

Who's Getting Married? Education and Marriage Today and in the Past

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In the last half century, marriage behavior has undergone some significant changes. This has occurred in the wake of widespread social, legal, and technological changes that have changed the incentives for individuals to form and invest in marriages. Many commentators have noted that marriage rates have fallen in recent decades, particularly for those with less education and income. Yet a closer look at marital behavior for men and women of varying educational backgrounds provides a better understanding of the changes taking place in marriage and the state of marriage today.

A Long-Standing Marriage Gap By Education for Women

Women with a college degree have historically been the least likely group of women to ever marry. In 1950, less than three-quarters of college-educated, white women had married by age 40. In contrast, 90% of their high school graduate contemporaries had. Marriage rates grew for everyone in the ensuing decades, most notably among college-educated women. By 1980, 92% of 40-year-old white female college-graduates had married compared to 96% of high school graduates. Between 1950 and 1980, the closing of the educational marriage gap among women was driven by large increases in the marriage rates of college-educated women, much of which occurred at older ages.

Trends in the Percent of 40-year-old White Women Ever Married

Year:	1950	1980	2000	2008	Change between 1950 and 2008
Education level					
Less than high school	93	96	87	81	-13%
High school graduate	90	96	92	88	-2%
Some college	92	95	90	90	-2%
College graduate	74	92	88	86	16%

NOTES: CENSUS OF POPULATION (1950, 1980, 2000) AND AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2008)

Since 1980, marriage rates have fallen for all women, but more so for those with less education. These changes further shrunk the gap in marriage rates between those women with a college-degree and those without. Between 1980 and 2008 the percent ever-married fell to 86% among 40-year-old white female college graduates and to 88% among those with only a high school degree. Marriage has fallen furthest among high school dropouts who have gone from the group most likely to marry to the least likely to marry. It should be noted, however, that fewer people today are high school dropouts since educational attainment has risen significantly.

In sum, those with less education had larger relative declines in marriage between 1980 and 2008, and it is this relatively larger decline that led to further decreases in the marriage gap between

those with and without a college degree since 1980. While those with a college-degree are still less likely than those with less education to have ever-married, the gap has closed considerably. More recently, a new marriage gap has emerged among white women—that between the marriage rates of high school drop-outs and those who complete high school.

Men’s marital behavior has tended to vary less by education, with similar marriage rates across all education groups. As with women, marriage rates for men of all educational groups have declined from the high rates seen among 40-year-olds in 1980. These declines have been largest among those with the least education. As a result, between 1980 and 2008, white males with any college became more likely than those with no college to ever marry.

Trends in Percent of 40-year-old White Men Ever Married

Year:	1950	1980	2000	2008	Change between 1950 and 2008
Education level					
Less than high school	90	92	79	76	-16%
High school graduate	89	94	84	79	-11%
Some college	93	94	85	84	-10%
College graduate	92	92	86	84	-9%

NOTES: CENSUS OF POPULATION (1950, 1980, 2000) AND AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2008)

Delaying Marriage

There have also been significant changes in the timing of marriage. Women with a college degree have increasingly delayed marriage to older ages. They began this shift both earlier and to a greater extent than women with either a high school degree or some college.

College-educated women rapidly began postponing marriage after birth control became widely available. In 1970 the vast majority of those who would ever marry had done so by age 25. This was even true among college-graduates, for whom nearly three-quarters had married by age 25. By 1980, only about half had done so and that proportion fell further to around a third in 2008. In comparison 90% of 25-year-old high school graduates had married in 1970 and this fell only slightly to 83% in 1980. The postponement in marriage among white high school graduates has happened only recently with a fall from nearly three-quarters marrying by age 25 in 1990, to only half having done so last year.

These delays are largely shifting first marriages to the late 20s or early 30s. However, in recent years there has also been a rise in first marriages among older adults, particularly among women with more education. Among 40-year-old white women who had never married in 1990, 20% of the college graduates went on to marry within the ensuing decade compared to 10% of those with a high school degree.

A Growing Racial Gap

In 1950, 40-year-old black men and women were slightly more likely than whites to have married. By 1980, this was no longer true. Between 1950 and 1980, the proportion of blacks who had married by age 40 fell for all education groups, while the marriage rate rose for all whites. As with whites, marriage rates for both black men and women of all educational backgrounds have fallen in the ensuing period. But the declines in marriage have been most stark among blacks and a wide gap has opened in marriage rates by education among both black men and women.

The education gaps in marriage that have emerged among blacks are much greater than those seen among whites. Marriage rates among black high school drop-outs have fallen nearly in half. By 2008, at 40-years-old only 53% of black female drop-outs and 41% of black male drop-outs had married. In contrast, the decline in the percent of 40-year-old black female college graduates who had married was only 10%. The decline among 40-year-old college-educated black men was larger, yet their higher earlier marriage rates mean that they are still more likely than their female counterpart to have married.

Trends in Percent of 40-year-old Blacks Ever Married

	1950	1980	2000	2008	Change between 1950 and 2008
Education level (Women)					
Less than high school	95	87	59	53	-44
High school graduate	96	89	69	60	-38
Some college	89*	90	73	65	-27
College graduate	78*	84	75	70	-10
Education level (Men)					
Less than high school	91	87	57	41	-55
High school graduate	91*	89	71	63	-31
Some college	97*	87	78	74	-24
College graduate	95*	90	81	76	-20

NOTES: CENSUS OF POPULATION (1950, 1980, 2000) AND AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2008) *DENOTES A 39-41 AGE WINDOW WAS USED DUE TO SMALL SAMPLE SIZES

Current Marriage Rates and Divorce

The picture becomes more complicated when we look at currently married rates instead of the percent who have ever married. Among whites, at age 25, those with the least education are the most likely to have married among both women and men. The marital patterns have reversed by age 30, at which point the proportion married rises slightly with education. This trend continues as the population ages and by age 40 the education gradient in marriage is even steeper.

There are two reasons for this reversal. The first is due to the timing of marriage. This first is that individuals with the least education marry younger. But by age 40, a second factor comes into play: differences in divorce rates. Not only have those who married at young ages had more time to divorce, but those with less education are more likely to get divorced compared to college-graduates, particularly if they marry young.

Percent Currently Married by Education in 2008 (Whites)

	Age 25	Age 30	Age 40
Education level (Women)			
Less than high school	44	56	56
High school graduate	39	56	63
Some college	39	58	66
College graduate	33	62	74
Education level (Men)			
Less than high school	30	45	57
High school graduate	26	46	60
Some college	25	53	68
College graduate	23	55	76

NOTES: CENSUS OF POPULATION (1950, 1980, 2000) AND AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2008)

Those who marry at younger ages both have a higher likelihood overall to divorce and they've had more time to do so. These differences are stark: 49% of male high school graduates who married before they turned 21 had divorced before they turned 30. In contrast, only 10% of male college graduates marrying in their mid-30s had divorced within the first 10 years of marriage. Overall, 27% of white male high school graduates marrying since 1990 saw their marriage end in divorce within the first 10 years, compared with just 13% of white male college-graduates.

Expectations for Marriage and Marital Happiness

As marriage behavior has changed over time so have people's attitudes toward marriage. Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) reveal that the perceived benefits of marriage differ by education. Among non-college graduates—both male and female—around 20% agree that “financial security is the main benefit of marriage”; while only 6% of college graduates thought this.

Turning to expectations of marital happiness, fewer people now agree with the statement that married people are happier than unmarried people. However, there is one exception: college-educated women. This trend reflects their marital behavior: in 1988, female college graduates were the least

Percent Agreeing: “Married people are generally happier than unmarried people?”

	1988	1994	2002	Change between 1988 and 2002
Women:				
College Graduate	47.4	46.6	50.7	7%
Non-College Graduate	53.7	45.2	37.4	-31%
Men				
College Graduate	62.2	57.8	47.9	-23%
Non-College Graduate	57.8	48.5	49.2	-15%

NOTES: DATA ARE FROM THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY. IN 1988, 1994, AND 2002. THE AGREE CATEGORY INCLUDES THOSE THAT “STRONGLY AGREE” AND “AGREE”

likely to agree that married people are happier and, by 2002, they were the most likely to agree. A similar pattern has not occurred among men, rather both those with and without college degrees became less likely to agree over time.

Turning to actual happiness in their own marriages, we find that people with more education are happier in their marriages and with their family life, just as they are more likely to think that married people are happier than unmarried people. The college-non-college differential is particularly stark for women with 67% of female college graduates very happy in their marriage compared to 60% of those without a college degree. While the data also reveal that men are typically happier in their marriages than are women, this difference is largest among those with less education. There is little difference in the marital happiness of college-educated men and women. Finally, these patterns of greater marital happiness among the college-educated are seen even when we condition on other factors such as whether women work, the household’s income, the number of children in the household, and their own upbringing.

Summary

Marriage rates immediately following World War II were at a historic high, leading to historically high ever-married rates for women who were of marrying age during this period. Marriage rates have declined in the ensuing period among people of all educational backgrounds. However, these declines have been steeper among those with less education and among blacks of all educational backgrounds. Because college-educated white women had historically been less likely to marry, these shifts in marital behavior have led to a closing of the education gap in marriage for white women. In contrast, among black women, these marital shifts have created a large education gap in which those with more education have become more likely to marry. Among both men and women, the movement away from marriage has happened most sharply among blacks of all educational backgrounds compared to that seen by whites. Finally, we see college graduates are more likely to be married during middle age both because they marry later and are less likely to divorce.

*This research summarizes findings contained in Isen and Stevenson “Women’s Education and Family Behavior: Trends in Marriage, Divorce and Fertility” forthcoming in *Demography and the Economy*, ed. John Shoven, University of Chicago Press. Available at http://bpp.wharton.upenn.edu/betseys/papers/Marriage_divorce_education.pdf*