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Visualizing 20 Years of Racial-Ethnic Variation in Women's Ages at Sexual Initiation and Family Formation

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Abstract

This data visualization uses several cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth to compare trends in median ages at first sex, birth, cohabitation, and marriage between 1995 and 2015 across non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, native-born Hispanic, and foreign-born Hispanic women aged 40 to 44 years. Generally, women's ages at first sex declined, ages at first cohabitation remained stable, and ages at marriage and birth increased. However, there were substantial race-ethnicity-nativity differences in the timing and sequencing of women's reproductive and family experiences, and these differences grew over time. These descriptive findings point to the importance of identifying the larger social forces that contribute to differential experiences while underscoring the fundamental problems inherent with defining whites' reproductive and family behaviors as "normal."

Keywords

sexual initiation; fertility; cohabitation; marriage

Shifts in reproductive and family behaviors have occurred unevenly across racial-ethnic-nativity groups, reflecting ongoing stratification and discrimination in the United States (Iceland 2019; Williams 2019). Although family changes are often studied separately, we use the National Survey of Family Growth to examine these trends jointly by documenting median ages of first sex, birth, cohabitation, and marriage with different-gender partners across race-ethnicity-nativity among women aged 40 to 44 years from 1995 to 2015 (Figure 1).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

In general, black women reported the youngest ages at first sex, whereas foreign-born Hispanic women reported the oldest ages. From 1995 to 2015, the median age at first sex exhibited the largest decline for native-born Hispanic women (from 18.6 to 17.0 years), followed by white women (from 18.6 to 17.8 years). For black women, the median age at first sex declined from 17.6 to 16.7 years, whereas foreign-born Hispanic women's median at first sex declined from 20.3 years in 1995 to 19.6 years in 2015.

In contrast, ages at first birth rose, demonstrating the ongoing delinking of sex and childbearing. The largest increase was experienced by white women, whose age at first birth grew from 23.9 to 26.5 years and who reported the oldest ages at first birth relative to other groups. Foreign-born Hispanic women's age at first birth rose slightly less, from 21.6 to 23.7 years, whereas Native-born Hispanic (from 21.0 to 22.6 years) and black (from 19.7 to 20.6 years) women had more modest gains in their ages at first birth. At each time point, black women reported the youngest median ages at parenthood.

Ages at cohabitation remained relatively stable for most groups, with few differences in these ages across race-ethnicity-nativity. In 2015, black and native-born Hispanic women's ages at first cohabitation (22.0 and 21.9 years, respectively) were slightly younger than in 1995 (21.7 and 21.6 years, respectively), and white women's age at cohabitation remained about 22 years. Only foreign-born Hispanics exhibited an increase, from 20.1 to 22.9 years. By 2015, ages at parenthood surpassed ages at cohabitation for white and Hispanic women.

In 1995, the median age at first marriage was about 21 years for ever-married women in each racial-ethnic-nativity group and increased for all groups by 2015. The increase was largest for black women, rising to 26.7 years, with white and Hispanic women reaching age 24. By 2015, black women experienced the oldest ages at marriage, and this age exceeded the median age at first birth for black and Hispanic women but not white women.

The disconnect between sex, fertility, and union formation has continued. By examining these trends together, we provide a nuanced portrait of family change that illustrates the unique experiences of women across race-ethnicity-nativity groups. This portrait underscores the fallacy of defining the sexual, childbearing, and union behaviors of whites as "standard"; doing so not only reinforces racial hierarchies and inequalities (Williams 2019) but also leads to misguided investigations into the root causes of other inequalities, such as children's educational achievement or involvement in the criminal justice system. Our approach highlights the need to understand both the macro and micro factors that contribute to variation in the experiences of family events within and across groups. More important, it serves as a call to identify how to promote individual and family well-being without pathologizing the family behaviors of racialized minorities in a system of racial inequality.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Karen Benjamin Guzzo is a professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University, the associate director of the Center for Family and Demographic Research, and an affiliate of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research. Her research centers on trends and variation in childbearing attitudes, intentions, and behaviors in the United States as well as work on shifting patterns of union formation.

Wendy D. Manning is the Dr. Howard E. Aldrich and Penny Daum Aldrich Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. She is director of the Center for Family and Demographic Research and codirector of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research. Her research examines how family members define and understand their obligations to one another in an era of increasingly diverse and complex family relationships

Susan L. Brown is a distinguished research professor and chair of sociology at Bowling Green State University. She also serves as codirector of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research. Her research examines the implications of the rapid transformation of American family life, with a focus on union dynamics and their consequences for well-being at various stages of the life course. She is the author of *Families in America* (University of California Press).

Krista K. Payne is a social science data analyst for the National Center for Family and Marriage Research and a research affiliate of the Center for Family and Demographic Research, both at Bowling Green State University, as well as a data technician for the Henry County Health Department. Her work encompasses a broad range of topics related to marriage, family, and health throughout the life course, including the geographic context of marriage, family formation, and life transitions; young adulthood; nontraditional family forms; relationship quality; the economies of families and individuals; health equity; mental health and psychological well-being; and the social determinants of health.

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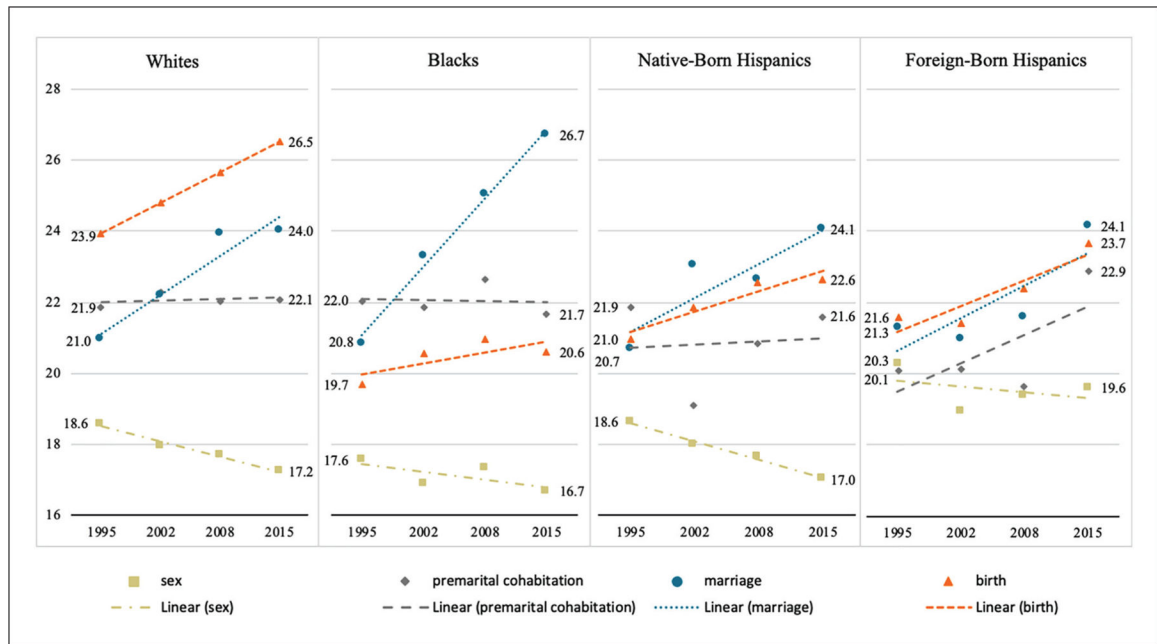


Figure 1.

Women’s (aged 40–44 years) median ages at first sex, birth, cohabitation, and marriage with opposite-sex partners from 1995 to 2015, by racial-ethnic-nativity status.

Note: Estimates are based on the 1995, 2002, 2006–2010, 2013–2015, and 2015–2017 National Surveys of Family Growth. The vertical axis represents ages, and points represent women’s median ages at first sex (beige squares), birth (orange triangles), cohabitation (grey diamonds), and marriage (blue circles) for each racial-ethnic group in 1995, 2002, 2008, and 2015. Lines indicate linear trends that best fit the estimates of women’s median ages at sexual initiation and family formation events for each racial-ethnic-nativity group (colors of trend lines and of points correspond to the same events). See the Appendix for a corresponding figure (Figure A) that organizes panels by sexual initiation and family formation events rather than racial-ethnic-nativity groups.