

2012

FP-12-03 Crossover in Median Age at First Marriage and First Birth: Thirty Years of Change

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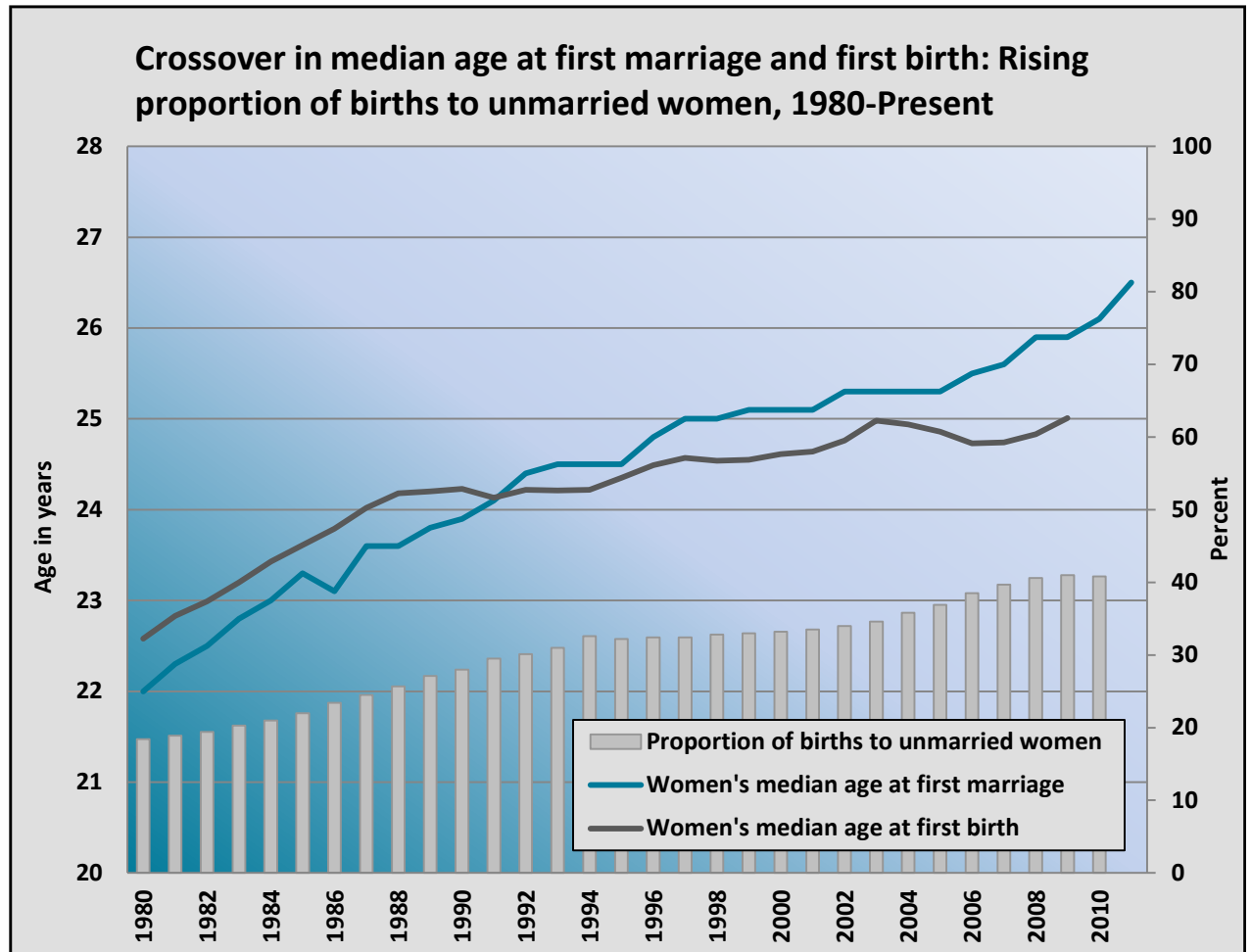
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Arroyo, Julia; Payne, Krista K.; Brown, Susan L.; and Manning, Wendy D., "FP-12-03 Crossover in Median Age at First Marriage and First Birth: Thirty Years of Change" (2012). *National Center for Family and Marriage Research Family Profiles*. 123.

https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ncfmr_family_profiles/123

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Americans increasingly delay family formation, meaning they marry or become a parent at later ages. This profile combines data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and the Center for Disease Control's National Vital Statistics to investigate the trends in women's median age at first marriage and median age at first birth since 1980. The median age at first birth exceeded the age at first marriage until 1991, and today women are entering marriage at increasingly later ages than they are entering motherhood.



Family Profiles examine topics related to NCFMR's core research themes. Data are presented at both the national and state levels using new data sources. Written for both researchers and broad communities, these profiles summarize the latest statistics on U.S. families.

Sources:

U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2011 and earlier.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. VitalStats. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/vitalstats.htm>. [February, 2012].

Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, et al. Births: Final data for 2009. National vital statistics reports; vol 60 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2011.

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Median Age at First Marriage, 1980-2011

- Between 1980 and 2011, women’s median age at first marriage rose 21%, from 22.0 to 26.5 years.
 - In 2011, the median age at first marriage was at a historic high point ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2011](#)); one-half of all first marriages were to women over the age of 26.5.
 - The growth in the age at first marriage accelerated most during the 1980s when it increased 8% over the course of the decade.
 - During the 2000s, the increase in the age at first marriage slowed and is only two thirds the rate of the 1990s.

Median Age at First Birth, 1980-2009

- From 1980 to 2009, women’s median age at first birth rose from 22.6 to 25 years, an 11% increase.¹
 - The median age at first birth was also at a historic high point ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/National Center for Health Statistics](#)); one-half of women who became mothers in 2009 did so by age 25.
 - The rise in the median age at first birth was greatest during the 1980s, increasing 7%.
 - In the 2000s, the rate of increase continues to be slow, rising only 1.6%, which is slightly more than the 1.3% increase experienced in the 1990s.

Crossover in the Median Ages at First Marriage and First Birth

- In the 1980s, the median age at first marriage was consistently lower than the median age at first birth. During this time period, the gap narrowed as the median age at first marriage climbed rapidly, while the median age at first birth began to plateau. In 1980, 18% of births were to unmarried women.
- In 1991, the median age at first birth converged with the median age at first marriage.
 - Half of all first marriages were to women younger than 24. Similarly, half of all first births were to women under age 24.
 - In 1991, one third of births were to unmarried women.
- Since 1991, the median age at first birth remains lower than the median age at first marriage.
 - The gap in the age at first birth and marriage has widened since 2006. In 2006, nearly 40% of births were to unmarried women.
 - Since 2006, the median age at first birth has remained at about 25 years. However, the median age at first marriage has increased by over a year—from 25.3 to 26.5 years, indicating growing divergence in the timing of entry into motherhood and marriage.

Suggested Citation:
Arroyo, J., Payne, K. K., Brown, S. L., & Manning, W. D. (2012). Crossover in Median Age at First Marriage and First Birth: Thirty Years of Change (FP-12-03). National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/family_profiles/file107893.pdf

This project was supported with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, grant number 5 UOI AEOOOOOI-05. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the federal government.

¹2009 represents the most recent VitalStats birth data files release for calculation of the median age at first birth.