

TITLE: Relationship status at the first birth for women in the United States, 1970–2012.

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SHORT ABSTRACT (150 words)

In this paper, we propose an exploration of new data examining changing trends in marital and cohabitation status of women in the United States at the time when they first became mothers; to do this, we will use newly available data from the Current Population Survey's (CPS) June 2012 Fertility Supplement. The fertility supplement, asked of women ages 15–50, has historically asked women for the year of their most recent birth. However, in 2012, in an effort to reduce redundancy with similar questions in the American Community Survey, researchers at the Census Bureau changed the focus of the CPS Fertility Supplement to instead ask about women's first births, and specifically about their marital and cohabitation status at the time of that first birth. These data are unique across federal surveys and allow a portrait of the shifting demographics of first births for American women across multiple decades.

NOTE: This paper is released to inform interest parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion. The views expressed on statistical and methodological issues are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the US Census Bureau.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT (2–4 pages)

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). Within this context, we also know that nearly half of all non-marital first births in the late 2000s occurred within cohabiting unions (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012).

These recent data suggest a shifting landscape for fertility. However, data limitations have constrained our ability to place these changes in a historical context. In this paper, using newly available data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), we will look at changing trends, between 1970 and the present, in the marital and cohabitation status of women in the United States at the time when they first became mothers.

The circumstances of first births have been demonstrated to have long-lasting implications for both children and their mothers. Children born into married unions are generally found to fare better than their single-parent counterparts, with more stable family situations, and better academic outcomes and lower incidence of behavioral problems (Aquilino, 1996; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Similarly, mothers whose children are born outside of marriage are generally found to have lower education (ChildTrends, 2012), lower income (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005), and to be less likely to have subsequent children in marriage (Upchurch, Lillard, & Panis, 2001) than are their counterparts who had their children in marriage.

Thus far, research suggests that cohabitation falls somewhere between marriage and single-parenthood in terms of outcomes for children and their parents. However, our understanding of cohabitation as a family form is still being developed, in part because the “institution” of cohabitation is not constrained by any legal or other, widely-accepted, definition. Moreover, the cultural meanings, and acceptance, of unmarried fertility and cohabitation have changed over time (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988; Cherlin, 2004; Smock, 2000). This means that the prevalence and experience of unmarried parenthood and cohabitation will not be the same for a mother that had her first child in the 1980s compared to a mother that had her first child in the 2000s.

Given this, understanding the changing prevalence of childbearing in each of these three contexts over time is important. This paper will offer a first look at historical changes in the demographic circumstances of first births among women in the United States. These data will inform our understanding of the apparent rise in cohabitation as a childbearing relationship, as well help contextualize the moving target that is both marital and non-marital fertility.

We propose to explore newly available data to examine how rates of marriage and cohabitation at the time of a first birth have changed over the past 40 years. We will map out how these trends have differed for different demographic subgroups over time. Further, we will explore the associations between age at first birth and relationship status at first birth for women's relationships and, for women who have completed their fertility, overall parity. We will also compare these data to other sources, where available, to verify their accuracy. Once validated, these new descriptive data will provide a historical context for current rates of cohabiting and single parent households, and will offer some insight into the potential implications of these rates for later fertility and relationships.

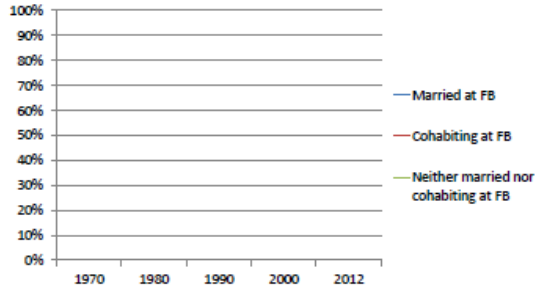
To do this, we will use newly available data from the CPS's June 2012 Fertility Supplement. In 2012, the Census Bureau updated the questions asked in the CPS Fertility Supplement, which is administered every other year as part of the June collection period. In previous years, this supplement contained questions on the total number of births for women age 15-44, as well as the month and year of women's last births. The 2012 CPS fertility supplement retained the question about overall parity, but expanded the eligibility to women ages 15-50.

Additionally, in 2012, in an effort to reduce redundancy with similar fertility questions in the American Community Survey, researchers at the Census Bureau changed the focus of the CPS Fertility Supplement to ask about women's first births, instead of most recent birth, and also to ask specifically about their marital and cohabitation status at the time of that first birth. Mothers who were not married at time of first birth were asked if they were living with a boyfriend or partner at the time of first birth.

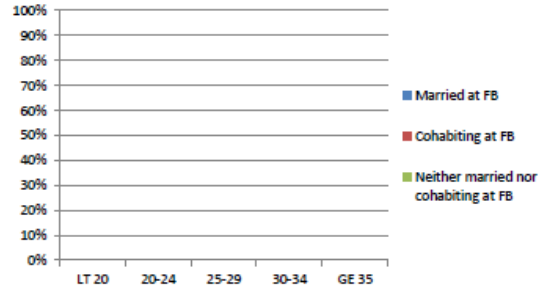
These data are unique across federal surveys and allow a nuanced historical portrait of the shifting demographics of first births for women in the United States across multiple decades.

Sample of graphics to be produced; data redacted because not vet cleared for public release.

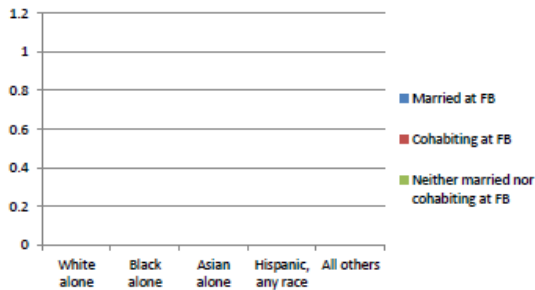
Relationship Status by Year of First Birth



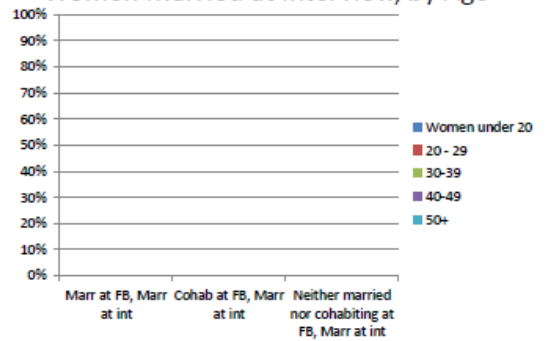
Age at First Birth by Relationship Status



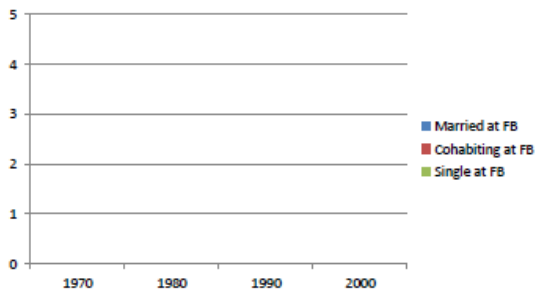
Race by Relationship Status at First Birth



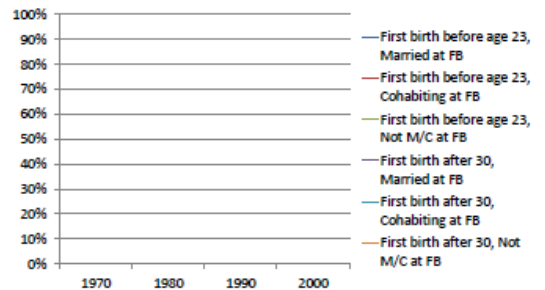
Relationship Status at First Birth among Women Married at Interview, by Age



Mean Number of Children at time of interview by Relationship Status at FB, by Decade of First Birth for Women 35+



Relationship Status by Age at First Birth, over time



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