Marriage isn't green, according to a new study. The research, led by ecologist Jianguo "Jack" Liu, a Michigan State University professor of fisheries and wildlife, looked at international data comparing utility consumption and housing space per capita in married and divorced households. He found that divorce creates more households with fewer people, using more energy and water and taking up more space.

The analysis, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, does not look at the environmental impact of singles who have never been married, but Liu says he plans to look at singles in a subsequent study.

"If you have more households as a result of divorce, then you would need more housing units, and if you need to build more houses or apartments, that means you need more land, and that will contribute to urban sprawl," he says.

Others familiar with such issues caution that the divorce link to the environment is a bit of a stretch.

While divorce leads to smaller household size on average for a population, "it's not just divorce," says social demographer Ronald Rindfuss of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has studied the relationship between population and the environment for more than a decade. "There's a whole variety of factors that have been leading to people living in dwelling units containing smaller units of people. Divorce is just one."

Matt Golden, founder of San Francisco home energy audit company Sustainable Spaces, says overall household space is increasing while occupancy is shrinking.

Liu acknowledges that not all people who divorce create two households; some move into existing households with friends or relatives. But the data he analyzed considered only those in which the divorced person was a head of household.

This analysis also did not compare married and divorced households with other types, such as cohabiting or those living alone. The aim was comparing married with divorced, he says.

"Environmental impacts of divorce and other lifestyles such as separation should be considered when making personal choices," the report says.

Liu says it took four years to analyze the stats, which include international census data from the 2000 Integrated Public Use Microdata in 12 countries; data from 1970-2001 from the USA, Greece and Ecuador; and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a sample of 3,283 U.S. households from 2001 to 2005.

So what about options such as communes, where more people live under one roof?

"That's one possibility for people to consider," Liu says.

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