

Percentage of Americans who are married reaches all-time low

WASHINGTON - With cohabitation, single-person households and single parenthood on the rise, the percentage of Americans who are currently married has reached an all-time low.

A new report from the Pew Research Center analyzing Census Bureau data found that only 51 percent of Americans 18 and over were married in 2010, compared with 72 percent in 1960. Among Hispanics and African-Americans, the decline is even more steep.

"If current trends continue, the share of adults who are currently married will drop to below half within a few years," said the report by Pew senior writer D'Vera Cohn, senior demographer Jeffrey S. Passel and research associate Wendy Wang.

Fifty-five percent of white Americans were married in 2010, down from 74 percent 50 years earlier. But among Hispanics and blacks, married people are already in the minority. Forty-eight percent of Hispanics and 31 percent of African-Americans were married in 2010, compared with 72 percent and 61 percent, respectively, in 1960.

The authors said it was "beyond the scope of this analysis to explain why marriage has declined," but they noted that its popularity has fallen less sharply among college graduates. They said a recent drop in the number of new marriages could have to do with the economic recession, but the linkage "is not entirely clear."

The Pew report found that the median age at first marriage has been steadily rising for both men and women over the past five decades, from 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women in 1960. The median age in 2010 was 26.5 for women and 28.7 for men in 2010.

Reinforcing the trend of a rising median age for marriage was the percentage of Americans ages 20 to 24 who had ever been married. In 1960, 60 percent of that age group had married, while in 2010 only 14 percent had.

Among those between the ages of 35 and 39, 93 percent reported having ever been married in 1960, compared to 77 percent in 2010.

Pew also asked in a 2010 survey of 2,691 American adults whether marriage is becoming obsolete. Only 39 percent of the respondents said it was, with college-educated Americans being the least likely to say marriage was becoming obsolete at 27 percent. Nearly half (45 percent) of those with a high school education or less agreed that marriage was becoming obsolete.

The responses also differed according to age group and racial and ethnic groups. While only 32 percent of Americans 65 and older said marriage was becoming obsolete, 44 percent of those 18 to 29 said so.

Thirty-six percent of white respondents, 44 percent of black respondents and 42 percent of Hispanics said they thought marriage was becoming obsolete.

But even if unmarried Americans believe marriage is becoming obsolete, many still want to get married themselves, according to the survey results.

“Asked whether they want to get married, 47 percent of unmarried adults who agree that marriage is becoming obsolete say that they would like to wed,” the Pew report said. In all, 61 percent of never married Americans said they want to get married.

The only unmarried group that indicated they did not want to marry were those who had been married previously. Just over a quarter (26 percent) of adults who had ever been married but were currently unmarried said they wanted to get married.

No margin of error was given for the survey portion of the report.

But a separate report issued earlier in 2011 by the Institute for American Values found that about 40 percent of U.S. couples who are divorcing said one or both members of the couple were interested in the possibility of reconciling.

William J. Doherty, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, and Leah Ward Sears, former chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, were the principal authors of the new report, titled “Second Chances.”

They also found that a modest reduction in divorce would benefit more than 400,000 U.S. children each year and could produce significant savings for U.S. taxpayers by reducing the costs of social welfare programs needed because of the effects of divorce on poverty.

The authors proposed model legislation for state legislatures that would:

- Extend the waiting period for divorce to at least a year.
- Require pre-filing education, with modules on reconciliation and on a nonadversarial approach to divorce, for parents of minor children considering divorce.
- Create university-based centers of excellence to improve the education available to couples at risk of divorce.

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