

# The marriage certificate as a shield?: the role of marital status on violent victimization

## Ph.D Dissertation

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### Abstract

Marital status is one of the most salient predictors of violent victimization risk among adult men and women. Findings from numerous sources indicate that victimization risk varies significantly across marital status categories. Specifically, research suggests that married individuals may have lower victimization rates than unmarried persons, and that victimization risk among the unmarried is highly associated with cohabitation status.

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is one of the leading sources for national victimization rates, but has rarely been utilized to conduct an in-depth examination of the association between marital status and victimization. The few NCVS studies that do explore this issue are severely limited by not including cohabitation as an important category of marital status. Due to the absence of a direct measure of cohabitation in the NCVS, the creation of an indirect measure is necessary in order to study the association between cohabitation and victimization. This is the first study to create and examine a measure of cohabitation using the NCVS. The stringent criteria of the measure utilized required that approximately 20,000 cases in the NCVS (8% of the sample) be hand-coded for individual cohabitation status. This project is the first to use the NCVS to explore the relationship between the marital status categories of "married," "cohabitating," and "non-cohabitating single" and violent victimization. Prior studies on the association between marital status and victimization are limited in their analyses by combining or excluding fundamental marital status groups, by focusing on only one type of victim-offender relationship, by limiting samples to females only, by having a small sample size, and/or by failing to include other significant individual and family explanatory factors. This project is able to account for these limitations by examining violent victimization by intimate partners, strangers, and non-strangers for married, cohabiting, and single adult men and women. Additionally, numerous individual and family variables related to victimization risk and selective processes into marital status groups are included in multivariate analyses. Finally, the limitation of small sample size is overcome through the use of the NCVS--which has one of the largest sample sizes of all victimization studies.

The findings from this study reveal that for the full sample, the risk to married adults is significantly lower than the risk to cohabiting and non-cohabiting single adults, regardless of victim-offender relationship. The difference in risk between married and cohabiting or single adults is not explained by significant individual- or family-level risk factors. Controls for age, gender, income, and race/ethnicity, among others, do not explain the protective effect of marriage. Findings from subgroup analyses reveal that although the benefit of marriage is largely universal across subgroups, the *amount* of protection granted by marriage is dependent upon gender, race/ethnicity, and crime type. Importantly, although the benefit of marriage varies in strength across subgroups, and at times is not significantly different from the benefit of cohabitation, it is **never** the case that marriage is a significant risk factor. Indeed, the data reveal that a marriage certificate really does act as a shield against most forms of violent victimization. The policy implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.