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FP-10-07 Trends in Cohabitation: Twenty Years of Change, 1987-2008

Wendy D. Manning
Bowling Green State University, wmannin@bgsu.edu

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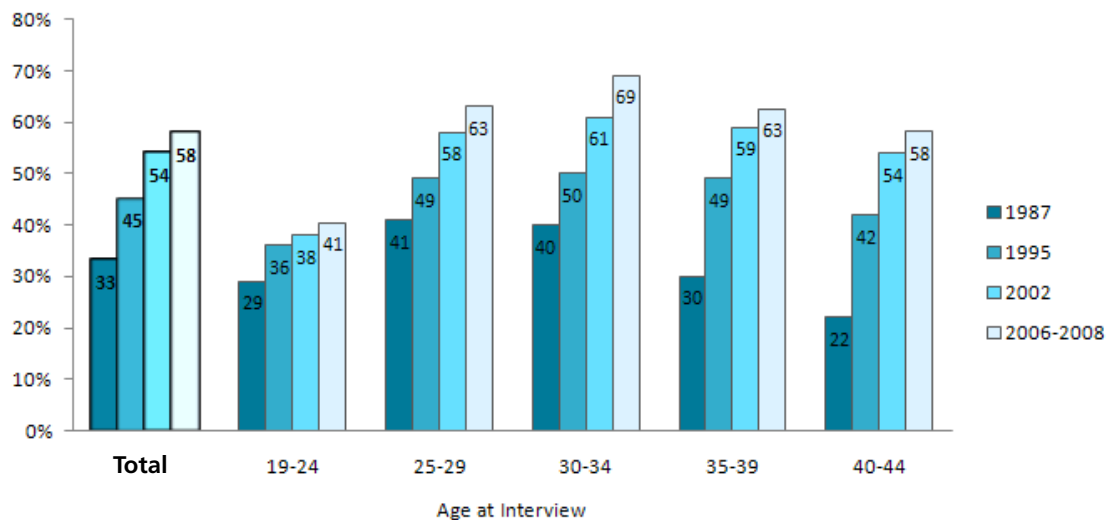
Change in Cohabitation in the U.S., 1987-2008

This profile presents findings about shifts in the percentage of women who have ever cohabited and cohabited prior to their first marriage over the last two decades. Relying on indicators of current cohabitation status is informative ([NCFMR FP-10-02](#)), but does not capture women's cumulative experiences with cohabitation. Given the relative short duration of cohabiting unions (about 18 months), it is important to evaluate women's lifetime experience and not just their status at the time of interview. We provide two decades of trends on cohabitation by drawing on three published articles (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; and Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008) as well as our own updated analyses of the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). For more information about the NSFG, see [2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth \(NCFMR's The Data Source\)](#) and [NSFG web page](#).

Percentage of Women Who Ever Cohabited

- The percentage of women ages 19-44 who have ever cohabited has increased by 75% over the past 20 years. In 1987, one-third of women had ever cohabited, and in 2006-2008, over half (58%) had ever cohabited (Figure 1).
- An increase in cohabitation experience exists for every age group. The age group with the greatest level of cohabitation in 2006-2008 is women ages 30-34; nearly 70% had ever cohabited.
- The greatest increase (163%) in cohabitation occurred among women ages 40-44, and the smallest increase was among the youngest women (19-24). Over the last two decades, there has been a 40% increase in cohabitation experience among women ages 19-24.

Figure 1: Two Decades of Trends by Age in the Percentage of Women (19-44) Ever Cohabited



Sources: 1987 NSFH data, Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; 1995 NSFG data, Bumpass and Lu, 2000; 2002 NSFG data, Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; 2006-2008 NSFG data, NCFMR analyses.

This profile draws on estimates published in the following articles:

Bumpass, L., & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. *Population Studies*, 54, 29-41.

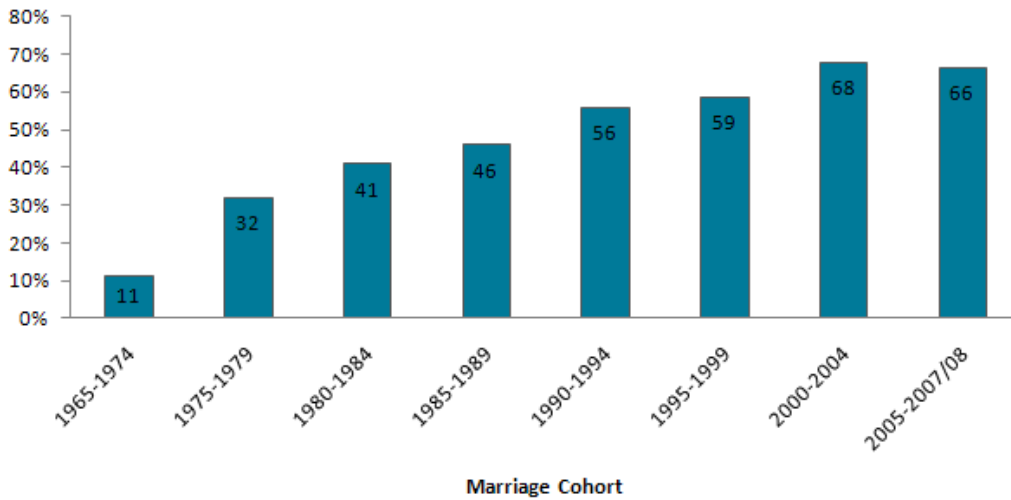
Bumpass, L., & Sweet, J. (1989). National estimates of cohabitation. *Demography*, 26(4), 615-625.

Kennedy, S., & Bumpass, L. (2008). Cohabitation and children's living arrangements: New estimates from the United States. *Demographic Research*, 19, 1663-1692. doi:10.4054/DemRes.2008.19.47

Percentage of Marriages Preceded by Cohabitation

- Cohabitation is now the typical pathway into marriage, such that about two-thirds of women first married in the last decade cohabited prior to marriage (Figure 2).
- Relatively few (11%) of women who first married between 1965 and 1974 cohabited prior to marriage. Approximately half of women first married 15 years ago (1985-89) cohabited before marrying.

Figure 2: Two Decades of Trends in the Percentage of Women (19-44) Who Cohabited Prior to First Marriage

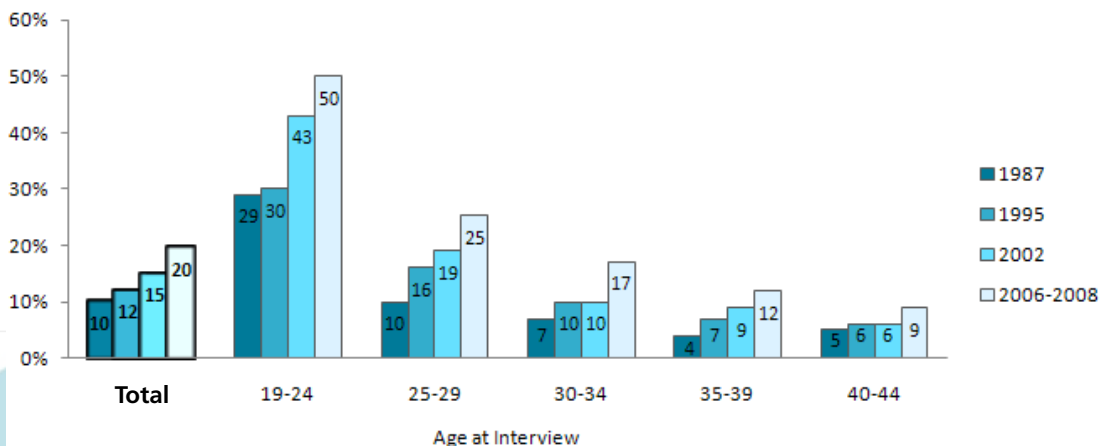


Sources: 1987 NSFH data, Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; 1995 NSFG data, Bumpass and Lu, 2000; 2002 NSFG data, Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; 2006-2008 NSFG data, NCFMR analyses.

Percentage of All Current Unions that are Cohabiting Unions

- About one-fifth of all current unions among women ages 19-44 are cohabiting unions, representing a doubling over the past twenty years (Figure 3).
- Every age group has experienced an increase in the proportion of current unions that were cohabiting rather than married. Younger women have consistently had larger proportions of unions that were cohabiting. In 2006-2008, half of 19-24 year olds in a union were in a cohabiting union.

Figure 3: Two Decades of Trends in the Percentage of Women (19-44) in Unions Currently Cohabiting

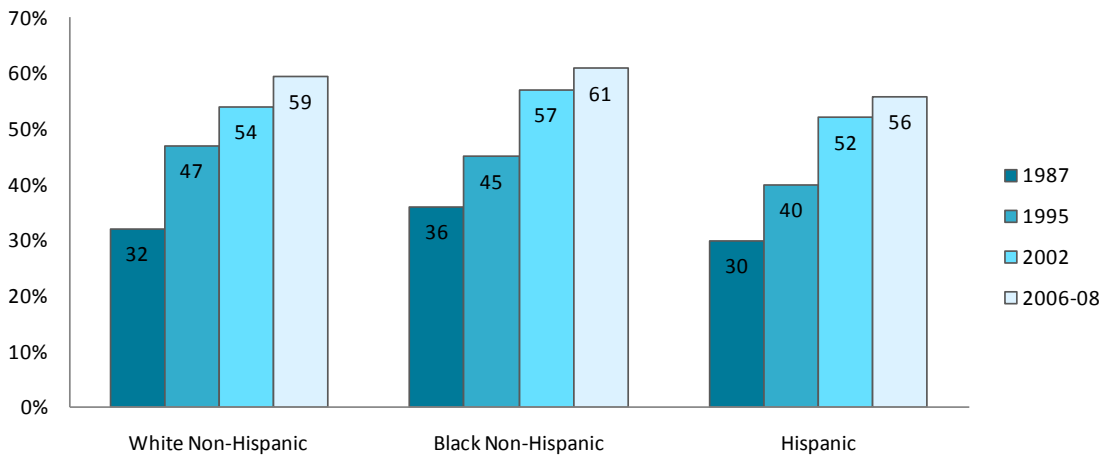


Sources: 1987 NSFH data, Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; 1995 NSFG data, Bumpass and Lu, 2000; 2002 NSFG data, Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; 2006-2008 NSFG data, NCFMR analyses.

Change in Cohabitation Experience and Race/Ethnicity

- Cohabitation experience has risen for all race and ethnic groups over the past 20 years (Figure 4). White non-Hispanic (86%) and Hispanic (86%) women experienced a greater increase in cohabitation compared to Black (69%) women.
- Consistently, a larger proportion of Black women—compared to White non-Hispanic and Hispanic women—have ever cohabited. However, the race and ethnic gap in cohabitation is relatively small.

Figure 4: Two Decades of Trends by Race/Ethnicity in the Percentage of Women (19-44) Ever Cohabiting

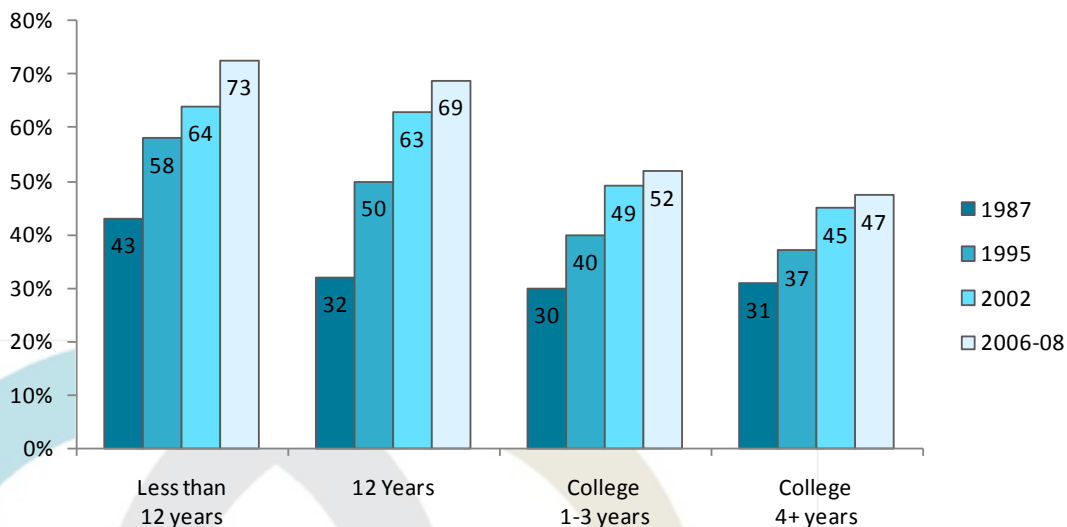


Sources: 1987 NSFH data, Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; 1995 NSFG data, Bumpass and Lu, 2000; 2002 NSFG data, Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; 2006-2008 NSFG data, NCFMR analyses.

Cohabitation Experience and Educational Attainment

- Cohabitation has increased among women in each educational attainment category (Figure 5). The education group experiencing the greatest increase in cohabitation is women with 12 years of schooling; there has been over a 100% increase in cohabitation experience over the last 20 years for this group.
- The education group with the greatest cohabitation experience is women with less than 12 years of education. In 2006-2008, nearly three-quarters of women without a high school degree had ever cohabited, in contrast to slightly less than half of women with a college degree. The education divide in the cohabitation experience has been increasing.

Figure 5: Two Decades of Trends by Education in the Percentage of Women (19-44) Ever Cohabited



Sources: 1987 NSFH data, Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; 1995 NSFG data, Bumpass and Lu, 2000; 2002 NSFG data, Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008; 2006-2008 NSFG data, NCFMR analyses.

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