

Linking Healthy Marriage Research & Practice: Findings from the Marriage Strengthening Research & Dissemination Center

2020 NCFR Annual Conference

- Elizabeth Wildsmith, Susan Brown, Mindy Scott, April Wilson, and Kendy Cox
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What is the MAST Center?

Marriage Strengthening Research & Dissemination Center (MAST Center)

- Team: multi-organizational leaders in the field
- Aim: build a nexus between HMRE* related-research and practice

*Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE)

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this presentation do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Mast Center Objectives



Advance a
Research
Agenda



Build Capacity
for Research/
Evaluation



Strategic
Dissemination



MAST Center: Research Aims

Relationship Patterns & Trends – Population-based research and data to better understand trends, predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of marriage and relationships in the United States.

HMRE Program Implementation and Evaluation – Research that helps build knowledge about what works in HMRE programming, for whom, and in what context.

Today's Presenters



Susan Brown
NCFMR at BGSU



Mindy Scott
Child Trends



April Wilson
Child Trends



Kendy Cox
Public Strategies

MAST Center Research - Relationship Patterns and Trends



Introductions

- MAST Center Priority Area Leads at the NCFMR
- Additional MAST Center team members involved: Krista K. Payne, Kasey Eickmeyer, Paul Hemez, Eric Sevareid, Lindsey Aldrich



Susan Brown



Karen Guzzo



Wendy Manning

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Objectives and Goals

- **Overall Objective:** To generate research and data on marriage/relationships and relationship processes to inform HMRE programs and practices
- **Goal:** Synthesize and conduct demographic analyses to establish how key relationship and marriage behaviors and attitudes vary across priority populations to inform HMRE research and evaluation activities

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Research Priorities

Research Questions:

1. What are the trends in marriage and relationships?
2. What are the patterns and antecedents of relationship quality and stability among daters, cohabitators, and marrieds?

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Research Activities

RQ1: What are the trends in marriage and relationships?

- **State of the Field Research Briefs**
 - Research Brief 1: Trends in Relationship Formation and Stability in the United States: Dating, Cohabitation, Marriage and Divorce
 - Research Brief 2: Socioeconomic Variation in the Formation and Stability of Cohabiting and Marital Unions

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ1

- Dating in adolescence is declining
- The proportion of women who have ever cohabited nearly doubled over the past 25 years
- Most young people want to marry, but the marriage rate has declined about 60% over the past 40 years
- Roughly 2 of every 5 marriages will end in divorce. The divorce rate peaked in 1980 and has declined in recent years

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ1 (...continued)

- Cohabitation remains more common among individuals with less education
- The transition from cohabitation to marriage is most likely to occur for groups with more economic advantage
- Higher levels of education and income as well as full-time employment are predictive of marriage among men and women
- Adults with a college degree marry at later ages than adults with less education but ultimately have higher marriage rates

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Research Activities

RQ2: What are the patterns and antecedents of relationship quality and stability among daters, cohabitators, and marrieds?

- **State of the Field Research Briefs**
 - Research Brief 3: Relationship Quality across Relationship Types (Dating, Cohabitation, and Marriage)
 - Research Brief 4: Relationship Quality among Youth
- **Relationship Quality Data Tool**
 - An interactive online data resource cataloging the measurement of relationship quality and attitudes toward relationships across surveys

Relationship Patterns and Trends – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ2

- Positive Dimensions of Relationship Quality
 - Happiness and Satisfaction
 - Affection
 - Commitment and Trust
 - Communication
 - Sexual Behaviors
 - Support
- Negative Dimensions of Relationship Quality
 - Disagreement and Conflict
 - Intimate Partner Violence
 - Instability

MAST Center Research – HMRE Program Implementation



Introductions

- Mindy Scott, Child Trends
 - Senior Research Scientist and Program Area Director
 - MAST Center Principal Investigator
- Additional MAST Center team members involved: Lindsay Anderson, Sydney Briggs, Ilana Huz, Deja Logan, Desiree Murray, Public Strategies



HMRE Program Implementation – Objectives and Goals

- **Overall Objective:** To assess, support, and strengthen HMRE programs to better meet program goals and achieve outcomes for priority populations
- **Goal:** Summarize and synthesize research on HMRE curricula, program models, and implementation approaches to assess relevance for youth, adult couples, or adult individuals participating in HMRE programs

HMRE Program Implementation– Research Priorities

Research Questions:

1. How are HMRE curricula designed and implemented?
 - Target populations
 - HMRE topics
 - Adaptations
 - Activities
 - Dosage
 - Staff training
2. How do HMRE program developers and providers design and implement programs for different priority populations?
 - Couples
 - Youth

HMRE Program Implementation – Research Activities

- **State of the HMRE Practice Field Literature Review**
 - Reviewed nearly 150 HMRE program implementation and evaluation-related studies published from 2008 to 2019
 - Full set of articles initially reviewed and coded using a standard coding scheme
 - Additional sorting, coding, and analysis conducted for specific research activities

HMRE Program Implementation – Research Activities (...continued)

- Research Brief 1: An Overview of HMRE Curricula
 - HMRE Curriculum Assessment Tool
 - HMRE Curriculum Summary Table
- Research Brief 2: Implementing HMRE Programs with Couples
- Research Brief 3: Leveraging a Positive Youth Development Approach to Enhance HMRE Programming for Youth

HMRE Program Implementation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ1

RQ1: How are HMRE curricula designed and implemented?

- HMRE curricula most commonly designed for married and/or unmarried adult couples or adult individuals
- Topics included in specific HMRE curricula often align with the unique strengths and needs of participants (e.g., adolescents versus adults)
- HMRE curricula adaptations used to tailor topics, activities, etc. for different populations

HMRE Program Implementation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ1 (...continued)

RQ1: How are HMRE curricula designed and implemented?

- Relevant, tailored, and research-based curricula are lacking for some priority populations
- Evaluators can ensure that evaluations are also appropriately designed and tailored

HMRE Program Implementation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ2

RQ2: How do HMRE program developers and providers design and implement programs for *couples*?

- HMRE programs serve a wide range of different types of “couples”
 - Married, cohabiting, engaged, expectant parents, couples experiencing relationship distress
- Strategies for recruiting, retaining, and engaging couples in HMRE are often tailored to the unique strengths and needs associated with working with couples
- Additional considerations
 - Addressing and preventing intimate partner violence
 - Working with same sex couples or culturally diverse couples
 - Linking implementation to outcomes

HMRE Program Implementation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ2 (...continued)

RQ2: How do HMRE program developers and providers design and implement programs for *youth*?

- The building blocks of healthy adult relationships are formed during adolescence
- Developmental considerations for establishing and maintaining healthy relationships during adolescence and young adulthood have implications for HMRE program design and implementation
- Application of Positive Youth Development (PYD) Approaches to support this work
 - Core principles and practices

MAST Center Research – HMRE Program Evaluation



Introductions

- April Wilson, Child Trends
 - Senior Research Scientist and Deputy Program Area Director in Parenting and Family Dynamics at Child Trends
 - MAST Center Priority Area Lead
- Additional MAST Center team members involved: Lindsay Anderson, Deana Around Him, Sydney Briggs, Ilana Huz, Deja Logan, Rachel Powell, Heather Wasik, Ellen Wilson



HMRE Program Evaluation – Objectives and Goals

- **Overall Objective:** Assess, support, and strengthen HMRE effectiveness and evaluation research in a way that is robust, transparent, and builds consensus and collaboration in the field
- **Three Goals:**
 - To synthesize and disseminate lessons learned from completed and ongoing evaluations
 - To build knowledge for better measurement of targeted outcomes that align with HMRE populations of interest and HMRE program models
 - To generate knowledge that will help evaluators and practitioners learn about evaluation design options, common challenges to evaluation, and proven solutions

HMRE Program Evaluation – Research Priorities

Goal: Synthesize and disseminate lessons learned from completed and ongoing evaluations

Research Questions:

1. What are the types and prevalence of outcomes measured in HMRE programs over the last decade at the individual, couple, family, and community levels?
2. What do we know about the impact of HMRE programs on different HMRE outcomes?
3. What do we know about what makes HMRE programs more or less effective?

HMRE Program Evaluation – Research Priorities (...continued)

Goal: To generate knowledge that will help evaluators and practitioners learn about evaluation design options

Research Questions:

4. What is culturally responsive evaluation?
5. Why should this type of evaluation be prioritized?

HMRE Program Evaluation – Research Activities

- Research Brief 1: Outcomes and Outcome Domains Examined in HMRE Evaluation Studies
- Research Brief 2: A Comprehensive Guide to Findings from HMRE Evaluations in the Past Decade
- Research Brief 3: Culturally Responsive Evaluation: An Introduction for HMRE Programs

HMRE Program Evaluation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ1

RQ1: What are the types and prevalence of outcomes measured in HMRE programs over the last decade at the individual, couple, family, and community levels?

- Most outcomes assess romantic relationship
 - 51% focused on participants romantic relationship
 - Most common: Relationship quality (e.g., communication and conflict, global assessments of satisfaction)
 - 27% focused on program participant as an individual
 - Most common: Participants' attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about romantic relationships generally and their psychological well-being
 - 20% focused on participants family unit
 - Most common: Parenting, family economic outcomes, and coparenting
 - 2% focused on community- or society-level outcomes

HMRE Program Evaluation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ1 (...continued)

RQ1: What are the types and prevalence of outcomes measured in HMRE programs over the last decade at the individual, couple, family, and community levels?

- Outcomes should align with the
 - Unique strengths and needs of families in HMRE programs
 - Program curricula and goals
- Consider relevance of outcomes missing in current evaluations
 - Other features of romantic relationships frequently tied to relationship stability and satisfaction
 - Parenting knowledge and skills
 - Social networks, community impacts, societal influences

HMRE Program Evaluation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ2

RQ2: What do we know about the impact of HMRE programs on different HMRE outcomes?

Evidence from Meta Analyses

- Primary outcomes assessed:
 - Relationship quality, communication, and a measure of overall effect
- Less frequent outcomes assessed:
 - Relationship stability, relationship attitudes (among youth), and parenting behaviors
- HMRE programs have statistically significant positive effects on most outcomes, but effect sizes are mostly small or very small
 - Slightly larger for communication

HMRE Program Evaluation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ2 (...continued)

RQ2: What do we know about the impact of HMRE programs on different HMRE outcomes?

Evidence from Experimental and Quasi-experimental Program Evaluations

- Evaluations of HMRE programs have found mostly positive effects for five outcome domains:
 - Participant relationship attitudes/beliefs/knowledge
 - Participant physical and psychological wellbeing
 - Global ratings of relationship quality or satisfaction
 - Commitment to and confidence in one's relationship
 - Child development
- Evaluations of HMRE programs have found mostly non-significant effects for three outcome domains:
 - Relationship status and stability
 - Parenting interactions
 - Family economic outcomes

HMRE Program Evaluation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ3

RQ3: What do we know about what makes HMRE programs more or less effective?

- Several program features may lead to improved program outcomes
 - Most commonly considered - dosage/duration; facilitation alliance; facilitator-participant demographic match, and program format

HMRE Program Evaluation – Key Findings and Considerations for RQ3 (...continued)

RQ3: What do we know about what makes HMRE programs more or less effective?

- Evidence limited so no definitive conclusions possible
 - Starting place for types of program features that may lead to better outcomes
- Future research also should consider what works for whom

Discussion – Linking Healthy Marriage Research and Practice



Linking Healthy Marriage Research and Practice

- How relationship patterns & trends impact program design and flexibility
- Field illustrations of program implementation research questions
- Areas of programmatic improvements identified within existing research
- Gaps in research: What programs need to know to refine & improve services



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