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Socio-economic differentials in family formation in Norway 1987- 2001

Extended abstract: The analysis is based on register data on family status and individual characteristics of cohorts of parental couples with their first (common) child born in the 1987 - 2001 period. The main data source is register data from the Norwegian Central Population Register, selecting all children born in a given year (t), who also are born as first common child of their parents. From 1987 and onwards Statistics Norway registers cohabiting couples with common children as a separate category within the regular family statistics in addition to married couples. In the present analysis we divide the parental couples into three categories of family status at the beginning of year ($t+1$): (i) married parents, (ii) cohabiting parents and (iii) others (i.e. parents that neither are married nor sharing residential address).

We use logistic regression to explore the effects of socio- demographic characteristics of the parents on the probabilities that the parents were respectively married or cohabiting by the beginning of year $t+1$. We model a selection process in two stages: First we include the total population of parental couples in the analysis of the effects of socio-demographic characteristics on the probability that the parents were married at the beginning of the year $t+1$. Secondly, we include the “rest- population” - all non- married couples - in the analysis of the corresponding effects on the probability that the parents were cohabiting at the beginning of year $t+1$.

There are considerable differences between parents that were respectively married and cohabiting by one year after the birth of their first common child in year t , with regard to most of the demographic and socioeconomic variables that are included in the analysis. Married parents are on the average older, have more education and higher incomes than cohabiting parents. Cohabiting mothers and fathers are to large extent born in Norway, while married mothers and fathers have higher proportions that are born outside Norway, either in other Nordic and Western countries or in non –Western countries. The proportions of mothers or fathers with children from earlier unions or relationships are considerably higher for cohabiting parents than for married. There are also considerable regional differences in the relative risks of marriage versus cohabitation. Mothers living in regions of the country where

the proportion of out-of-wedlock births in early decades was higher than the average level, have higher relative risks for not living together, also after the increase in cohabitation in recent decades.

During the period that we analyze, there have also been considerable changes in the respective shares of parental couples that were either married, cohabiting or not living together by the beginning of year $t + 1$. The shares of married parents and parents not living together, have both declined substantially over the period from 1987 to 2001 (from respective 48.6 and 22.9 per cent of parental couples by 1 January 1988 to 37.5 and 11.6 per cent by 1 January 2002, while the share of cohabiting parents increased correspondingly (from 28.5 per cent of parental couples by 1 Jan 1988 to 50.9 per cent by 1 Jan 2002).

The findings of the multivariate analysis indicate considerable similarities in the effects of the socio-demographic variables in the two stages of the selection processes. The probabilities of both marriage and cohabitation increased with parents' age, income, and educational attainment. The relative effects of parents' socio-economic characteristics were, however, stronger for the probability of marriage than for cohabitation for most of the variables. However, when we include possible interaction effects of education and income with period, the differences in relative effects of socio-economic characteristics between married and cohabiting parents decreased over the observation period, whereas the differences in relative effects of the variables between cohabiting and not-cohabiting parents became more pronounced. The decline in importance of socio-demographic variables for the choice of respectively marriage or cohabitation at the time of first birth may be seen as an indicator that cohabitation has become a more broadly accepted family status. The changes may, however, in part be influenced by the changes in the regulations of Norwegian transitory allowance for single parents during the 1990's.