

Fewer americans tying the knot, survey shows

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Government report also finds people waiting longer to marry.

(HealthDay) -- That shiny band of gold may be losing its luster: A new government report shows more Americans are either avoiding marriage or marrying much later in life than their parents' generation did.

The percentage of women aged 15 to 44 in their first marriage has dipped steadily, from 44 percent in 1982 to 36 percent in 2006-2010.

But during that same period, women who were cohabitating -- in a [sexual relationship](#) with someone of the opposite sex with whom they lived -- rose from 3 percent to 11 percent.

If not avoiding marriage completely, people appear to be putting it off

until later in life. On average, women got married for the first time at 26, while men did at 28, in 2006-2010.

"People are not abandoning marriage, but they're postponing it until later ages," said report lead author Casey Copen, a demographer with the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. Education and economics seem to be playing a role, she said, with lesser-educated people more likely to cohabitate.

Released on Thursday, the report examines the results of a survey of roughly 12,300 women and 10,400 men. The response rate to the 2006-2010 survey was 77 percent. The report focuses on statistics regarding women because surveys before 2002 didn't look at men.

From 1982 to 2006-2010, the percentage of women aged 15 to 44 who had never been married rose from 34 percent to 38 percent, with the percentage of never-married [black women](#) (55 percent) making up the largest number in the latter period.

Why the change?

"Women become more independent economically now than in the past because of an increase in women's education and labor-force participation. The [economic benefit](#) from marriage may decrease, resulting in a delay in marriage," said Hui Liu, an assistant professor of sociology at Michigan State University who studies marriage.

Cohabitation was most common among those with the least education in 2006-2010: one in five women without a [high school diploma](#) or GED was living with a man in a sexual relationship while unmarried, compared with one in 14 women with a bachelor's degree.

Liu said cohabitation appears to play different roles among racial groups.

"Whites are the most likely to marry their cohabiting partner, so cohabitation for this group may be more of a trial marriage," she said. "In contrast, cohabitations tend to be an alternative to marriage, and perhaps more 'marriage-like,' for blacks."

If women did get married, the likelihood that their marriage would survive for 20 years was 52 percent as of 2006-2010. That's similar to rates in the 1970s. However, nearly 70 percent of Asian women were still in their first marriage after 20 years.

"Divorce risks appear to remain on a pretty high plateau," said Kelly Musick, an associate professor in Cornell University's Department of Policy Analysis and Management, who also studies marriage. "But evident from this report and other work is that the chances of divorce chances are not uniform. Those who marry later and have higher education, for example, have much lower chances of divorce. So, the overall stability in divorce risks masks a lot of variability."

Musick said the results are important because they shed a light on the workings of society. "[Marriage](#) has long been a fundamental social institution, and changing patterns have potential implications for the health and well-being of adults and children," she said. "They also reflect changing attitudes and opportunities and can be a critical window into, for example, the shifting social roles of men and [women](#) and growing inequality across education groups."

More information: The U.S. National Library of Medicine has details about [divorce](#).

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