

# Rising Unwed Pregnancy and Childbearing across Educational and Racial Groups

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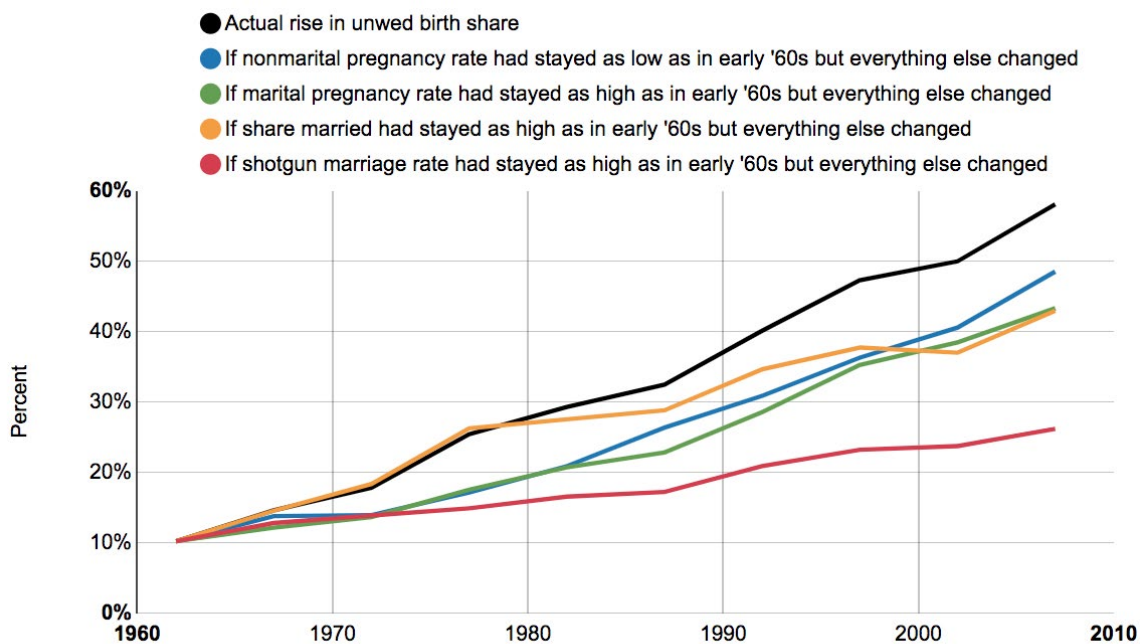
**social capital project**

A project of the Joint Economic Committee – Republicans | Chairman, Sen. Mike Lee  
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Nonmarital childbearing has increased dramatically in the United States. In 1960, roughly 5 percent of births were outside of marriage. Today, over 40 percent of children are born to single mothers. This trend is troubling, considering that children are on average at-risk for poorer outcomes when raised outside a married-parent home.<sup>1</sup> As we explain in our recent report, [Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage: The Rise in Unwed Childbearing](#), several factors contributed to the increase in nonmarital births. The most significant factors, however, have been the decline in “shotgun marriage” (unions occurring between a nonmarital conception and a birth) and the drop in marriage altogether.

Among women of childbearing age (15-44 years of age), we found that the drop in the overall marriage rate was the greatest contributing factor to nonmarital childbearing. But the decline in shotgun marriage was nearly as strong in its impact. When we used the method of a 1999 Census Bureau report by limiting our sample to women ages 15-29 and looking just at first births—focusing on women who were transitioning to motherhood—the decline in shotgun marriage played the largest role in the growth of nonmarital childbearing.<sup>2</sup>

*Increase in the Share of Births That Are to Unwed Mothers, and Counterfactual Scenarios, Previously Childless Women 15-29, 1960-64 to 2005-09*



Source: Social Capital Project analyses. See the Source Notes at the end of the report [Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage: The Rise in Unwed Childbearing](#).

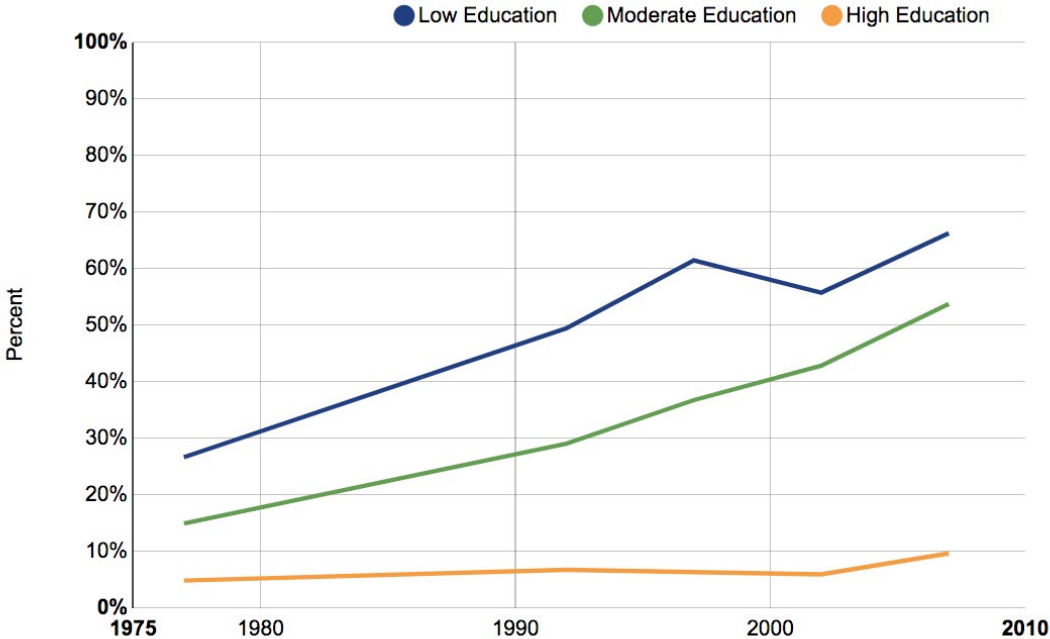
As a follow-up to our previous report, this analysis examines trends in nonmarital births, nonmarital conceptions, and shotgun marriages by education level and race. We rely on Current Population Survey (CPS) data from the June 1980 and 1995 Fertility and Marital History Supplements, and various cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). (See the Source Notes to our original report for methodological details.)

# EDUCATION

Many social-scientific analyses assess various trends by highest degree attained or years of schooling. However, doing so creates interpretive problems, since overall educational attainment has risen over time. For example, “college graduates” today are a much larger and very different group than “college graduates” were in the 1950s. Similarly, those with less than a high school education today are a much smaller share of the population than in the past. For any given group defined by fixed educational attainment levels, over time that group is likely to have become less academically qualified, because more marginal students have moved into higher levels of attainment. To address this issue, we defined three categories of educational attainment—low, moderate, and high—each of which represents a roughly stable share of women over time. For reasons we discuss in the end notes, we are able to pursue the education analyses only back to the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

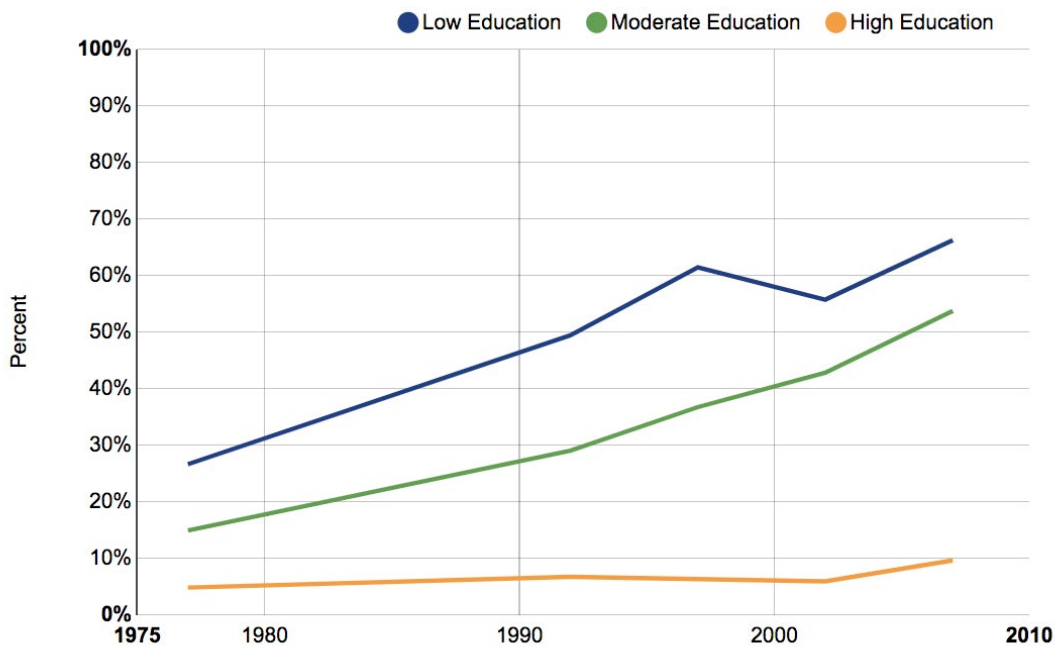
Between 1977 and 2007, nonmarital childbearing increased among women across all education levels, although nonmarital childbearing has stayed much lower and grown more slowly among highly educated women. Among highly educated women over that same time period, nonmarital childbearing doubled from 5 to 10 percent, but among this group nonmarital childbearing is still far from the norm. As of 2007, among moderately educated women and low-educated women, the proportion of nonmarital births was 54 percent and 66 percent, respectively. The greatest increase in nonmarital childbearing occurred among moderately educated women, where it increased by three-and-a-half times over 30 years.

Figure 1. Nonmarital Share of Births, by Education, Women Ages 15-44



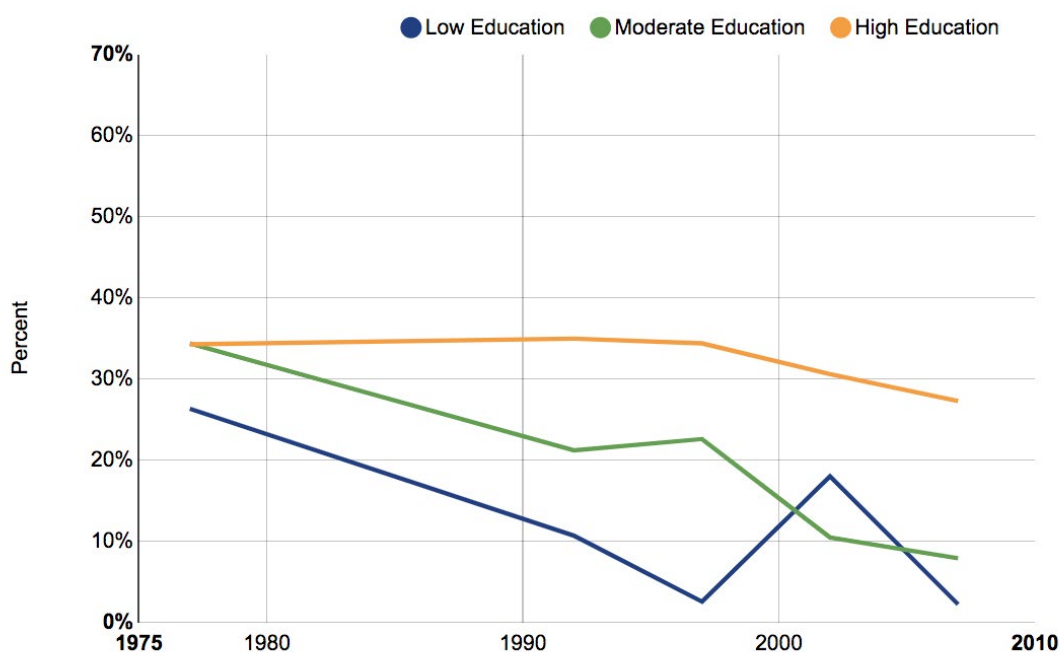
Nonmarital pregnancies have also increased across education levels, as Figure 2 shows. This may seem obvious, given the increase in nonmarital births. However, a nonmarital pregnancy does not necessarily lead to a nonmarital birth, since some women get married after the pregnancy but before the birth, while other pregnancies end in an abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth. Figure 2 includes only those nonmarital pregnancies that ended in a live birth, so any difference between Figures 1 and 2 is due to single women marrying prior to the birth of the child.

*Figure 2. Nonmarital Share of Pregnancies Ending in a Live Birth, by Education, Women Ages 15-44*



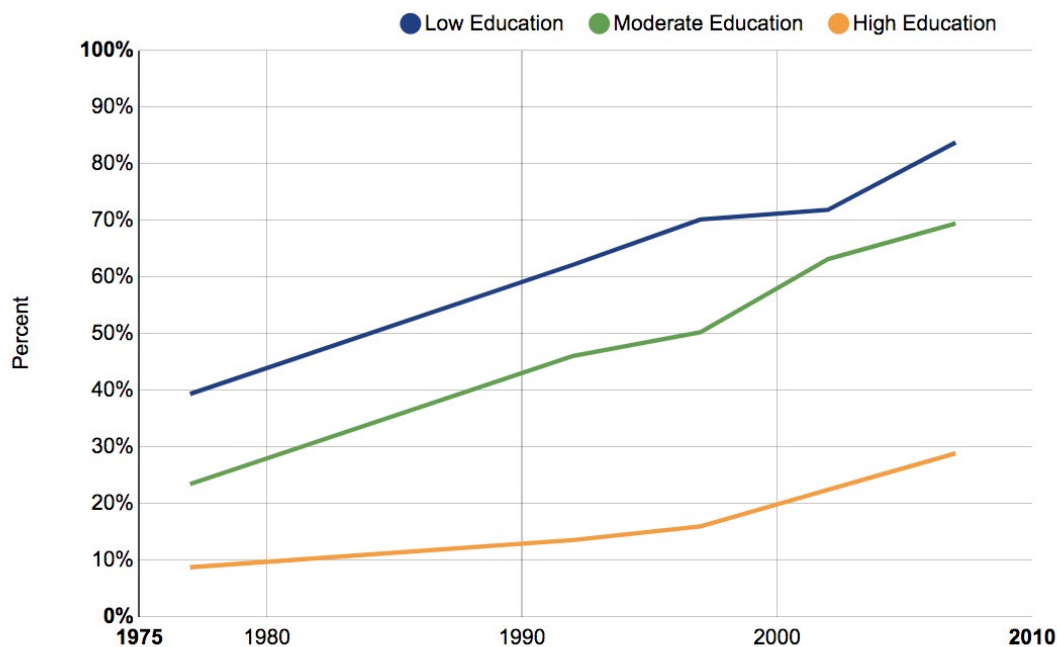
Shotgun marriage rates have dropped among all education levels. However more than a quarter (27 percent) of nonmarital pregnancies among highly educated women are still followed by a shotgun marriage. Shotgun marriage has declined most among low-educated women, but it has also fallen substantially among moderately educated women (Figure 3). In 2007, a mere 2 percent of nonmarital pregnancies among low-educated women were followed by a shotgun marriage, compared to 26 percent in 1977. And in 2007, only 8 percent of nonmarital pregnancies among moderately educated women were followed by a shotgun marriage, compared to 34 percent in 1977.

Figure 3. Share of Nonmarital Pregnancies Ending in a Live Birth That Were Followed by a Shotgun Marriage, by Education, Women Ages 15-44



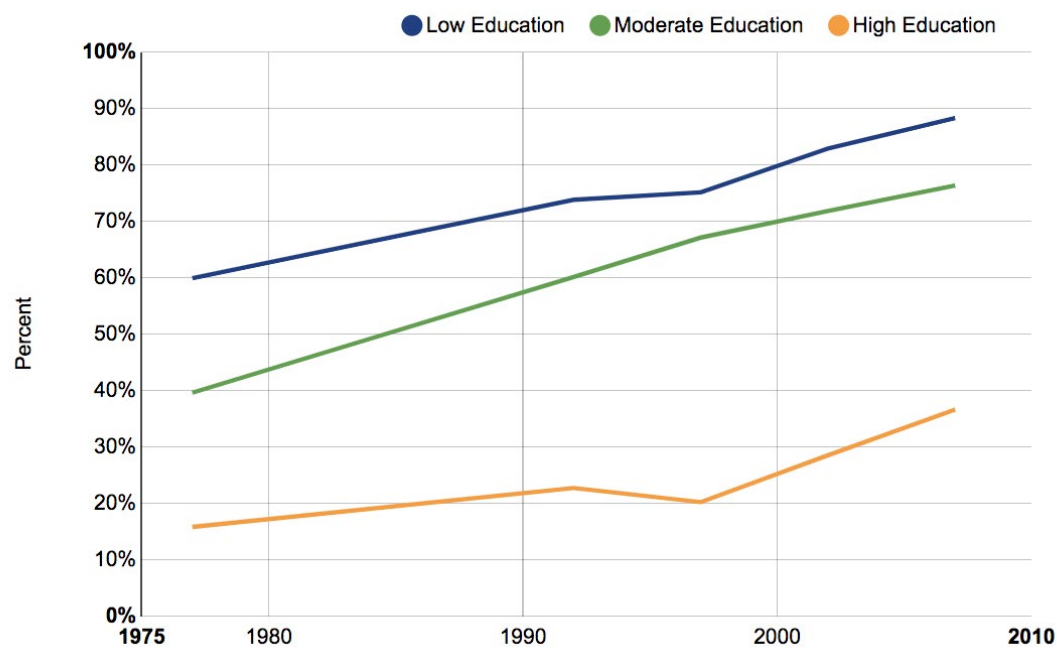
Limiting our analyses to women ages 15-29 (Figures 4-6) and looking only at first births— pushes the proportion of unwed births up across all education levels. Unsurprisingly, younger women are more likely to have a nonmarital birth, both in the past and in recent years. Although nonmarital childbearing has increased across all education levels, it is far more common among low- and moderately educated women than among highly educated women. However, nonmarital childbearing has increased to nearly 30 percent for highly educated women ages 15-29 giving birth for the first time. Among low-educated women ages 15-29, the vast majority—84 percent—of all first births are outside marriage. Among moderately educated women, 69 percent of first births taking place outside marriage. Thus, highly educated women are still much less likely to give birth outside of marriage compared to women with lower educational attainment. But at nearly 30 percent, nonmarital childbearing has become quite common.

Figure 4. Nonmarital Share of First Births, by Education, Women Ages 15-29



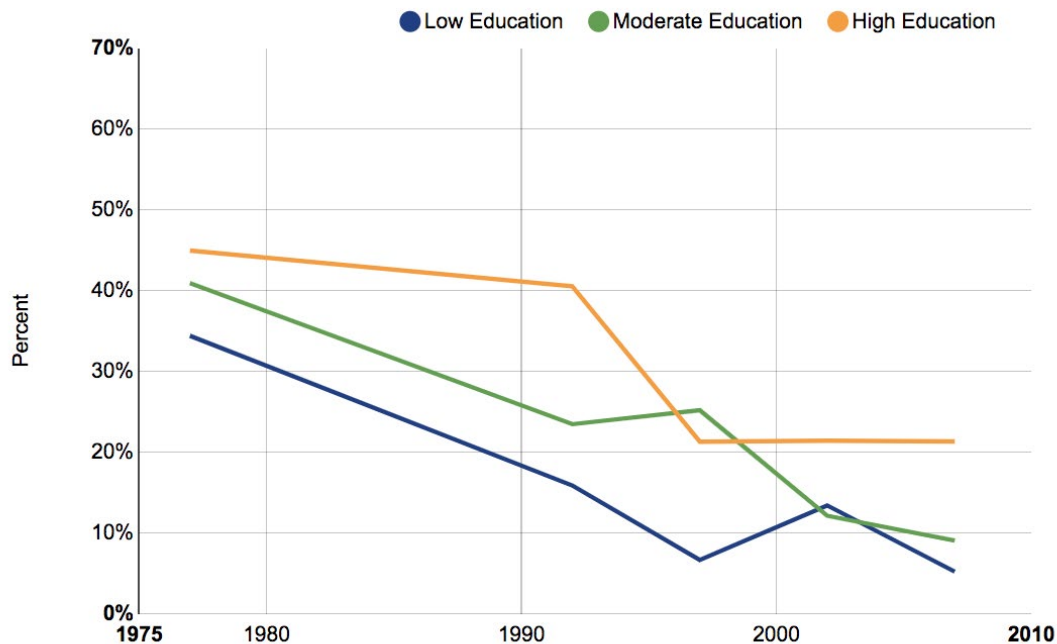
Nonmarital conceptions have also increased among 15-29-year-old women who are first-time mothers, tracking closer to the share of nonmarital births over time as shotgun marriage declines. Notably, between 1997 and 2007, the share of first births conceived outside of marriage among highly educated women nearly doubled.

Figure 5. Nonmarital Share of Pregnancies Ending in a First Live Birth, by Education, Women Ages 15-29



Shotgun marriage rates are somewhat higher among 15- to 29-year-old low- and moderately educated women compared to 15- to 44-year-old women (but nonmarital conceptions are also higher among this younger group). However, the rate of shotgun marriage is somewhat lower for highly educated 15- to 29-year-old women compared to 15- to 44-year-old highly educated women. Between 1977 and 2007, the decline in the shotgun marriage rate for 15- to 29-year-old highly educated women was much greater than it was for 15- to 44-year-old women, dropping by 53 percent, compared to only 20 percent among highly educated women ages 15-44.

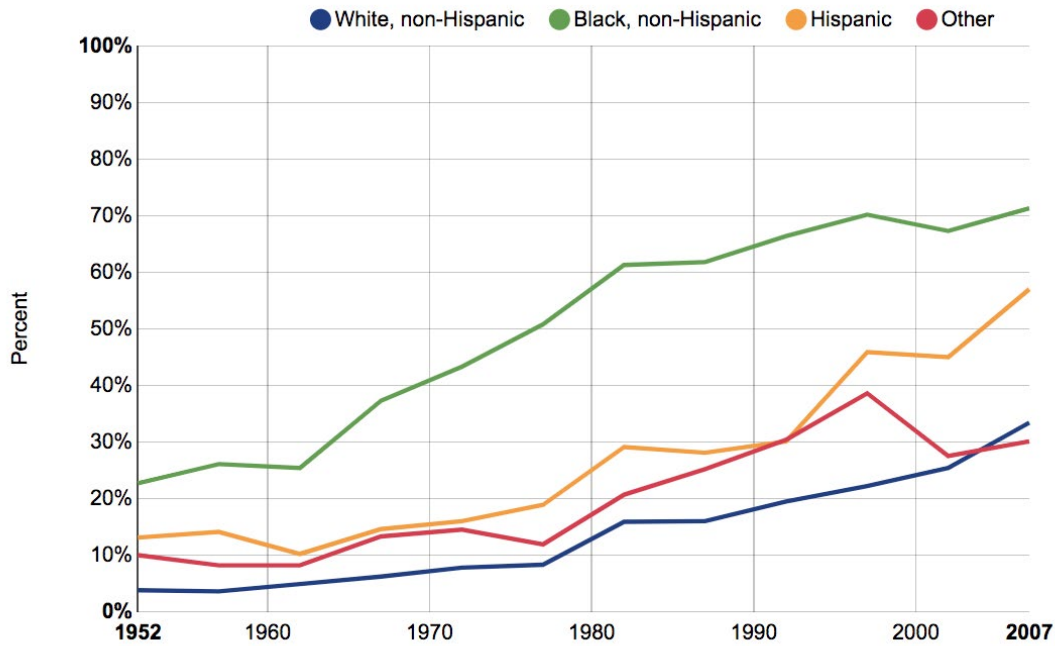
*Figure 6. Share of Nonmarital Pregnancies Ending in a First Live Birth That Were Followed by a Shotgun Marriage, by Education, Women Ages 15-29*



## RACE

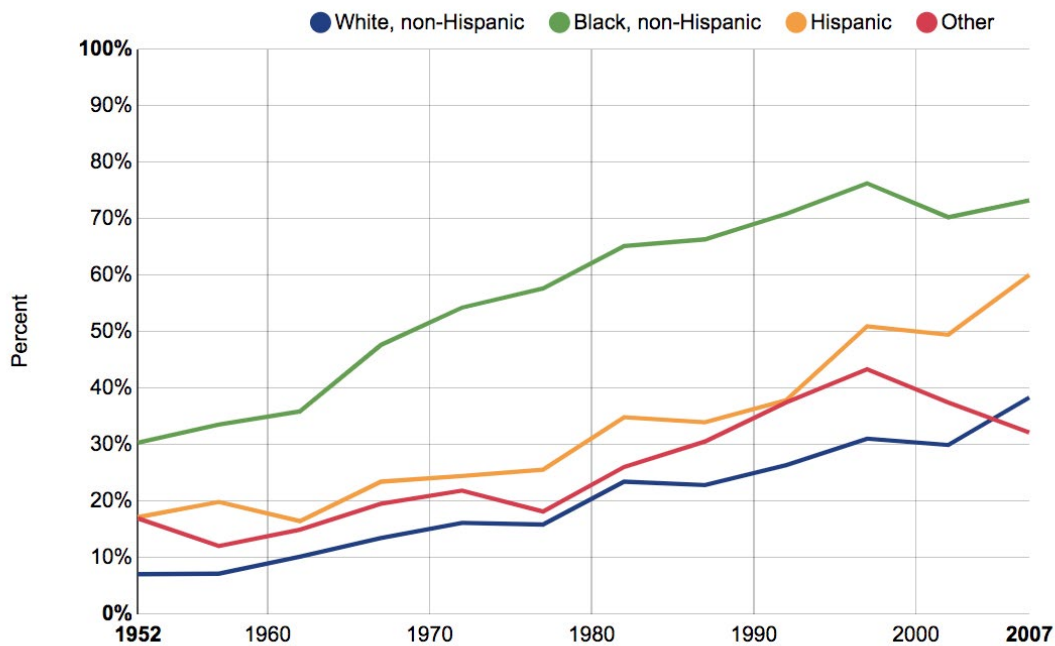
Nonmarital childbearing has also increased among women from all racial groups (Figure 7). We can track these trends back to the 1950s. Although nonmarital childbearing is much lower among non-Hispanic white women (henceforth, “white women”) than among non-Hispanic black (“black”) women and Hispanic women, white women have experienced the greatest growth in nonmarital childbearing—a nine-fold increase since the early 1950s. In 2007, for white women, the percentage of children born outside marriage was 33 percent, a large increase from 4 percent in 1952. Nonmarital births are highest among black women, at 71 percent as of 2007, up from 23 percent in 1952. Among Hispanic women, nonmarital childbearing was at 57 percent in 2007, up from 13 percent in 1952. Among women of other races, it was lowest, at 30 percent, up from 10 percent in 1952.

Figure 7. Nonmarital Share of Births, by Race, Women Ages 15-44



Nonmarital conceptions have increased substantially among all races as well (Figure 8). White women have experienced the greatest growth, with nonmarital pregnancies increasing by five-and-a-half times between 1952 (7 percent) and 2007 (38 percent).

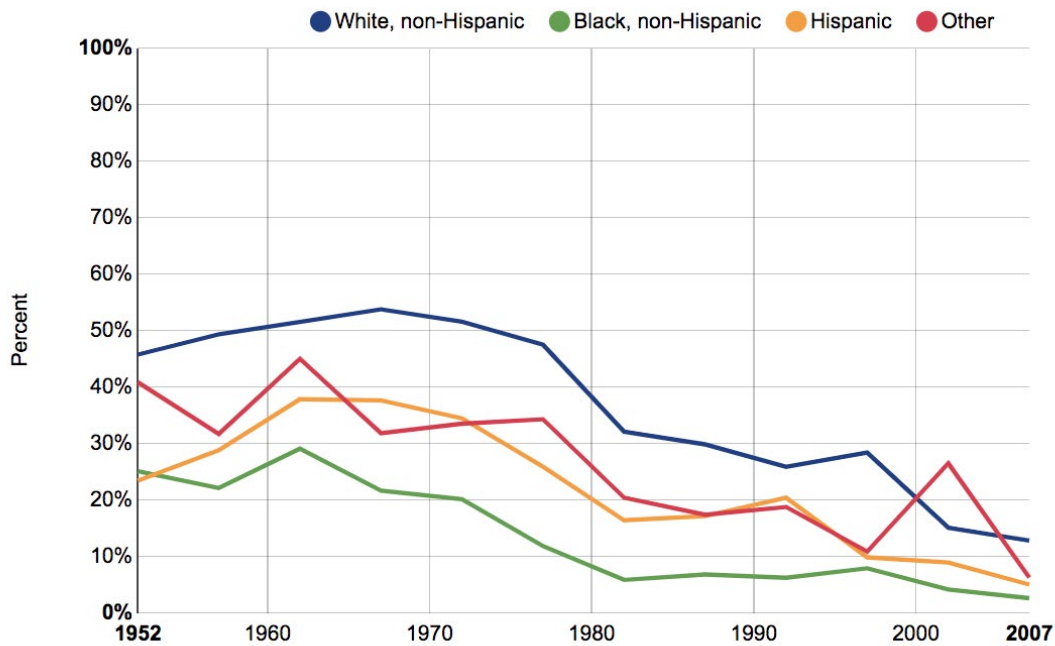
Figure 8. Nonmarital Share of Pregnancies Ending in a Live Birth, by Race, Women Ages 15-44





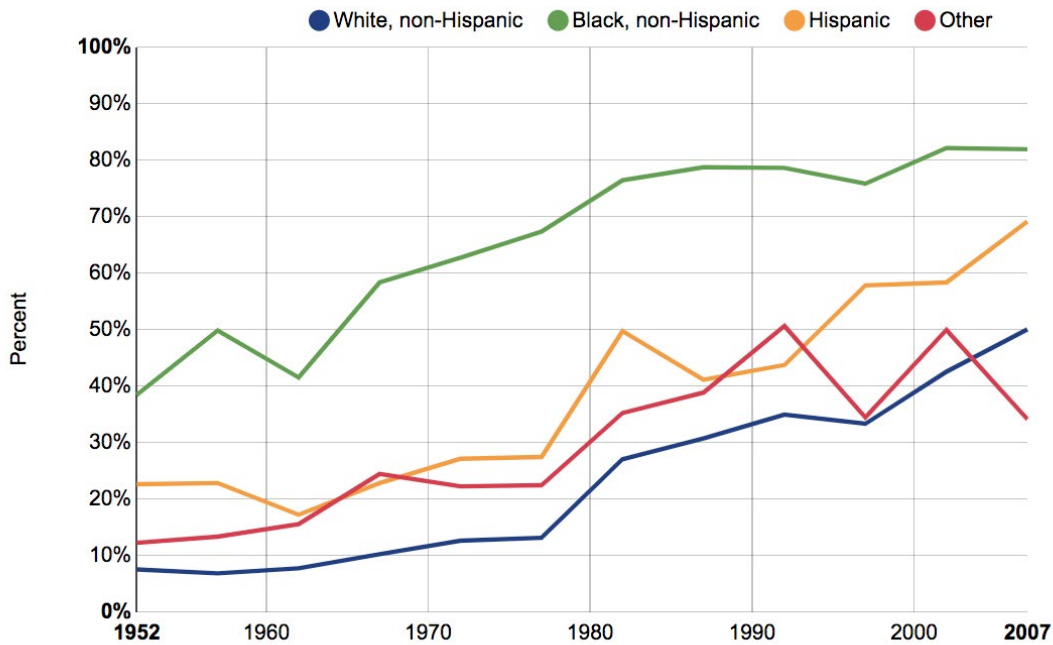
The shotgun marriage rate has also declined precipitously for women of all racial groups (Figure 9). In 2007, only 13 percent of nonmarital pregnancies among white women were followed by a shotgun marriage, compared to 46 percent in 1952 (and a peak of 54 percent in 1967). Only 5 percent of nonmarital pregnancies among Hispanic women were followed by a shotgun marriage in 2007, compared to 23 percent in 1952 (and a peak of 38 percent in 1962). And just 3 percent of nonmarital pregnancies among black women were followed by a shotgun marriage in 2007, compared to 25 percent in 1952 (and a peak of 29 percent in 1962). For women of other races, 6 percent of nonmarital pregnancies were followed by a shotgun marriage in 2007, compared to 41 percent in 1952 (and a peak of 45 percent in 1962). Overall, black women saw the greatest decline in shotgun marriage between 1952 and 2007, followed by women of other races, Hispanic women, and white women.

Figure 9. Share of Nonmarital Pregnancies Ending in a Live Birth That Were Followed by a Shotgun Marriage, by Race, Women Ages 15-44



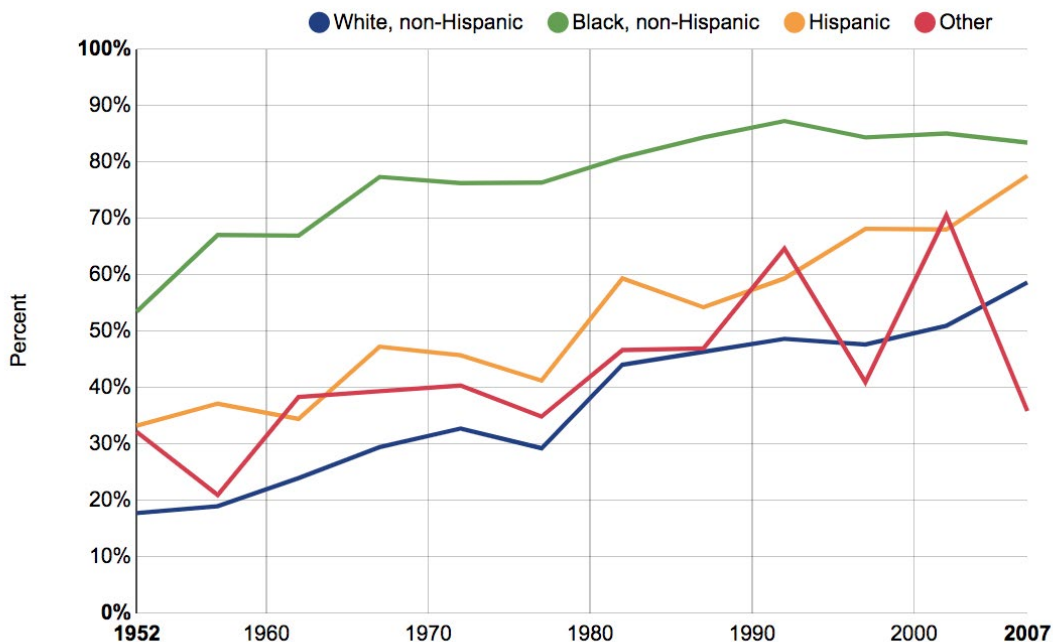
Limiting our analyses to women ages 15-29 giving birth for the first time (Figures 10-12) provides a similar picture of increasing nonmarital childbearing across all racial groups, although unwed births are higher among this group of younger, new mothers compared to 15-44-year-old women. Again, it is white women that have had the greatest growth in unwed births, increasing by close to seven-fold. (Note that the erratic trend among women of “other” races between 1997 and 2007 is likely due to small sample size once we limited our analyses to 15-29-year-olds.)

Figure 10. Nonmarital Share of First Births, by Race, Women Ages 15-29



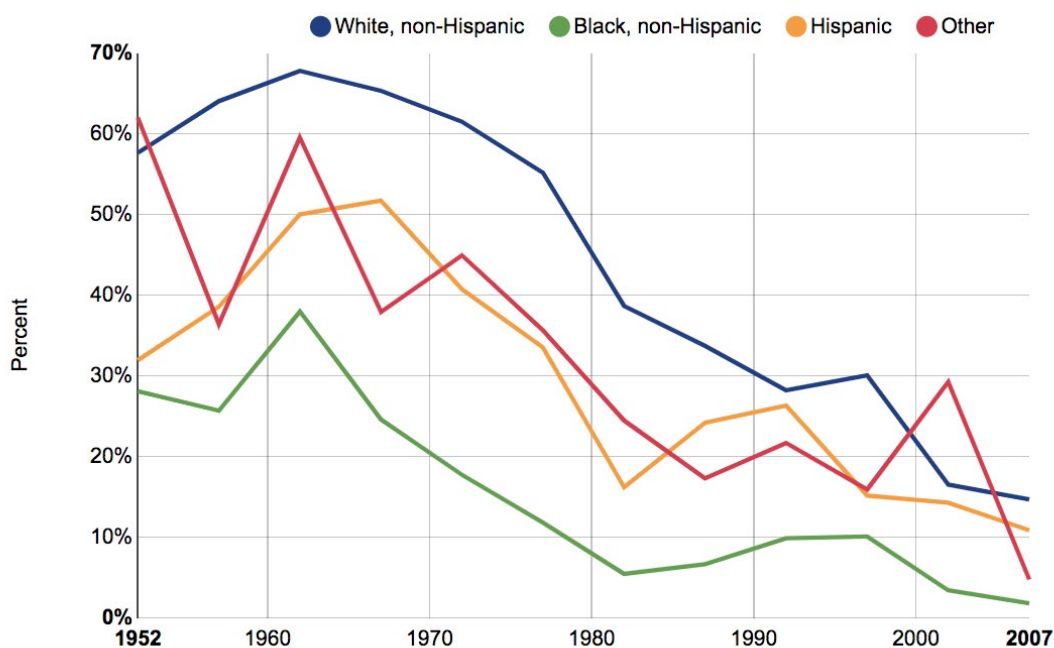
Nonmarital pregnancies are also higher across racial groups for the younger age group, compared to the entire group of 15-44-year-old women. The increase was greatest among white women, with more than a three-fold increase.

Figure 11. Nonmarital Share of Pregnancies Ending in a First Live Birth, by Race, Women Ages 15-29



Finally, shotgun marriage has also declined rapidly across all racial groups for 15-29-year-old women giving birth for the first time. The drop in shotgun marriage has been greater among 15- to 29-year-old women compared to women ages 15-44, considering that nonmarital pregnancies are more common for this group. The exception is among Hispanic women, among whom shotgun marriage has dropped slightly more when considering births to women of all childbearing ages.

Figure 12. Share of Nonmarital Pregnancies Ending in a Live First Birth That Were Followed by a Shotgun Marriage, by Race, Women Ages 15-29



## CONCLUSION

Nonmarital childbearing, once rare in the United States, has become commonplace today. This is the case among low- and moderately educated women, as well as across racial lines. While nonmarital childbearing among highly educated women is still quite rare, it has nonetheless increased over time, particularly among younger women giving birth for the first time. Although nonmarital births were already fairly common among Hispanic and black women in earlier decades, today they are the majority or vast majority of all births. Among white women and women of other races, nonmarital births were once the exception, but now they are quite typical.

A major contributing factor to the growth in nonmarital births—for women of all education levels and races—is the decline in shotgun marriage. Because of the decline of marriage—both shotgun marriage and marriage in general—far fewer children today reap the benefits of a married-parent family than in past decades. This is particularly the case among minority children and those from less-educated households. Of course, marriages occurring at the end of the metaphorical shotgun

may create families with less commitment to joint childrearing. Reviving shotgun marriage would surely do less for children than reversing the growth in nonmarital pregnancy. At the very least, nonmarital childbearing—and the forces behind its rise—should be of great concern when considering the wellbeing of children.

## ENDNOTES

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1. See, for example, W. Bradford Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011), accessed January 24, 2018, <http://www.americanvalues.org/search/item.php?id=81#.UV7T6ze9EgU>.
2. U.S. Census Bureau, *Trends in Premarital Childbearing: 1930-1994*, Current Population Reports, by Amara Bachu, October 1999, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/p23-197.pdf>.
3. We first estimated the distribution of educational attainment for women 15-44 or 15-29 during each of several five-year windows between the early 1960s and the present, using the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS. Then we defined three categories of educational attainment in each five-year group, attempting to the extent possible to keep each group the same relative size. That is, “low education” in earlier years corresponds to fewer years of schooling than “low education” in more recent years, but roughly the same share of women is in this group every year.

We then assigned women with births in our June CPS and NSFG data to one of the three categories, depending on the year a birth occurred and what the woman reported her educational attainment to be. For instance, a woman who gave birth in the late 1970s was assigned to “low,” “medium,” or “high” depending on where her educational attainment fell in the distribution of women’s educational attainment during the late 1970s.

Because women report their educational attainment when surveyed—not when they gave birth—this assignment is approximate. The problem is worse in the CPS samples. For example, in the 1980 CPS, women 15-44 years old when they gave birth in 1950 were 45-74 years old in 1980, when they reported their educational attainment. Women giving birth in earlier cohorts have had a longer time since childbirth to obtain additional education. In the NSFG, the problem is less severe because only women 15-44 are interviewed, and they provide information about births that occurred more recently.

To address this problem, in our education analyses we use the 1980 CPS only to estimate outcomes by education for the 1975-79 birth cohorts (so that births occurred no more than 5 years before a woman provided her educational attainment). Similarly, we use the 1995 CPS only to estimate outcomes for the 1990-94 birth cohorts. The NSFG results are not similarly affected, because there is never more than seven or eight years between the time a woman is interviewed and the relevant birth.

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