High School Seniors’ Ideal Time for Marriage

Over the past 40 years, high school seniors’ expectations to marry have remained nearly universal. Only 5% of high school seniors in 1976 and 6% in 2014 did not want to marry. Their reported ideal time to marry, however, has changed. High school seniors are increasingly inclined to say their ideal time to marry is later, with the majority (52%) reporting they expect to marry “over five years from now,” which means the mid-twenties or later. This profile is one in a new three-part series using Monitoring the Future data to examine almost 40 years of change in high school seniors’ expectations and attitudes regarding marriage and cohabitation. The focus of this profile is on high school seniors’ response to the question “if it were just up to you, what would be the ideal time for you to get married?” Additionally, we examine variation by parental educational attainment, race and ethnicity, gender, and region of the United States.

High School Seniors’ Ideal Time to Marry

1. In 2014, the majority of high school seniors reported that they wanted to marry over five years from now (52%).

2. The percentage change was greatest for the “over five years from now” category, which doubled from 1976 to 2014. This corresponds with actual changes in marriage timing, as the median age at first marriage for women rose from 21.3 in 1976 to 27.9 in 2014 (FP-16-07, not shown).

Figure 1. High School Seniors’ Ideal Time to Marry, 1976 and 2014

% Change

- >5 yrs: 100%
- 4-5 yrs: 11%
- 2-3 yrs: 64%
- 1 yr: 78%
- No marriage: 20%

Source: Monitoring the Future, 1976 & 2014

High School Seniors Expecting Marriage Over Five Years from Now

Parental Educational Attainment

- A parental education gradient persists in the ideal timing of marriage. As parents’ education rises, the share of high school seniors reporting an ideal time of marriage of five plus years also increases.

- The education gradient is closing for those with parents that have less than high school, high school, or some college education.

Figure 2. High School Seniors Expecting Marriage Over Five Years from Now, by Parental Educational Attainment, 1976 & 2014

Race & Ethnicity

- The percentage of students expecting to marry over five years from now doubled from 1976 to 2014 for both Whites and Non-Whites.

- In 2014, at least half of Black, White, and Hispanic high school seniors expected to marry over five years from now. Black students (57%) have the largest share expecting to wait at least five years for marriage.

Figure 3. High School Seniors Expecting Marriage Over Five Years from Now, by Race & Ethnicity, 1976 & 2014

Source: Monitoring the Future, 1976 & 2014
Gender

- A larger share of young men (compared to young women) expect to marry in five plus years in both 1976 and 2014.
- The proportional increase in expectations to marry in over five years is larger for women than men.

Region

- In most regions, the majority of HS seniors expect to marry over five years from now, but the South is an exception.
- There is a 12 percentage point difference between the South (the lowest percentage) and the West (the highest percentage).

References:

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