

Marriage Rate and Age

The marriage rate was lower at the end of the century than ever before. The average age at first marriage, which fell to an all-time low during the baby boom, climbed to an all-time high by the close of the century.

The marriage rate generally rose and fell with the business cycle. The 1990s, with conspicuously low marriage rates in years of unprecedented prosperity, were exceptional. The marriage rate is conventionally calculated as the annual number of marriages per one thousand unmarried women over the age of fifteen. Unmarried women may be single, widowed, or divorced. A rate based on unmarried men would produce a similar pattern.

The highest rate observed since the beginning of the national series was 118, registered in 1946 as millions of soldiers left the armed services and embarked on married life. Until the 1990s, the lowest rate was 52, registered in 1931, when the Depression abruptly lowered the incomes and living standards of most of the American population. As the upper chart shows, that record was broken in 1995, when the marriage rate dropped to 51. In 1996, the rate fell to 50.

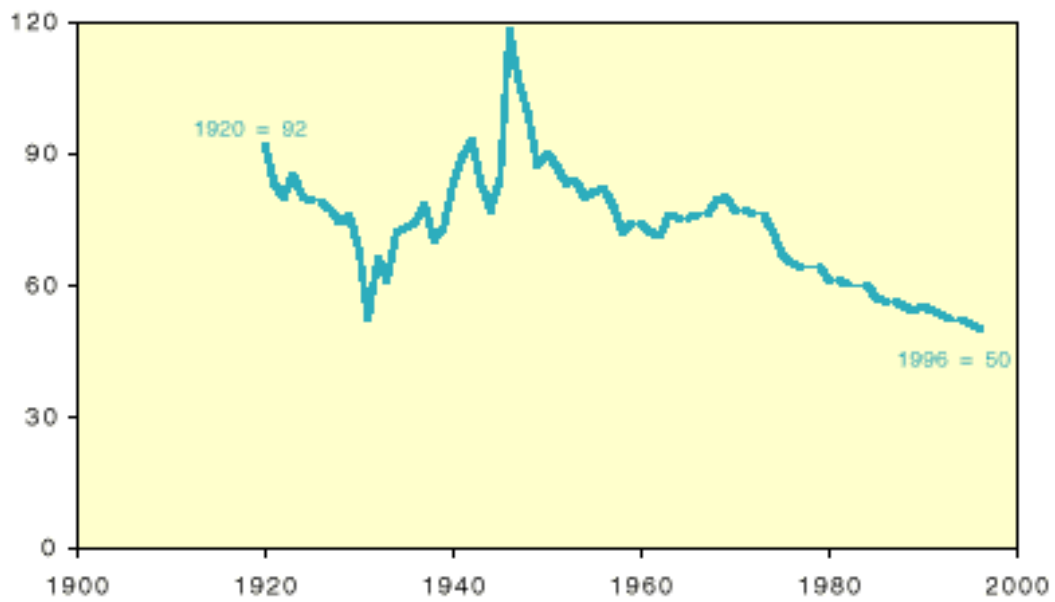
The married proportion of the adult population fell from 66 percent in 1980 to 59 percent in 1997—about the same percentage as in 1931. Part of this decline reflected an increase in the number of elderly widows, the result of an aging population in which women had greater life expectancy, and part was attributable to an increase in the average age at first marriage.

In 1900, as the lower chart shows, the typical young groom was almost twenty-six and his bride was four years younger. For the next half century, couples approaching the altar grew steadily younger and the age difference between bride and groom diminished. In 1960, the bride was just over twenty and the groom was under twenty-three. This trend reversed around 1970, and by 1996, the grooms were somewhat older than their counterparts in 1900, while the brides were substantially older.

One out of three men and more than one out of four women in their early thirties were unmarried in 1997, compared with fewer than one in ten in 1900. Still, between 80 and 90 percent of Americans got married during their lifetimes.

Marriage Rate

Number of marriages per thousand unmarried women per year



Marriage Age

Median age at first marriage

