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**The Declining Significance of Marriage:
Changing Family Life in the United States**

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NSFH Working Paper No. 66



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Abstract

This paper reviews the roles of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation in the changing family contexts of children, and then provides new estimates of current family composition which incorporate cohabitation. The underlying process is viewed in terms of the declining significance of marriage linked to long-term trends in individuation. Half of all children in the U.S. will spend some time in a single-parent family, and nonmarital childbearing is an important factor creating these families. At the same time, increased cohabitation requires that family definitions based on marital status be replaced with those that include cohabitation. A sixth of traditionally defined “mother-only” families are cohabiting two-parent families, and the one-fourth of current stepfamilies that are cohabiting are missed by marriage-based definitions.

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The stability and character of family life is a major factor in the well-being of both adults and children, and in the human and social capital the next generation will bring to labor force, citizenship, and to their own adult families. As family issues are becoming increasingly central to public policy debates in the U.S., it is all the more essential that we understand both the dynamics and consequences of changing family transitions. While single-parent families an inescapable fact of American family life, both social research and social policy have failed to appreciate the implications of cohabitation for children's family experience. Our traditional family definitions, based on marriage, have blinded us to the increasing prevalence of two-parent families that are unmarried. This paper reviews the roles of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation in changing the family contexts of children, and provides new estimates of current family composition that incorporate cohabitation.

With the exception of orphanhood, children's family experience results from decisions made by adults. Consequently, our understanding of family change for children must be set in the context of the underlying transformation in adults' decisions about cohabitation, marriage, childbearing and the dissolution of marital or cohabiting unions.

The ascription of trends in these decisions to factors such as welfare policy is a myopic view that fails to recognize the deep historical roots of current trends, and the extension of these roots across all of western society. As I have developed before (1990), I believe the long-term decline in the centrality of family life is reinforced by, but not caused by, the sequence of recent

¹ New estimates in this paper are based on the National Survey of Families and Households, which is described in Appendix A.

developments. For example, trends in divorce (Preston and McDonald, 1979), or in women's employment (Davis and van den Oever, 1982) extend back over a century. The changing family decisions made by adults that directly affect children's lives seem to me to be best captured by the concept of "the declining significance of marriage." This decline is a central characteristic of recent levels of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation. At the same time, it must be emphasized that the declining significance of marriage **does not** mean that marriage has become unimportant, or is likely to become so (Popenoe, 1993). Despite profound changes, marriage and family life continue to be exceedingly important in the lives of most persons.

The Declining Significance of Marriage

As for family change in general, the declining significance of marriage is in large part a working out of the implications of secularization and individuation in our culture (Lesthaeghe, 1983; Stone, 1982; Bellah et al., 1985). This individuation has multiple roots including the atomizing effect of market economies on the one hand, and a related but separate ideational force on the other (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988). In any event, our society progressively recognizes the legitimacy of self-interest as the basis of resolving conflicting interests--even when the other interests at issue are those of a spouse or of children. "Self interest" here ought not be read narrowly as "selfishness," since it includes values that are competing goods in our society such as empowerment, self-realization, and the maintenance of the potential for economic self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, this individuation is accurately characterized as an increased "aversion to long term commitments" (Lesthaeghe, 1983), a process with clear implications for marriage, cohabitation, childbearing, parenting, and the stability of families. It is possible, as Alice Rossi (1987) suggests, that this process has occurred more among men more than women, but I think this is an important issue that is yet to be resolved.

Divorce: Figure 1 illustrates the trend in divorce in the U.S. While there have been fluctuations around the trend line, it is clear that the underlying trend has been steadily upward. The plateau since 1980 (not shown on this graph) must be interpreted in light of this history, and in recognition of the similar plateau that preceded the sharp upturn of the late 1960s. It is likely that the processes underlying this long-term decrease in the stability of marriages have not yet fully run their course.

Single-parent families obviously are not new, but qualitative differences have occurred as a result of the increasing prevalence of divorce. Increases in divorce over the first half of the century were offset by declines in mortality, so that it was only for children born in the 1960s that there was an actual increase in the proportion experiencing a single-parent family (Bane, 1976; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989a). What was new in this transformation was the increasing creation of such families by parental decision, and the decreasing disapproval of such decisions (Thornton, 1989). By the late 1970s, two-fifths of children of **married** parents would not make it through childhood in an intact family (Bumpass, 1984a; Bianchi, 1995). While the increase of the late 1960s was a continuation of the long-term trend, it was, nonetheless, a major turning point in the significance of marriage in defining family life. With almost half of married parents divorcing, marriage as a contract “until death” had become a very weak guarantee for the parenting contexts, and the social and financial well-being of children (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Unmarried Sex and Childbearing: Increasing nonmarital childbearing was the next major factor affecting children’s family experience, though the source of this change was initially in the separation of sex from marriage. Obviously, unmarried sex and childbearing are not post-modern inventions (Laslett, 1980). Nonetheless, there has been a major revolution in age at first

sexual intercourse and in relevant social values, perhaps facilitated by the changed expectations about contraceptive efficacy associated with oral contraceptives. Figure 2 illustrates how rapidly this change occurred, with a doubling in just two decades of the proportion sexually experienced by each age between 15 and 20. Over three-quarters of U.S. teens now have intercourse before age 20 (Forrest and Singh, 1992; Sonnestein et al., 1989), and less than a fifth of young adults believe that unmarried teenage sex is wrong (Bumpass, 1990).

The progressive delay of marriage has further contributed to the number of adult years spent unmarried and sexually active. We see in Figure 3 that the joint effect of earlier ages at first sex and later ages at marriage have more than doubled the number of years spent sexually active and unmarried before age 20, and approximately doubled the number of years before age 25. The significance of marriage as a necessary condition to legitimate sexual relationships is eroding so rapidly that it is arguably gone among the younger generation. Both secular trends and cohort replacement continue to transform attitudes in the society at large.

A major consequence of this sexual revolution has been a dramatic increase in unintended pregnancies to unmarried women. This is not inevitably so, since other countries have shared the sexual revolution without this consequence (Trussell, 1988). Nonetheless, 80 percent all pregnancies to unmarried women in the U.S. are unintended. Despite the fact that half are aborted (Forrest, 1994), two-thirds of the births to unmarried women result from accidental pregnancy (Williams and Pratt, 1990). This is a key insight for considerations of the relationships between social policy and unwed motherhood.

The pervasiveness of the changing significance of marriage is indicated by the fact that most of the increase in nonmarital childbearing has occurred among majority whites. In Figure 4, we see that nonmarital birth rates have more than doubled at every age among white women.

The result of these trends is that almost one out of every three children are now born to an

unmarried mother (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994). Thus, while the majority of children still begin life with married parents, marriage is clearly not a necessary condition for motherhood. It is likely that our high level of divorce has contributed to this change: single-motherhood following divorce is already common (and hence not stigmatizing in itself), and unmarried pregnant women recognize that, even if they marry, they will still face a high risk of single-motherhood. Social expectations have changed radically on this point as well. What was once commonly described as “illegitimacy” and “bastardy” is no longer so strongly disapproved. A majority of the population do not believe that it is wrong for an unmarried woman to have a child, and only a third of young persons disagree with the statement: “It would be all right for me to have children without being married” (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin, 1991).

Mother-only families created by birth differ in important ways from those created by marital dissolution, ranging from the absence of residential parental conflict preceding disruption, through lower levels of domestic conflict, to reduced contact and receipt of child support from the nonresident father (Seltzer, 1991). Consequently, it is essential that we recognize the role of childbearing in creating single-parent families. Even though, as noted above, the majority of this experience results from the separation of sex from marriage, and consequent unintended pregnancy, there is also a significant component deriving from planned pregnancy. For these instances in particular, marriage has declined in significance for parenting as well as for the legitimization of sex.

Cohabitation: Unmarried cohabitation has evolved from a strongly disapproved arrangement known derogatorily as “shacking up” or “living in sin,” to something experienced by almost half of all persons marrying in the early 1980s (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989b; Thornton, 1988). As the normative link between sex and marriage eroded, there was progressively less

reason for unmarried couples not to share households. In Figure 5, which includes data from our follow-up survey, we can see that the trend has continued: both within cohorts and by cohort succession². The process of cohort succession will be particularly important in transforming the experience of the adult population. For example, as those who were in their late 30s five years ago moved into their early 40s, the proportion of persons 40-44 who had ever cohabited increased from 25 to 40 percent. When the cohorts now 25-29 reach retirement age, over half of the pre-retirement population will have lived in a cohabiting relationship, even if there were to be no further increase for within cohorts.

Through the early 1980s, most of the decline in marriage was offset by increased cohabitation, a pattern shared by a number of other countries (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin, 1991). However, there is clear evidence now that the probability of marrying following cohabitation is declining (Figure 6) as the cumulative proportion married by each duration declined over successive cohabitation cohorts. Not shown in this figure is a matching increase in the proportion disrupted without marrying, so this decline is not simply a product of delayed marriage.

There is a continuing debate in the literature over the location of cohabiting relationships along the dating to marriage continuum (Wiersma, 1983; Rindfuss and Van den Heuvel, 1990). This focus on the nature of the commitment between the partners is important, but it often obscures the fact that almost half of all cohabitations have children present (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989b)—and consequently constitute parenting households. Thus the declining significance of marriage has extended beyond the stability of unions, sex, and childbearing to the family contexts of two-parent families.

² Because the youngest NSFH1 respondents were age 25 and ~~old~~ at reinterview, the 1993 estimates are drawn from the older children survey in NSFH2. See Appendix A.

The Changing Family Contexts of Children

Trends in Children's Family Living Arrangements: Our data and conceptualization are only beginning to accommodate to the implications of cohabitation for family classifications. However, before turning to those issues, it is useful to review the trends in family arrangements over the last half century in the U.S. There was little change over the two decades between 1940 and 1960. However, as a consequence of the trends in marital stability and unmarried childbearing outlined earlier, rapid changes followed. Figure 7 displays the dramatic decline in two-parent families and increase in one-parent families after 1960. By 1988, 71 percent were in two-parent families and 24 percent were in single-parent families (overwhelmingly mother-only families). Only about half of all children in 1988 were living in families with both natural parents who had been married only once (Hernandez, 1993).

It is extremely important that a quarter of all children are currently in single-parent families, but this only tells part of the story. From a life-course perspective, about half of all children in the U.S. spend at least part of their lives in a single-parent family (Bumpass, 1984b; Bumpass and Raley, 1995). Roughly following the trend in marital disruption, this represents a doubling between the birth cohorts of the late 1950s (Bumpass and Rindfuss, 1979) and the late 1970s, with a plateau at this high level subsequently (Castro Martin and Bumpass, 1989).

It is also essential from a life-course perspective to recognize that single-parent families are not simply transitional periods before stepfamilies, and furthermore, that subsequent stepfamilies may also be unstable. About half of the children entering a single-parent family reach age 18 without the mother subsequently marrying (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989a); and of those whose mother does marry, about half experience the disruption of that family in childhood (Bumpass, 1984a). Stepfamilies provide a two-parent, and often two-earner, family context for children, but multiple family transitions also represent cumulative life-course stress (Wu and

Martinson, 1993).

Implications of Nonmarital Birth and Cohabitation: While the increase in children's single-parent experience has plateaued over the last 15 years, the composition of that experience has changed significantly as a consequence of the trends in nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation discussed above. We have already observed that the proportion of children born to unmarried mothers has more than doubled since 1975, (National Center For Health Statistics, 1978, 1994), at the same time that the proportion born to cohabiting parents has also increased. This conjunction has several implications for our classification and analysis of "single-parent" families. It is conventional to think of nonmarital births as creating single-parent families, but in fact a quarter of nonmarital births in the early 1980s occurred to two-parent, though unmarried, families (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989a). These children enter a household with both biological parents, and yet their families are officially recorded as single-parent: a parent, this parent's child, and an adult unrelated to the parent.

A similar definitional problem exists with respect to stepfamilies. A quarter of current stepfamilies are missed if only married stepfamilies are counted: i.e., if families with cohabiting couples and a child of only one of the partners are excluded (Bumpass, Sweet, and Raley, 1994). Figure 8 illustrates the composition of current stepfamilies in terms of whether the preceding event was marital dissolution or nonmarital birth, and whether they were formed by marriage or cohabitation. Our traditional concept of stepfamilies as being formed by marriage after marital dissolution characterizes only a fifth of current stepfamilies in the U.S. (left side of graph). A third of these stepfamilies followed nonmarital birth rather than marital disruption, and two-thirds were begun by cohabitation rather than by marriage.

While applying a "family" definition to cohabiting couples with children might seem less clear when the male partner is not the child's father, the appropriateness of this definition is

supported by fact that half of **all married** stepfamilies began as cohabitations (Bumpass, Sweet, and Raley, 1994). It is hard to argue that these coresidential parenting units became families only at the wedding ceremony.

These definitional issues have large effects on our estimates of children's family experiences. For example, though still very important, the role of childbearing in creating mother-only families is less when cohabiting two-parent families are taken into account. Using a definition based on the mother's marital status and transitions, mother-only families created by childbirth would be estimated to have increased from 41 to 47 percent of all first single-parent entries between the birth cohorts of 1970-74 and 1980-84 (Bumpass and Raley, 1995). However, after cohabiting two-parent families are removed from these estimates, the change is from 34 to 36 percent over these cohorts.

Further, the duration of children's first single-parent experience is forty percent shorter, and we reach an **opposite** conclusion about the trend in this duration, when cohabiting families are included compared to definition based only on marriage. While the number of years spent in single-parent families appear to have increased when family definitions based only on marriage are used, they actually decline when cohabiting families are included.

There is an additional point about the nature and duration of single-parent families worth attention here. As noted earlier, current high levels of nonmarital childbearing are frequently discussed as though mother-only households were being created by these births. When coresidence with the mother's parental household is addressed, it is usually in terms of a residential **response** to the unwed birth. A striking aspect of nonmarital fertility in the U.S. is the extent to which it occurs before the mother has left home for the first time. We were able to estimate this from the NSFH by combining information from the respondent's homeleaving history with her birth and marital histories (Bumpass and Raley, 1995). Figure 9 displays the

proportion of nonmarital births 1970-84 in which this was the case, and differences by race/ethnicity and age of mother. Overall, almost a third of unmarried births occurred to women before they had left home; the figure is almost three-quarters among teenage unwed mothers.

Combining both cohabitation and residence in the mother's parental household, we have examined the composition of children's experience in single-parent families for the period 1980-84. We found that 22 percent of the time that might be assumed to have been a "mother-only household" was spent either in the grandparental household (5 percent) or in a cohabiting family (17 percent); for children born to an unmarried mother, the proportions were 9 and 21 percent, respectively.

Differentials in Current Family Arrangements

Tables 1 and 2 present new estimates of the composition of the family circumstances of children in the U.S. in 1987-88. Methodological details are in Appendix B, but it should be noted that these estimates are limited to children living with their mothers. This excludes less than 5 percent of all children and for the sake of ease of expression, we will not repeat this constraint when describing the living arrangements of "all" children.

In Table 1, we see that about 70 percent of all children are living with both biological parents, about 10 percent are in stepfamilies, and 20 percent are in single-mother families. Cohabitation is relatively unimportant for biological families, but clearly has a major impact on the definitions of step and mother-only families. The latter is addressed systematically in Table 2, but first it is useful to review differentials in these family living arrangements.

Clearly there are substantial correlations in the U.S. among the variables presented in Table 1. Consequently, it is important to note that logit analyses (not presented here) indicate highly significant and independent effects of each of these variables on the proportion of children

in mother-only families. This is true using definitions both including and excluding cohabitation, and the single-variable coefficients are only modestly altered by the inclusion of all four variables.

Child's Age: While there is little difference by age in the proportion in a single-parent family, the proportion with both biological parents goes down with age while the proportion in stepfamilies increases. Fifteen percent of children ages 10 and over are living with a stepfather, compared to three percent of those under age five.

Race/Ethnicity: Reflecting large differences in both marital stability and unmarried childbearing differences between blacks and whites, though well-known, are dramatic nonetheless. One-third of black children in the U.S. are living with both biological parents compared with three-quarters of majority white children. The proportions in stepfamilies are very similar, with large matching differences in the proportion in mother-only families.

Mexican-Americans³ are as likely as majority whites to be living with both biological parents, though the parents of these children are more likely to be cohabiting. This latter is an important example of how cohabitation can be significant for the analysis of biological two-parent families even though only it plays a very small role for the total population of such families. Mexican-Americans are about half as likely as majority whites to be living in stepfamilies, and though they are more likely to be in mother-only families than are majority white children, they are much more similar to the Non-Hispanic white children in this regard than they are to black children.

Mother's Education: Children have profoundly different family experiences depending on their mother's education. The proportion living with both natural parents is 87 percent among

³ There are large differences among Hispanic populations in the U.S. including Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and those of various other Caribbean and Latin American origins; the NSFH sample is sufficiently large only for the separate estimation for Mexican Americans.

children of college graduates compared to 57 percent among those whose mother did not complete high school; the proportions in mother-only families are 7 and 32 percent, respectively. As we saw for Mexican Americans above, among the least educated, cohabitation is an important component of even biological two-parent families.

Mother's Family at Age 15: There are similar, and largely independent⁴ differences associated with the mother's own childhood experiences. Three-quarters of the children whose mothers came from intact families were living with both biological parents, compared to half of those whose mother was in a single-parent family when she was 15.

Table 2 turns our attention to the role of cohabitation in the classification of mother-only families and stepfamilies. In the first column we see that 18 percent of the children who are classified as in "mother-only" families by conventional marriage-based definitions are living in two-parent families. This proportion ranges from 22 percent among children under five to 13 percent among those ten and over, from 13 percent among black children to 24 percent among Mexican Americans, and from 23 percent among children of the least educated mothers to 6 percent among children whose mothers completed college.

Even more dramatic results are seen in the second column of Table 2. As noted earlier in this discussion, a quarter of the children in stepfamilies are missed if only married stepfamilies are included. Far more important than this overall level, however, is the differential impact: when cohabitation is ignored, over 40 percent of the children in stepfamilies are missed for children under age 5, black children, and for children of mothers who did not complete high school.

Not including cohabitation results errors of classification that are too large, and with too

⁴This is the only place where adding the other variables substantially reduced the observed effect of a variable. The odds ratio for children of mothers who were themselves in a single-parent family at age 15 is reduced by about a third—though it remains highly significant at 1.63.

great a differential impact, to justify the continuation of family definitions based solely on a mother's marital status. I will return to this theme in the conclusions.

Parenting

First, however, it is necessary to recognize some important aspects of variability in parenting. Though causal interpretation is often difficult, it is clear that children who do not grow up in intact families do less well on a number of indicators (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Income differences associated with two-earner families are especially important with respect to educational achievement, but parenting differences play a demonstrable role as well (McLeod and Shanahan, 1993).

It is extremely important that we learn more about how parenting varies across single, step, and biological families, and between married and cohabiting families. We do know that children in single-parent, step, and cohabiting families receive a lower investment of parental time than those in two-parent families (Thomson et al., 1992). Further, the majority of children with nonresident fathers have little or no contact with those fathers after a few years (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985). For many of those who do remain in contact, visitation is a source of conflict between their parents that may actually increase the tension and disruption in their lives. In addition, one-third of the children of married parents and three-quarters of those of unmarried mothers do not receive any regular child support from their nonresident father (Seltzer, 1991).

At the same time, dramatic changes have occurred in the family contexts of children in two-parent families, even when they live with both biological parents. One component of this is that many have half-siblings or step-siblings as a consequence of the patterns of childbearing and family transitions we have reviewed (Bumpass, 1984b; Cherlin and McCarthy, 1985).

Perhaps more important, however, has been the revolution in the employment of mothers

of young children. Despite the enormous difficulties of childcare arrangements, the proportion of mothers of infants and toddlers who are employed has doubled to over half since 1970 (Moen, 1992). The consequences of this employment for the well-being of children are highly debated (Parcel and Menaghan, 1994), but it is unarguable that parenting has changed dramatically as a result (Hernandez, 1993).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the large changes in the family and living arrangements of children in the United States that have followed from the changing decisions their parents are making about marriage, childbearing and cohabitation. The underlying processes are seen as historically continuous with longterm trends in individuation and the impact of these trends on the significance of marriage. Though there are important international differences, these are processes shared across most industrial societies (Coleman, 1992).

One major implication of this interpretation is that, while social policies may have effects at the margin, it is unlikely that legislation can turn back the clock on family change. Hence, social policies can best affect the well-being of children, and the productivity of the next generation, by addressing the consequences of children's changing family contexts.

The increasing role of cohabitation in the family lives of children has strong implications for family definitions in both research and social policy. Ignoring cohabitation in family definitions results in a serious misrepresentation the social reality that is intended to be represented. It is instructive that we have long used a cohabitational definition of the end of a marriage. Recognizing that the timing and occurrence of legal divorce is often an artifact of legal contexts and other circumstances, the date a couple stopped living together is routinely used to classify the end of a marriage (and the beginning of a single-parent family). We now have to

apply a similar standard to the beginning of two-parent families. That such a redefinition will likely be politically volatile is no argument for preserving ignorance by the retention of family definitions so out of touch with current social reality.

The “declining significance of marriage” describes a critical element of family change without implying that marriage is about to wither away. Marriage clearly remains very important, and the vast majority of persons eventually marry. At the same time, the marriage contract no longer marks the major family transitions or guarantees it once did. We must treat marriage as a highly significant variable in family life, but not as the defining characteristic of families.

Appendix A. The National Survey of Families and Households

NSFH1: The National Survey of Families and Households, conducted during 1987 and 1988, is a national sample survey that covers a wide variety of issues on American family life (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call, 1988). It involved interviews with 13,017 respondents, including a main cross-section sample of 9,643 persons aged 19 and over plus an oversample of minorities and households containing single-parent families, stepfamilies, recently married couples, and cohabiting couples. In each household, a randomly selected adult was interviewed. In addition, a shorter, self-administered questionnaire was administered to the spouse or cohabiting partner of the primary respondent. Interviews averaged about 100 minutes, although interview length varied considerably with the complexity of the respondent's family history. Topics covered included detailed household composition, family background, adult family transitions, couple interactions, parent-child interactions, education and work, economic and psychological well-being, and family attitudes.

NSFH2: A second wave of NSFH was conducted in 1992-1994, primarily in 1993. This new survey includes: 1) an interview of surviving members of the original sample via face-to-face personal interview (10007 respondents); 2) a personal interview with the current spouse or cohabiting partner covering much of the same material as the interview with the main respondent (N=5643); 3) a personal interview with the original spouse or partner of the primary respondent in cases where the relationship had ended (N=789); 4) a telephone interview with "focal children" who were originally age 13-18 (N=1079); 5) a short telephone interview with focal children who were originally age 5-11 (N=1416); 6) short proxy interviews with a surviving spouse or other relative in cases where the original respondent had died or was too ill to interview (N=802); 7) a telephone interview with a randomly selected parent of the main respondent (N=3347).

Designed to maximize opportunities for longitudinal analysis, NSFH2 content includes: 1) life history information for the period since the first interview, including marriages, marital dissolutions, births, work experience, and other transitions; 2) measures of health and well-being in a variety of domains; 3) measures of family process, including parenting and spousal relationship questions; 4) questions concerning kinship, social support, and interhousehold exchanges; 5) questions on current labor force involvement, income sources, assets and debt; and 6) a repetition of attitudinal items from NSFH1 relating to marriage and family.

These data are in the public domain. Further information on data content or access can be obtained from the author or through:

NSFHHELP@SSC.WISC.EDU

Appendix B. Methodological Note

Tables 1 and 2 were constructed using the NSFH household roster of ages and relationships, and the mother's current cohabiting or marital status. To maximize the accuracy of the relationship classification, these tables are limited to children living with their mother or stepmother and to cases in which this mother was the primary respondent. (The limitation to children living with their mother excludes less than 5 percent of all children, but about 10 percent of black children.) In such instances, a record was created for each child under age 18 listed as either a biological, step, or adopted child. Adopted children (about 2 percent) are included with biological. Stepfamilies are identified in two ways. Children living with their stepmother are identified by the relationship category "stepchild" in the household roster. Biological children of the mother are classified as living in stepfamilies if they were identified, in a separate sequence, as not being the biological child of the mother's spouse/partner. Because of the lower age constraint of 19 in the NSFH, children in who live with mothers under age 19 are not represented, but these are only about 1.5 percent of children in mother-only families and less than one percent of all children. Estimates are weighted to compensate for the complex sampling design and to represent the population of the U.S.

The NSFH estimates agree closely with the Current Population Survey data for 1987 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989), though they are slightly higher. Given that the CPS reports children in cohabiting families as in single-parent families, the appropriate comparison to the "mother-only" category in the CPS is the sum of our "single-mother" and two cohabiting categories. The denominators in both instances are all children living with their mothers or stepmothers. The resulting estimates are 24.6 percent and 22.3 percent from the NSFH and CPS respectively. This difference is small enough to be of little concern in any event, but even so, it results the fact that the NSFH procedure includes children living with their mothers in their

grandparents' home, whereas the CPS does not. When the households with a grandparent are excluded from the NSFH, our estimate is 22.5 percent compared to the 22.3 in the CPS.

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Table 1. Family Living Arrangements of Children, by Whether Married is Married or Cohabiting: Children Under Age 17 and Living With Their Mother, 1987-88 NSFH

	Two-Parent Families						Single Mother	Total	Number of Cases
	Biological			Stepfamilies					
	Total	Married	Cohab	Total	Married	Cohab			
Total	69.8%	68.0%	1.8%	9.8%	7.3%	2.5%	20.3%	100%	7093
Child's Age									
0-4	77.3	73.3	4.0	3.3	1.9	1.4	19.4	100	2145
5-9	71.3	69.9	1.4	9.6	6.1	3.5	19.0	100	1967
10-17	63.3	62.9	0.4	14.8	12.1	2.7	21.8	100	2981
Race/Ethnicity									
Black	35.2	31.8	3.4	11.5	6.8	4.7	53.2	100	1622
Non-Hispanic White	76.4	75.4	1.0	10.3	8.0	2.3	13.2	100	4438
Mexican/American	73.6	69.6	4.0	5.0	4.3	0.7	21.4	100	611
Mother's Education									
LT 12 years	56.6	52.1	4.5	12.0	6.9	5.1	31.9	100	1602
12 years	69.3	67.9	1.4	10.5	7.9	2.6	20.1	100	3008
Some College	69.5	68.0	1.5	10.0	8.0	2.0	20.1	100	1548
College Graduate	86.9	86.8	0.1	5.8	5.5	0.3	7.3	100	896
Mother's Parental Family at 15									
Intact	74.5	73.1	1.4	9.2	7.2	2.0	16.3	100	4844
Stepfamily	65.8	62.4	3.4	11.3	7.4	3.9	22.9	100	337
Single-Parent	53.1	50.4	2.7	11.9	7.8	4.1	35.0	100	911

Table 2. Proportion of Children With a Cohabiting Mother Among Children Living With an Unmarried Mother, and Among Children Living in Stepfamilies: 1987-88 NSFH

	Mother Cohabiting	
	Unmarried ^a	Stepfamily ^b
Total	17.6%	25.5%
Child's Age		
0-4	21.8	42.4
5-9	20.6	36.5
10-17	12.7	18.2
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	13.2	40.9
NonHispanic White	20.1	22.3
Mexican-American	24.3	14.0
Mother's Education		
LT 12 Yrs	23.2	42.5
12 Yrs	16.8	24.8
Some College	14.5	20.0
College Graduate	5.8	5.2

^a This is the proportion, of “mother-only” families classified by usual marriage based procedures (see Appendix B), that are misclassified by ignoring cohabitation.

^b This is the proportion of coresidential stepfamilies that are missed when only marriage is used and cohabitation is ignored.

FIGURE 1

Number of Divorces (thousands) and Rate of Divorce per 1,000 Marriages, 1860–1980

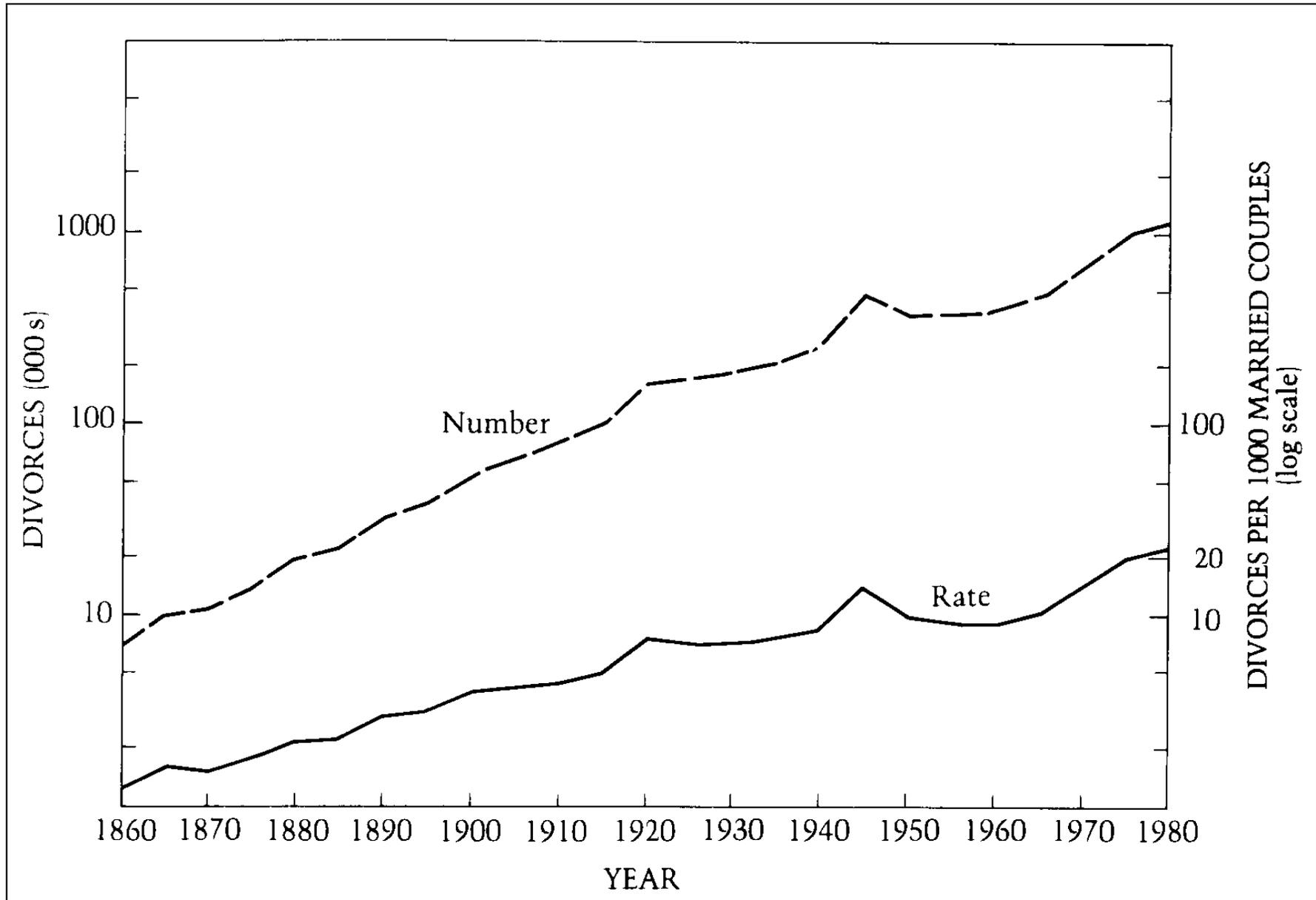
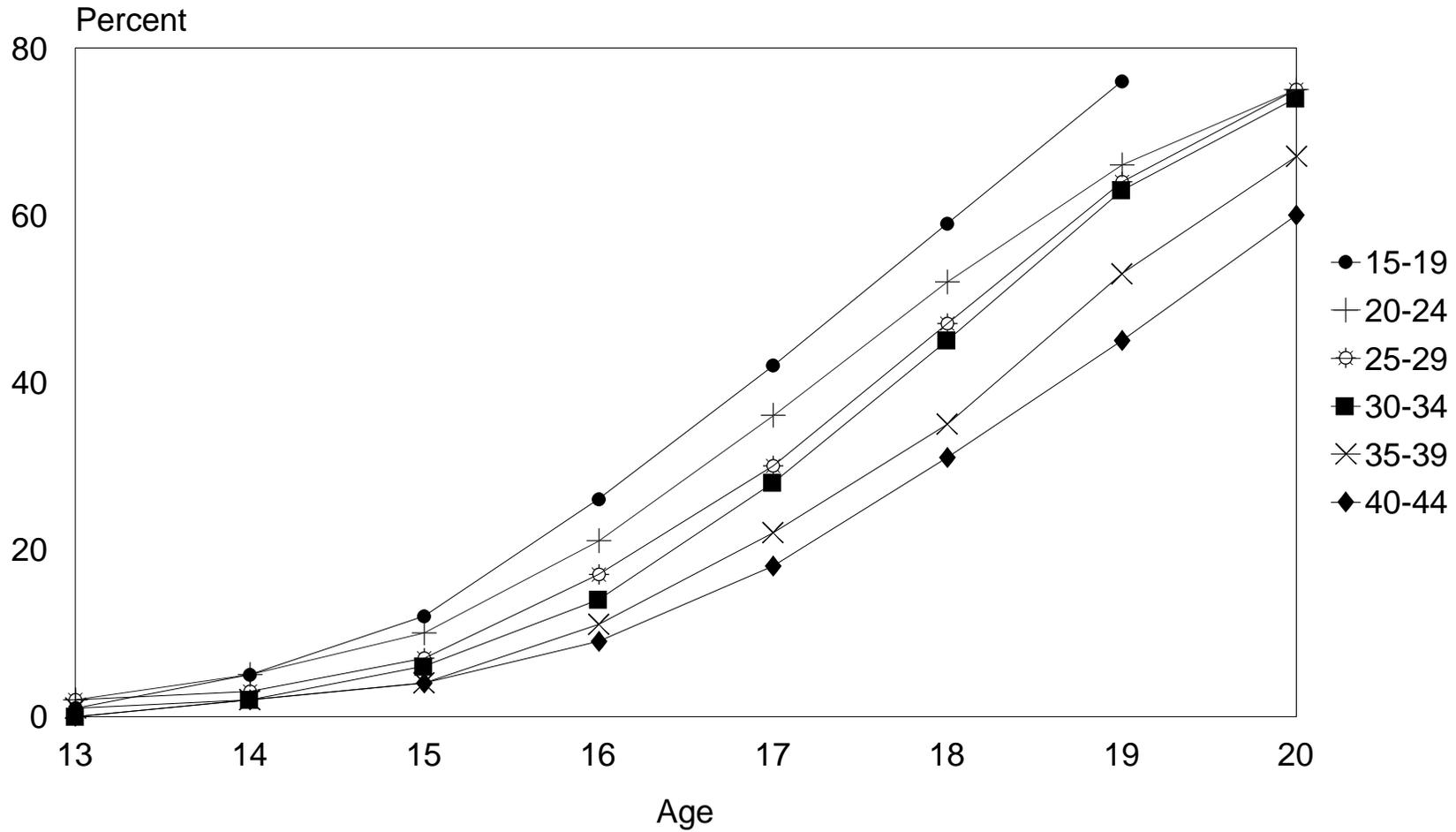


Figure 2
Cumulative Percent Sexually Active by Age, by Age Cohort
1988 National Survey of Family Growth



Life-Table Estimates

Figure 3

Mean Years Between First Sexual Intercourse and First Marriage,
Before Age 20 and Before Age 25, by Age Cohort

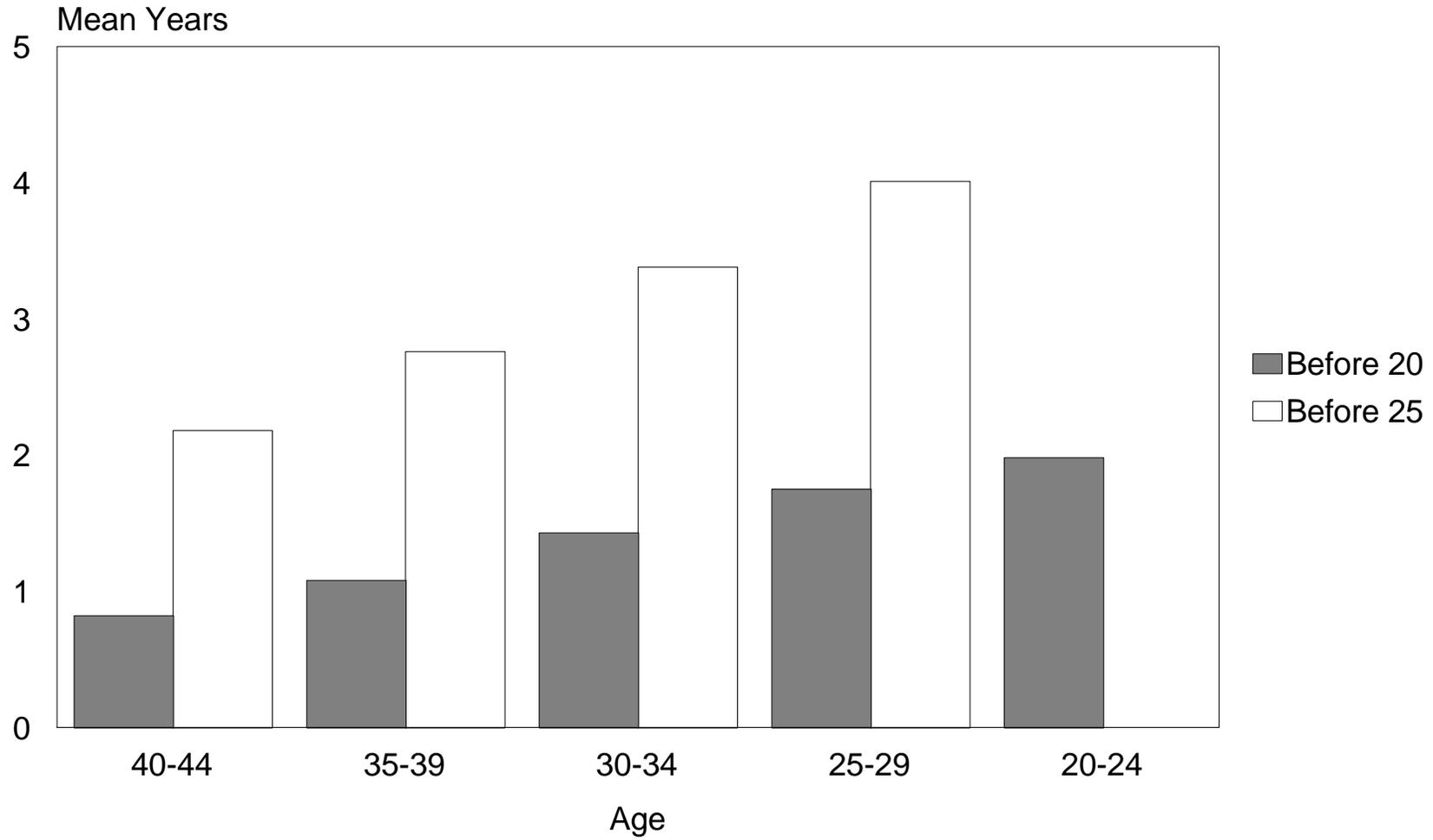


Figure 4

Birth Rates to Unmarried Women, by Age of Mother, 1980-92
White Women

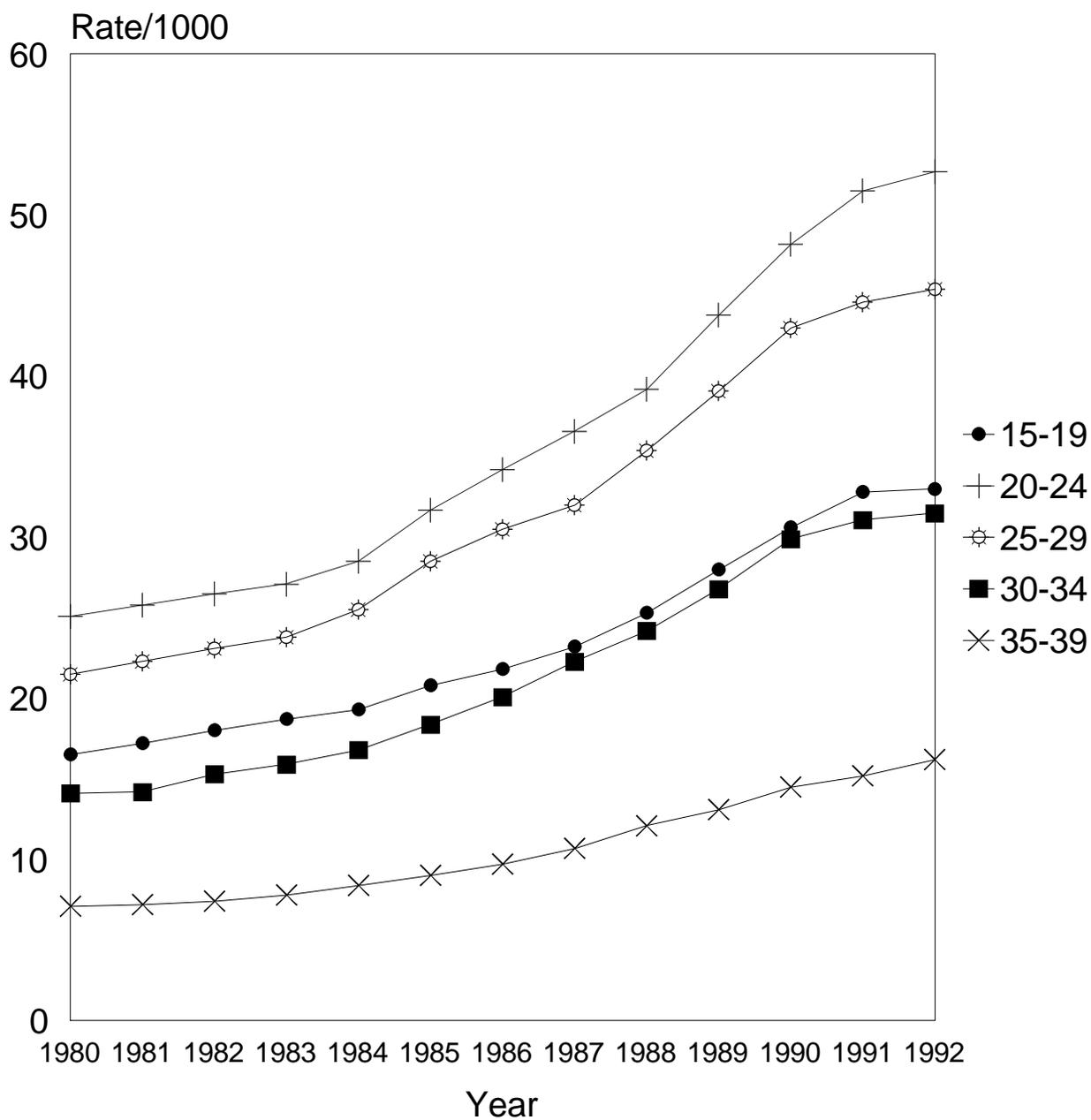


Figure 5.
Percent Who Had Ever Cohabited, by Age: NSFH1 and NSFH2.

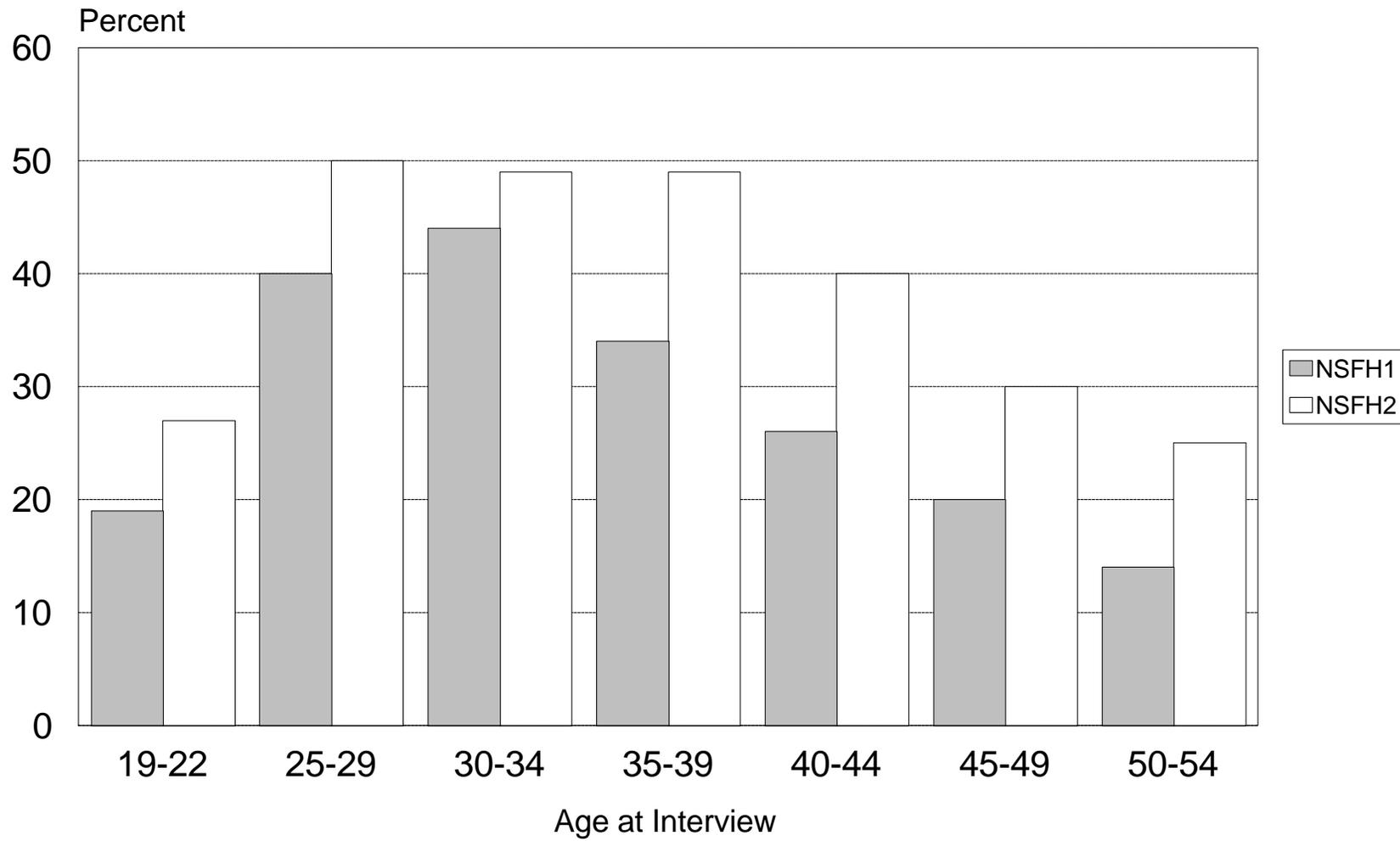


Figure 6

Life-Table Estimates of Cumulative Proportion Married by Duration:
Cohabitations Begun at Age 25 and Over, 1970-79 to 1989-92

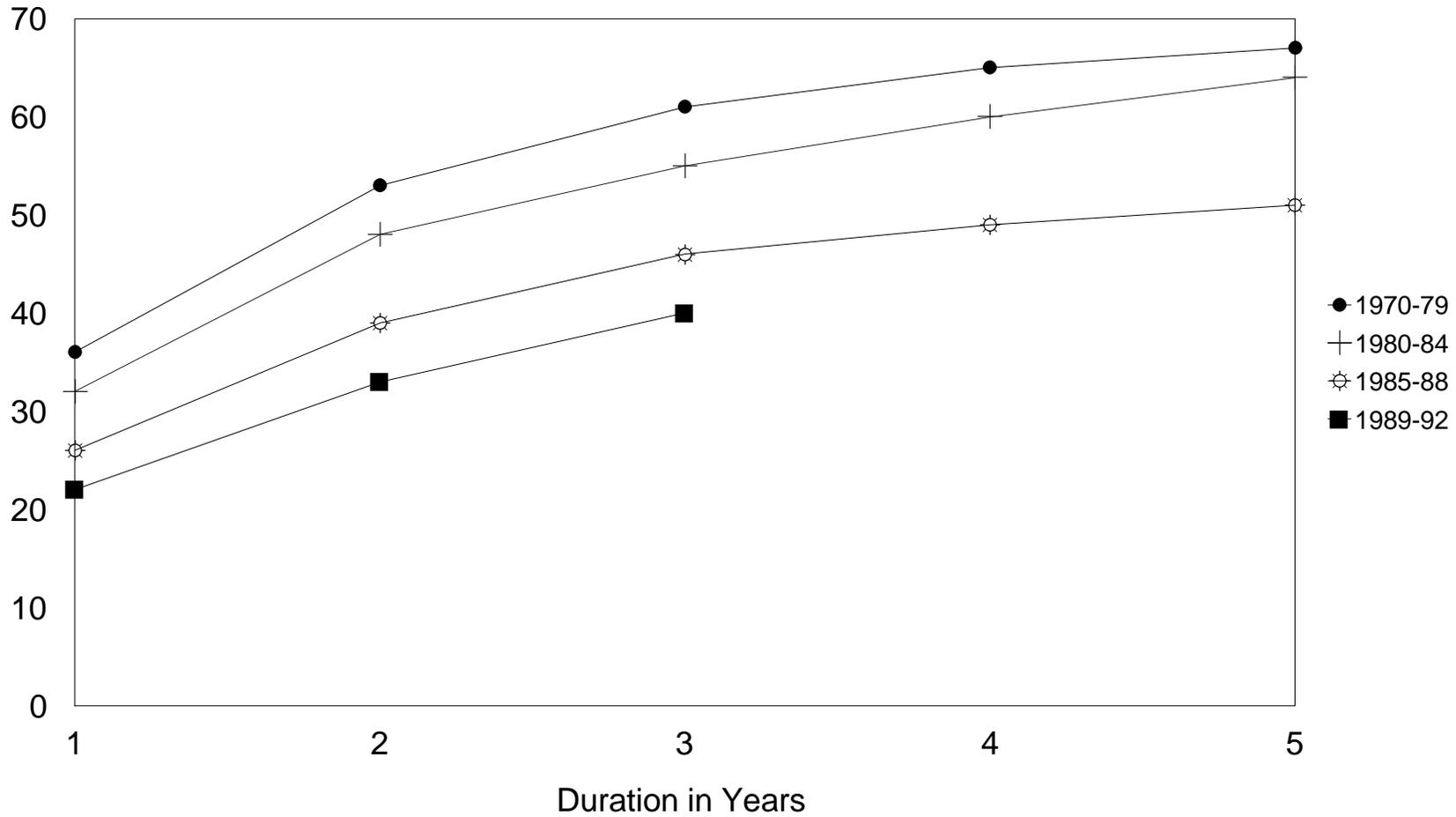
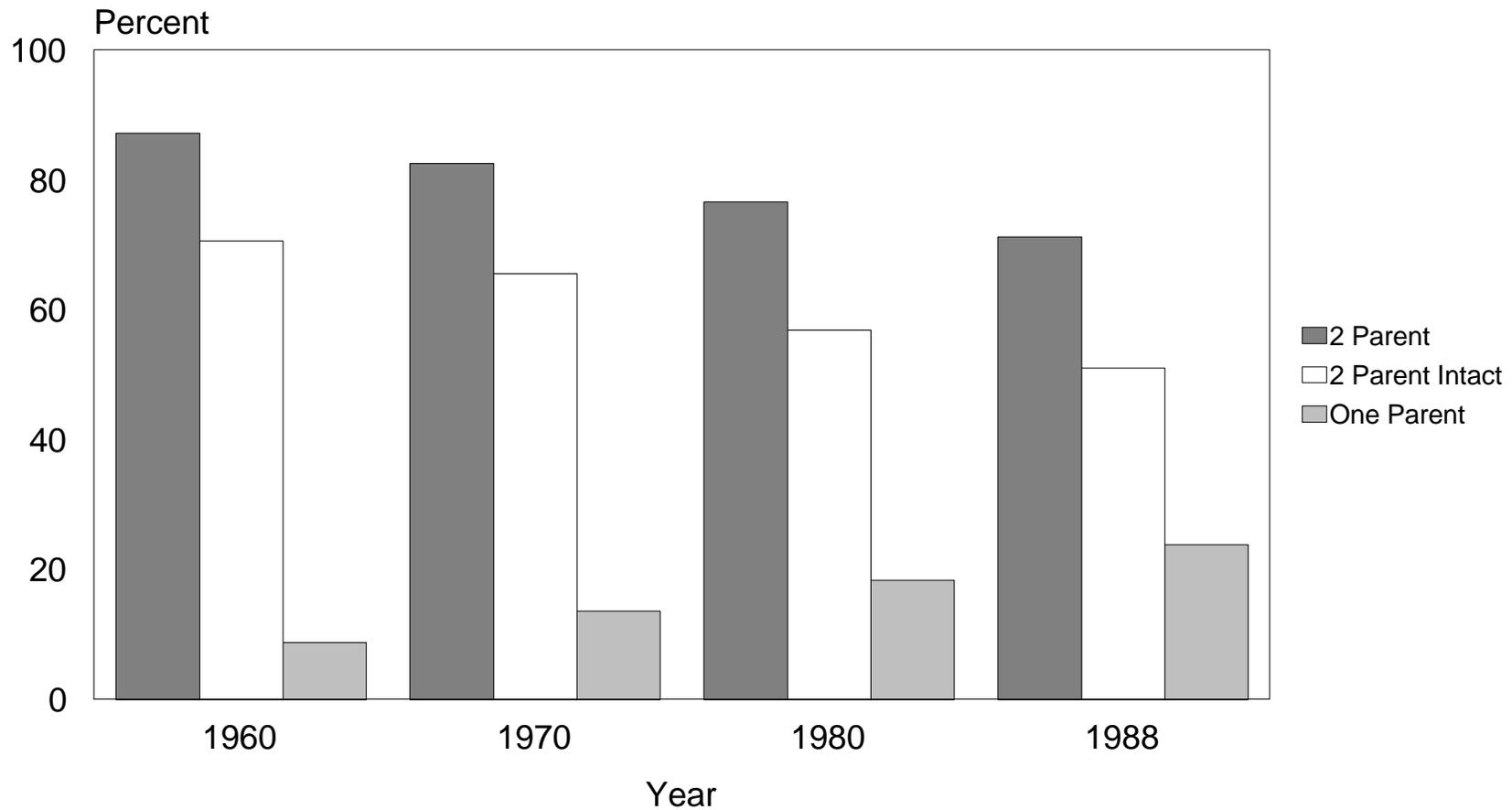


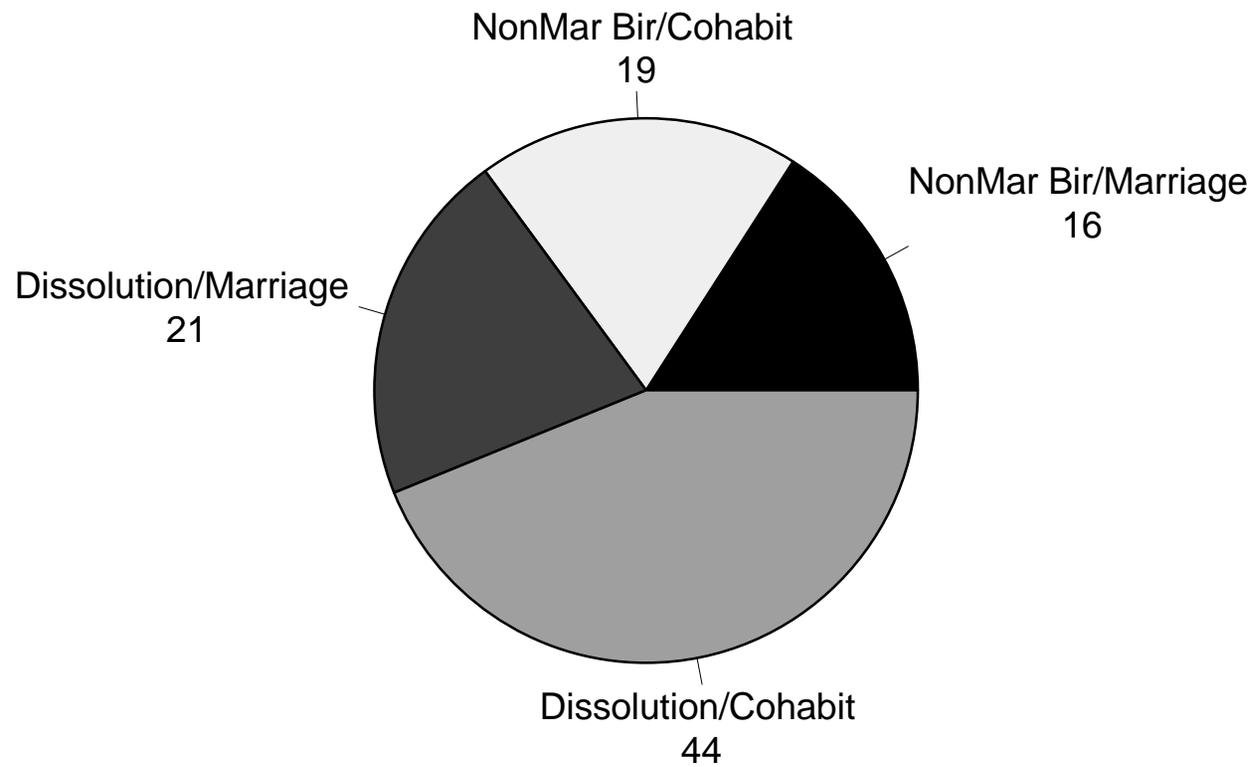
Figure 7. Living Arrangements of Children Aged 0-17:1960-1988.



From Hernandez (1993), Table 3.1.

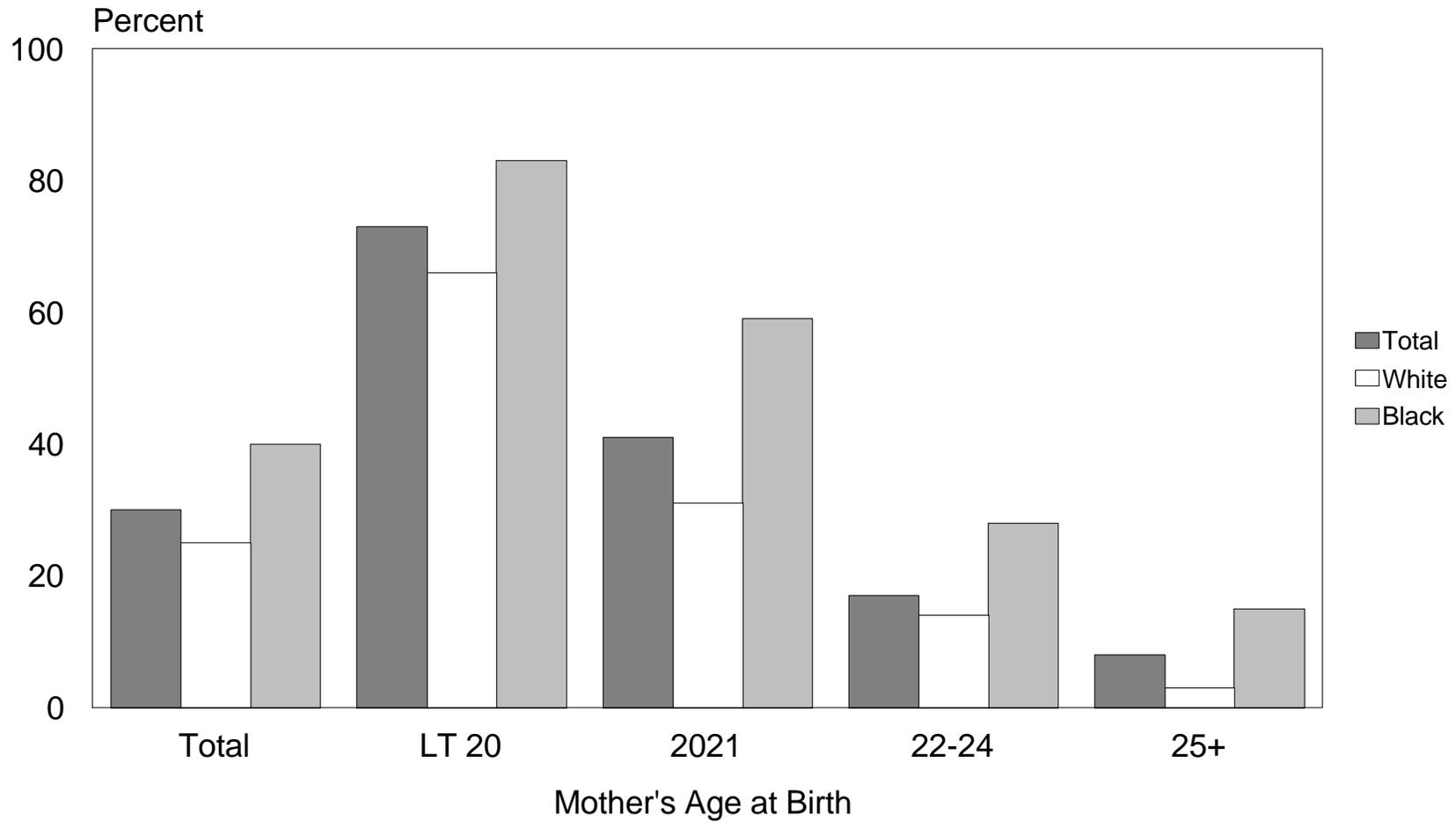
"2 Parent Intact" denotes born in marriage, both parents married once

Figure 8. Preceding Event and Union Status at Start, Stepfamilies in the U.S, 1987-88 NSFH



From Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet, 1994, Table 7.

Figure 9. Percent of Children Born to an Unmarried Mother Before She First Left Home, by Mother's Age at Child's Birth, Total and by Race/Ethnicity 1987-88 NSFH.



From Bumpass and Raley, 1995, Table 6.

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