

Relationship Status at First Birth for Women Age 15–50 in the United States

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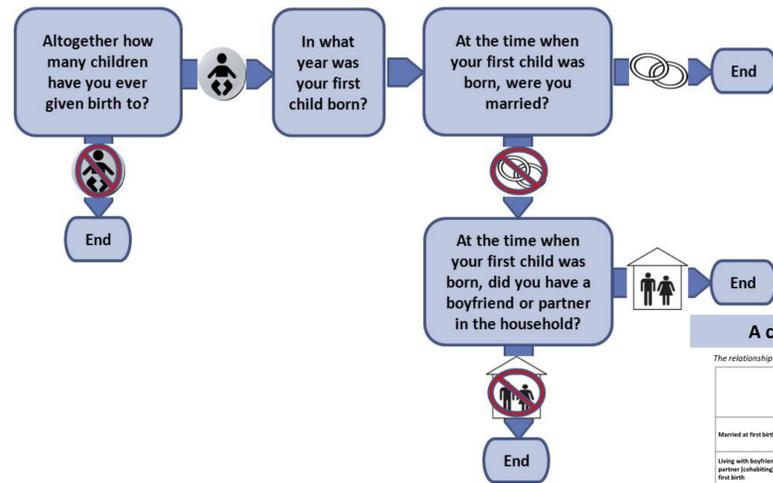
New Data

In 2012, researchers at the Census Bureau changed the focus of the Current Population Survey's (CPS) June Fertility Supplement, as follows:

- Expanded age range (age 15-50, instead of 15-44);
- Questions about timing of first birth (instead of most recent birth);
- New questions** about women's relationship circumstances at the time of their first birth.

These new, nationally-representative data allow for a more extensive retrospective examination of the relationship status of women at the time that they entered motherhood.

2012 June CPS Fertility Supplement Questions



A caveat to our data:

The relationship sub-groups include women who:

	Had a partner in the household	Had a partner not in the household	Did not have a partner
Married at first birth	✓	✓	
Living with boyfriend or partner (cohabiting) at first birth	✓		
Neither married nor cohabiting at first birth			✓

That is, marriage is not limited to coresident spouses, and having been neither married nor cohabiting does not necessarily mean "without a partner."

Reasons for the change to the survey

The focus of the CPS Fertility Supplement was changed from most recent birth to first birth to reduce redundancy with the American Community Survey. In the context of the shift to focus on first births, researchers at the Census Bureau added two questions about relationships at first birth.

Historically, social science has conceptualized childbearing dichotomously, as either marital or non-marital. However, recent decades have made apparent a third family form into which children are born – cohabiting unions. We know that more than a third of new births occur outside of marriage (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2011), and that nearly half of all non-marital first births in the late 2000s occurred within cohabiting unions (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012).

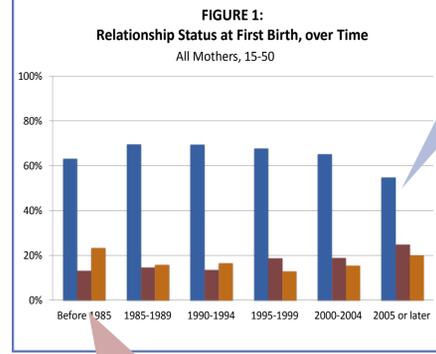
Given these shifts in the family landscape, previously available data have been criticized for the dearth of large, nationally representative data sources, and the lack of data sources that can study changes over time (Casper & Hofferth 2007). These new CPS data are intended to help fill this gap with a large, nationally representative sample, and retrospective information about relationship status at first birth across multiple age and birth cohorts.

Relationship Contexts at First Birth

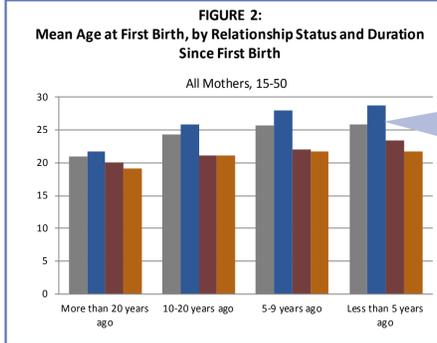
LEGEND

- Full Sample**: Includes all sampled mothers, age 15-50. N = 18,755* mothers between the ages of 15-50 as of June, 2012. Mean Age = 37 years old at time of interview. Earliest observed year of first birth: 1973. Latest observed year of first birth: 2012.
- Married at first birth**: Includes all mothers who were married at time of first birth. N = 12,169* mothers. Mean Age = 39 years old at time of interview.
- Cohabiting at first birth**: Includes all mothers who were cohabiting at time of first birth. N = 3,550* mothers. Mean Age = 33 years old at time of interview.
- Neither married nor cohabiting at first birth**: Includes all mothers who were neither married nor cohabiting at time of first birth. N = 3,036* mothers. Mean Age = 34 years old at time of interview.

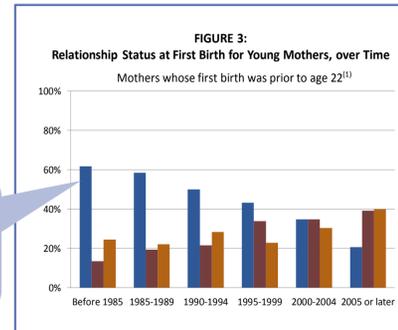
* Unweighted counts



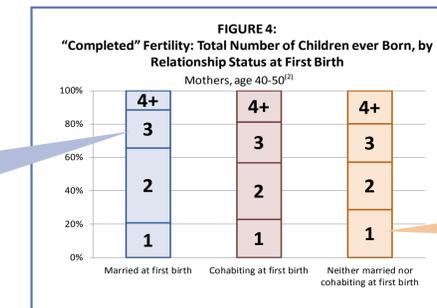
The majority of first births occur in marriage for each cohort observed.*



Mean age at first birth is increasing over time for both women who were married at first birth, and those who were cohabiting. However, women married at first birth are consistently older than women in other relationship statuses.*



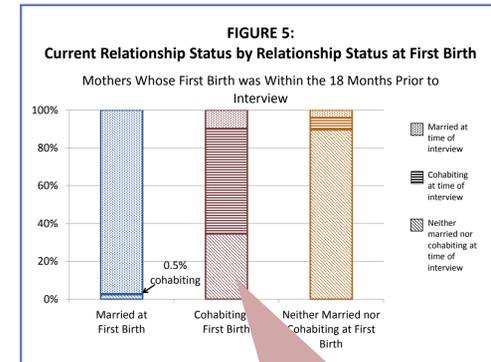
The proportion of young mothers who were married at the time of their first birth has been declining steadily.*



Women age 40 to 50 who were married at first birth are less likely to have three or more children than women who were unmarried at first birth.*

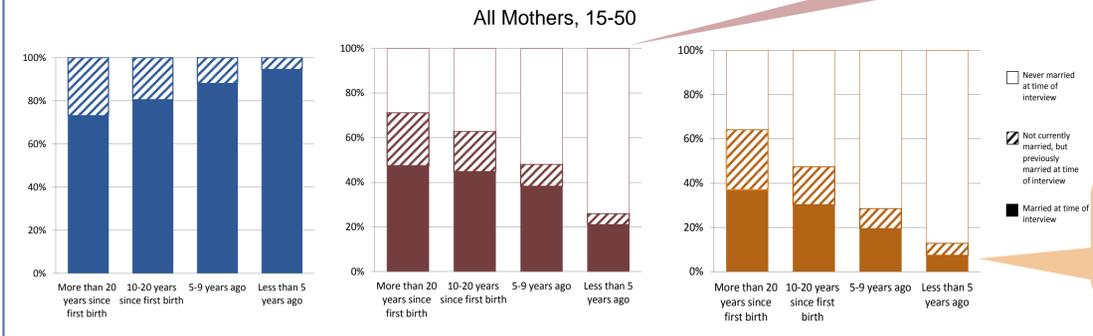
Women in their 40s who were neither married nor cohabiting at their first birth are more likely than other mothers to have had only that one child.*

Not having been married at time of first birth does not mean that these mothers never marry; by 20 years after the first birth, the majority of these women have been married.*



For women with a recent first birth at the time of the interview, cohabiters experience higher relationship turbulence in the months between their first birth and the interview than do other mothers.*

FIGURE 6: Percent Ever Married at Time of Interview, by Duration since First Birth



Women who cohabited at first birth have higher ever-married rates than do women who were neither married nor cohabiting at first birth.* Moreover, cohabitation at first birth is associated with higher rates of marriage at the time of interview.*

Mothers who were neither married nor cohabiting at first birth experience high relationship instability; within five years of the first birth, 7% are currently married, while 6% are formerly married.⁽³⁾

Discussion

This early-stage analysis corroborates the general trends outlined in other studies, but extend them both into recent years, and farther back in time. For example, we see that:

- Marriage is still the primary childbearing relationship for first births;
- Among women with recent first births, cohabitation is more prevalent than it was for earlier cohorts;
- Age at first birth is increasing for women who were either married or cohabiting at first birth.

Additionally, these data expand existing knowledge by adding information about more complex relationship statuses, demonstrating the extent to which family relationship patterns have changed, and continue to change. We see that:

- Despite the decline in marriage at first birth for young mothers, the majority of young mothers continue to have their first births within partnerships – that is, either marriage or a cohabiting relationship;
- Women married at first birth are most likely to complete their fertility after a second child, while women who were neither married nor cohabiting at first birth are more likely to have only one child compared to women who were married at first birth;
- Non-marital births are associated with lower rates of ever married, but not the absence of marriage.

We will explore the patterns described here in greater depth in forthcoming analyses.

* Indicates significance at the .05 level.

DATA SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, June 2012 Fertility Supplement
* Unless otherwise noted, all estimates are weighted so as to be nationally representative.

- NOTES:
- Adolescent mothers are frequently studied, as they and their children are considered to be an at-risk population. However, research has shown that the risk associated with 'young' entrance into motherhood actually extends into the early 20s (Manlove, Terry-Humen, Mincieli & Moore, 2009). We use this broader definition of early entry into motherhood.
 - Although improvements in both maternal health and reproductive technology are allowing more and more women to remain fertile into their 40s, the vast majority of women (more than 95%; Osterman, Martin & Menacker, 2009) still complete their fertility in their 30s; given the relative lack of births to women in their 40s, we selected this decade to represent women who are unlikely to have more children. These two numbers are not significantly different from each other at the .05 level.

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