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.

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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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.