

New Jersey leads U.S. in till death do us part

by [Amy Kuperinsky](#)

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(RNS) Poor New Jersey -- derided for "Jersey Shore," aggressive driving and talking too fast. But when it comes to happily ever after, the Garden State is No. 1.

A recent U.S. Census report shows the Northeast -- and New Jersey in particular -- has the lowest divorce rate in America, trailed closely by New York.

The Bible Belt, meanwhile, home to Southern hospitality, church telethons and country music, has more "shotgun" weddings and the most divorces.

"People assume that people in the Northeast divorce easily because they're less religious, but that's not the case," said Deborah Carr, a professor of sociology at Rutgers University.

In the Northeast, 7.2 per 1,000 men and 7.5 per 1,000 women got divorced. In the South, the rates were 10.2 for men and 11.1 for women. New Jersey's rates were 6.1 for men and 6 for women, according to the 2009 American Community Survey, which released the data in August.

Even though Jean Grossman is from New Jersey, her story mirrors those statistics. When she first moved to Texas, it was a classic case of culture shock.

"I thought I had landed on the moon," said Grossman, 59, a native of Oradell, N.J. After getting married, she moved in 1984 with her husband to Dallas, where he was pursuing a business opportunity. "I thought we were going into 'happily ever after,'" she said.

"Nobody in my family had ever gotten divorced," said Grossman, who now works as a divorce coach. "It just wasn't done."

Almost a decade later, in 1993, she asked her husband to move out, and they divorced three years later. Still living in the South, Grossman started a relationship with the man who would become her second husband, before returning to New Jersey in 2006.

The South sees more divorce for several reasons, Carr said:

-- First, Southerners tend to marry young, partly due to a lower rate of college attendance.

-- Second, couples don't usually move in together while unwed, a trend tied to religious beliefs. They often frown upon birth control, and are "more likely to have nonmarital pregnancies, which ... then trigger 'shotgun' marriages."

-- Third, there are simply more marriages in the South. New Jersey had the second-lowest marriage rates, just above Maine. The Census survey reported while New Jersey's marriage rate is 14.8 for men and 13.3 for women, Georgia's is 22.1 and 20.4, respectively.

Though the South's marriage rate is 20.3, the West is highest, at 20.7. Wyoming was the single state with the highest marriage rates for both men (30.7) and women (28.7). And though it's not a Southern state, Alaska ranks like one, with the highest divorce rate for women, at 16.2. (For men, it's Arkansas at 13.5.)

While the national median age for a woman's first marriage is 26.5 and 28.4 for men, in New Jersey, people tend to get married at an older age; the median age for women is 28, and 30.2 for men.

Matt Eventoff, 38, recently celebrated his fifth wedding anniversary with his wife Nicole, 31. His parents, who are still together, got married in their early 20s, but he appreciates the fact that he waited until he was 33.

"The benefit to me was that I was more mature," said Eventoff, of Lawrenceville, N.J. "I was more established in my career. I felt that I

was in a position where I could give more of myself."

New Jerseyans may also stick together because, well, it's just too expensive to break up.

Rick Verbanas, 40, belongs to the Central New Jersey Successful Divorce Support Group, which has more than 800 members. Verbanas and his family lived in Atlanta for several years before his wife, who grew up in Bridgewater, N.J., filed for divorce.

He moved to Somerville months later to be near his two children and won joint custody. Now an organizer for the Central Jersey Single Parents Meetup Group, Verbanas pays \$500 more a month to rent half a house than he paid for a mortgage on a four-bedroom in Atlanta.

"When you really think about it, the thousands of dollars a month that are going into having two separate locations versus one certainly has to play into peoples' decisions," he said.

Choosing where to file for divorce can directly relate to the cost of living in that state, according to family law attorneys.

"When there's more money to fight about in New Jersey," said Randall Kessler, a family law attorney in Atlanta, "people take longer to get a divorce."

Tom Meagher of the Star-Ledger contributed to this report.