



# Sequencing of Family Experiences

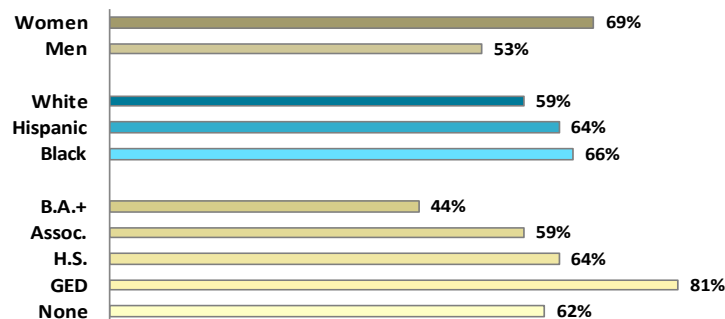
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The family formation experiences of young adults in the United States have undergone significant shifts over the past twenty years. The age at first birth and age at first marriage among men and women continue to be delayed (FP-11-04, FP-09-03), and there are increasing proportions of young adults who have ever cohabited (FP-10-07). The examination of these experiences is important because for many, forming a family is considered a significant marker of adulthood—whether this means having a child, getting married, or cohabiting with a romantic partner. Young adults can have vastly different experiences within this short period in the life course, with variation in the prevalence, timing, and sequencing of family formation experiences. This profile presents analyses of longitudinal data from the National Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) revealing the various family formation sequences of having a child, cohabitation, and marriage experienced among young adults by age 25.

## Family Formation Experiences in Early Adulthood

- Most (61%) young adults have formed a family—cohabited, married, or become a parent—by age 25.
  - Over two-thirds of women (69%) formed a family in early adulthood compared to just over half of men (53%).
  - Blacks and Hispanics are similarly likely to form a family in early adulthood (66% and 64%, respectively). Whites are not far behind; 59% have cohabited, married, or become a parent by age 25.
  - Family formation in early adulthood is most prevalent among young adults with a GED (81%). Forming a family is least prevalent among those with at least a Bachelor’s degree (44%).

Figure 1. Family Formation in Early Adulthood Across Demographic Characteristics



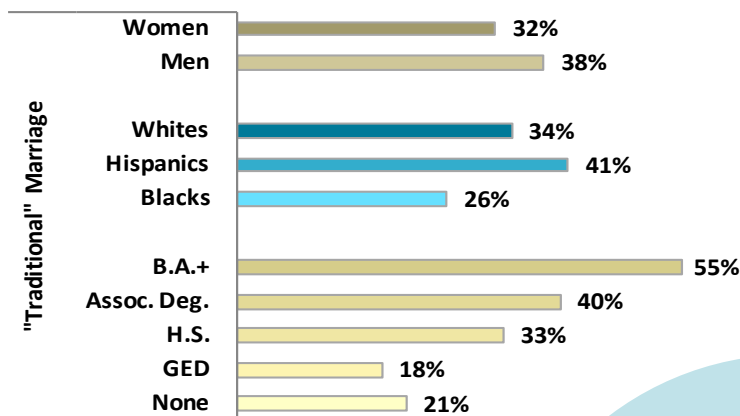
Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Rounds 1-13: 1997-2009 (weighted). U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, NCFMR analyses of valid cases.

*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.*

## Marriage in Early Adulthood

- Over a quarter (27%) of young adults married prior to their 25th birthday.
  - Over a third (35%) of young adults who married followed a direct or “traditional” pathway into marriage, i.e., they did not cohabit or experience a birth prior to their first marriage.

Figure 2. Prevalence of “Traditional Marriage” Across Demographic Characteristics



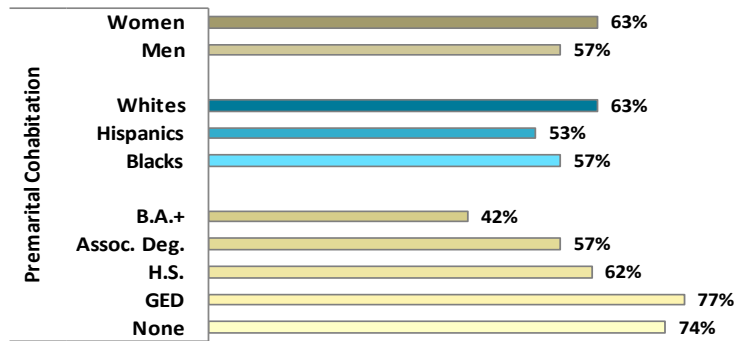
Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Rounds 1-13: 1997-2009 (weighted). U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, NCFMR analyses of valid cases.

- » Men are more likely than women to have followed a “traditional” pathway into marriage (38% versus 32%).
- » A “traditional” pathway into marriage is more prevalent among Hispanics (41%), followed by Whites (34%). Of those Blacks who married in early adulthood, only 26% did not cohabit or experience a birth prior to their first marriage.
- » Those with at least a Bachelor’s degree had the greatest prevalence of “traditional” marriage (55%). On the other end of the educational attainment spectrum, roughly one fifth of those with a GED and those without a diploma (18% and 21%, respectively) did not cohabit or have a child prior to marriage.

## Cohabitation in Early Adulthood

- While the most common family formation experience is to have spent time cohabiting (47%), there is considerable variation in the cohabitation experience.
  - Thirty-seven percent of young adults with cohabitation experience have only cohabited, one half (50%) have cohabited and had a birth, 36% have cohabited and married, and nearly one quarter (23%) have experienced parenthood, marriage, and cohabitation.
  - Most young adults who cohabited and have a child, first cohabited and then had their child (71%).
  - Cohabitation is the modal pathway into marriage; among those who married, over three fifths cohabited prior to tying the knot (61%).
    - » Women are more likely than men to cohabit before marriage (63% versus 57%).
    - » Cohabitation before marriage is more prevalent among Whites; 63% of Whites cohabited before marriage compared to 57% of Blacks and 53% of Hispanics.
    - » Regarding educational attainment, those with a GED most often cohabited before marriage (77%). Those with at least a Bachelor's degree were least likely to cohabit before getting married (42%).

Figure 3. Prevalence of Premarital Cohabitation Across Demographic Characteristics

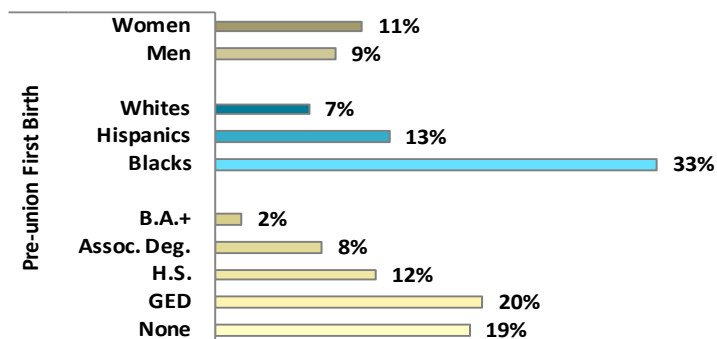


Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Rounds 1-13: 1997-2009 (weighted). U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, NCFMR analyses of valid cases.

## Parenthood in Early Adulthood

- One-third (34%) of young adults had a child; however, the sequencing of parenthood varies considerably.
  - Over one in three (35%) of young adults who had a child did so before entering a union (cohabitation or marriage).
    - » Women are more likely than men to have a child before entering a union.
    - » One-third of Blacks have a child before they enter a union—a rate that is over twice that of Hispanics (13%) and almost five times that of Whites (7%).
    - » The prevalence of a pre-union birth among those with at least a Bachelors degree is only 2%. In contrast, about one-fifth of young adults without a diploma/degree or with a GED have had a pre-union birth by age 25.
  - Among young adults who married, 26% had a birth prior to marriage and 34% had a child after marriage. In contrast, among young who adults who cohabited, 14% had a child before they cohabited and 36% after cohabitation.
  - One in seven (14%) young adults who had a child followed a pathway from cohabitation, to marriage and then parenthood by age 25.

Figure 4. Prevalence of Preunion First Birth Across Demographic Characteristics



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Rounds 1-13: 1997-2009 (weighted). U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, NCFMR analyses of valid cases.

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