NCFMR
Family Profiles

First Divorce Rate, 2010

Over the last four decades, there has been more than a three-fold percentage increase in the proportion of Americans who are currently divorced, rising from 2.9% in 1970 to 10.7% in 2008 (FP-10-01). Despite this growing proportion, research suggests that among married couples, the divorce rate—which peaked in the late 70s at about 23 divorced per 1,000—has declined over the past 25 years (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

- In 2010, the rate of first divorce in the U.S. was 17.5 per 1,000 women in a first marriage aged 18 years and older (Figure 1). This represents a small change from 2008 with a first divorce rate of 18.7 per 1,000 women in a first marriage.
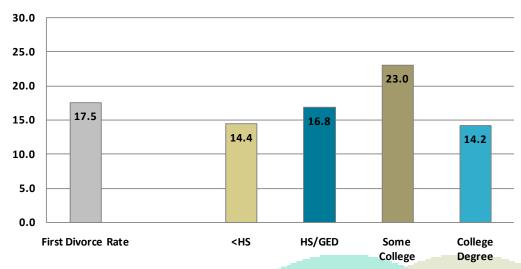
Additionally, research has demonstrated that while the lifetime probability of marital disruption is between 40 and 50%, there is substantial variation in this probability by educational attainment and race/ethnicity (Raley & Bumpass, 2003).

First Divorce Rates of Women by Educational Attainment, 2010
Educational attainment is related to divorce rates. Recent declines in the probability of divorce largely reflect an increase in marital stability among the more educated (Amato, 2010).

- Among women in a first marriage, the rate of first divorce is highest for those who have attained some education after high school but have not earned a Bachelor's degree ('some college') (23 per 1,000).
- The association between educational attainment and divorce is curvilinear: the least (no high school diploma/GED) and highest (college degree) educated women share the lowest rates of first divorce with 14.4 and 14.2 per 1,000, respectively.
  - When analyses are limited to native-born women, the relationship is no longer curvilinear; the highest educated women have the lowest rates of first divorce (14.5) compared to those with less than a high school education (20.9), high school diploma/GED (18.0) and some college (24.2) per 1,000.

Figure 1. First Divorce Rates per 1,000 Women in First Marriages Aged 18 and Older by Educational Attainment, 2010
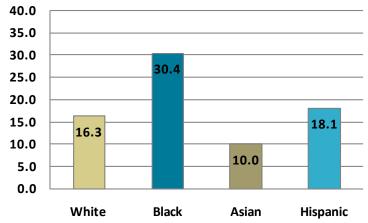

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010

First Divorce Rates of Women by Race and Ethnicity, 2010

- Asian women have the lowest first divorce rate at 10 divorces per 1,000 women in a first marriage.
- The first divorce rates of White and Hispanic women are similar at 16.3 and 18.1, respectively.
- Black women have substantially higher rates of first divorce compared to all other racial and ethnic groups at 30.4 divorces per 1,000 women in a first marriage.

Figure 2. First Divorce Rates Per 1,000 Women in First Marriages Aged 18 and Older by Race and Ethnicity, 2010
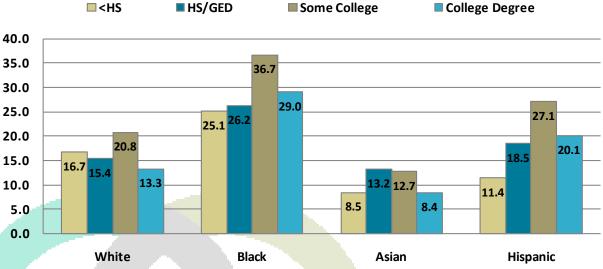

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010

Educational Attainment and Racial and Ethnic Variation in the Rate of First Divorce, 2010

- With the exception of Asians, across all racial and ethnic groups, the highest rate of first divorce is among women with some college.
- There is a curvilinear association between educational attainment and the first divorce rate among Blacks, Asians and Hispanics. In other words, women with less than a high school degree share a similar divorce rate as women who have graduated from college. Among Black and Hispanic women, the lowest first divorce rates are among those women with less than a high school education.
- The protective effect of a college degree against divorce is evident for all racial/ethnic groups.
- Among White women, there is not a strong education gradient, but women with a college degree experience lower divorce rates than any other education group.

Figure 3. First Divorce Rates per 1,000 Women in First Marriages Aged 18 and Older by Educational Attainment and Race/Ethnicity and Hispanic Nativity Status, 2010

Source: American Community Survey, 2010
Note: This graph does not include racial categories comprising American Indians, Alaska Native Tribes, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders and/or a combination of these racial/ethnic groups, as it only constitutes 3% of the overall sample.

Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 72*(3), 650-666. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x

Raley, K. R., & Bumpass, L. (2003). The topography of the divorce plateau: Levels and trends in union stability in the United States after 1980. *Demographic Research, 8*, 245-260 doi:10.4054/DemRes.2003.8.8

Stevenson, B., & Wolfers, J. (2007). Marriage and divorce: Changes and their driving forces. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 21*(2), 27-52. doi:10.1257/jep.21.2.27