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Fifty Years Of Looking At Changes In People's Lives

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes new numbers each month or quarter on unemployment, job growth, productivity, prices, pay, and benefits. To answer some questions about the labor market and economy, we may need years or decades instead of months or quarters. For example, how many jobs do people hold in their lifetimes? How much of people’s lives do they spend working or looking for work? How many people ever marry or divorce or have children? We call surveys designed to answer questions like these “longitudinal” surveys. Longitudinal surveys help us understand long-term changes, such as how events that happened when a person was in high school affect labor market success as an adult.

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the National Longitudinal Surveys, which have tracked the experiences of different generations of Americans. This Spotlight on Statistics looks at some measures from two of those generations—people born in 1957–64 and people born in 1980–84.

Rate of job changing slows as people age

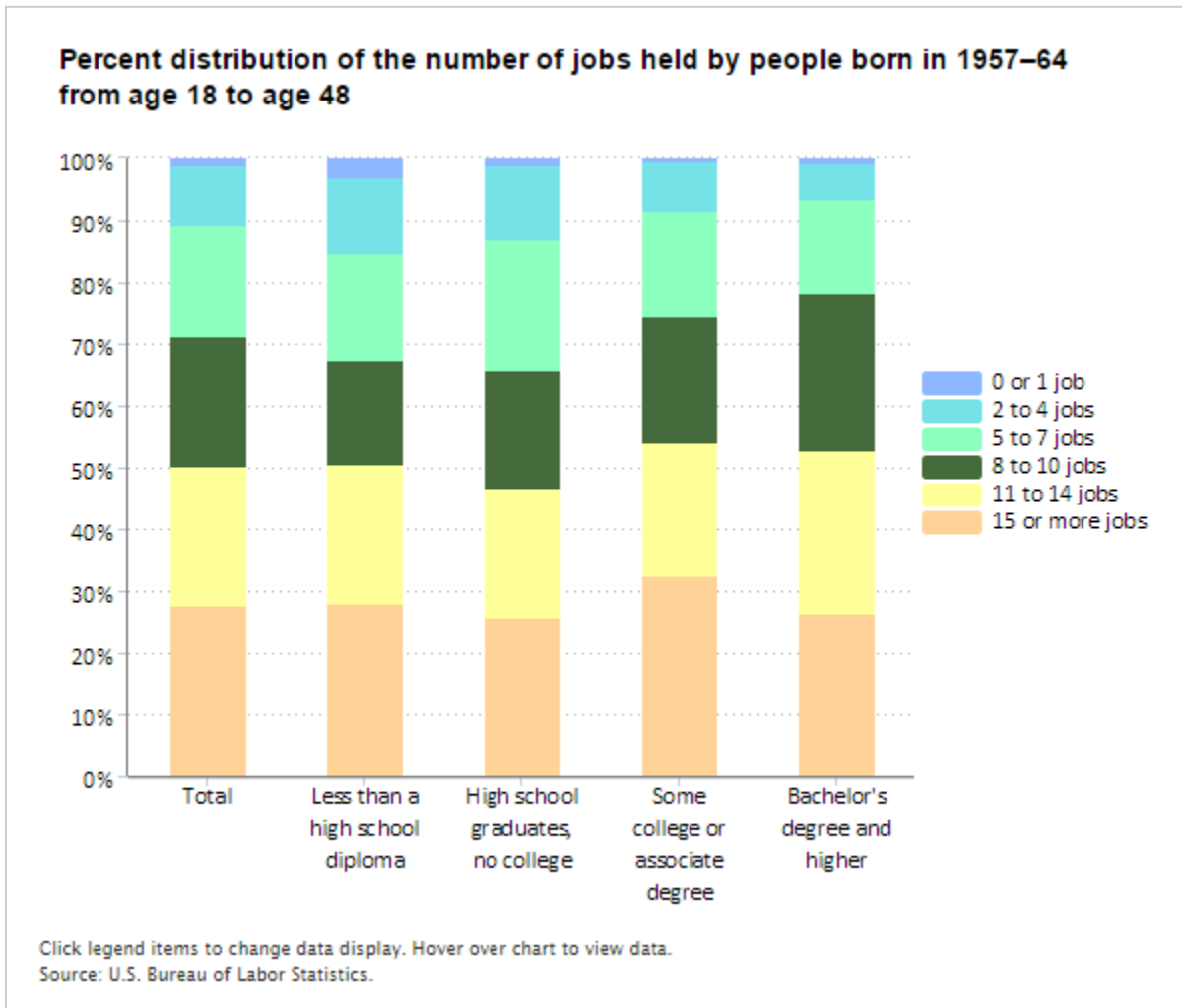
People born in 1957–64, the latter part of the post-World War II "baby boom" generation, held an average of 11.7 jobs from age 18 to age 48. They held nearly half of them, 5.5 jobs, by the time they were age 24. They held an average of 2.9 jobs from age 25 to age 29. The average was 2.0 jobs from ages 30 to 34, 2.1 jobs from ages 35 to 39, and 2.4 jobs from ages 40 to 48.

From ages 18 to 24, baby boomers with some college or a bachelor's degree held more jobs than high school dropouts or high school graduates who had not attended college. After age 24, the average number of jobs held differed little among the educational groups.



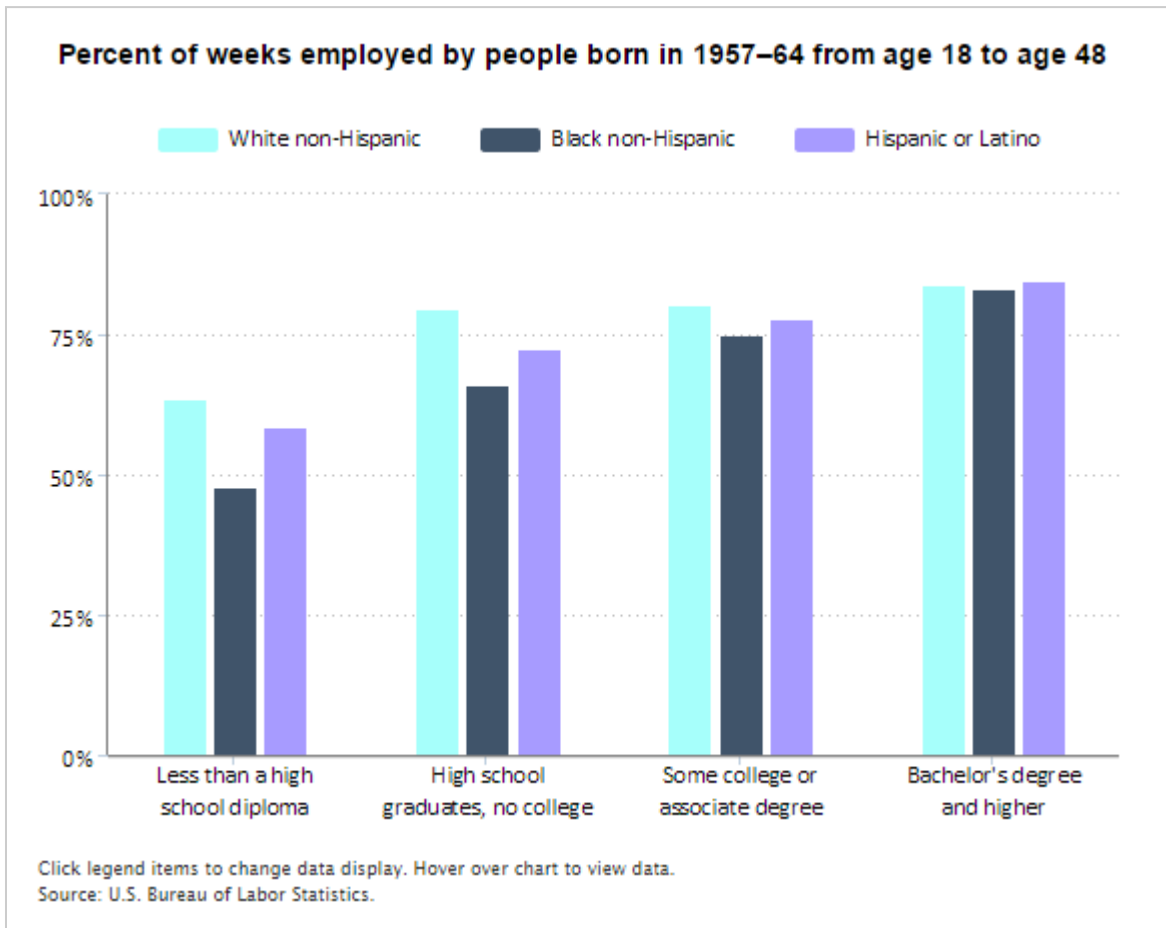
Some people held more jobs than average, others held fewer

Nearly all of these baby boomers had held more than one job by age 48; less than 1 percent of them had held no jobs or 1 job. More than a quarter (27.7 percent) had held 15 jobs or more from age 18 to age 48. High school dropouts were slightly more likely than other education groups to have held fewer than 4 jobs. Otherwise there were not large differences among the educational groups in the number of jobs held.



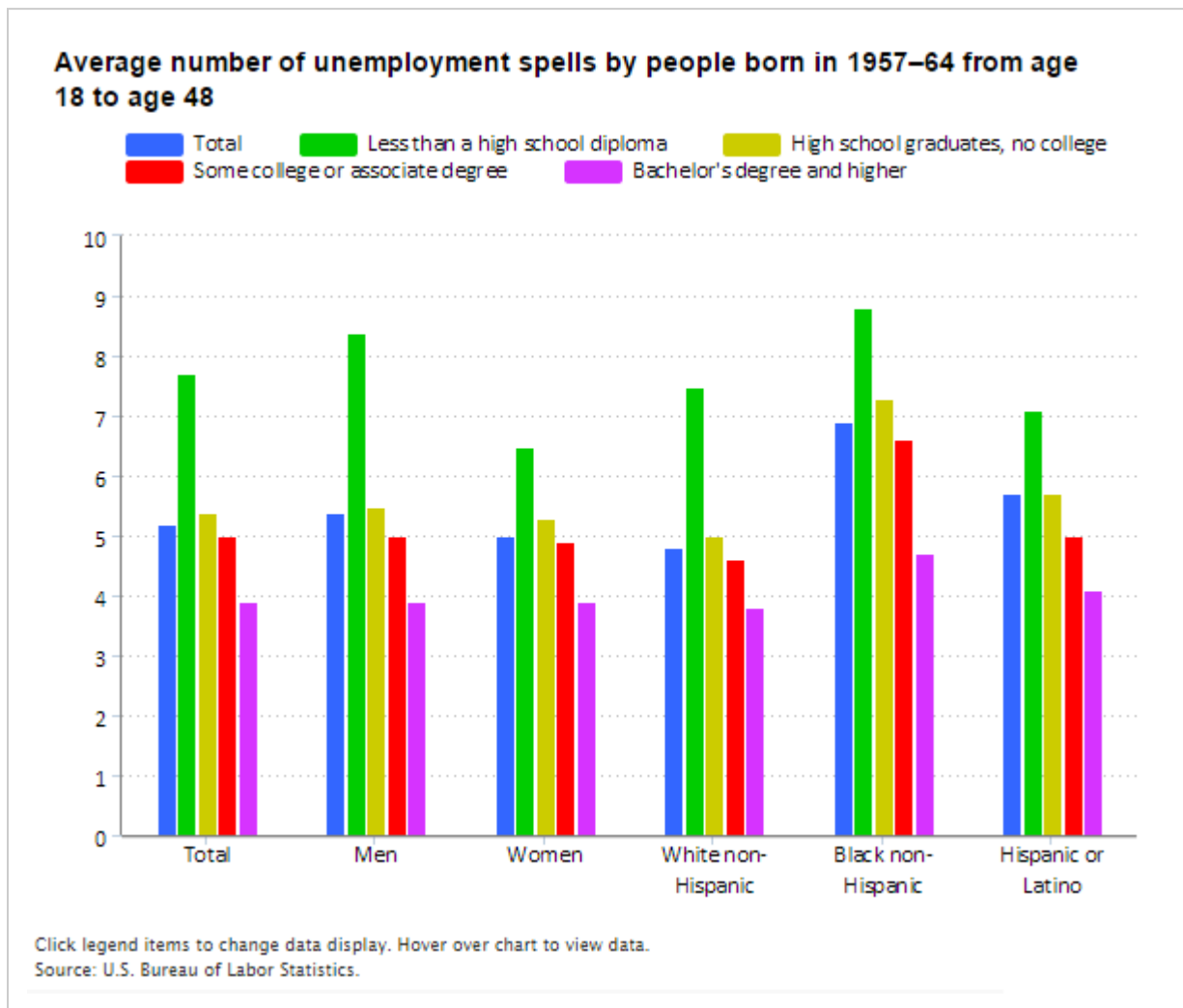
High school dropouts were employed fewer weeks than other groups

On average, these baby boomers were employed during 78 percent of all the weeks from age 18 to age 48. People who had never completed high school were employed fewer weeks than people who had graduated from high school or attended college. Among high school dropouts, non-Hispanic Whites were employed more weeks on average from age 18 to age 48 than were non-Hispanic Blacks or Hispanics and Latinos. Among baby boomers with at least a bachelor’s degree, there was little difference among Whites, Blacks, or Hispanics in the percentage of weeks they were employed.



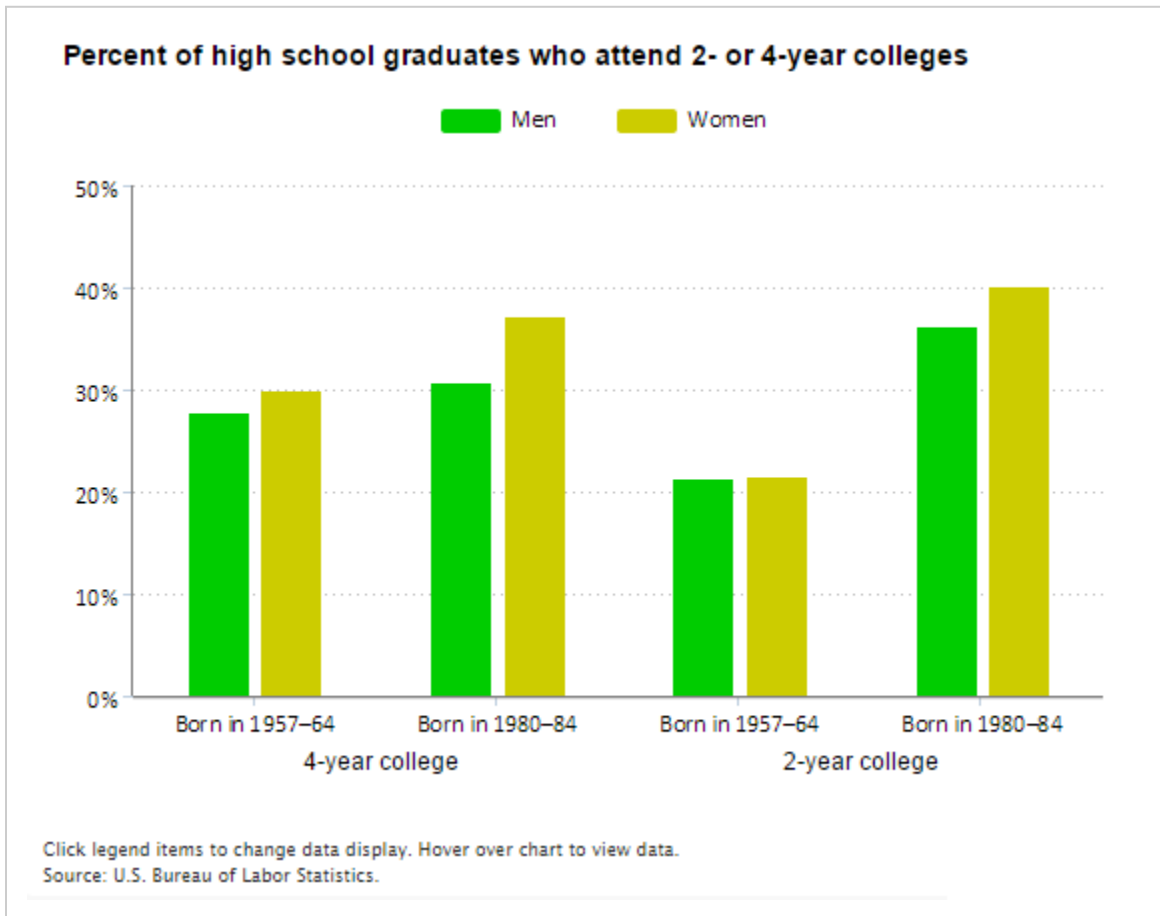
People with less education experience more unemployment spells

We know from the monthly survey of the U.S. labor market that people with less education have higher unemployment rates. From our longitudinal survey of people born in 1957–64, we learn that people with less education also experience more frequent spells of unemployment. On average, these baby boomers experienced 5.2 unemployment spells from age 18 to age 48. People without a high school diploma experienced 7.7 spells on average from age 18 to age 48. People who completed high school but did not attend college experienced 5.4 unemployment spells, while people with at least a bachelor’s degree experienced 3.9 spells.



A gender gap in college attendance emerges

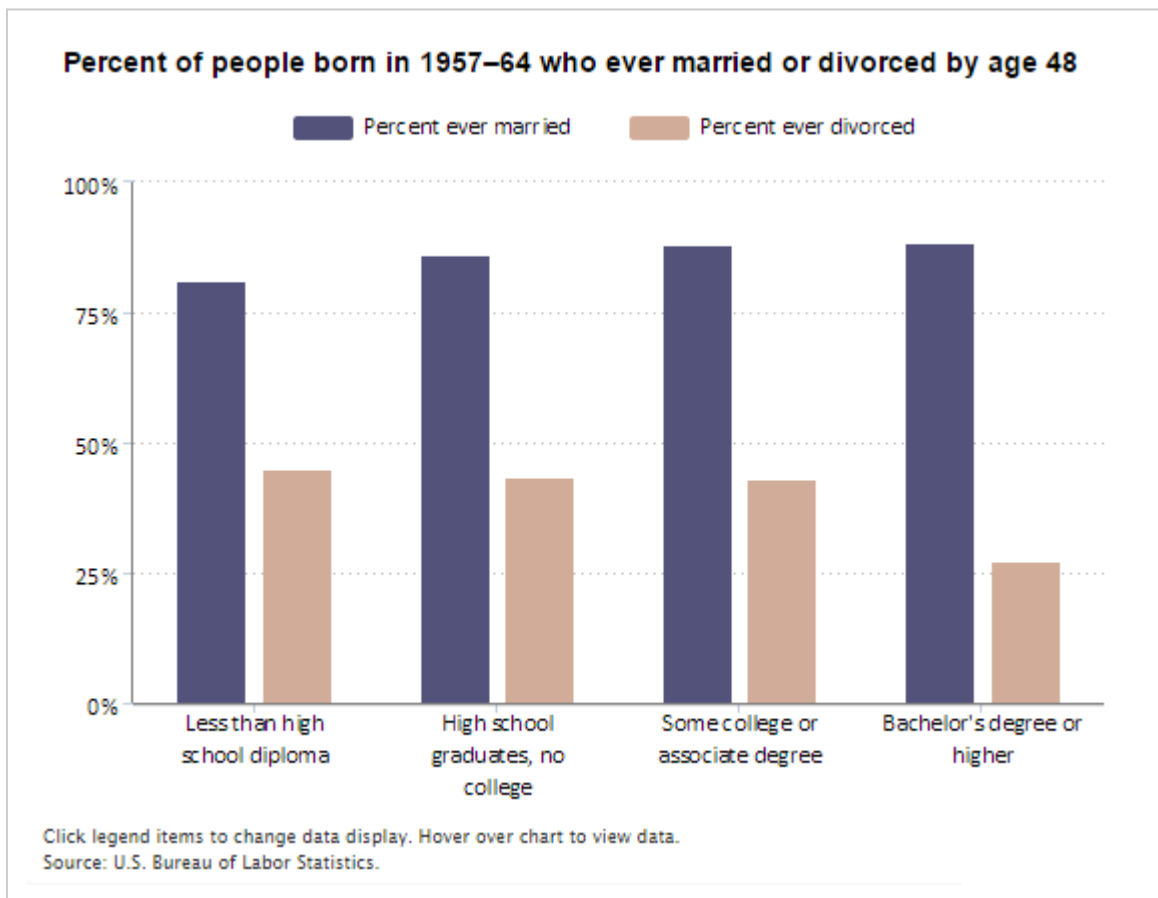
Among people born in 1957–64, women were slightly more likely than men to have attended a 4-year college; women and men in that generation were equally likely to have attended a 2-year college. Among people born in 1980–84, a larger gender gap in college attendance emerged; women were more likely than men to have attended either a 4-year or 2-year college.



College graduates more likely to marry, less likely to divorce

Among people born in 1957–64, most had married at least once by age 48. High school dropouts were less likely to have married than baby boomers with more education; 81 percent of dropouts had married by age 48, compared with 86 percent of high school graduates who had not attended college and 88 percent of people with at least a bachelor’s degree.

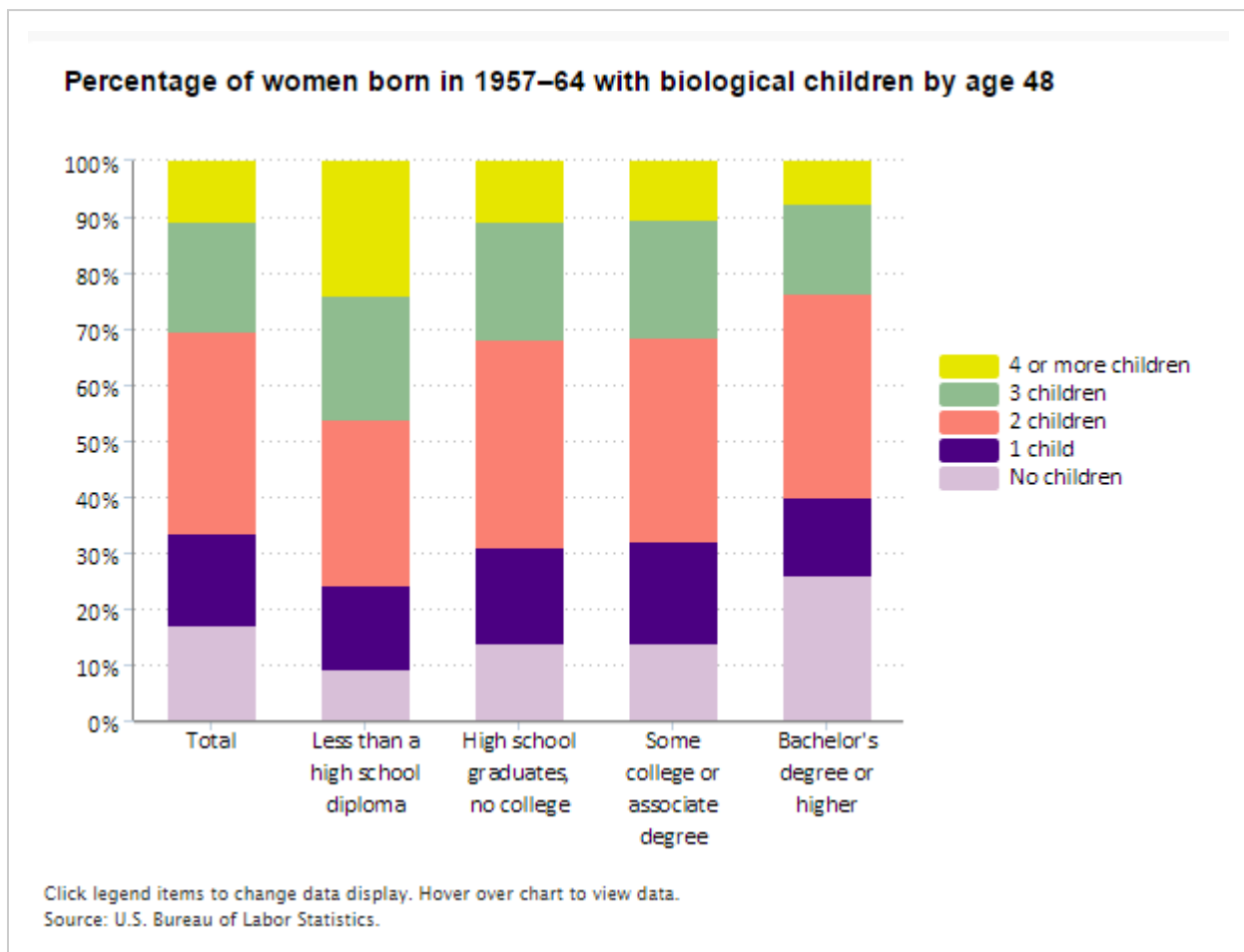
College graduates were less likely to divorce than people with less education. About 27 percent of baby boomers with a bachelor’s degree had divorced at least once by age 48. That compares with 45 percent of high school dropouts and 43 percent of both high school graduates and people who had attended college but not earned a bachelor’s degree.



Most women had at least one child by age 48

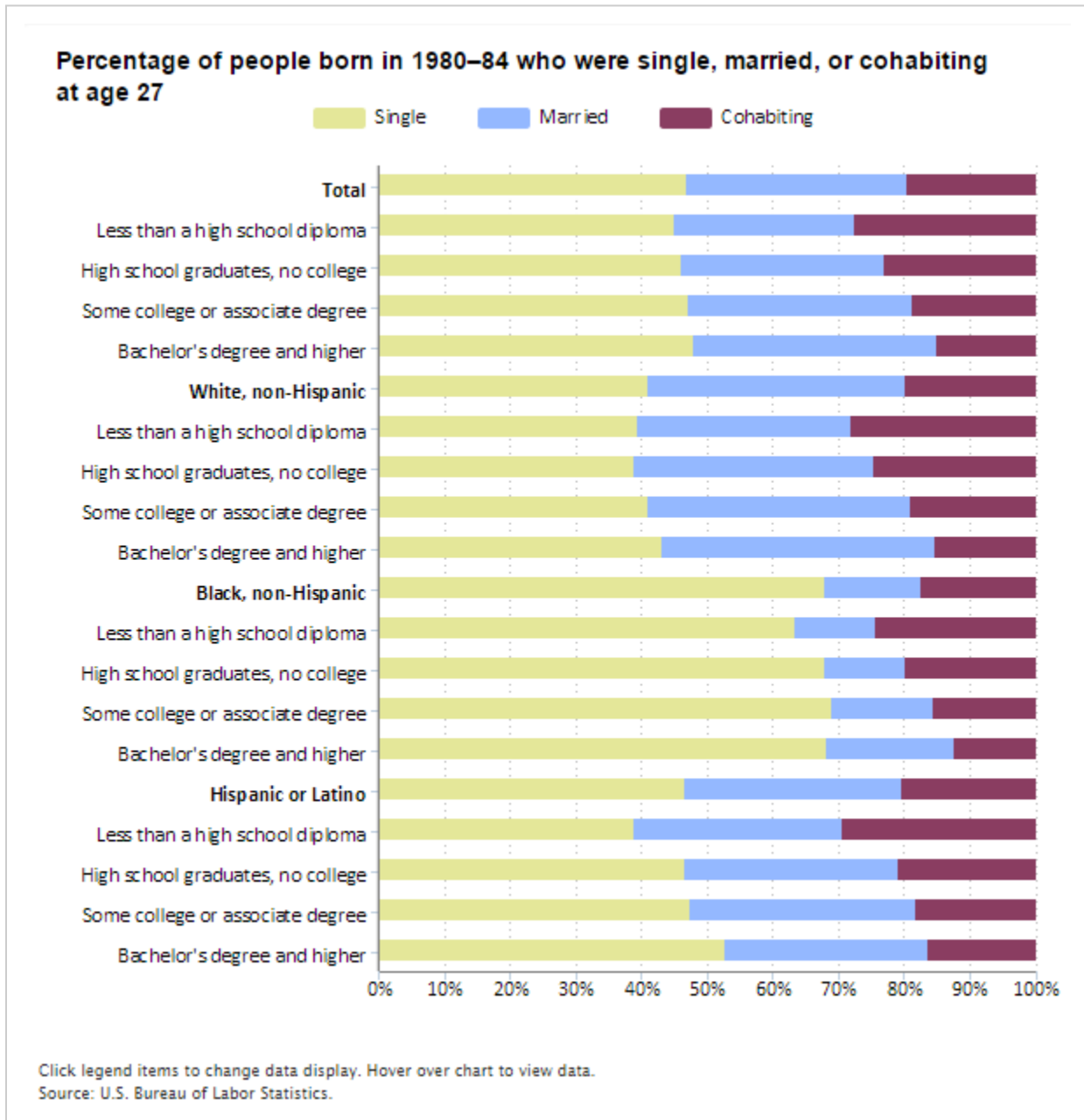
Among women born in 1957–64, 83 percent had at least one biological child by age 48. Having two children was most common. About 36 percent had two children, 20 percent had three children, 16 percent had one child, and 11 percent had four children or more.

Women with at least a bachelor’s degree were less likely to have children than women with less education. Twenty-six percent of women with at least a bachelor’s degree had no children, compared with 14 percent of both high school graduates and women who had attended college but not earned a bachelor’s degree. Nine percent of women without a high school diploma did not have any biological children. Women without a high school diploma were more than twice as likely as other women to have four or more children.



Almost half were single at age 27

Among people born in 1980–84, 47 percent were single at age 27. About 33 percent were married, and 20 percent were cohabiting—that is, living with a partner but not married. People with at least a bachelor’s degree were slightly more likely to be single at age 27 than were people with less education. Blacks were considerably more likely than Whites or Hispanics or Latinos to be single at age 27. Among Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics, people without a high school diploma were more likely to cohabit than were people with more education.



More information

This Spotlight on Statistics presents data from two surveys. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, or NLSY79, is a nationally representative sample of people who were born in 1957–64 and lived in the United States when the survey began in 1979. Respondents were ages 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979 and ages 47 to 56 when interviewed most recently in 2012–13. They were interviewed annually from 1979 to 1994 and biennially since 1994.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, or NLSY97, is a nationally representative sample of people who were born in 1980–84 and lived in the United States when the survey began in 1997. Respondents were ages 12 to 17 when first interviewed in 1997 and ages 26 to 32 when interviewed for the 15th time in 2011–12.

The National Longitudinal Surveys began in the mid-1960s with surveys of two groups of men and two groups of women. You can learn more about the history of the National Longitudinal Surveys and the data available at <https://www.bls.gov/nls/>. For more information about how the surveys are used, see a recent [Commissioner's Corner](#) blog post.