

# Trends in Cohabitation: Over Twenty Years of Change, 1987-2010

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## Change in Cohabitation in the U.S., 1987-2010

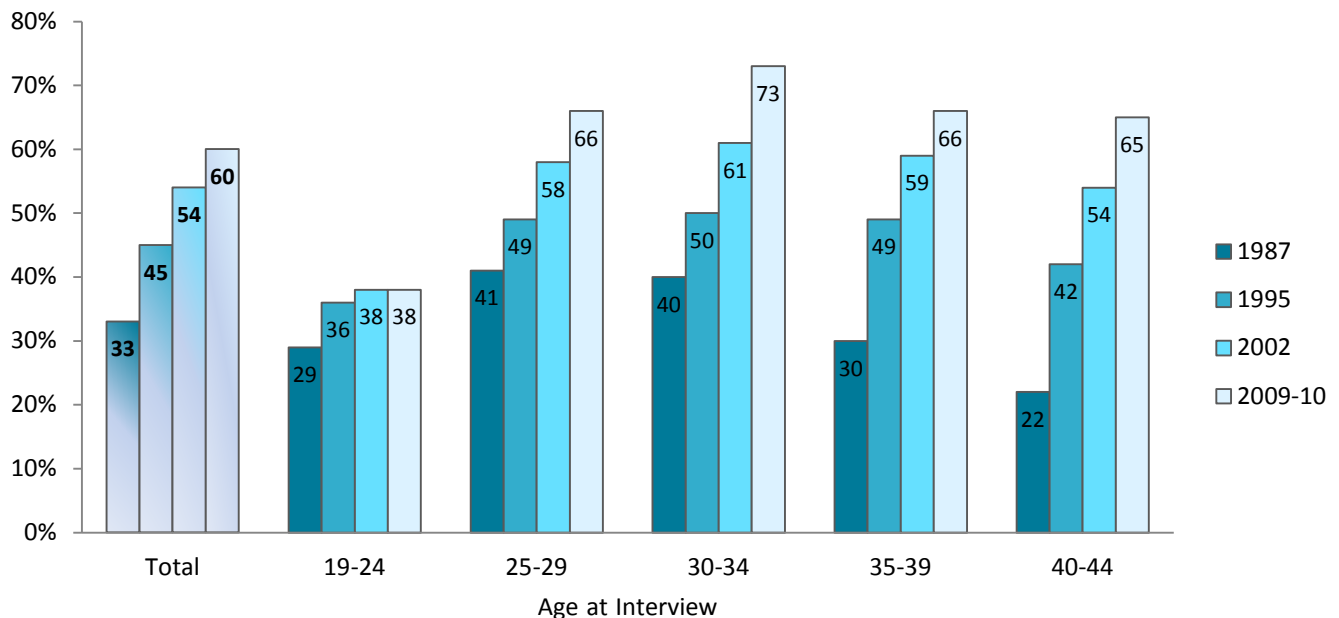
This profile presents findings about shifts in the percentage of women who have ever cohabited and cohabited prior to their first marriage over the last 23 years. Relying on indicators of current cohabitation status is informative (NCFMR FP-10-02), but does not capture women's cumulative experiences 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 2009-2010 using the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). For more information about the NSFG, see [2006-2010 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 82% over the past 23 years. In 1987, one-third of women had ever cohabited, and in 2009-2010, three-fifths (60%) 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 2009-2010 is women ages 30-34; nearly three-fourths (73%) had ever cohabited. The greatest increase (195%) in cohabitation occurred among women ages 40-44, and the smallest increase was among the youngest women (19-24). Over the last 23 years, there has been a 31% increase in cohabitation experience among women ages 19-24.

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.

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



Sources: Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008

This profile draws on estimates published in the following articles:

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

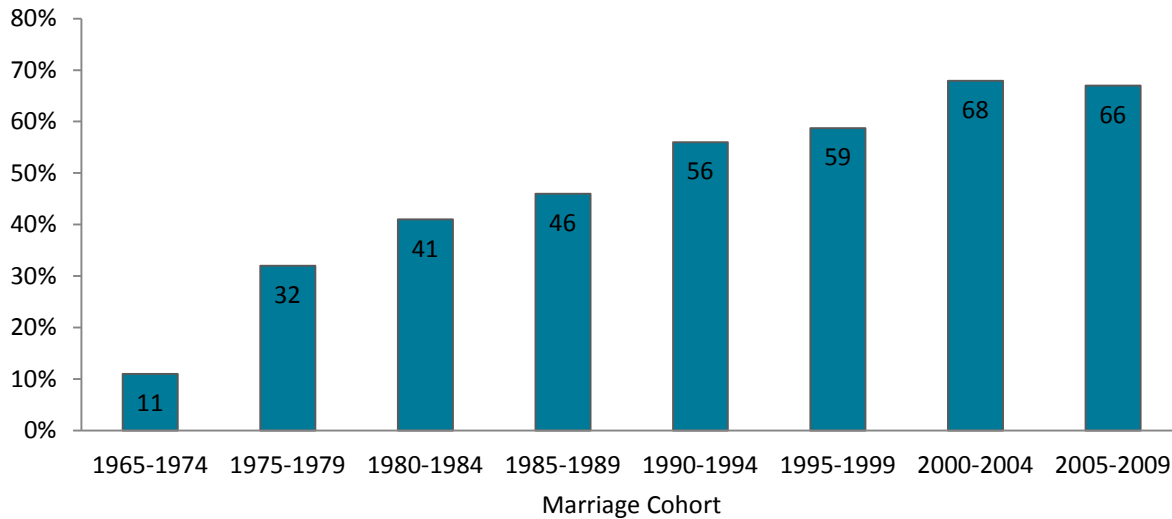
Bumpass, L., & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. *Population Studies*, 54, 29-41.

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. Approaching half of women first married 15 years ago (1985-89) cohabited before marrying.

Figure 2. Two Decades of Trends in Percentage of Women (19-44) Cohabiting Prior to First Marriage

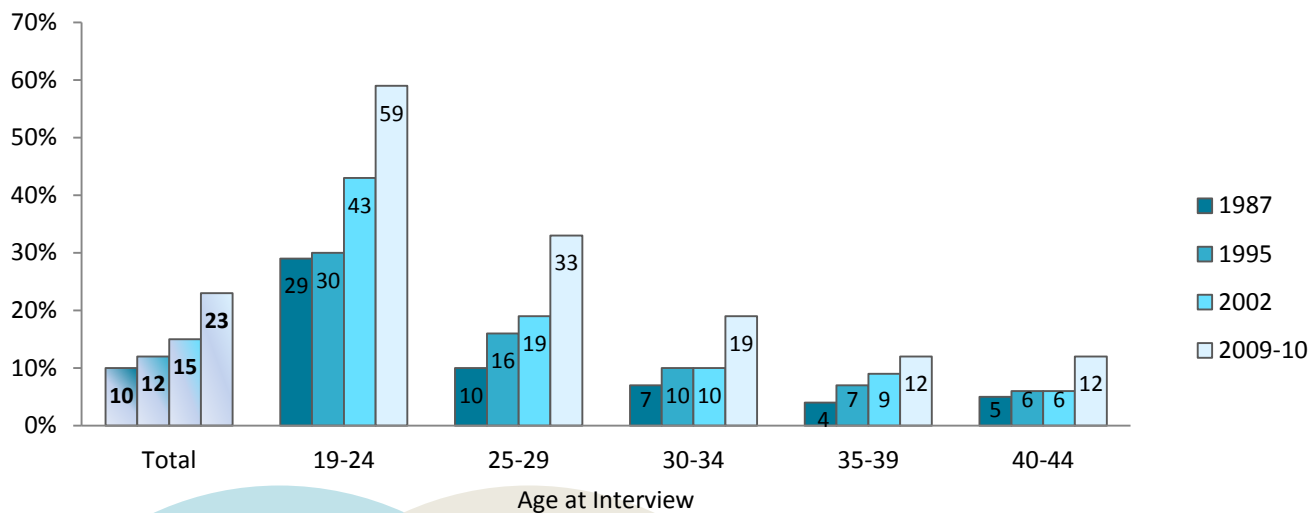


Sources: Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008

### Percentage of All Current Unions that are Cohabiting Unions

- Nearly one-quarter (23%) of all current unions among women ages 19-44 are cohabiting unions, more than doubling over the past twenty-three 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 2009-2010, nearly three-fifths of 19-24 year olds in a union were in a cohabiting union.

Figure 3. Two Decades of Trends in Percentage of Women (19-44) Cohabiting in Current Unions



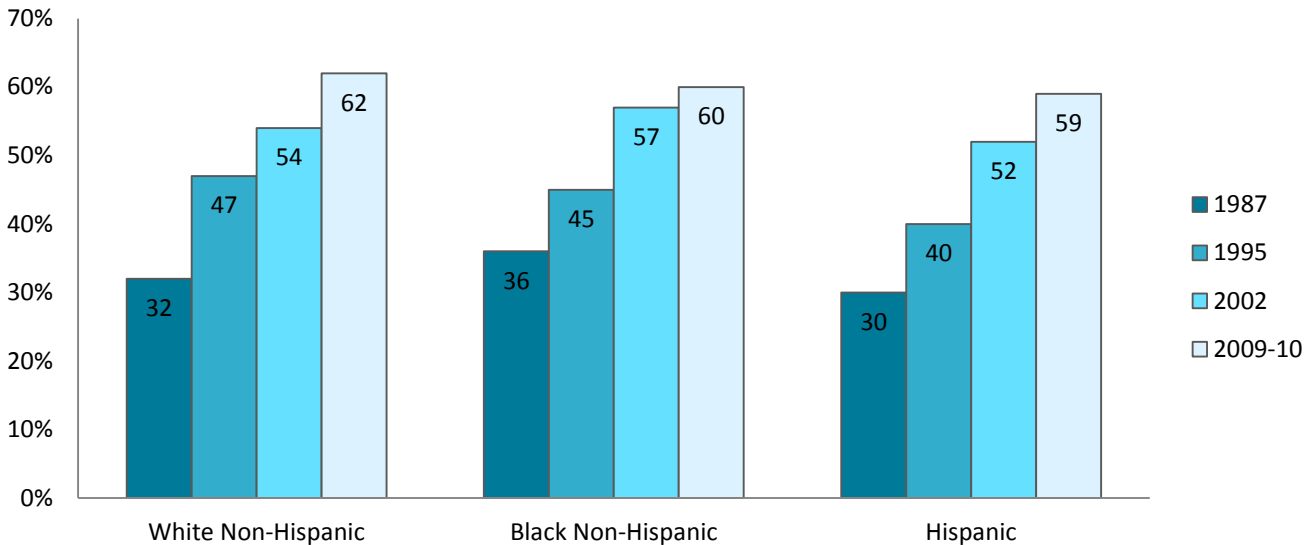
Sources: Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008



## Change in Cohabitation Experience and Race/Ethnicity

- Cohabitation experience has risen for all race and ethnic groups over the past 23 years (Figure 4). White and Hispanic women experienced a greater increase in cohabitation (94% and 97%, respectively) compared to Black women (67%).
- In the past, a larger proportion of Black women—compared to White and Hispanic women—have ever cohabited. However, the share of White women who have ever cohabited has surpassed that of Black women, though the race and ethnic gap in cohabitation is relatively small and narrowing.

Figure 4. Two Decades of Trends in Percentage of Women (19-44) in Race/Ethnic Groups Cohabiting

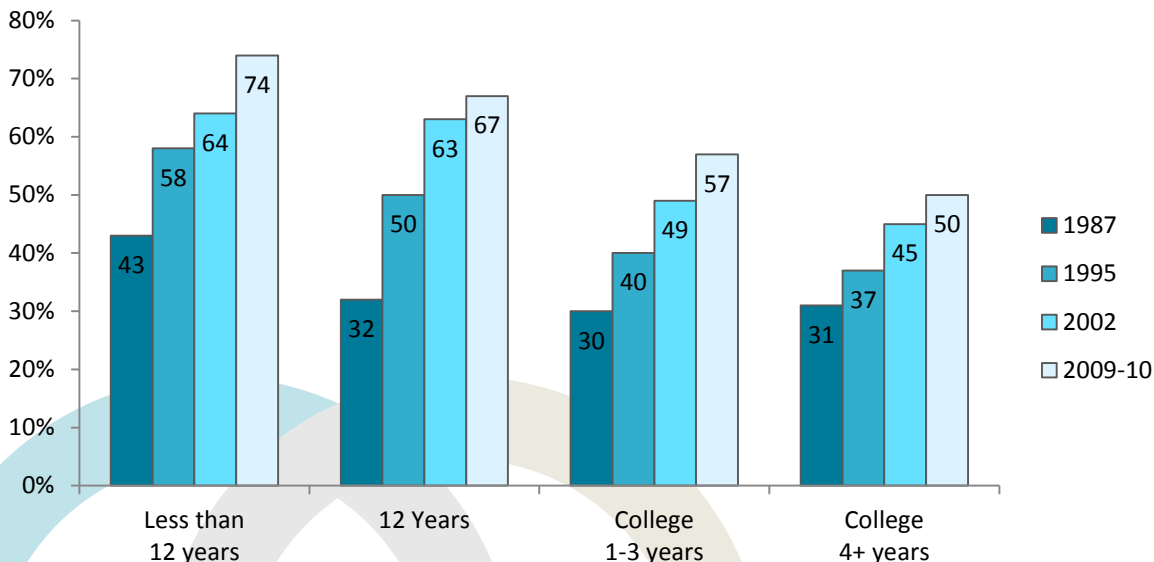


Sources: Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008

## 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 23 years for this group.
- The education group with the greatest cohabitation experience is women with less than 12 years of education. In 2009-2010, nearly three-quarters of women without a high school degree had ever cohabited, in contrast to half of women with a college degree. The education divide in cohabitation experience has been increasing.

Figure 5. Trends in Percentage of Women (19-44) in Education Groups Ever Cohabiting



Sources: Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008

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