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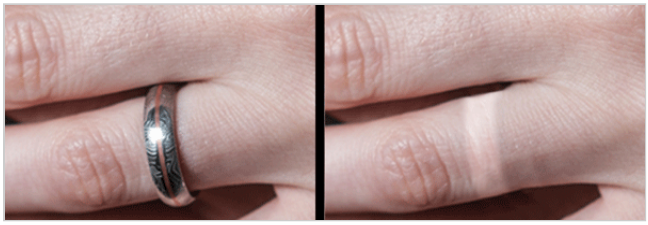
Marriage and divorce: patterns by gender, race, and educational attainment

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), this article examines marriages and divorces of young baby boomers born during the 1957–1964 period. The article presents data on marriages and divorces by age, gender, race, and Hispanic origin, as well as by educational attainment.



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Many changes in the last half century have affected marriage and divorce rates. The rise of the women's liberation movement, the advent of the sexual revolution, and an increase in women's labor force participation altered perceptions of gender roles within marriage during the last 50 years. Cultural norms changed in ways that decreased the aversion to being single and increased the probability of cohabitation.[1] In addition, a decrease in the stigma attached to divorce and the appearance of no-fault divorce laws in many states contributed to an increase in divorce rates.[2]

Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79)—a survey of people born during the 1957–1964 period—this study examines the marriage and divorce patterns for a cohort of young baby boomers up to age 46. In particular, the study focuses on differences in marriage and divorce patterns by educational attainment and by age at marriage. This work is descriptive and does not attempt to explain causation or why marriage patterns differ across groups.

About 85 percent of the NLSY79 cohort married by age 46, and among those who married, a sizeable fraction, almost 30 percent, married more than once. The bulk of marriages occurred by age 28, with relatively few marriages taking place at age 35 or older. Approximately 42 percent of marriages that took place between ages 15 and 46 ended in divorce by age 46. In the NLSY79, women in this cohort were more likely to marry and to remarry

than were men. In addition, marriages of women were more likely to end in divorce, as were marriages that began at younger ages. On average, women married at younger ages than men.

Marriage patterns differed markedly by age at marriage and by educational attainment.

Marriage patterns differed markedly by age at marriage and by educational attainment. College-educated men and women married at older ages compared with their counterparts who had fewer years of schooling. About equal proportions of men and women who received a college degree married by age 46, 88 percent for men and 90 percent for women. Men and women who did not complete high school were less likely to marry than were men and women with more education. Men who earned a bachelor's degree were more likely to marry than men with less education.

The chance of a marriage ending in divorce was lower for people with more education, with over half of marriages of those who did not complete high school having ended in divorce compared with approximately 30 percent of marriages of college graduates.

In their 2007 study, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers used data from the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to examine marriage and divorce patterns up to age 45 for cohorts born in 1940–1945 and 1950–1955.[3] A comparison of the two cohorts shows that the likelihood of marriage declined, the average age at first marriage increased by 1 year, and married couples were more likely to divorce in the latter cohort.

Stevenson and Wolfers found stark differences in marriage patterns between racial groups and between education groups for the 1950–1955 birth cohort: Blacks married later and at lower rates compared with Whites. College graduates and those with less education married at approximately the same rates, but college graduates married later (at age 24.9 versus age 22.8). The probability of divorce for those with a college degree was lower compared with those without a college degree. College graduates were 10 percentage points less likely to divorce.

The current study differs from Stevenson and Wolfers' 2007 study in that the current study examines a younger birth cohort of Americans. This paper considers differences by gender and by racial/ethnic group but focuses on differences across education groups and by age of marriage. The trends of declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates, shown by Stevenson and Wolfers, continue with the 1957–1964 NLSY79 cohort. The longitudinal survey shows the same patterns regarding differences between racial/ethnic groups and education groups as did the SIPP—though the NLSY79 differences between college graduates and the other education groups are even starker. While the marriage rate for the NLSY79 cohort fell to 86.8 percent compared with 89.5 percent for the 1950–1955 cohort, the rate among college graduates slipped only slightly, from 89.5 percent to 89.0 percent, between the two cohorts. In addition, though the rate of divorce rose to 44.8 percent in the NLSY79 cohort compared with 40.8 percent in the 1950–1955 cohort, the rate of divorce among college graduates fell from 34.8 percent to 29.7 percent.

Data source

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 is particularly well suited for studying marriage and divorce patterns. The NLSY79 is a nationally representative sample of men and women who were ages 14 to 22 when they were first interviewed in 1979. Respondents were interviewed annually until 1994, and since then they have

continued to be interviewed on a biennial basis. The NLSY79 collects detailed information on fertility, marital transitions, and employment in a format that allows one to determine the dating of the specific events.

Because the NLSY79 contains a longitudinal marital history for each respondent, the survey permits the study of marriage and divorce over the life cycle. For a specific cohort, the NLSY79 can provide statistics on the percentage of marriages that end in divorce. In contrast, official statistics on marriage and divorce rates from Vital Statistics Records are based on counts of marriages and divorces reported by the states from registration records. The rates are calculated by dividing the marriage and divorce totals by population estimates from the decennial census. These rates tell us what percentage of the U.S. population experiences a marriage or divorce in a given year but cannot provide information on what percentage of marriages end in divorce for the U.S. population.[4]

Because the NLSY79 collects data on many aspects of respondents' lives—including employment, fertility, and income—many researchers have used the NLSY79 to look at marriage in conjunction with a variety of outcomes. For instance, by estimating the relationships among marriage, divorce, work effort, and wage rates, researchers found that being married and having high earnings reinforce each other over time.[5] Others looked at the how income affects the marriage and divorce decisions of young Americans; they found that high earnings capacity increases the probability of marriage and decreases the probability of divorce for young men, but decreases the probability of marriage for young women and has no effect on the likelihood of divorce.[6] A different study used the NLSY79 to identify causal effects of marriage and cohabitation on total family income.[7] This study found that women who enter a cohabiting relationship gain roughly 55 percent in needs-adjusted family income, defined as income per adult equivalent, regardless of whether or not they marry; for men, the level of needs-adjusted family income does not change when they make the same transitions.[8] In addition, a 2009 study found that marriage lowers female wages by 2 to 4 percent in the year of marriage and lowers the wage growth of men by 2 percentage points and of women by about 4 percentage points.[9]

In our research for this article, we use data collected through 2010, which is when the youngest of the sample members were age 46. At each interview, NLSY79 respondents report whether their marital status has changed since the date of their last interview. Respondents who have experienced a change in marital status are asked to list each change and report the type and date of that change.

Using these reports, NLS staff calculates start dates for the first through third marriages and end dates (if any) for the first and second marriages. In the same way, we use the respondent reports on type and date of marital change to create start and end dates for additional marriages. One issue that arises in creating a history of marital changes is the treatment of marital separations. In some instances, respondents report a separation prior to divorce. However, in other instances, respondents report a transition from marriage directly to divorce. Separations are ignored in both the creation of these variables by survey staff and our work in classifying the termination of higher order marriages. Divorce and widowhood are classified as the termination of marriage.

The sample criteria used in this study require that a sample member participated in an NLSY79 interview at age 45 or older, reported valid dates for the start and any end of all marriages, and reported his or her highest grade completed in round 9 (1988) or a later round of data collection. The most recent report of highest grade completed is used to classify respondents on the basis of educational attainment.

This study examines marriage and divorce patterns among people between the ages of 15 and 46 using a sample of 7,357 men and women who had 8,112 marriages during those ages. The data are weighted using custom weights that make the sample used in the study statistically representative of the population from which the NLSY79 was drawn.[10]

Tables 1 and 2 provide some information about the sample composition. The sample is composed of about 51 percent men and 49 percent women. Non-Black non-Hispanics make up almost 80 percent of the sample, with Blacks and Hispanics composing the remainder at 14 percent and 7 percent, respectively.[11] For the remainder of the paper, the term White is used as shorthand for the group of non-Black non-Hispanics; included in the "White" group are Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans as well as Whites. Note that in the NLSY79 more than 90 percent of non-Black non-Hispanics are White. The educational distribution shows that 13 percent of the NLSY79 cohort did not complete high school, 36 percent completed high school but did not go on to college, 24 percent attended some college including earning an associate's degree, and 27 percent earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of survey respondents

Characteristic	Sample size[(1)]	Percent
Gender		
Men	3,613	50.88
Women	3,744	49.12
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	1,389	6.57
Black non-Hispanic	2,253	14.20
Non-Black non-Hispanic	3,715	79.24
Educational attainment		
Less than high school diploma	1,209	12.94
High school graduate, no college	2,671	36.27
Some college or associate's degree	1,868	23.89
Bachelor's degree or higher	1,609	26.90

Notes:

[(1)] The sample sizes are unweighted. The data used in this study, however, are weighted such that the sample employed is representative of those born in the years 1957–1964 and living in the United States in 1978.

Note: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957–1964 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 45 to 52 in 2010–2011. Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity groups are mutually exclusive. Educational attainment is as of the most recent survey.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 2 provides additional breakdowns of the sample by educational attainment for men, women, and each of the race/ethnicity groups. We provide additional detail on the composition of the subgroups by educational attainment because the subsequent tables show that marital outcomes are strongly related to educational attainment.[12]

Table 2. Percentage of the sample by gender, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment

Characteristic	Full sample	Less than high school diploma	High school graduate, no college	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Gender	100.0	12.9	36.3	23.9	26.9
Men	50.9	7.3	19.1	11.2	13.3
Women	49.1	5.6	17.1	12.7	13.7
Race/ethnicity	100.0	12.9	36.3	23.9	26.9
Hispanic or Latino	6.6	1.7	2.1	1.9	0.9
Black non-Hispanic	14.2	2.6	5.5	4.0	2.2
Non-Black non-Hispanic	79.2	8.7	28.7	18.0	23.8
Race/ethnicity and gender	100.0	12.9	36.3	23.9	26.9
Hispanic or Latino men	3.4	0.9	1.2	0.9	0.5
Hispanic or Latino women	3.1	0.8	0.9	1.0	0.5
Black non-Hispanic men	7.3	1.5	3.2	1.6	1.0
Black non-Hispanic women	6.9	1.1	2.3	2.4	1.2
Non-Black non-Hispanic men	40.2	5.0	14.7	8.7	11.8
Non-Black non-Hispanic women	39.1	3.8	14.0	9.3	12.0

Note: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957–1964 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 45 to 52 in 2010–2011. Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity groups are mutually exclusive. Educational attainment is as of the most recent survey. The data used in this study are weighted such that the sample employed is representative of those born in the years 1957–1964 and living in the United States in 1978.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The educational attainment of women exceeds that of men to a small extent. Compared with the percentage of men, a slightly smaller percentage of women fall into the two lowest education groups (less than a high school diploma and high school graduate, no college). The differences in educational attainment across race/ethnic groups are starker. Whites are about twice as likely as Blacks and Hispanics to have earned a bachelor's degree.

Marriage outcomes through age 46

Several trends that emerged from the 1940–1945 to the 1950–1955 birth cohorts continued with the NLSY79 cohort. Tables 3 and 4, which show marriage and divorce over the life cycle for the NLSY79 cohort, are modeled on Stevenson and Wolfers' work.[13] Compared with the 1940–1945 and 1950–1955 birth cohorts examined by Stevenson and Wolfers, fewer men and women in the NLSY79 have married by age 46. By age 46, 86.8 percent of the men and women in the NLSY79 have married, compared with 93.1 percent for the 1940–1945 cohort and 89.5 percent for the 1950–1955 cohort. Both men and women delayed first marriage, with the age of first marriage

rising to ages 25.6 and 23.4 for men and women, respectively, compared with ages 24.7 and 22.6 in the 1950–1955 cohort. In addition, a larger proportion of marriages ended in divorce, approximately 44.2 percent of first marriages, compared with the earlier birth cohorts studied in Stevenson and Wolfers (32.7 percent and 40.8 percent of first marriages end in divorce among the 1940–1945 and 1950–1955 cohorts). Overall, a smaller percentage (65.7 percent) of the NLSY79 cohort remarried following a divorce from a first marriage compared with the 1940–1945 and 1950–1955 cohorts (70.5 percent and 68.9 percent, respectively).

Table 3. Marriage outcomes by age 46 by gender, race/ethnicity and educational attainment

Characteristic	Full sample	Gender		Race/ethnicity			Educational attainment			
		Men	Women	Black non-Hispanics	Non-Black non-Hispanics	Hispanics	Less than high school diploma	High school graduate, no college	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Percent ever married	86.8	84.3	89.5	68.3	90.4	84.6	81.3	87.0	87.1	89.0
Percent ever divorced	38.9	36.0	42.0	33.1	40.0	39.3	47.8	42.8	42.3	26.5
Among those ever married, percent ever divorced	44.8	42.7	46.9	48.4	44.2	46.5	58.8	49.1	48.5	29.8
Among those ever married										
Average age at first marriage	24.4	25.6	23.4	26.2	24.2	23.8	22.7	23.6	24.2	26.5
Percent still in first marriage	53.0	56.1	49.9	47.0	53.9	51.4	37.6	48.6	48.9	69.0
Percent of first marriages ending in divorce	44.2	42.4	46.0	47.9	43.7	45.5	58.2	48.2	47.9	29.7
Among those who divorced										
Average duration of marriage (in years)	9.2	8.9	9.5	9.3	9.1	10.9	10.1	9.0	9.0	9.5
Percent remarrying	65.7	65.3	66.1	52.4	68.6	54.8	60.8	68.0	64.8	66.3
Among those who remarried after divorce										
Average time to remarriage (in years)	4.3	4.2	4.4	4.6	4.3	4.2	4.5	4.3	4.4	3.9
Percent still in second marriage	62.0	63.9	60.2	63.7	61.8	61.0	57.1	60.0	59.4	73.6
Percent of second marriages ending in divorce	36.4	35.2	37.4	33.2	36.6	37.7	40.8	38.8	37.4	26.1
Among those whose second marriage ended in divorce										

See footnotes at end of table.

Table 3. Marriage outcomes by age 46 by gender, race/ethnicity and educational attainment

Characteristic	Full sample	Gender		Race/ethnicity			Educational attainment			
		Men	Women	Black non-Hispanics	Non-Black non-Hispanics	Hispanics	Less than high school diploma	High school graduate, no college	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Average duration of second marriage (years)	6.6	6.8	6.5	6.0	6.6	8.0	6.0	6.7	6.8	6.6
Percent remarrying	54.0	50.4	56.8	45.3	55.2	48.7	62.0	53.8	51.1	50.1
NLSY79 (N=7357)										

Note: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957–1964 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 45 to 52 in 2010–2011. Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity groups are mutually exclusive. Educational attainment is as of the most recent survey. The data used in this study are weighted such that the sample employed is representative of those born in the years 1957–1964 and living in the United States in 1978.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Stark differences in marriage rates by race/ethnicity are apparent in the NLSY79, much like those that were observed for the 1940–1945 and 1950–1955 birth cohorts. Three out of ten Black non-Hispanics born during 1957–1964 did not marry by the age of 46, while the same statistic for Whites remained close to the 1-in-10 ratio seen in the earlier cohorts. That is, the proportion ever married among Blacks decreased from 77.6 percent for the 1950–1955 cohort to 68.3 percent in the NLSY79 cohort. The percentage of Black non-Hispanics who have ever divorced is lower than that of Whites or of Hispanics, reflecting the smaller percentage of Black non-Hispanics who marry. Conditional on having ever married, a larger percentage of Blacks have divorced. As with first marriage, reentry into marriage among Black non-Hispanics was less common than among Whites. Hispanics marry at a younger age. Hispanics who divorced have first marriages that tend to last longer than other racial/ethnic groups.

Notably, the differences in marriage and divorce patterns across education groups are larger in the NLSY79 than those reported for the 1950–1955 birth cohort. The percentage ever married and age at first marriage increased as education increased, with 81 percent of those with less than a high school diploma having married by age 46, compared with 89 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or higher. In contrast, in the 1950–1955 birth cohort, there was no difference in the marriage rate of the college educated compared with those who have less than a college degree. In the NLSY79, the average age at first marriage was 22.7 among those with less than a high school diploma versus 26.5 among those with at least a bachelor's degree. In contrast, in the 1950–1955 birth cohort, college graduates married at age 24.9, and those with less than a college degree married 2 years earlier at age 22.8.

Moreover, the "divorce gap" between college graduates and those with less education was larger in the NLSY79 cohort than it was for the 1950–1955 birth cohort. In the NLSY79 cohort, the divorce rate for first marriages is nearly 20 percentage points lower for those who have completed their bachelor's degree compared with those who have completed high school, regardless of whether they have some college or not. The gap is even greater, approaching 30 percentage points, when comparing those with a college degree to those with less than a high

school diploma. Just as with first marriages, college graduates were more likely to stay in a second marriage when compared with groups that have less education.

Further disaggregating the sample by both education and gender, table 4 shows notable differences between men and women who had the same level of education. Men and women with at least a bachelor's degree are about equally likely to marry by age 46 (90 percent and 88 percent, respectively). However, at all lower levels of education, women are more likely to marry compared with men. For men, the probability of marriage increases with education. Among women, those who did not complete high school are less likely to marry compared with women of all higher education levels. However, in contrast to the situation for men, there is little difference in the propensity to marry among women with at least a high school degree. Relative to male members of their cohort who did not complete high school, men with at least a bachelor's degree are about 11 percentage points more likely to have married by the age of 46, while female college graduates are only about 4 percentage points more likely to have married than are women who did not complete high school.

Table 4. Marriage outcomes by age 46 by gender and educational attainment

Characteristic	Less than high school diploma	High school graduate, no college	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Men				
Percent ever married	77.5	84.2	84.3	88.0
Percent ever divorced	44.4	41.2	39.5	20.9
Among those ever married, percent ever divorced	57.2	49.0	46.9	23.7
Among those ever married				
Average age at first marriage	24.3	24.8	25.5	27.2
Percent still in first marriage	41.4	50.0	52.0	75.1
Percent of first marriages ending in divorce	56.6	48.7	46.3	23.7
Among those who divorced				
Average duration of marriage (in years)	9.4	8.7	8.5	9.5
Percent remarrying	58.3	66.7	65.5	68.9
Among those who remarried after divorce				
Average time to remarriage (in years)	5.4	4.1	3.7	3.9
Percent still in second marriage	60.1	59.4	60.7	85.0
Percent of second marriages ending in divorce	38.8	40.1	37.3	15.0
Among those whose second marriage ended in divorce				
Average duration of second marriage (in years)	6.0	6.9	6.9	7.2
Percent remarrying	56.4	50.8	45.7	49.2
Women				
Percent ever married	86.2	90.3	89.6	89.9

See footnotes at end of table.

Table 4. Marriage outcomes by age 46 by gender and educational attainment

Characteristic	Less than high school diploma	High school graduate, no college	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Percent ever divorced	52.3	44.5	44.7	32.0
Among those ever married, percent ever divorced	60.6	49.3	49.9	35.6
Among those ever married				
Average age at first marriage	20.9	22.3	23.2	25.9
Percent still in first marriage	33.3	47.1	47.4	63.3
Percent of first marriages ending in divorce	59.9	47.6	49.3	35.4
Among those who divorced				
Average duration of marriage (in years)	10.9	9.3	9.3	9.4
Percent remarrying	63.5	69.5	64.3	64.7
Among those who remarried after divorce				
Average time to remarriage (in years)	3.6	4.5	5.0	3.8
Percent still in second marriage	54.1	60.7	58.4	65.8
Percent of second marriages ending in divorce	42.9	37.4	37.5	33.6
Among those whose second marriage ended in divorce				
Average duration of second marriage (in years)	6.1	6.5	6.7	6.5
Percent remarrying	67.2	56.8	55.3	50.4

Note: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957–1964 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 45 to 52 in 2010–2011. Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity groups are mutually exclusive. Educational attainment is as of the most recent survey. The data used in this study are weighted such that the sample employed is representative of those born in the years 1957–1964 and living in the United States in 1978.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Historically, college-educated women had been less likely to marry compared with less educated women.[14] However, this cohort has continued the trend in which college-educated women became at least as likely to marry as less educated women.[15]

At each level of educational attainment, men marry later compared with women. Although both men and women with a college education delay first marriage compared with their counterparts who have less than a high school diploma, for women the average length of the delay is 5 years, compared with almost 3 years for men.

For both men and women, the probability of divorce declines with educational attainment. The gradient, however, is steeper for men than it is for women.

For both men and women, the probability of divorce declines with educational attainment. The gradient, however, is steeper for men than it is for women. For men, those who married and only completed high school are 25 percentage points more likely to divorce than are their counterparts who have a college degree. In contrast, this difference is roughly half as large for women. The key to this difference is that college-educated men and women who marry divorce at different rates, with about a quarter of college-educated men divorcing compared with 35 percent of women.

Just as men with more education were more likely to get married a first time than were men with less education, men with more education were more likely to remarry after their first divorce. For women who have divorced, the propensity to remarry did not increase with education. It is also interesting to note that men with a college education were much more likely to remain in their second marriages (85 percent) relative to women with the same amount of education (65.8 percent).

Marital history by age

The data in table 5 show how marital status evolved with age. Each column shows the percentage of people with a particular marital status, such as “in first marriage” or “second marriage ended, no third marriage.”

Table 5. Marital history at selected ages by gender, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, percent distribution

Characteristic and age	Never married	In first marriage	First marriage ended, no second marriage	In second marriage	Second marriage ended, no third marriage	In third marriage	Third marriage ended, no fourth marriage	In or beyond fourth marriage
Total								
15	99.9	0.1	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	47.6	44.2	5.2	2.6	0.3	0.1	—	—
35	19.2	54.6	10.9	11.1	2.1	1.7	0.2	0.2
45	13.7	48.6	13.3	15.6	4.3	3.0	1.0	0.5
Men								
15	100.0	0.0	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	56.1	38.4	3.7	1.7	0.0	—	—	—
35	22.5	55.4	10.1	9.1	1.5	1.3	0.2	0.1
45	16.3	49.8	12.2	14.1	4.0	2.5	0.8	0.3
Women								
15	99.9	0.1	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	38.8	50.2	6.7	3.5	0.6	0.3	—	—
35	15.8	53.9	11.8	13.1	2.8	2.2	0.2	0.4
45	11.0	47.3	14.4	17.1	4.5	3.6	1.3	0.7
White non-Hispanics								
15	99.9	0.1	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	44.7	46.4	5.4	3.0	0.3	0.2	—	—
35	15.3	57.4	10.6	12.0	2.4	1.9	0.2	0.2
45	10.0	51.3	12.4	16.6	4.6	3.3	1.2	0.6
Black non-Hispanics								

See footnotes at end of table.

Table 5. Marital history at selected ages by gender, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, percent distribution

Characteristic and age	Never married	In first marriage	First marriage ended, no second marriage	In second marriage	Second marriage ended, no third marriage	In third marriage	Third marriage ended, no fourth marriage	In or beyond fourth marriage
15	100.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	65.0	30.2	3.7	0.8	0.2	0.0	—	—
35	40.3	38.8	12.7	6.2	1.0	1.0	0.1	—
45	32.9	34.4	16.5	10.7	3.0	1.9	0.3	0.2
Hispanics								
15	100.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	44.5	48.0	5.6	1.5	0.3	0.1	—	—
35	20.7	54.7	11.7	10.6	0.9	1.0	—	0.4
45	16.4	46.1	16.4	17.2	3.6	2.0	0.7	0.6
Less than a high school diploma								
15	99.6	0.4	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	42.1	45.1	8.1	3.3	0.9	0.4	—	—
35	24.0	43.6	15.0	10.9	3.5	2.1	0.5	0.5
45	19.1	34.3	18.9	15.7	4.9	5.4	0.9	1.0
High school graduate, no college								
15	99.9	0.1	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	40.4	49.4	6.3	3.3	0.4	0.2	—	—
35	18.0	51.7	11.8	13.3	2.3		—	—
45	13.5	44.5	13.7	17.7	5.2	2.9	1.7	0.8
Some college or associate's degree								
15	100.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	44.5	46.5	6.0	2.8	0.2	0.1	—	—
35	19.1	51.4	13.1	12.1	2.2	1.7	0.3	0.1
45	13.3	45.9	14.5	16.4	5.0	3.6	1.0	0.4
Bachelor's degree or higher								
15	100.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
25	62.7	34.8	1.6	0.9	0.0	—	—	—
35	18.5	66.7	5.8	7.2	1.1	0.7	0.1	—
45	11.8	63.3	8.9	12.1	2.0	1.6	0.3	0.1

Note: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957–1964 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 45 to 52 in 2010–2011. Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity groups are mutually exclusive. Educational attainment is as of the most recent survey. The data used in this study are weighted such that the sample employed is representative of those born in the years 1957–1964 and living in the United States in 1978.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

At age 15, virtually none of the respondents have married. By age 25, less than half of the respondents have never married, 44 percent are in their first marriage and 8 percent had a first marriage that ended. When they are 10 years older, at age 35, less than 20 percent have never married, 55 percent are in their first marriage, 11 percent had their first marriage end but have not remarried, and 11 percent are in their second marriage. As the

respondents continue to age, the percentages who have never married or who are in their first marriage decline, while the percentage who have experienced other marital changes increases.

At every age, women have experienced more marital changes than men. On average, women married earlier than men. At age 25, about 39 percent of women have never married, compared with 56 percent of men. At age 45, the percentage of never married men and women is more comparable, with 16 percent of men and 11 percent of women never having married. In addition, women have more marriages that ended.

In the NLSY79, Blacks were less likely to marry than were their White and Hispanic counterparts. At age 25, about 45 percent of Whites and Hispanics have never married. The proportion of Blacks who have never married at age 25—65 percent—is more than 20 percentage points higher. The marital status of Blacks, in contrast to that of Whites and Hispanics, did not converge with age. When the respondents are age 45, the percentage of Blacks who have married still lags those of Whites and Hispanics substantially; about 33 percent of Blacks have never married, compared with 10 percent and 16 percent of Whites and Hispanics, respectively. Blacks are also less likely to have remarried than Whites and Hispanics when their first marriages ended.

When respondents were age 25, the marital histories of those who earned a bachelor's degree differed from the histories of respondents with less education. While 63 percent of the college graduates had never married, the percentage who had never married ranges from 40 to 45 percent for those with less education. At age 35, this pattern reversed: the percentage of college graduates who had never married (19 percent) was comparable to the percentage of high school graduates who had never married (18 percent), but these percentages were exceeded by that of people with less than a high school diploma who had never married (24 percent). Furthermore, about two-thirds of college graduates had married and remained in their first marriage at age 35 versus about half of high school graduates (with or without some college) and 44 percent of people with less than a high school diploma.

From age 35 to 45, the marital histories of college graduates continued to diverge from those of their less educated counterparts. At age 45, 12 percent of college graduates remained never married, 63 percent were married and in their first marriages, 9 percent had had their first marriage end and had not remarried, 12 percent were married and in a second marriage, and 4 percent had a second marriage that had ended. In contrast, 34 percent of those with less than a high school credential were married and in a first marriage at age 45. For this lowest education group, a higher percentage had seen their first marriage end, with 19 percent unmarried following the end of their first marriage, 16 percent married in a second marriage, and 12 percent having had a second marriage end.

Duration of marriages by age and education

The data in table 6 show the duration of marriage by age of the survey respondent at time of marriage and by educational attainment. In this table, a marriage, rather than an individual, is the unit of observation.

Table 6. Duration of marriages begun by individuals ages 15 to 46 in 1978–2010 by age, gender, and educational attainment

Age at start of marriage and educational attainment	Percent of marriages ongoing at 46th birthday	Percent of marriages ending in divorce	Percent of marriages ongoing			
			After 2 years	After 5 years	After 10 years	After 15 years
Ages 15 to 46	57.7	43.1	91.5	80.6	69.0	62.6
Less than a high school diploma	47.3	52.8	87.4	76.1	63.2	55.2
High school graduate, no college	54.0	46.7	90.5	78.4	65.8	58.9
Some college or associate's degree	54.9	45.7	91.0	78.9	66.6	59.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	71.8	29.6	95.5	88.1	79.5	75.1
Ages 15 to 22	41.0	58.4	89.4	74.9	60.5	50.9
Less than a high school diploma	31.3	68.8	87.7	72.4	55.6	45.9
High school graduate, no college	42.4	57.2	88.6	74.2	60.5	51.3
Some college or associate's degree	38.3	60.0	89.0	73.9	58.5	47.3
Bachelor's degree or higher	53.6	46.6	94.3	82.0	70.0	62.4
Ages 23 to 28	57.6	43.1	91.9	81.9	69.7	62.2
Less than a high school diploma	44.0	54.1	84.0	76.5	62.4	50.4
High school graduate, no college	51.1	49.9	90.1	78.7	64.5	56.0
Some college or associate's degree	55.1	45.6	91.9	79.3	66.7	59.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	70.1	31.3	96.0	88.5	79.2	73.9
Ages 29 to 34	65.2	36.2	92.0	82.1	70.0	65.5
Less than a high school diploma	54.3	43.9	88.6	75.0	61.2	54.3
High school graduate, no college	59.7	42.6	91.5	79.1	65.4	60.0
Some college or associate's degree	60.5	40.6	90.2	79.5	66.1	61.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	78.4	23.4	94.8	89.6	80.9	78.4
Ages 35 to 40	79.9	23.4	94.7	86.3	79.9	—
Less than a high school diploma	77.5	30.7	87.9	81.1	77.5	—
High school graduate, no college	77.4	25.1	96.2	86.0	77.4	—
Some college or associate's degree	77.6	25.8	94.5	84.7	77.6	—
Bachelor's degree or higher	87.8	13.4	96.8	91.6	—	—
Ages 41 to 46	92.1	10.5	93.7	—	—	—
Less than a high school diploma	90.4	9.1	92.6	—	—	—
High school graduate, no college	90.5	8.4	92.5	—	—	—
Some college or associate's degree	93.1	13.9	93.5	—	—	—
Bachelor's degree or higher	94.5	10.6	96.7	—	—	—

Note: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 consists of men and women who were born in the years 1957–1964 and were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979. These individuals were ages 45 to 52 in 2010–2011. Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity groups are mutually exclusive. Educational attainment is as of the most recent survey. The data used in this study are weighted such that the sample employed is representative of those born between 1957 to 1964 and living in the United States in 1978.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Approximately 43 percent of marriages that took place at ages 15–46 ended in divorce. In general, there is an inverse correlation between education and the likelihood of a marriage ending in divorce. More than half of the marriages by men and women with less than a high school diploma ended in divorce. Marriages of high school graduates and those with some college or an associate degree ended in divorce 47 percent and 46 percent of the time, respectively. Among college graduates, 30 percent of marriages ended in divorce. Because age at marriage increases with education, the question arises of whether lower divorce rates among the college educated are due to having had fewer years over which their marriages could have ended.

This table provides two pieces of information to the contrary. First, for college graduates, the percentage of marriages that are ongoing at 10 and 15 years exceeds the percentages among the other education groups. At 15 years, 75 percent of the marriages of college graduates are ongoing compared with 55–60 percent of marriages among those with less than a college degree. Second, with the exception of marriages that began between ages 41 and 46, divorce rates generally decline as educational attainment increases. For instance, of those marriages that began from ages 23 to 28, the proportion that ended in divorce was 54 percent for those with less than a high school diploma, 50 percent for high school graduates with no college, 46 percent for high school graduates with some college, and 31 percent for college graduates. A similar pattern occurs among marriages that began from ages 35 to 40: the proportion that ended in divorce was 31 percent for those with less than a high school diploma, 25 percent for high school graduates with no college, 26 percent for high school graduates with some college, and 13 percent for college graduates.

A negative relationship between the age at which the marriage began and the propensity for the marriage to end in divorce is also apparent. Among marriages that began at ages 15 to 22, 58 percent ended in divorce. Of marriages that began at ages 23 to 28, 43 percent ended in divorce. Of marriages that began at ages 29 to 34, the percentage that ends in divorce declines further to 36 percent. Hence, the data support the finding that, on average, people who marry later are more likely than younger couples to stay married.

Caution should be exercised, however, in interpreting the data for marriages that begin after age 35. The number of years that respondents who marry at older ages are in the survey is relatively short, so it is not possible to know whether these marriages will, in time, end in divorce or will continue.

Two patterns emerge in table 6: for the NLSY79 cohort, (1) the probability of divorce decreases as educational attainment increases, and (2) the probability of divorce generally decreases as age at marriage increases. In addition, as shown in tables 3 through 5, college graduates marry at older ages than do people with less education. It may be the case that marrying at older ages decreased the chance of divorce for this cohort. In addition, some of the same personal or socioeconomic characteristics that help in the completing of a college degree may also help in maintaining a marriage.

USING DATA FROM THE NLSY79, this article examines marriages from ages 15 to 46 for a cohort of Americans born between 1957 and 1964. As time passes and more rounds of data are collected by the NLSY79, the NLSY79 will provide a longer horizon over which to examine marital patterns for this cohort.

About 85 percent of the NLSY79 cohort married by age 46, and among those who did marry, nearly 30 percent married more than once. The bulk of marriages occurred by age 28, with marriage at age 35 or older relatively infrequent.

The propensity to marry varied by sex, race/ethnicity, and education. In the NLSY79, women were more likely to both marry and remarry. On average, women married at younger ages than men. Compared with Whites and Hispanics, Blacks were less likely to marry and, conditional on marriage, more likely to divorce. Men and women who did not complete high school were less likely to marry than were men and women with more education. Women in all other education groups had approximately the same probability of marrying by age 46, about 90 percent. For men, however, those who graduated college were more likely to marry than were men with less education. For both men and women, those who have a college degree married at older ages—on average, age 26 for women and 27 for men—compared with their counterparts who have less education. For example, among people who did not complete high school, the average age at first marriage was 21 for women and 24 for men.

Approximately 43 percent of all marriages that began from age 15 to 46 ended in divorce. Women's marriages were more likely to end in divorce, as were marriages that began at younger ages. The probability of divorce did not vary much across the racial/ethnic groups. The chance of a marriage ending in divorce decreases as educational attainment rises: over half of the marriages among people who did not complete high school ended in divorce compared with approximately 30 percent of marriages among the college graduates. Moreover, the inverse relationship between probability of divorce and educational attainment remains evident when the data are broken down by age at the start of the marriage.

Note: The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the views of other BLS staff members. The authors wish to thank Chuck Pierret, Mark Loewenstein, and Tom Nardone for useful comments. All errors are our own.

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NOTES

[1] For women ages 15 to 44, the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) shows that 5 percent were cohabiting in 1988, 7 percent in 1995, and 9 percent in 2002. For the NLSY79 cohort, the 1986 interview found that 7.3 percent of the men and women ages 21 to 29 were cohabitating. Five and 10 years later, cohabitation rates were roughly steady at 8.1 percent and 7.0 percent, respectively.

[2] Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "Bargaining in the shadow of the law: divorce laws and family distress," *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* February 2006, pp. 267–288.

[3] Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "Marriage and divorce: changes and their driving forces," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, spring 2007, pp. 27–52.

[4] Calculating the ratio of the marriage and divorce rates can provide the proportion of marriages that end in divorce only if the marriages that occur in a given year have the same probability of ending in divorce as the past marriages that are generating the divorces recorded in the same year. This is not the case. Divorce rates peaked in 1981. Of marriages that began in the 1970s, approximately half ended in divorce within 25 years. An insufficient time has passed to calculate the percentage of marriages that began in the 1980s that will have ended 25 years later, but of marriages that began during the 1980s, the proportion that had ended by each anniversary was lower compared with those that began in the 1970s. The proportion ending by each anniversary is lower still for marriages that began during the 1990s. See Stevenson and Wolfers, "Marriage and divorce."

[5] Avner Ahituv and Robert Lerman, "How do marital status, work effort, and wage rates interact?" *Demography*, August 2007, pp. 623–647.

[6] Simon Burgess, Carol Propper, and Arnstein Aassve "The role of income in marriage and divorce transitions among young Americans," *Journal of Population Economics*, August 2003, pages 455–475.

[7] Audrey Light, "Gender differences in the marriage and cohabitation income premium," *Demography*, May 2004, pp. 263–284.

[8] In "Gender differences," Light calculates adult equivalence by assigning weights to family members: one for the first adult, 0.8 for the second adult, 0.4 for the first child, and 0.3 for subsequent children.

[9] David Loughran and Julie Zissimopoulos, "Why wait? The effect of marriage and childbearing on the wages of men and women," *Journal of Human Resources,* spring 2009, pp. 326–349.

[10] The documentation for the custom weights is available at http://www.nlsinfo.org/pub/usersvc/CustomWeight/CustomWeightingProgramDocumentation.htm

[11] For the definitions used in this paper, race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity are mutually exclusive. The NLSY79 sample was drawn such that it was representative of Blacks, Hispanics, and non-Black non-Hispanics living in the United States in 1979. In this paper, these are the three race/ethnic groups considered.

[12] The smallest subsamples are those for college-educated Hispanics, which comprised 79 men and 99 women. When weighted each of these cells represents about half of a percent of the NLSY79 population.

[13] See table 1 in Stevenson and Wolfers, "Marriage and divorce."

[14] Paula England and Jonathan Bearak, "Women's education and their likelihood of marriage: a historical reversal," fact sheet prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families, April 2012, http://contemporaryfamilies.org/work-family/fact-sheet-marriage-and-education.html.

[15] Statistics for the 1950–1955 cohort are presented in Stevenson and Wolfers, "Marriage and divorce."

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