

Study examines family formations in young adulthood

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For many, an important marker of adulthood is forming a family, whether it's having a child, getting married or cohabiting with a romantic partner. Researchers at Bowling Green State University's National Center for Family and Marriage Research's (NCFMR) say a majority (61 percent) of young adults have formed a family by age 25.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, researchers looked at the different pathways to [family formation](#). The results are the latest in a five part series from the NCFMR, "On the Road to Adulthood," which looks at the [experiences](#) of [young adults](#) through age 25.

According to the research, over two-thirds of women (69 percent) have formed a [family](#) in early adulthood compared to just over half of men (53 percent). Education also plays an integral part in how a family is formed, in sometimes unexpected ways. Family formation in early adulthood was most prevalent among young adults with a GED diploma, at 81 percent. Those with at least a bachelor's degree were least likely to form a family before age 25 (44 percent).

"Increasingly, young adults are spending more time in school as they pursue college and advanced degrees," said Dr. Susan Brown, co-director of the NCFMR and a professor of sociology. "This tends to delay family formation—whether childbearing, cohabitation, or [marriage](#)—as most people aim to achieve financial security prior to starting a family."

Marriage in Early Adulthood

Researchers found over a quarter of young adults married prior to their 25th birthday. Over a third of them followed a direct or "traditional" pathway into marriage, meaning they did not live with their partner or have a child before getting married. Men were more likely than women to follow this "traditional" pathway, and it was more prevalent among Hispanics and less so among African-Americans. Only 26 percent of African-Americans who married in [early adulthood](#) did not live with their partner or have a child before getting married.

Young adults with at least a bachelor's degree were most likely to follow a "traditional" marriage path at 55 percent, while those with a GED or without a high school diploma were more likely to cohabit or have a child before marriage.

According to Sociologist Dr. Wendy Manning, co-director of the NCFMR, these patterns showcase the educational divide in family patterns in the United States. "Young adults with the lowest economic prospects are least likely to follow the traditional family patterns."

Cohabitation in Early Adulthood

Researchers found the most common family formation experience was cohabitation, but with considerable variation. Thirty-seven percent of young adults with cohabitation experience have only lived with their significant other. One-half have cohabited and had a child, 36 percent have lived together and married, and nearly a quarter have experienced parenthood, marriage and cohabitation. Of those who cohabited and had a child, the majority first lived together, then became parents.

It turns out living together is a strong pathway to marriage. Among

young adults who got married, over three-fifths cohabited before tying the knot. Women are also more likely than men to live with someone before marriage (63 percent versus 57 percent).

"Today, most marriages are preceded by cohabitation," Brown said. "It's really become a stage in the courtship process. It's unusual for couples to marry without first cohabiting."

Cohabitation before marriage is more prevalent among whites than African-Americans or Hispanics. Factoring in education, those with a GED most often lived together before marriage while those with at least a bachelor's degree were least likely to.

Parenthood in Early Adulthood

The NCFMR found one-third of young adults have had a child and over one in three of them did so before cohabitation or marriage. One-third of African-Americans have a child before entering a union— a rate that is over twice that of Hispanics and almost five times that of whites.

At only 2 percent, it's rare for young adults with at least a bachelor's degree to have a child pre-union. In contrast, about one-fifth of young adults without a diploma or degree or with a GED have had a pre-union birth before age 25. One in seven young adults who had a [child](#) went from cohabitation to marriage and then parenthood by age 25.

Provided by Bowling Green State University

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