in detail about their most recent separation. They were asked: ‘Did you continue living together after deciding to separate? 1. Yes; 2. No’; 32% ( $n = 894$ ) answered Yes. They were then asked ‘For how long?’ and ‘Was it for any of the following reasons: 1. Practical or logistical, time to make arrangements; 2. Financial (housing costs, etc.); 3. For the children; 4. Other reasons.’ We also know whether the partners were married, in a civil partnership (PACS) or a consensual union, if they had shared assets, if they had children, their age at separation, and the duration of the dissolved union.

Given the small number of same-sex couples in the sample, our study is limited to separations of heterosexual couples. In addition, given the respondents’ age range, separations before 1984 were rare, so only separations occurring between 1984 and 2013 were considered ( $n = 2,760$ ). The data were weighted to make them representative of the general population in 2013.

**Method used for Figure 2**

We used a logistic regression to distinguish the specific effect of each factor on the probability of continuing to live together for at least 2 months. The logit coefficients were then converted into adjusted probabilities (or standardized mean probabilities) using the method developed by Leridon and Toulemon (1997\*\*\*). This makes it possible to represent the hypothetical rates for a given situation (for example, with or without shared assets) ‘all other things being equal’, i.e. if all other characteristics of couples with shared assets were the same as those of couples with no shared assets.

The model groups men and women together as gender differences are small. In addition to the variables shown in Figure 2, it includes the respondent’s sex, year of separation, having envisaged separation some time before it occurred, relationship quality 1 year before separation, respondent’s educational level, and each ex-partner’s occupational status and previous union history (see [4] for the separate male/female models and for more details).

\* The EPIC survey was conducted with the support of CNAF (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales), DREES (Direction de la recherche, de l’évaluation, des études et des statistiques), ANR (Agence nationale de la recherche, CECHIC project: Corpus pour l’étude de cent ans d’histoire du couple en France) and the Labex iPOPs (Individuals, Populations, Societies Laboratory of Excellence).

\*\* Rault W., Régnier-Loilier A., 2019, Studying individual and conjugal trajectories in France: Scientific and methodological choices in the EPIC survey, *Population*, 74(1–2), 11–40.

\*\*\* Leridon H., Toulemon L., 1997, *Démographie. Approche statistique et dynamique des populations*, Paris, Economica.

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**Abstract**

In 1 out of 4 separations in France, the former partners continue living together under the same roof. While most often temporary, this arrangement lasts at least a year for 1 out of every 5 unions that have experienced it. ‘Living together apart’ is more frequent when couples have children and shared assets. Reasons most often given are ‘practical or logistical, time to make arrangements’ (70%), followed by ‘for the children’ (24%) and ‘financial’ reasons (21%).

**Keywords**

France, unions, union dissolution, living together apart, EPIC survey



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