

## **Married Women**

**The proportion of the population that is married varied considerably, with the lowest points occurring at the beginning and the end of the century.**

The proportion of white women who were married at any given time rose irregularly from a low of 57 percent in 1900 to a high of 70 percent at the peak of the baby boom in 1960. The percentage began to decline after 1960, and by the late 1990s, it was again approaching the level of 1900.

During the first half of the century, the share of black women who were married differed little from that of their white counterparts. But the incidence of marriage among black women began to fall before the baby boom was over, and the gap between black and white women widened significantly. Although the proportion of black and white women who were married differed by no more than 4 percentage points during the first half of the century, the gap expanded to 21 percentage points by 1998. This disparity was even greater for young women. Among twenty-nine-year-old women, for example, 52 percent of blacks but only 19 percent of whites described themselves as “single—never married” in 1990. Proportionately more black women than white women reported themselves as separated, and significantly more as widowed or divorced, particularly at older ages. The marital characteristics of Hispanic women, recorded separately only since 1970, were closer to those of white women than of black women.

The trends displayed in this chart, combined with trends in nonmarital births and cohabitation, suggest that by the end of the century, the black population of the United States had entered uncharted territory with respect to the pattern of their personal relationships and the composition of their households. But it is equally clear from the chart, and from a substantial volume of additional data, that similar trends were under way in the rest of the American population, both white and nonwhite, with long-term consequences that are difficult to predict.

## **Nonmarital Births**

**Births to unmarried women increased sharply after 1960.**

What used to be known as illegitimate births in the first half of the century came to be called out-of-wedlock or nonmarital births during the second half. This evolution in terminology mirrored a massive change in social and legal norms: sanctions were no longer imposed on unmarried women who bore children, and the ancient stigma of bastardy was no longer recognized by law or public opinion.

Nonmarital births were always more common among black Americans than among whites, but as recently as 1950, the great majority—83 percent—of black mothers were married, with a husband present. The trend in the second half of the century changed significantly. Less than a quarter of black infants were born to unmarried mothers in 1960, but the comparable figure for 1997 was 69 percent.

The rise in white nonmarital births was even more startling because there was little history of even partial tolerance in this sector of the population. Until the 1960s, young women who became pregnant outside of marriage were encouraged to stay in special institutions and

give up their infants for adoption. Before the advent of reliable contraception and legal abortion, any nonmarital pregnancy was considered unintended and unwanted.

This began to change in the 1960s, when intentional childbearing by unmarried women came to be tolerated, if not fully approved. By 1997, 26 percent of white infants were born to unmarried mothers, up from only 2 percent in 1960. The parents of a considerable number of these infants eventually married.

In the 1990s, the rate of pregnancy among teenagers declined significantly, particularly among blacks. From 1991 to 1997, the birth rate among women aged fifteen to nineteen declined 15 percent. This trend may well presage a decline in nonmarital births.