Cl: Cynthia

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Office of the Deputy Secretary

Washington, D.C. 20201

FACSIMILE

DATE June 14, 1999

TO: (NAME, ORGANIZATION, CITY/STATE AND PHONE NUMBER):

Andrea Kane
OPC
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FROM: (NAME, ORGANIZATION, CITY/STATE AND PHONE NUMBER):

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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NUMBER OF PAGES TO SEND (INCLUDING COVER SHEET): 11

COMMENTS:

Re: Manage Data. We'll get back to you when Linda returns from vacation later in June.

Lisa

To: ISMTP@B11WDC-OV08B@Servers[<Andrea_Kane@opd.eop.gov>],Mary Bourdette@ASL
From: Lisa Gilmore@IOS.IO
Cc:
Bcc:
Subject: re: marriage data
Attachment:
Date: 6/14/99 3:54 PM

Andrea,

I would like to wait until Linda Mellgren gets back. She has been following this and knows the right HHS and outside contacts. We'll set something up for late June. Meanwhile I will send you a copy of the report Theodora Ooms wrote on this and the copy of the memo she sent to Ron Haskins which details some of the specifics. Sorry for the delay but Linda's on vacation and I'm off to an organ donation conference for the rest of this week.

Would you send me your address at OEOB for the report? I'll fax the memo today. - Lisa

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Original text

To: Ron Haskins Ph.D., Staff Director, House Subcommittee on Human Resources
From: Theodora Ooms, Executive Director, Family Impact Seminar
Re: The Lamentable Status of Vital Statistics on Marriage and Divorce
Date: April 23, 1999

As you know, the Family Impact Seminar has long had an interest in improving the quantity, quality and coordination of child and family data. In recent years I have become especially aware of the serious inadequacies of our national vital statistics on marriage and divorce. These shortcomings became dramatically worse in 1996 when the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), facing budgetary pressure, discontinued collecting detailed marriage and divorce data from the states, although it has continued to collect total counts of these events each month. However, since several states, including California and Texas, have stopped sending in monthly divorce data, NCHS is reassessing even this practice and may decide to stop publishing monthly estimates of national divorce totals.

In an unrelated development, the Census Bureau decided a few years ago to drop the marital status question from the short form of the Census 2000 (though it remains on the long form which is given to 1 out of 6 housing units). Both actions, in my view, are the most recent evidence of the low priority assigned to the institution of marriage by public officials.

The negative consequences became vividly clear when I recently began to work in Grand Rapids, Michigan and in the state of Oklahoma with public officials and others who are launching initiatives to strengthen marriage. In both places the lack of adequate data on marriage and divorce seriously handicaps their ability to describe and understand the decline in marriage in their state and community, and to develop and evaluate knowledge-based policy and programs to remedy this problem.

Poor quality marriage and divorce data will frustrate implementation of the family formation goals of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant. If states and communities are expected to promote marriage, reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing and encourage and maintain two-parent families, it is essential that the federal government reverse current policy and reinvest in helping states collect uniform, consistent and useful data on marriage and divorce.

I appreciated the opportunity a few weeks ago to raise these issues with you. You agreed that it would be helpful if I summarized some of the background information that I have gathered from recent conversations with federal and state statistics officials and other experts about the status of

marriage and divorce statistics. (They are listed at the end of the paper). This is what I have tried to do here. Please note that I do not include any information about the inadequacies of data on abortion, which is another, more complicated story.

In conclusion, I very much hope that you can stimulate congressional interest and action to reverse the recent cutbacks and improve the quantity, quality and availability of state and national statistics on marriage and divorce. It is very clear that this can not happen without significant additional funding to the tune of at least several million dollars annually.

I believe a very useful first step would be to commission a report from DHHS to examine in detail the current status of state marriage and divorce statistics, how they relate to census data, and recommend how these data can be improved and what the costs would be of doing so. I respectfully suggest that the Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics be given oversight over such a study. And I believe that the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS) would also be very happy to collaborate.

I hope this background paper is useful. Please let me know if there are additional ways that I can help.

The Lamentable Status of Marriage and Divorce Statistics

Prepared by Theodora Ooms

This background paper:

- Provides illustrative examples of the poor and deteriorating status of marriage and divorce statistics
- Briefly describes the vital statistics system
- Summarizes how the system treats marriage and divorce data
- Urges that the federal government take steps to work with states to improve these data

The Problem

The following are examples of data problems I recently encountered when trying to understand the status of marriage and divorce in our nation, and specifically in Michigan and Oklahoma

- **I could not obtain recent marriage and divorce rates by state to verify whether Oklahoma is still the state with the second highest divorce rate, or what Michigan's current ranking is.** These data used to be published on an annual basis. But since 1996 the only national data available are the reported total counts of the numbers of marriages and divorces that take place each year by state. The Division of Vital Statistics (DVS), National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), no longer has staff assigned to convert these numbers into annual rates (number of events per 1000 persons).

- **I could not find any current national or state-by-state published data to describe and compare marriage and divorce rates, trends in age of marriage, duration of marriage, numbers of marriages, age of divorce, numbers of children involved in divorce, or any of these trends by race or education.** Prior to 1996 DVS did extract these data from a sample of state marriage and divorce records, published them annually until 1990, and then made them available on a CD ROM until this practice was discontinued. (However these data were not available for all states, see below.)

- **In Michigan marriage and divorce data has serious limitations, and in particular cannot readily be compared with national or other states.** I am providing technical assistance to the Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy (GGRCMP) initiative. They have established numeric goals for reductions in the divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates over the next ten years. The GGRCMP began by seeking to understand the nature of the decline in marriage in their community, and then to establish baseline data to evaluate the future success of their efforts. Dr. Fred De Jong, of Calvin College, in Western Michigan, has just completed a report on recent trends in marriage, divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing in Kent County, and compares these with state and national trends. In the course of preparing this report he learned that the data available has serious limitations, namely Michigan marriage and divorce certificates do not ask for race or education. In addition Michigan is

one of only two states (including New York) that do not currently ask marital status on the birth record or electronic birth certificate, so that non-marital paternity has to be inferred. (A third state, Nevada, does not have marital status on the birth certificate, but does include it in the electronic birth certificate sent from a hospital to the state registration office.) Finally, the county and statewide marriage and divorce rates calculated and published by the Michigan State Health Department are twice as high as the national rates! We learned that this is due to the state's different method of calculating the rates: Michigan counts numbers of persons married and divorced, rather than the number of marriage and divorce events, which is the standard federal practice.

- **Oklahoma has the second highest divorce rate in the nation, but the state does not collect the marriage and divorce data needed to describe or begin to understand this situation.** Governor Keating of Oklahoma in his January 1999, State of the Union address, declared his intention to reduce the divorce rate by one-third by 2010. On March 22 he called together 200 leaders from every sector of the state to participate in a Conference on Marriage. Speakers were asked to address the reasons for Oklahoma's high divorce rate. Several reasons were suggested, including the persistent tradition of marrying at an early age (17-18) since early marriages are at higher risk of divorce. However there were no data available to provide evidence of whether this hypothesis was correct. Oklahoma it turns out is one of only three states which has no central state files of marriage and one of four states with no central files of divorce.

These two state examples are not typical, and clearly Oklahoma is an outlier. According to federal statistics officials, by 1994 the majority of states had marriage and divorce data of reasonably good quality. However, a number of states never met the federal standards for marriage and divorce data needed to become a part of the Marriage and Divorce Registration Areas (see below). Unfortunately, there are no current studies of the quality of marriage and divorce data across states, or to what extent they tabulate, analyze and/or publish them.

The Vital Statistics System: Background, structure and recent history

(This section draws heavily upon a very useful report published by NCHS in 1997, *U.S. Vital Statistics System: Major Activities and Developments, 1950-95* and an earlier report on the *History and Organization of the Vital Statistics System* published in 1950 and included as Appendix II in the 1997 report**)

Vital statistics for the U.S. are obtained from the official records of live births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages, divorces and annulments prepared by thousands of physicians, hospital staff, and funeral directors, plus local officials who are situated generally in county registration offices and courts. These records are then typically transmitted to the state where they are coded and keyed, queried for accuracy and completeness, edited and filed in state offices. The data are released by states to the public on an annual basis as reports or electronic products. The data are also transmitted periodically to NCHS as the records are processed.

The recording of these events is the legal responsibility of the individual states and independent

registration areas (D.C., New York City, and the territories) and is governed by state statute and regulation. Vital statistics information is continually used by state and local officials for planning, evaluating and administering health related activities.

The federal government currently obtains the use of data from these state records for statistical purposes through a voluntary cooperative arrangement with the responsible agency in each state. Under this arrangement, which involves sharing of costs annually adjusted for inflation, the federal government contracts with the states to obtain electronic files containing detailed data from the records of the various vital events. During the seventies and eighties, as funding and technical assistance became more available, more and more states began to forward their computer tapes to NCHS, so that now almost all birth and death data are precoded and transmitted electronically. However, as of 1995, marriage and divorce statistics were still incomplete and relatively primitive.

Prior to 1946, vital statistics were the responsibility of the Census Bureau. In 1946, this responsibility shifted to the National Office of Vital Statistics (NOVS) in the Public Health Service. In 1960, NOVS merged with the National Health Survey to establish the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

In 1974 the Health Services Research and Evaluation and Health Statistics Act (P.L. 93-353) legally authorized NCHS and spelled out its mandate and authorities. The Act provided for NCHS to collect statistics on a broad range of health-related subjects, including births, deaths, marriages, and divorces. It called for the Center to undertake demonstrations and evaluations regarding survey methods and to provide technical assistance to states and local jurisdictions.

Since 1900 attention has been focused on improving the quality of vital statistics and making them more useful and widely available. The federal government has pursued these aims through a variety of means including:

1. **Development of Model Legislation.** The Model Vital Statistics Act, originally formulated in 1907 and revised in several subsequent years, recommended a centralized system in each state for the collection, processing, registration and certification of vital records and placed local registry offices under the direction of the State Office of Vital Statistics. Model regulations were added to ensure consistency of recording and standardized procedures with respect, for example, to security and confidentiality. The model law and regulations have been generally adopted by the states for births and deaths, but three states--Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma--do not have central files of marriage records, and these three states, plus Indiana, do not have central files of divorce.

2. **Standardization.** In 1900, U.S. standard birth and death certificates were first promulgated, and since then numerous revisions and additions have been made. Federal officials encouraged all states to follow these standard certificates, and by the mid-thirties this was achieved. Both forms have been considerably lengthened and now include very detailed items related to the medical conditions of the infant, mother and deceased. Most states and territories now closely follow the U.S. standards for births and deaths. The first U.S. standard certificates of marriage

and divorce, dissolution of marriage, or annulment were not issued until 1956, and then revised in 1968, 1978, and 1989 (see copies of the 1989 revisions, attached.) But, unlike birth and death certificates, state marriage and divorce certificates do not conform closely to the content of the standards.

3. Registration Areas. To help ensure uniformity and quality of data, a system of registration areas was developed first for birth and death data and later for marriage and divorce. (A registration area can include any of the 50 states, 5 territories, D.C., and N.Y. City— a maximum of 57 entities.) To be admitted to a registration area, states were required to establish central state files, to maintain regular and timely reporting, to use the US Standard certificates format, and to agree to tests of completeness and accuracy in cooperation with the National office. Registration of events and reporting of required items were expected to be at least 90% complete. By 1933 all states had joined the Death and Birth Registration Areas. Currently all state health departments code and tabulate the birth and death data and publish periodic, detailed reports.

Progress was much slower with respect to marriage and divorce data, whose registration areas were started in 1957 and 1958, respectively. In 1995 the Marriage Registration Area (MRA) included 42 states, D.C., New York City (an independent registration area), Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands; the Divorce Registration Area (DRA) included only 31 states (including NYC), D.C., and the Virgin Islands. It is not known how many of the states code, tabulate or publish detailed marriage and divorce data, though most publish summary counts.

The primary motivation for states to join the registration areas has generally been the recognition of the importance for public health of national statistics, with the associated standardization of data collection systems and interstate comparability. The money they currently receive under the Vital Statistics Cooperative System only covers a portion of the costs of preparing data for transmittal to NCHS. States that want to improve their data have been able, however, to get help from the NCHS staff.

4. National Data Production. In the nineteen-eighties the Division of Vital Statistics, NCHS, had a staff ranging from one to three full time analysts, plus several other technical staff, who were involved with processing and analyzing marriage and divorce data. They were involved in reviewing the state records for completeness and accuracy, and analyzing and publishing the data. In addition NCHS contracted with the Census Bureau for data coding and keying from a sample of the detailed records submitted by certain states that did not submit precoded electronic data files. Detailed tables were published by NCHS in the annual Volume III, Marriage and Divorce, of *Vital Statistics of the United States* (1987 was the last volume published, after this date the data were made available electronically through 1995, when detailed data collection ceased.)

Future Directions of the Vital Statistics System

NCHS in cooperation with NAPHSIS has developed a vision for the future of vital statistics in the 21st Century. They envision

> a vital statistics system in which birth and death certificates (and possibly other vital events) are created, edited, coded, queried, and corrected at the source point in electronic form; transmitted over high-speed lines to a central location in each state for any state processing and information management; and finally, electronically transmitted to NCHS on a frequent and regular basis. (NCHS,1997:25)

Significant progress has been made towards achieving this vision: 85 to 90 percent of all birth records are now electronic (Electronic Birth Certificates, EBC) and sent directly to the state central offices which forward them to NCHS. The Electronic Death Certificates are in prototype and being piloted. There has also been interest expressed by some states in developing electronic systems for registering marriages and divorces, but to date there has been very little movement in this direction.

Recent cutbacks

In the early 1990's, federal payments to states under the voluntary cooperative agreements were increasing with inflation but the federal appropriations were staying at the same level. Due to these budgetary pressures NCHS made cuts in its entire statistical program, including vital statistics (several items were dropped from birth and death data collection), and in 1995 decided to end the program of collecting detailed information on marriage and divorce from the states and of providing technical assistance to states to bring them all up to the same standard. The staff working on marriage and divorce were reassigned to other tasks. However the Division of Vital Statistics continued to collect the provisional counts of marriage and divorce from each state and publish national totals. Currently, NCHS is preparing to change even this practice, as it may soon decide not to publish national divorce estimates because five states (including California and Texas) are not sending the provisional monthly counts to NCHS.

Conclusions

I end by sharing a few personal conclusions. The U.S. Vital Statistics System is basically sound, and state and local officials are clearly collecting good quality, comprehensive birth and death data. But marriage and divorce data have always had low priority at national and state levels. Part of the explanation seems to be that the status of marriage and divorce are not perceived as public health concerns or responsibilities of the state and national health agencies. Thus health departments in many instances have not invested resources needed to collect and analyze good quality marriage and divorce statistics. A second, related reason is that there are no strong constituents who have a clear stake in these issues—no public or non-profit organizations who depend upon good marriage and divorce data, although the data have been widely used by many organizations, both public and private. Thus there has been virtually no inside or outside pressure to improve their collection. (I understand that Lexus-Nexus buys marriage and divorce data from the states, indicating that they are considered valuable to commercial users.)

This situation is changing as more and more researchers, public officials and community leaders understand that the status of marriage and divorce are issues of urgent public concern, and that efforts need to be made to strengthen the institution of marriage. It is indeed ironic that the marital status question is being dropped from the short form in the 2000 Census just at the time that marriage is beginning to get much more national attention. (I am assured by Census officials that this change will not have any substantive effect since marital status is retained in the long form, but I think we have not yet heard from the state and local users about whether they agree).

An argument has been made that the current limitations in marriage and divorce statistics are not a serious issue

because sufficient information is already available about marriage and divorce trends from data collected by the Census Bureau and from other national surveys. Each of these sources are different with unique strengths and limitations. They are complementary types of data, not substitutes. The decennial census collects periodic counts and characteristics of individuals at a single point in time, likened to a social photograph. Vital statistics provide a comprehensive, continuous flow of information about behavioral events as they occur, more like a movie film. Vital statistics are necessary to monitor and predict changes in behavior. The other limitations of national surveys is that they collect information only about samples, and hence do not provide information relevant to small geographic areas, or for sub-groups of the population.

There are three main reasons for investing in complete and good vital statistics on marriage and divorce. They are needed:

- by states and localities to describe and understand the changing patterns of marital behavior in specific geographic areas.
- to evaluate the effect of changes in state and local policy and programs on family formation and marital status.
- as benchmarks to assess the adequacy of sample surveys or population estimates.

I very much hope that actions will be taken to reverse current national policy, and that the federal and state governments will invest in improving the quantity, quality and public availability of marriage and divorce statistics to bring them up to the standard of the other categories of vital statistics—birth and death data

I believe a critical first step is for DHHS to conduct a study of the quality and availability of vital statistics on marriage and divorce, how they could be improved and the costs of doing so.

**Reference: Hetzel A.M. *U.S. Vital Statistics System: Major Activities and Developments, 1950-95.* National Center for Health Statistics, 1997.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following individuals for generously sharing their expertise:

James Weed, George Gay, and Stephanie Ventura, Division of Vital Statistics, NCHS;
Michael Hamm, National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS)
Sarah Di Persio and Mary Piscitello, Oklahoma Department of Health,
Linda Mellgren, OASPE/DHHS,
Lynne Casper, Bureau of the Census,
Fred De Jong, Calvin College, Michigan

Copies of this paper are also being sent to the following who have expressed interest:

William Doherty and Michael Benjamin, National Council on Family Relations
Pat Fagan and Robert Rector, Heritage Foundation
Michael McManus, Marriage Savers
Kristin Moore, Child Trends
Doug Nelson, Ralph Smith, Bill O'Hare, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Ann Segal, OASPE/DHHS
Diane Sollee, Coalition on Marriage, Family and Couples Education
Matt Stagner, OASPE/DHHS

Andrea Kane 06/01/99 03:45:25 PM

Record Type: Record

To: Cynthia A. Rice/OPD/EOP

cc:
Subject: Re: guidance

---------- Forwarded by Andrea Kane/OPD/EOP on 06/01/99 03:45 PM ----------

Robin J. Bachman 06/01/99 01:03:19 PM

Record Type: Record

To: Erica S. Lepping/WHO/EOP
cc: Andrea Kane/OPD/EOP, Barry J. Toiv/WHO/EOP
bcc:
Subject: Re: guidance

A little more detail from Census.

Marriage Q:

The Census Bureau has been very interested in simplifying the short form to increase the response rate. As a part of the Census Bureau's overall reviewing process, the Bureau looked at the statutory requirements of each question on the short form. It was determined that the marital status question, along with a number of housing questions, could be moved to the long form.
(About 1 in 6 households receive a long census questionnaire.)

Marriage/divorce info will be collected on the American Community Survey, a survey that will provide information every year.

Further questions may be referred to the Census Bureau's press office.

060199.do
Erica S. Lepping

Erica S. Lepping
06/01/99 11:25:41 AM

Marriage Statistics Q&A
June 1, 1999

Q: Why has the federal government stopped collecting data on marriage, as reported in USA Today?

A: The Census Bureau will continue to collect self-reported information on marital status on the Census long-form, though it will no longer collect this information on the short form. The National Center for Health Statistics stopped collecting detailed data on marriage and divorce in January 1996 as a result of budget constraints and state decisions regarding data collection. NCHS had to make across-the-board budget cuts requiring difficult trade-offs, including in the vital statistics program. The decision was made to suspend marriage and divorce data collection rather than hinder collection of mortality or birth data. The decision was influenced by the fact that some states are no longer collecting—and therefore cannot report—precise data on marriage and divorce; thus, NCHS could no longer collect full and accurate data on these issues. NCHS's decision to stop collecting this data was published in the Federal Register on December 15, 1995.

Q. When did the National Center for Health Statistics stop collecting marriage and divorce data?

A. The collection of detailed data was suspended beginning in January 1996. Information on the total numbers and rates of marriages and divorces at the national and State levels are still published in the NCHS National Vital Statistics Reports. The most recent comprehensive analyses of detailed marriage and divorce data are published in the "Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1989-90" and "Advance Report of Final Divorce Statistics, 1989-90." Data collected between 1991 and 1995 have not been analyzed by NCHS but are available on public use files.

Q. Was there any announcement accompanying this decision to stop collecting this data?

A. A public notice was published in the Federal Register on Dec. 15, 1995. This information also has been available on the NCHS web site http://www.cdc.gov/nchswww) since January 1996.

Q. Why was the decision made to stop collecting detailed information on this subject?

A. Budgetary considerations as well as limitations in the information collected by the States necessitated this action. At the time, NCHS had to make across-the-board budget cuts, including in their vital statistics program. It was decided that marriage and divorce collection would be suspended rather than hinder collection of mortality or natality data. The information on marriage and divorce recorded at the State level was becoming more and more incomplete, which influenced this decision. By 1997, five states -- including California -- did not report any information on divorces. The same year, Maine stopped reported the number of marriage licenses granted.

Q. How does this information differ with what the Census Bureau has traditionally collected?

A. Traditionally, the Census Bureau has asked about marital status on their short form, which is like "self-reporting" on marriage/divorce; the NCHS data is records-based and comes from actual marriage and divorce certificates reported to the state registries. Thus, budgetary concerns in each state also have had an impact on the ability to collect national data on this subject.

Defenders of marriage feel undercut by loss of stats

By Karen S. Peterson
USA TODAY

Theodora Ooms needs good data from the federal government if she is going to continue her mission to help turn the nation's divorce rate around. But she can no longer get the numbers.

Ooms cannot track trends because the government has stopped keeping the kinds of statistics she needs. She cannot find any current, published numbers that let her make the comparisons she wants, nationally or state by state — including how old people were when they married, how long they were married, how many children they had before getting divorced — or any way to track that information by race or education.

This type of data is critical to the work of social scientists, who use it for everything from predicting the likelihood that a remarriage will fail to tracking the marital trends of baby boomers.

But availability of those detailed statistics quietly came to a halt in 1996. Now social scientists are feeling the aftereffects.

Ooms, director of the nonprofit Resource Center on Couples and Marriage Policy, is finding it difficult to assist folks in the Grand Rapids, Mich., area who have asked her to put their problems into a national or state-by-state context as they try to reduce their divorce rate.

"The feds are cutting back on what they tell us," she says. "It is frustrating to those of us who are trying to understand what is happening."

In the past, she could have gone to the National Center for Health Statistics. But the NCHS is getting out of the business of collecting in-depth, yearly stats on marriage and divorce.

It no longer publishes yearly, richly detailed, state-by-state information on marriages and divorces, says James Weed of the center's vital statistics division. Citing budget cuts, he says the center no longer collects such wide-ranging data; staffers who worked on the data were reassigned.

In addition, the short form of the U.S. census, to be sent to most households in 2000, will no longer ask about marital status, although the long form, sent to about 16 million, will, the Census Bureau's Martin O'Connell says. The decision was made to limit the short form to questions required by law; marital status is not.

Cutbacks send message

The dual cutbacks are "a message about what the government sees as important," family therapist Diane Sollee says. "That message is that nobody cares anymore." Sollee's Washington conference, Smart Marriages, Happy Families, will spotlight shortages in statistics July 1-4.

Some say that having fewer government statistics is not a big loss because the numbers are imperfect and other studies can be used. Others say privacy is an issue: Information on someone's divorce is not the government's business.

But most say fewer good stats make it tougher to come up with state-by-state comparisons or to paint a clear national picture of marriage and divorce trends.

Less NCHS information affects researchers trying to get some perspective on teen marriages, track how likely it is that a couple married today will divorce, and make projections about how long a remarriage might last, Weed says.

NCHS data can no longer be used to forecast that one out of two new marriages will end in divorce — a statistic that has been quoted by virtually everyone who writes on the subject. That government data no longer will be available.

Nor will there be the kind of NCHS data that helped experts forecast that about 1 million children will be affected by divorce each year, Weed says. The information is vital to researchers who are learning that parental divorce can affect many aspects of a child's life, from success in school to future earnings to whether he or she will marry or divorce.

Those in the "marriage movement" need good numbers to see how reforms designed to cut the divorce rate are working. And politicians making policy need the stats for activities including monitoring welfare reform and evaluating changes in state divorce laws.

Concern over the changes has reached Capitol Hill. Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn., who heads a House Ways and Means subcommittee, calls changes in the short form of the census "a mistake." She is considering asking the Department of Health and Human Services for a report on how the government handles marriage and divorce statistics. "We will be looking into it. We need this kind of information."

Paul Webster, a staff member of the House Family Caucus, says it is concerned about fewer statistics. "Government policymakers and advocates for marriage have to be able to speak accurately."

Other politicians are reacting. Gov. Frank Keating of Oklahoma hopes to reduce his state's high divorce rate by a third by 2010.

"In my state, it is more difficult to get a hunting license than a marriage license and easier to get out of a marriage contract with kids than a Tupperware contract," he says.

His state needs better methods to track local data, but Keating also says it won't be easy with the changes to understand how Oklahoma fits into the national picture. Without good statistics, he says, "we are fighting a battle blind."

The spigot has not completely closed. There is information of varying quality from a number of private and university studies. But many of them are done infrequently, use a relatively small sample, provide little detail and can't reflect subgroups in the population.

The Census Bureau collects data from virtually every household every 10 years. It also publishes the annual Current Population Survey, with fresh data from a national sampling of households. But its surveys ask only about current marital status or living arrangements as of that day. That can't compete with the breadth of information that used to be gathered yearly by the National Center on Health Statistics, Ooms says.

There is no substitute for detailed yearly vital statistics, she says. Ooms calls census data a "social photograph" taken at one point in time: A

1/2

USA TODAY · TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 1999

Values at play in data cuts

Government cutbacks on marriage and divorce statistics "tell us something about the values in our society," says David Blankenhorn, a social scientist who several years ago wrote *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem.*

The founder of the Institute for American Values, a think tank on family issues, Blankenhorn is a pioneer in the "fatherhood movement" and has chronicled the impact of divorce on the American family.

His work, he says, is "absolutely" affected by having fewer numbers available on divorce trends.

"Over the last 10 years, the basic idea a lot of us have worked on is that marriage is society's most important social institution. How can you know the condition of that institution if you don't know detailed information on who enters it and who exits it?"

Basic Books

Pioneer: Blankenhorn says the cuts have hurt his work.

Would we, he asks, make domestic economic policy without knowing the unemployment rate? "How can you make good family policy based on ignorance about marriage?"

The federal government, he says, is ultimately "the only entity with the money and capacity to collect information we can rely on."

respondent is not asked a marriage date, information that would allow groups such as baby boomers to be tracked in depth, for example.

On the other hand, yearly vital statistics have provided "a comprehensive, continuous flow of information about behavioral events as they occur, more like a movie."

The Census Bureau refers those wanting in-depth information on marriage and divorce to the NCHS.

States are not required to forward marriage and divorce data to the NCHS. They do so on a cooperative basis with the federal government, Weed says.

Since 1996, after budget cuts, the agency makes available only the total numbers of marriages and divorces from states, with no details that facilitate an in-depth analysis. And, as always, those numbers come only from those choosing to participate.

No numbers to study

Having in-depth information does matter, University of Chicago sociologist and researcher Linda Waite says. How can social scientists study "what divorce means to kids if you don't know how many kids (affected by parental divorce) there are, the ages and education of their parents, income, the very most fundamental pieces of information?"

Maggie Gallagher and Waite wrote *The Case for Marriage*, due next spring from Harvard University Press. Gallagher says federal health statisticians seem to have cut marriage and divorce information — while continuing to collect thorough data on births and deaths — without realizing that getting and staying married protects health.

One major study by Waite finds, after controlling for risk factors, that nine out of 10 men married at 48 will still be alive at 65, while only six out of 10 single men will be.

The NCHS now frequently refers queries to experts outside government. One is Andrew Cherlin, a professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University and president of the Population Association of America, a research group of demographers.

"Not only does this handicap my own research, but it handicaps my ability to give useful information about recent changes," he says of the statistics cutback. "I'm supposed to be an expert, but I don't have the information to answer many questions."

But not everyone sees it his way, Cherlin says. Some have privacy concerns and want the government to collect as little information as possible. Some don't want the government to track information on marriages and divorces by race, age or education, believing it is not the government's business.

Some government officials note financial concerns. Weed explains that a "budget crunch" dictated that the government cut back on vital statistics and that the decision was made to whittle away at marriage and divorce rather than births and deaths.

Some experts, including landmark demographer Larry Bumpass, are not impressed by the quality of the NCHS data in the first place and are not upset about cutbacks.

States have varied widely in the ways they collect and report data, he says, and not all provide it. The NCHS has had to adjust some statistics to make them work.

A sociologist and demographer at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Bumpass conducts his own extensive research and basically uses government data for comparison.

But the budget cuts are upsetting to many people who are tracking the American family.

Syndicated religious columnist Mike McManus tried to get complete information on divorce trends from the NCHS and couldn't get enough of the right stuff. He ended up writing: "There are federal employees counting the number of California red-legged frogs and coffin cave mold beetles, two . . . endangered species. But no one counts divorces."

▶ Census changes, 1A

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