



# Divorce is Down in Duval County: A Preliminary Evaluation of The Culture of Freedom Initiative in Florida

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2016, the Culture of Freedom Initiative (COFI) has partnered with a range of churches and nonprofits, including Live the Life, in an effort to strengthen marriage and family life in Duval County, the home county for Jacksonville, Florida. COFI and Live the Life, a Florida nonprofit dedicated to strengthening family life, have sponsored dozens of events, worked with churches and nonprofits across Jacksonville, and reached thousands of men and women in person across the county. The COFI effort in Jacksonville has also garnered more than twenty million impressions on the internet. Many initiatives across the United States designed to strengthen marriage and family life have not had a clear impact on relationships and families. How, then, does this COFI effort measure up?


We answer this question by looking at divorce and marriage trends in Duval County and three comparable counties in Florida: Hillsborough, Orange, and Escambia. Our initial data analysis suggests that the COFI effort with Live the Life and a range of religious and civic partners has had an exceptional impact on marital stability in Duval County. Since 2016, the county has witnessed a remarkable decline in divorce: from 2015 to 2017, the divorce rate fell 28 percent. As family scholars, we have rarely seen changes of this size in family trends over such a short period of time. Although it is possible that some other factor besides COFI's intervention also helped, we think this is unlikely. In our professional opinion, given the available evidence, the efforts undertaken by COFI in Jacksonville appear to have had a marked effect on the divorce rate in Duval County.

However, the initiative did not increase the marriage rate in Duval County. From 2014 to 2017, the marriage rate rose in some of the comparison counties but remained essentially flat in Duval. There are at least two possible reasons for these divergent trends. First, Hurricane Irma struck



Jacksonville in September of 2017; this weather may have led couples to postpone or relocate their fall weddings. Second, the COFI effort focused on strengthening marriages and relationships, not marriage promotion. In any case, we find no evidence that this COFI effort increased the marriage rate in Duval County in its first two years (2016-2017).

Finally, these results must be regarded as preliminary. Given that this COFI effort has only been on the ground in Duval County for two years, it will be important to monitor continuing trends in divorce and marriage to determine if the work that Live the Life and the rest of the COFI coalition is doing in Jacksonville has a continuing impact on divorce and marriage trends in Duval County.



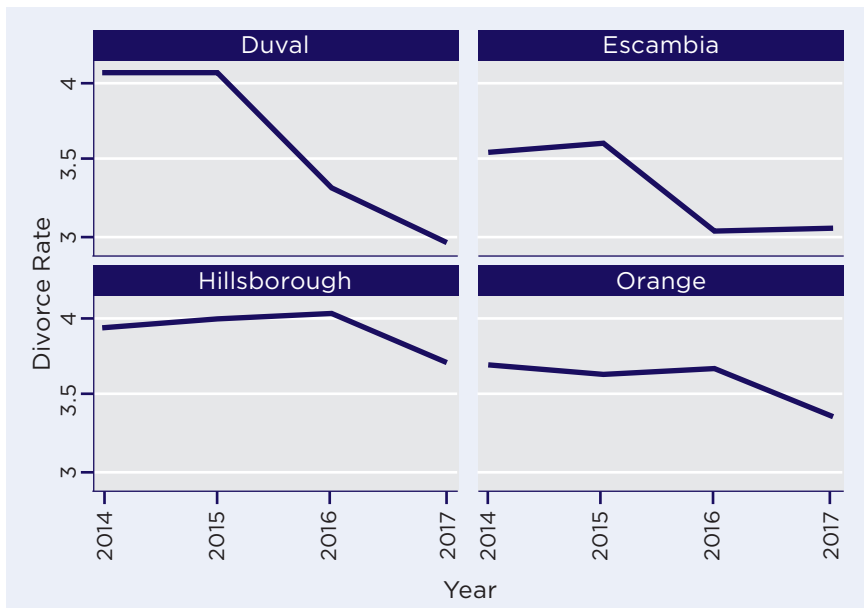
Since 2016, the Culture of Freedom Initiative (COFI) has partnered with a range of churches and nonprofits, including Live the Life, in an effort to strengthen marriage and family life in Duval County, the home county for Jacksonville, Florida. COFI and Live the Life—a nonprofit dedicated to strengthening family life in Florida—have sponsored dozens of events, worked with churches and nonprofits across Jacksonville, and reached thousands of couples in person in the county. In fact, Live the Life has provided more than 4 hours of marriage and relationship education to more than 15,000 men and women in Jacksonville. The COFI’s other civic partners in Jacksonville have reached another 19,000 people in Jacksonville with family and religious programming. This coalition utilized shared data and marketing tools provided by the COFI to advance their efforts in the city. Moreover, this initiative in Jacksonville has registered more than twenty million impressions through its internet campaign on marriage and divorce-related themes. The digital marketing campaign offered messages encouraging Jacksonville residents to strengthen their relationships and to become involved with local nonprofit and religious organizations that might improve their relationships and family life.

Nevertheless, many efforts to strengthen marriage, relationships, and family life have met with mixed success. Since 2006, for instance, the federal government has provided grants to community organizations to provide marriage and relationship education services targeted primarily at disadvantaged, at-risk individuals and couples. For the most part, however, rigorous evaluations of these efforts have not demonstrated consistent impacts. In a study of programs in eight cities serving unmarried couples having a child together, only one site—Oklahoma City—showed that participants had greater family stability over the course of three years than a control group of similar couples. How, then, does the COFI effort measure up in Jacksonville? We turn first to divorce.



## DIVORCE RATES

Starting in 2016, there was a significant and sizeable decline in divorce rates in Duval County, especially compared to the other three comparison counties (Hillsborough, Orange, and Escambia). To illustrate this difference, Figure A displays the divorce rates across the period studied here, 2014-2017. This figure documents shifts in the divorce rate per 1,000 people in the population in these four counties.



**Figure A. Divorce Rates in Four Florida Counties, 2014-2017.**

What is clear from this graph is that the divorce patterns in Duval County are different from the other counties. While the overall trend across all four counties is negative, nowhere is this negative trend nearly as pronounced or as sustained as Duval County, which began declining in 2016 and continued through 2017, a pattern not seen anywhere else. The divorce rate fell from 4.07 people per thousand in 2015 to 2.95 per thousand in 2017 in Duval County, a 28 percent decline. This decline was much larger than that reported in comparable counties in Hillsborough (down 8

percent), Orange (down 7 percent), and Escambia (down 15 percent).

We then tested to see whether these differences were systematic, rather than due to random chance alone and looked for statistical differences between the trends in Duval County and other counties, both with and without statistical controls. The results of the ordinary least square regressions are below.

**Table 1. Divorce Rates in Four Florida Counties, 2014-2017.**

	Drop in Divorce Rate 2014-2017	Drop in Divorce Rate 2014-2017
Duval County	-0.75***	-0.45**
	(0.06)	(0.04)
% Bachelors+		-0.02
		(0.89)
Unemployment Rate		-0.56
		(1.31)
% Black		-3.14*
		(0.66)
% Hispanic		0.01
		(0.24)
% Asian		4.01
		(2.66)
% 15-44		0.06
		(0.44)
% Poverty		0.83
		(1.27)
Constant	-0.36***	-0.03
	(0.03)	(0.27)

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001



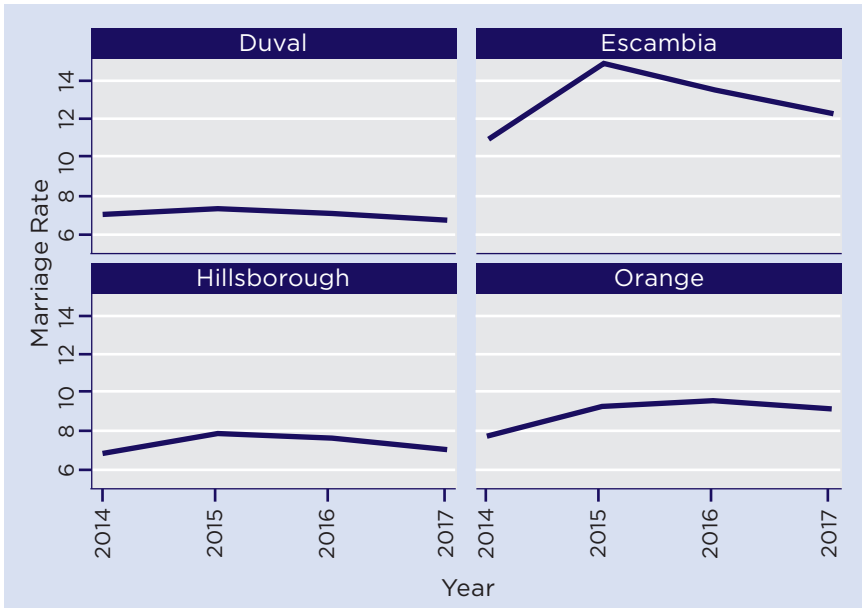
The results were remarkably clear and strong, especially considering how few data points we are working with and the number of controls we have included. Without controls, we see a sizeable gap in divorce rates between Duval and the others emerge, with Duval reporting about a .75 point larger drop in divorce rates than the other counties. Even after accounting for compositional differences between the counties in terms of education, unemployment, race/ethnicity, age, and poverty, this difference is still significant at about .45 points, markedly larger than the other counties.

**Summary:** We think the change in divorce rates in Duval county is a) real and b) larger than any of the changes observed in the comparison counties. More specifically, between 2015 and 2017, even after controlling for a range of factors, the divorce rate in Duval County fell 28 percent, compared to about 10 percent in the other counties. The difference in these two trends is statistically significant.

What about marriage rates in Duval County versus its comparison counties?

## MARRIAGE RATES

The story for marriage rates is different. Results suggest that the marriage rate in Duval County actually declined slightly between 2014 and 2017, in comparison to increases in the comparison counties. We ran the same statistical tests as we did for divorce rates, and the results confirmed this initial observation.



**Figure B. Marriage Rates in Four Florida Counties, 2014-2017.**

Figure B indicates that Escambia and Orange counties experienced increases in the marriage rates between 2014 and 2017, whereas Hillsborough and Duval stayed largely flat. Specifically, from 2014 to 2017, the marriage rate declined from 7.05 marriages to 6.66 per 1,000 people for Duval County, a six percent decline. This is in contrast to the increases in marriage rates seen in comparable counties, where Hillsborough saw a slight increase of four percent and larger increases were registered in Orange (18 percent increase) and Escambia (13 percent increase).



To test for whether the trends in Duval's marriage rates were different from the other counties, we ran two ordinary least square regressions, mirroring those for divorce rates.

**Table 2. Marriage Rates in Four Florida Counties, 2014-2017.**

	Change in Marriage Rate 2014-2017	Change in Marriage Rate 2014-2017
Duval County	-1.43***	-3.10***
	(0.29)	(0.15)
% Bachelors+		-9.11
		(3.26)
Unemployment Rate		2.48
		(5.85)
% Black		21.00**
		(2.44)
% Hispanic		4.15*
		(1.30)
% Asian		2.59
		(13.77)
% 15-44		11.31*
		(3.37)
% Poverty		-16.49**
		(2.78)
Constant	1.04***	-3.82*
	(0.15)	(1.18)

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The results show that the drop in the marriage rate in Duval County from 2014 to 2017 is a statistically different pattern than the increase in marriage rates for the other three counties. Accordingly, we do not see any evidence that Live the Life's work increased the marriage rate in



Duval County. This may be because the COFI effort did not do much to directly promote marriage per se (it focused on strengthening existing marriages and relationships), or it may be because the effort ended up encouraging Jacksonville residents considering marriage to proceed more carefully. One other possibility may also help explain the distinctive pattern for Duval County. Hurricane Irma struck Jacksonville in September of 2017; this weather event may have encouraged couples to postpone or relocate their weddings.

**Important Note:** The 2017 data, on which this change variable is based, comes from provisional data from the Florida Department of Health. Accordingly, these numbers should be viewed as preliminary and may change slightly.

**Summary:** Provisionally, the marriage rate in Duval County was basically flat between 2014 and 2017, even as the marriage rate rose in the other three comparison counties, Escambia, Hillsborough, and Orange. But the slight downward trend in marriage for Duval County may partly be a consequence of the differential impact of Hurricane Irma in 2017. We will monitor marriage trends in 2018 to see if a different pattern emerges for Duval County this year.

## IN CONCLUSION

Efforts to strengthen marriage and family life in the United States have met with mixed success in recent years. However, the Culture of Freedom Initiative in Jacksonville, led by Live the Life and a range of other religious and civic nonprofits, appears to be an exception. Although this initiative has not increased the marriage rate in Jacksonville since it began its work in 2016, it does appear to have had a major impact on marital stability in the city in this time frame. Specifically, the divorce rate fell 28 percent in Duval County from 2015 to 2017, compared to a decline of just about 10 percent in three other comparable counties. Moreover, the declines in divorce in Duval County also far outpace declines in divorce in the nation as a whole. Because marital stability was the primary focus, we conclude that the Culture of Freedom Initiative has likely had a major impact in Jacksonville, Florida.

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