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**TWO DECADES OF CHANGE IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF  
SEX, BIRTH, PREMARITAL COHABITATION, AND MARRIAGE**

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**BACKGROUND:** The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory suggests a growing disconnect between reproductive and union formation events, but the focus on population-wide statistics may obscure subgroup variation in these transitions in diverse settings, like the U.S.

**OBJECTIVE:** To determine the utility of the SDT for explaining American family trends by investigating whether overall changes in the experiences and timing of key family formation events across cohorts are driven by countervailing behaviors across race-ethnic groups.

**METHODS:** We use four cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (1995 – 2013) to document changes in the shares experiencing – and median ages of – first sex, first birth, first premarital cohabitation, and first marriage across cohorts of White, Black, and Hispanic women aged 40-44.

**RESULTS:** Across cohorts, the gap between the median age at first sex and first birth widened considerably more for White than Hispanic and Black women. For Whites, the median age at cohabitation and marriage both remained consistently lower than the age at first birth. Conversely, Black women consistently had an earlier median age at first birth than the age at cohabitation or marriage. Hispanic women exhibited unique cohort patterns with a crossover for births relative to union formation, such that the median age at first birth is now later than cohabitation but earlier than marriage.

**CONTRIBUTION:** Changes in the experience and timing of family events align with the SDT more consistently for Black and Hispanic than for White women, suggesting the SDT may not be equally applicable across the American population.

**KEYWORDS:** Sex, Fertility, Cohabitation, Marriage

## **1. Introduction**

Key characteristics of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) include delays in family formation and a disconnect between various intimate/family behaviors. This occurs because young adults shift to focusing on individual goals (such as greater educational attainment and rewarding careers), though they still continue to have relationships and less formal unions, such as cohabitation (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Overall delays and convergence in the ages at which individuals experience marriage and parenthood (Bridges and Philbin, forthcoming; Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014) provide support for the SDT in the United States; however, such general trends may be due to different – and sometimes countervailing – behaviors among subgroups. This is likely the case in the U.S, which has substantial race-ethnic variation in family behaviors (Hemez & Manning, 2017; Raley & Sweeney, 2009; Sweeney & Raley, 2014).

All race-ethnic groups have experienced changes in the family behaviors, but the proportion experiencing events, the timing of these events, and the ordering of these events varies across groups. For instance, cohabitation has become increasingly common in young adulthood, with little difference in cohabitation experiences among White, Hispanic, and Black women (Hemez, 2018). Cohabitation as a context for childbearing, however, has become considerably more common among Black and Hispanic women than White women (Eickmeyer, 2019; Lichter, 2012; Wu, 2017). Marriage has also changed since the 1960s, with delays across all race-ethnic groups along with differential likelihoods of marriage. For instance, Black women have become more likely to marry later, but less likely to marry at all, compared to White and Hispanic women (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). Given variation in behaviors, we explore how the shares of women who experience sex, birth, premarital cohabitation, and marriage, and the ages at which women first experience these events, have shifted across cohorts of women aged 40-44 (approximating the end of the childbearing years) between 1995 and 2013 by race-

ethnicity. In doing so, we provide some insight into whether the SDT is useful for explaining family trends in diverse contexts.

## **2. Data and Methods**

We use four consecutive cycles (1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2015) of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a nationally representative U.S. dataset with detailed retrospective information on reproductive and family behaviors. We focus on women because men were not interviewed until the 2002 cycle; additionally, there is evidence that men's fertility data are problematic (Joyner et al. 2012). Furthermore, we restrict our sample to women 40-44 to observe nearly completed fertility histories. When weighted, the data produce nationally representative estimates for the years 1995, 2002, 2008 (for the 2006-2010 continuous NSFG), and 2013 (for the 2011-2015 continuous NSFG). The unweighted analytical sample sizes range from 1,172 to 1,800 women between the ages of 40 and 44.

Using the detailed histories, we created measures indicating four family events: whether women have ever (1) had sex, (2) had at least one birth, (3) had a premarital or nonmarital cohabitation (for those who never married; we use the term "premarital cohabitation" for both groups for brevity), and (4) married. We also measure women's age when they experienced these events for the first time. To examine subgroup variation, we focus on three race-ethnic groups: non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic; we exclude "others" due to small sample sizes. We use descriptive analyses to document changes over time and across groups in these events, focusing our discussion on two birth cohorts: 1) the Baby Boom cohort (i.e. those aged 40-44 in 1995 who were born between 1951 and 1955) and 2) Gen-X cohort (i.e. those aged 40-44 in 2013 who were born between 1969 and 1973).

### 3. Results

We first show variation in the shares who ever had sex, ever had a birth, premaritally cohabited, or married across cohorts of women aged 40-44 between 1995 and 2013 (Figure 1). Changes and absolute differences in having sex and having children were relatively small whereas cohabitation and marriage both varied over cohorts and across race-ethnicity. The top left panel shows that the share who had sex was similar across cohorts and race-ethnic groups. Premarital cohabitation (shown in the upper right) became more common across all groups. Although the share who lived with an unmarried partner increased most among White women, the proportion of Gen-Xer women who reported having ever cohabited was the same for White and Black women (62%) followed by Hispanic women (51%). Across cohorts, there was a decline in the share who ever married (bottom left side). The decline was relatively modest for White women (from 93% to 90%) between the Baby Boom and the Gen-X cohorts. Black and Hispanic women, however, experienced a much more pronounced decline. Among Baby Boomers, 79% of Black women and 91% of Hispanic women had ever married by their early 40s, declining to 64% and 81%, respectively for Gen-Xer women. Finally, the shares of women who had a child increased slightly across race-ethnic groups, and at each time point, greater shares of Hispanic women became mothers than White or Black women.

\*\* Figure 1 about here \*\*

Figure 2 presents overall trends in women's median ages at first sex, birth, cohabitation, and marriage for each race-ethnic group. The median age at first sex was the only event to experience a decline from the Baby Boom to the Gen-X cohorts while the age at first birth rose from about 22.9 to 25.0. These diverging trends representing a lengthening of time between sexual initiation and parenthood for more recent cohorts of women. The median age at first cohabitation remained stable at just under 22.0 for all women. Finally, women's overall median

age at marriage rose 3.5 years between the two cohorts, the largest change of the four events considered.

\*\* Figure 2 about here \*\*

The overall population trends presented in Figure 2, however, mask considerable race-ethnic diversity, as shown in Figure 3. The median age at first sex exhibited the largest decline across cohorts for White women (from 18.5 to 17.0) between 1995 and 2013 (left panel). For Black women aged 40-44 (center panel), the median age was slightly greater than 17 throughout the period, with the exception of 2002, when it declined to 16.8. Hispanic women reported the highest ages at first sex across cohorts, declining from 19.3 among the Baby Boomers to 17.8 for the Gen-Xers (right panel).

\*\* Figure 3 about here \*\*

Larger changes are evident for the entrance into parenthood, with ages at first birth rising. Among the Baby Boomers, Black mothers had the youngest age at first birth (19.8), followed by Hispanic (21.3), and White (23.8) mothers. This pattern remained among Gen-Xers, with Black women continuing to have the youngest ages at first birth (20.6), followed by Hispanic (22.7) and White mothers (26.5). Although the median length of time between sexual initiation and parenthood increased for each group, the magnitude of change was not consistent across race-ethnicity. In the Baby Boom cohort, for example, White women reported about 5.3 years between first sex and first birth. By the Gen-X cohort, this gap had nearly doubled, to 9.5 years. The intervals between sex and birth were much smaller for Black and Hispanic women. Among Black women, the median amount of time between first sex and first birth rose from about 2.3 years for the Baby Boom cohort to 3.4 years among the Gen-X women, whereas the interval between these events for Hispanic women increased from 2.1 to 4.8 years between the cohorts.

White and Black women's increases in the timing between sex and birth were largely driven by delays in childbearing, whereas most of the increase between these events for Hispanic women was attributable to earlier sexual initiation among Gen-X women than Baby Boomers.

Changes in White, Black, and Hispanic women's median ages at first premarital cohabitation were more similar. Baby Boom Black women reported the oldest ages at premarital cohabitation at 22.2, increasing slightly to 22.4 in the Gen-X cohort. In 1995, entry into a premarital cohabitation occurred at 21.8 for White women and 21.1 for Hispanic women who had ever cohabited. White women's median age at first premarital cohabitation changed very little across cohorts. Hispanics, however, exhibited a decline, and by 2013, the median age at first cohabitation for Gen-X Hispanic women was six months younger than it had been for the Baby Boom Hispanic women.

The gap in timing between cohabitation and parenthood across cohorts grew by 2.7 years for White women and by 1.8 years for Hispanic women. Among Black women, however, the interval between cohabitation and birth declined by about seven months. Since the ages at cohabitation remained fairly stable for each race-ethnic group across cohorts, the changes in the interval between cohabitation and parenthood were largely driven by changes in the ages which women first experienced childbirth. In both cohorts, White and Hispanic women reported older median ages at parenthood than cohabitation indicating that, on average, cohabitation preceded parenthood, whereas Black women consistently reported the opposite pattern.

Focusing on marriage and fertility timing, Baby Boom women reported a median age of first marriage just under 21, regardless of race-ethnic status. Although the median age at marriage increased for all women, it did so to varying degrees across race-ethnicity. Among White women, for example, the median age at marriage rose 3.4 years, and for Black women it

rose by 4.9 years. The interval between marriage and parenthood declined by less than one year from the Baby Boomer to the Gen-X cohort for White women. In contrast, both cohorts of Black women reported younger ages at childbearing than marriage, with the gap between the two events growing for Black women due to only a modest increase in the age at parenthood but a large increase in age at marriage. Hispanic women experienced almost no change in the interval between parenthood and marriage as the ages at marriage and parenthood remain closely tied throughout the time period (the events were less than year apart).

#### **4. Conclusions**

Key features of the SDT include postponement of marriage, retreat from parenthood, and decoupling of marriage and childbearing that unfold in a larger context of changing patterns of socioeconomic attainment with increased emphasis on educational achievement and stable income positions (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Whether the United States is experiencing the SDT remains a point of debate among scholars (Lesthaeghe & Neidert, 2006; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). Our study contributes to this debate by providing evidence that not all events and transitions have exhibited the same degree of change for women across race-ethnic groups. Ultimately, our work calls into question the utility of the SDT in a diverse context with high levels of inequality.

First, increases in the age at childbearing between Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers were most pronounced among White women. Between the Baby Boom and Gen-X cohorts, the median age at parenthood increased just 0.8 years for Black women, and 1.4 years among Hispanic women, whereas White women born in the Gen-X cohort reported a median age at parenthood that was 2.7 years greater than that of Baby Boomers. Second, the gap between ages at premarital cohabitation and childbirth grew among White and Hispanic women, with cohabitation occurring at younger ages than the entry into parenthood. The ages at which Black women first cohabit were older than the ages they became parents, though the changes were



similar in magnitude. Third, the ages at first birth and first marriage exhibited parallel increases for White and Hispanic women. Although the events were much more closely tied for Hispanic women, there was little change in the length of the interval between marriage and birth for White and Hispanic women. Black women, in contrast, experienced a lengthening of the timing between marriage and childbearing, with the median age at parenthood preceding the age at marriage by 5.2 years in the Gen-Xer cohort. Furthermore, we document the largest reductions in the share of women who ever married by the end of their childbearing years for Black women, despite consistently high proportions with at least one birth.

Results from the current study elucidate sharp race-ethnic differences in family formation experiences that challenge SDT theory. Despite a longer period of sexual activity prior to childbearing, White women continue to exhibit patterns of childbearing that align with more traditional notions of family sequencing, where birth occurs at older ages than union formation. This is not the case for Black women, however, who report younger ages at parenthood than union formation, and Hispanic women, for whom marriage and cohabitation seems to be more closely tied to childbearing. Furthermore, the retreat from marriage described by the SDT was experienced by Black and Hispanic women but not among White women. These findings reveal that relying on aggregate estimates of key reproductive and family events in countries with large and widening racial and ethnic disparities can obscure important variation in the timing and ordering that women experience these events. Theoretical arguments about ongoing and future demographic change, such as those explicated in the SDT literature (Lesthaeghe, 2010), thus do not seem equally applicable across groups in the U.S., warranting further investigation.

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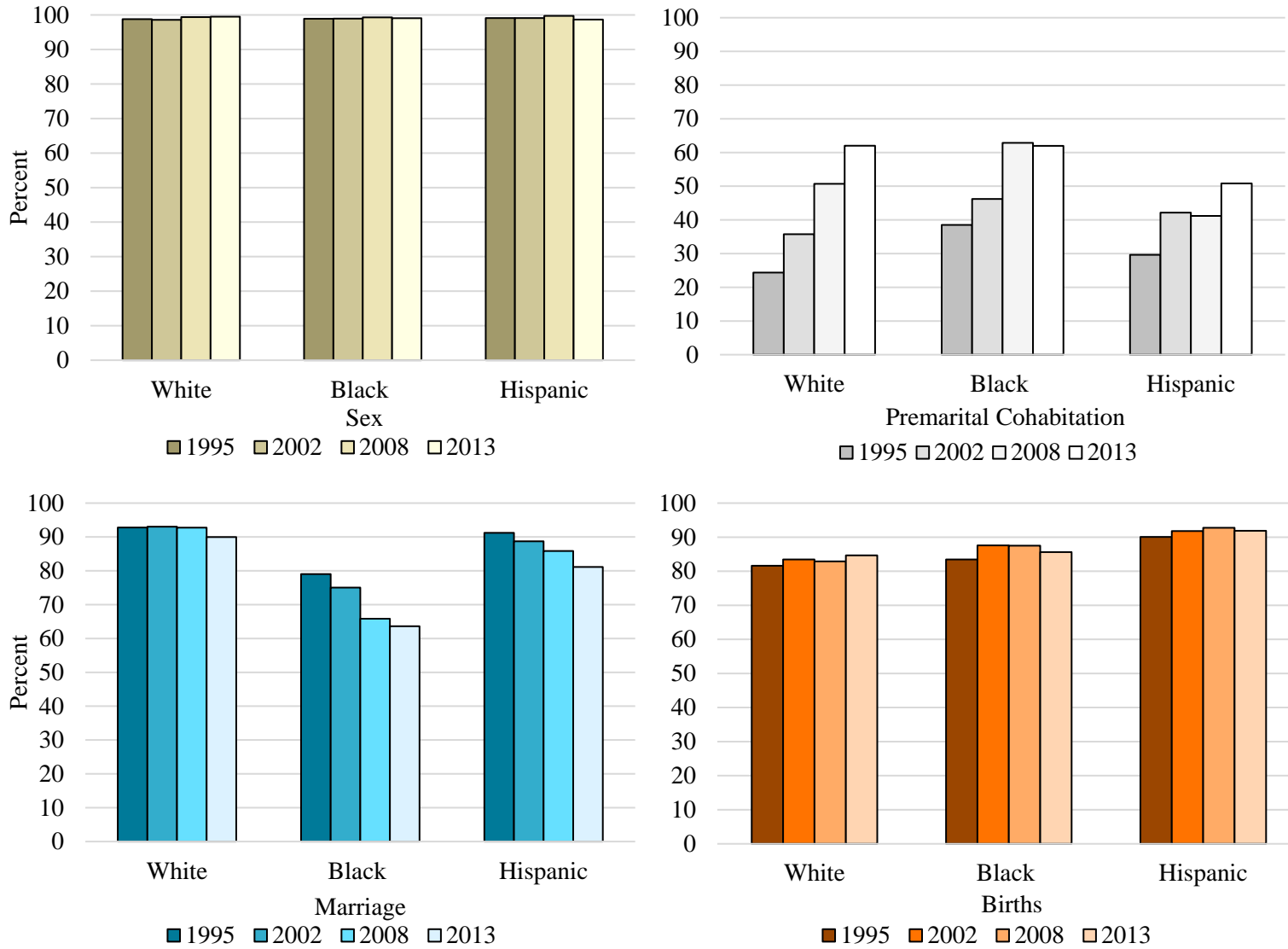
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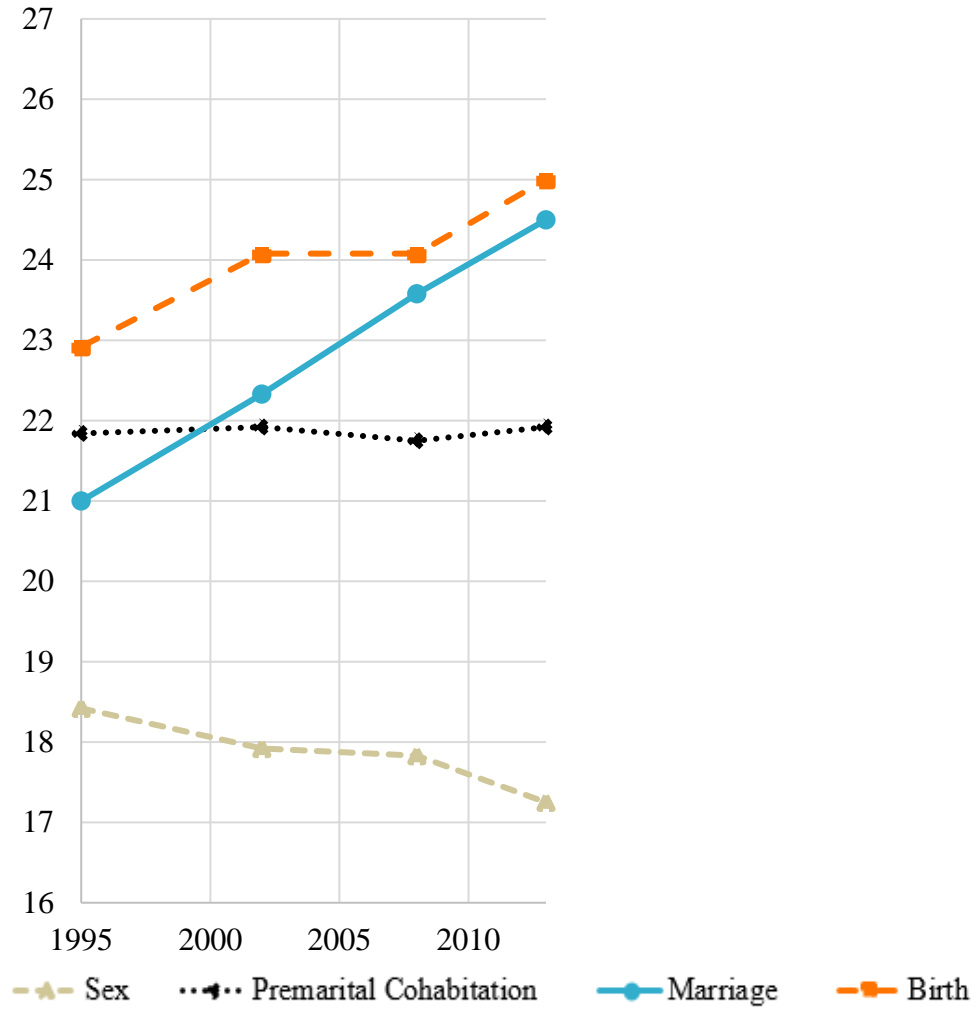
**Figures**

Figure 1. Percent of Women (40-44) who ever had Sex, had a Birth, Premaritally Cohabited, or Married, by Race-Ethnicity, 1995-2013



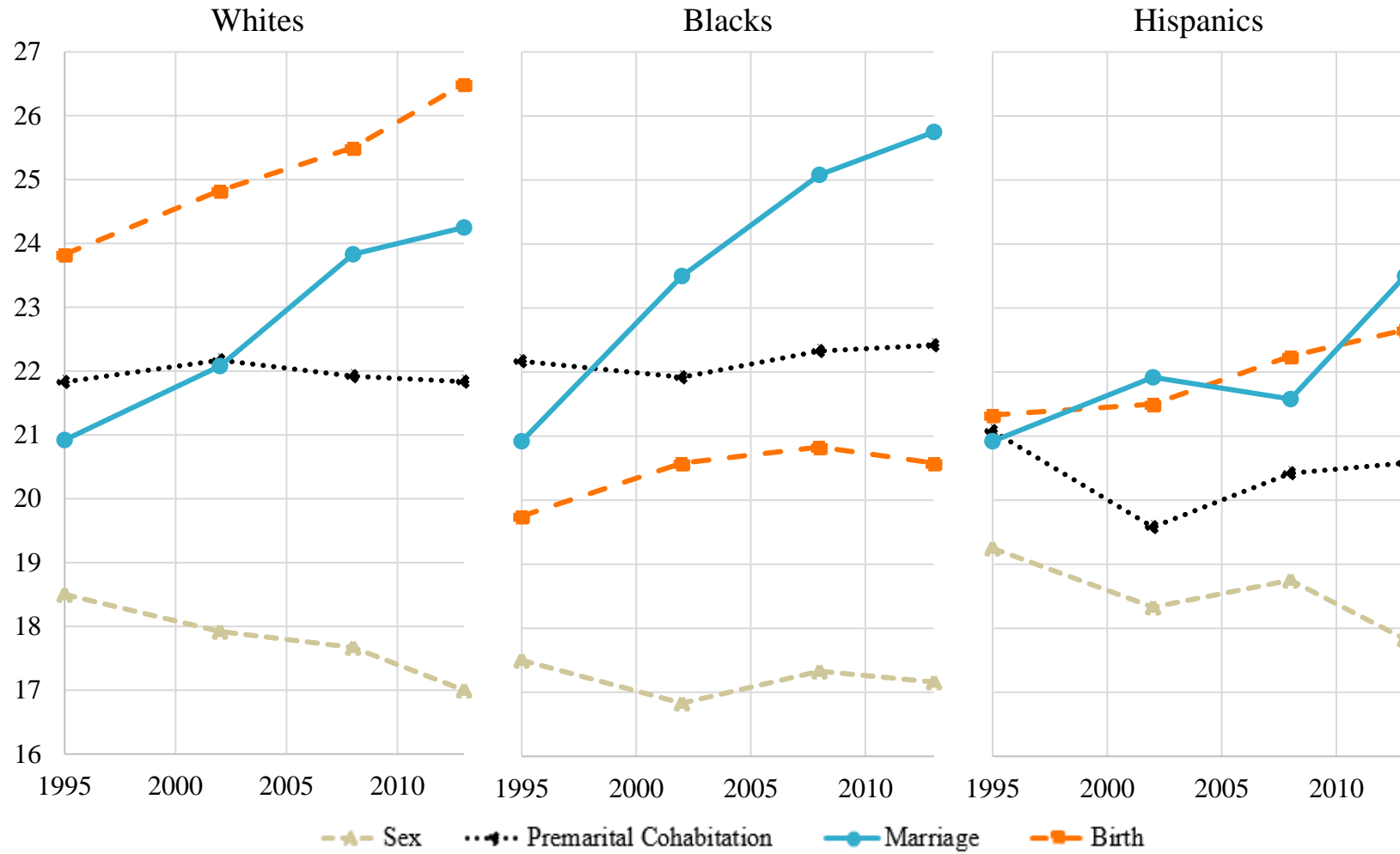
Source: 1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2015 NSFGs

Figure 2. Median Age at First Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, Marriage, and Birth among Women (40-44), 1995-2013



Source: 1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2015 NSFGs

Figure 3. Median Age at First Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, Marriage, and Birth among Women (40-44), by Race-Ethnicity 1995-2013



Source: 1995, 2002, 2006-2010, and 2011-2015 NSFGs