

# Trends in Median Age at First Marriage

The age of first marriage has fluctuated in the U.S. over the last century.

## Headline/Trends

The median age at first marriage in the United States has been rising steadily since the 1960s for both males and females. In 1960, the median age at first marriage was 20.3 for females and 22.8 for males. By 2004, these ages had risen to 25.8 years for females and 27.4 years for males.<sup>1</sup>

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The age of first marriage has fluctuated in the United States over the past century, with the youngest median age at first marriage occurring between 1940 and 1970. Today's later age of marriage is more in line with the age of marriage between 1890 and 1940. Historians do not agree on what caused the period of earlier marriages between 1940 and 1970. The median age at first marriage varies greatly among countries. Compared with other regions of the world, the United States and Northwestern Europe have relatively later ages of marriage, a larger proportion of the population who remain single, and more of an emphasis on nuclear families versus extended families.<sup>2</sup>

## Importance

Traditionally, marriage has demarcated the transition to adulthood and the beginning of new families. However, family dynamics have changed over the last

half century as more young adults cohabit and delay marriage. Women in recent cohorts are more likely to cohabit and less likely to be married at first birth, compared with women born several decades earlier.<sup>3</sup> Marriages entered at earlier ages are more likely to break up. In 1995, the probability that the first marriage breaks up within 10 years was highest among those individuals who were married under the age of 18 and lowest among those married after the age of 25.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, delayed marriage increases the number of years when a non-marital pregnancy may occur.

## Differences by Subgroup

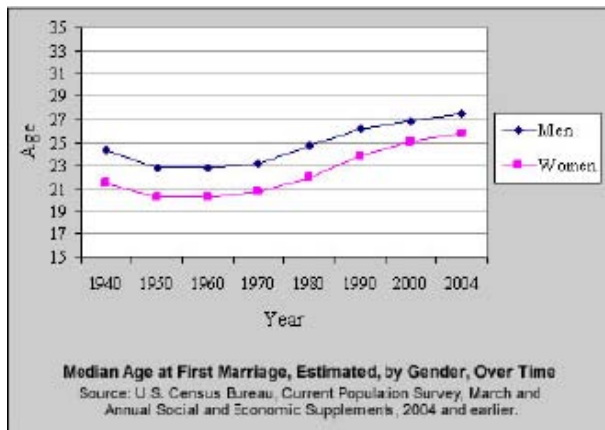
People from economically disadvantaged families tend to marry earlier compared with those from advantaged families.<sup>5</sup> Women living in non-metropolitan regions tend to marry at younger ages and to be married at first birth compared with women in metropolitan regions. When cohabitation and marriage are compared, women living in non-metropolitan areas are more likely to be married versus cohabiting compared with women in metropolitan regions.<sup>6</sup> Among non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black



populations in 1995, marriages entered at younger ages were more likely to break up within 10 years. However, there was no association between age at first marriage and break-up among Hispanics.<sup>7</sup>

## Median Age at First Marriage, Estimated, by Sex, Over Time

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2004 and earlier.



### Definition

The median age at first marriage is a measure of the age at which individuals enter into their first marriage. Data presented here are estimates that are computed indirectly from data on marital status and age.<sup>8</sup>

### Data Source

U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2004 and earlier.<sup>9</sup>

1. Data are from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, March Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2004 and earlier
2. Skolnick, A. (1991). *Embattled Paradise: The American family in an age of uncertainty*. New York: Basic Books.
3. Snyder, A.R., Brown, S.L., & Condo, E.P. (2004).

Residential differences in family formation: The significance of cohabitation. *Rural Sociology*. 69(2), 255-260.

4. Bramlett, M.D., & Mosher W.D. (2002). Cohabitation, Marriage Divorce, and Remarriage in the United State. National Center for Health Statistics. *Vital Health Stat* 23(22), figure 19.
5. South, S.J., & Crowder, K.D. (2000). The declining significance of neighborhoods? Marital transitions in community context. *Social Forces*, 78(3), 1067-1099.
6. Snyder, A.R., Brown, S.L., & Condo, E.P. (2004). Residential differences in family formation: The significance of cohabitation. *Rural Sociology*. 69(2), 255-260.
7. Bramlett, M.D., & Mosher W.D. (2002).
8. The CPS uses several steps to approximate median age at first marriage. According to the U.S. Census Bureau website's *Current Population Surveys (CPS) Reports Definitions and Explanations* page: "In computing this median, several steps are involved. First, the expected proportion of young people who will ever marry during their lifetime is computed. Second, one-half of this expected proportion is calculated. And third, the current age of young people who are at this halfway mark is computed. From the assumptions made and the procedures used, it follows that the date of the survey is also the date when this halfway mark is reached. Half of the young people of the given age who will ever get married had done so prior to the survey date and half are expected to marry in years to come."
9. The Census Bureau collects annual data from samples that are representative of the civilian noninstitutionalized population ages 16 years and older in the United States (Data available online from the U.S. Census Bureau's website).; See also: U.S. Census Bureau, & U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2002, March). *Current Population Survey – Design and methodology*. Technical Paper 63, Revised. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.; Note that data shown for years prior to 1947 are taken from decennial censuses rather than the CPS.