

# African-American Families

## W.E.B. Du Bois *The Philadelphia Negro* (1896)

- 58% of 7th Ward families of 2 were unmarried couples in 1896; “centres of irregular sexual intercourse.”

Explanations:

- African cultural traditions (polygamy)
- Legacy of slavery (disruption of families, loss of male authority)
- Poverty



E. Franklin Frazier  
*The Negro Family in the United States* (1939)

- High percentage of single parent families
- Disorganization of black family attributable to effects of slavery
  - Contrasted “house slaves” vs. “field slaves”
- Expressed concern that low marriage, high unmarried fertility could increase



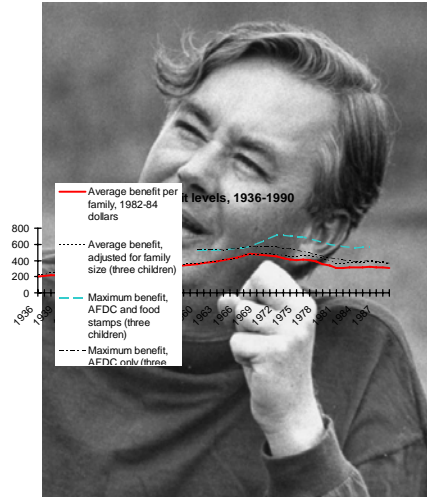
Daniel Patrick Moynihan  
*The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* (1965)

- Produced as part of LBJ's war on poverty
- “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family”
- Argued patterns observed by Frazier were growing and would not stop without intervention
- Advocated coordinated government programs to strengthen black family



## Moynihan Report Controversies

- Moynihan had it backwards: single parenthood was the *consequence* of poverty, not the cause of it.
- Moynihan ignored the strength and resilience of the black family, and denigrated black culture
- Dozens of historical studies argued that black families in the nineteenth century were male-headed, nuclear, just like white families



## THE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY STRUCTURE\*

STEVEN RUGGLES  
University of Minnesota

*I use a new data source, the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, to trace race differences in family structure between 1880 and 1980. Analysis confirms recent findings that the high incidence among African-Americans of single parenthood and children residing without their parents is not a recent phenomenon. From 1880 through 1960, black children were two to three times more likely to reside without one or both parents than were white children. In recent years, however, the race differential in parental absence has grown. Also, blacks have had a consistently higher percentage of extended households than have whites, but until 1940 this was the result of single parenthood and parentlessness among children: Extended households were more common among whites once the effects of absent parents were controlled.*

Two distinctive features of African-American family structure are well known: Blacks are far more likely than whites to become single parents and to reside in extended families. The theories offered to explain these differences are diverse and have generated

egories. Many theorists have argued that Moynihan got it backwards: The disadvantaged position of blacks is not the consequence of single-parent families, but rather the cause of them. This interpretation is frequently accompanied by the thesis that the black extended

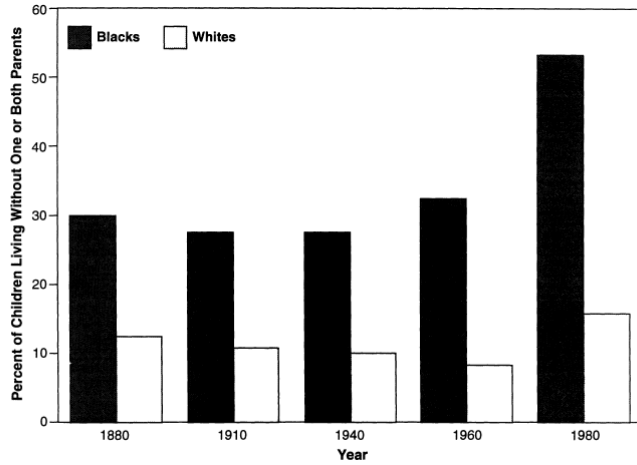


Figure 1. Percentages of Children Ages 0 to 14 With One or Both Parents Absent, by Race: United States, 1880–1980

## W.E.B. Du Bois

*The Philadelphia Negro* (1896)

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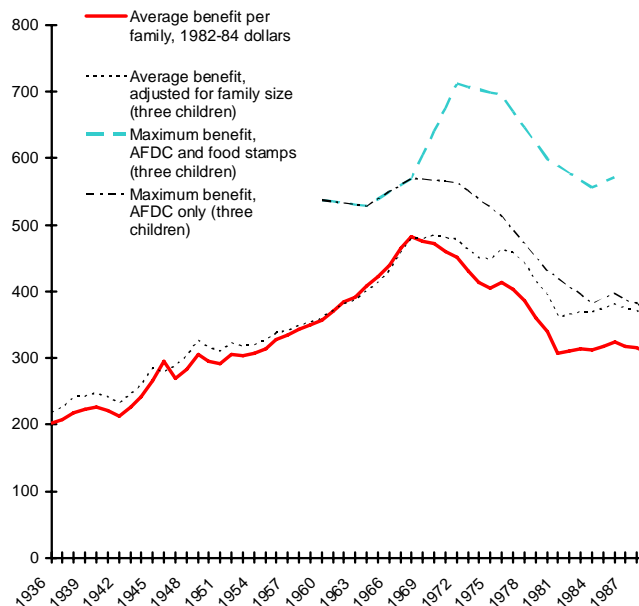


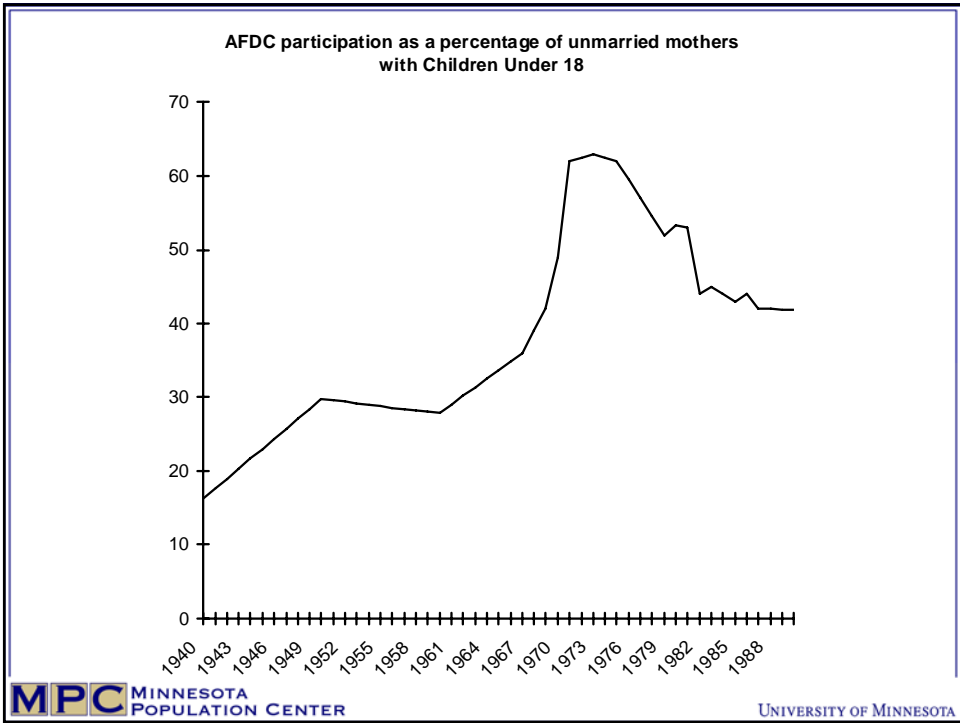
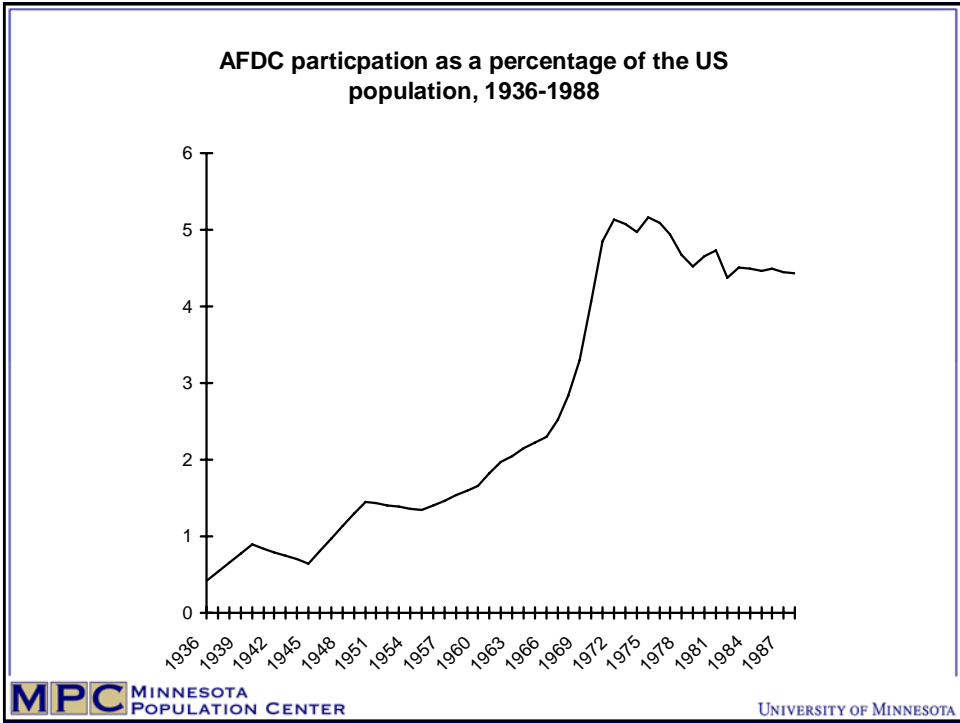
## Charles Murray *Losing Ground* (1984)

- Single parenthood was the *consequence* of welfare
- AFDC provided incentives for unmarried fertility and marital dissolution
- Since pathology of black family causes poverty, and welfare is cause of family weakness, therefore welfare causes black poverty



**AFDC benefit levels, 1936-1990**





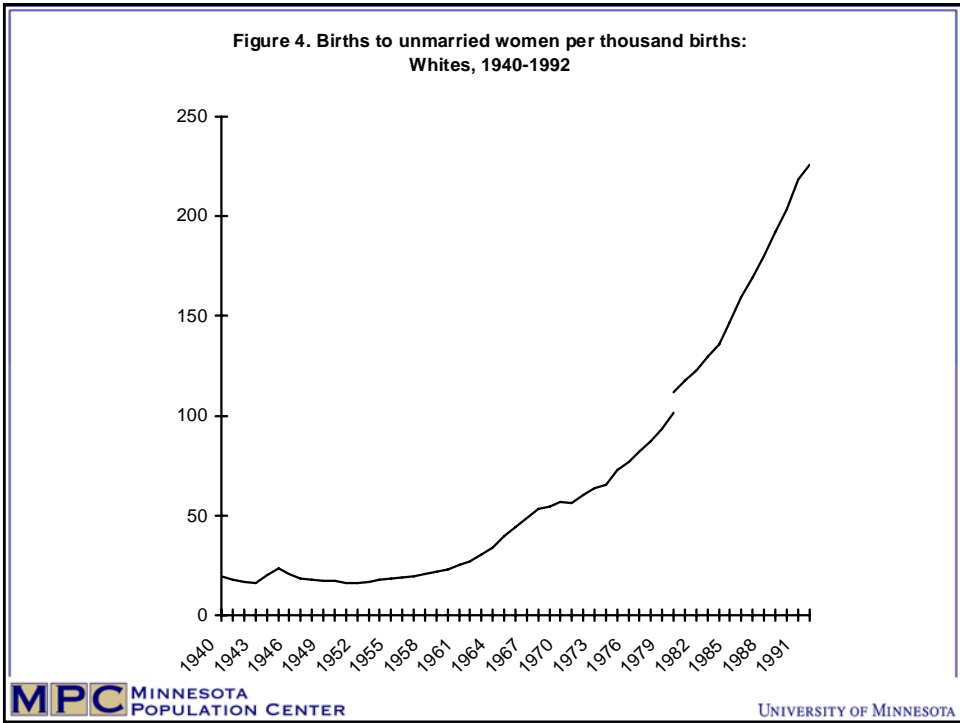
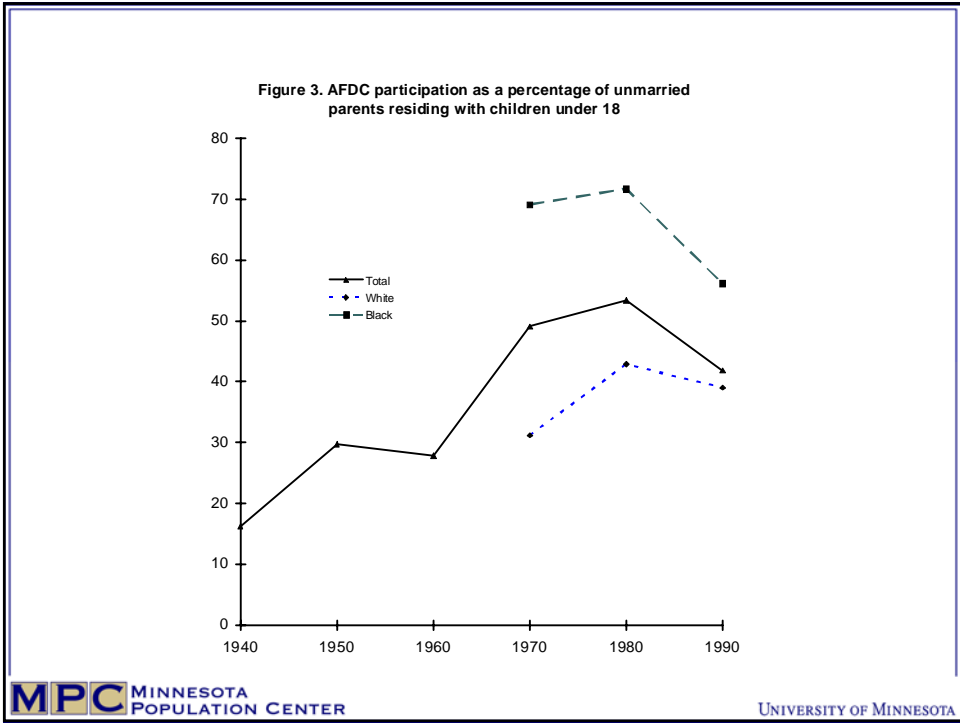
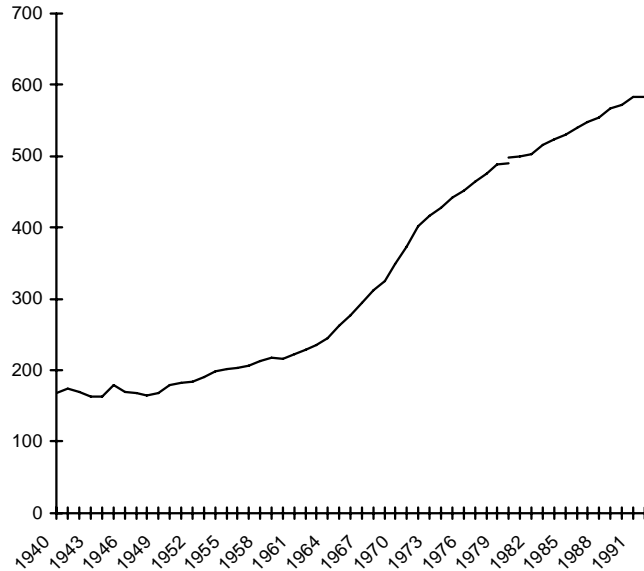


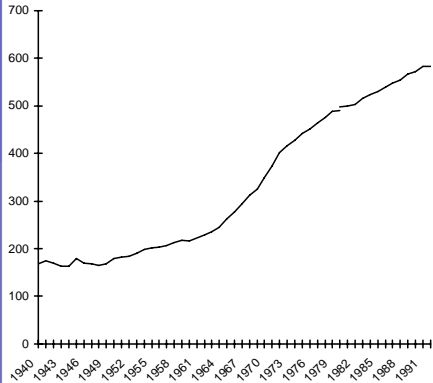
Figure 5. Births to unmarried women per thousand births:  
Nonwhites, 1940-1992



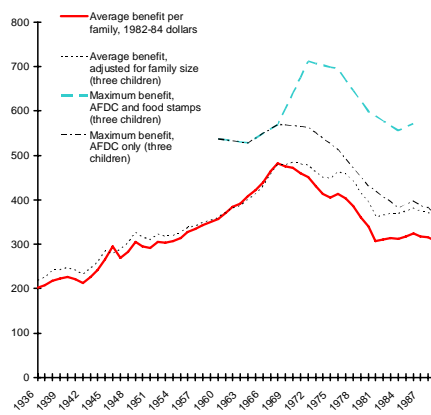
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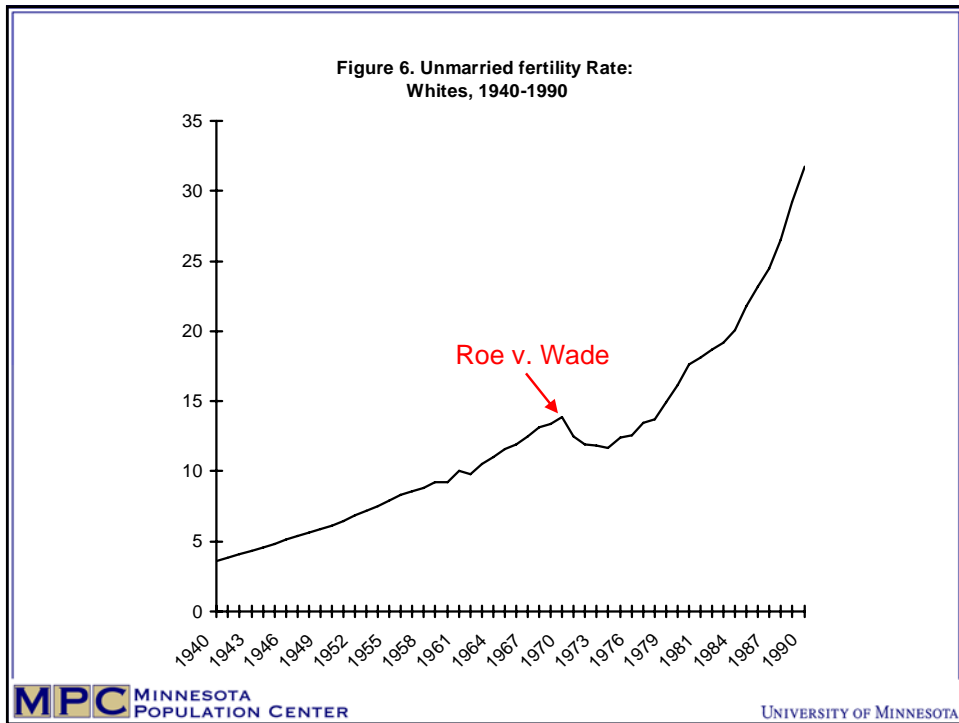
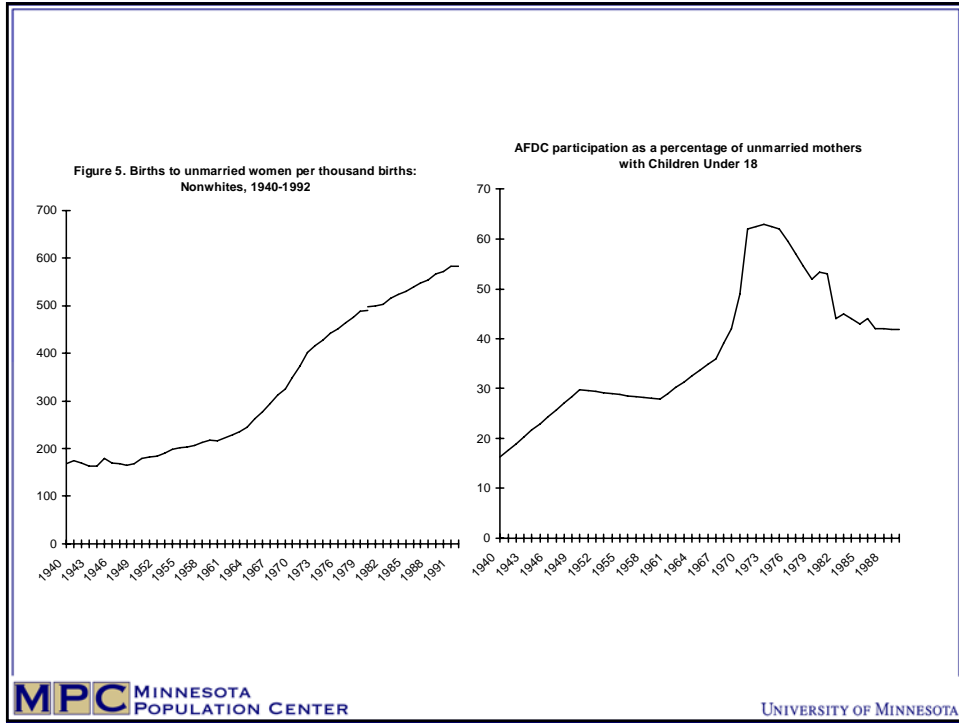
AFDC benefit levels, 1936-1990

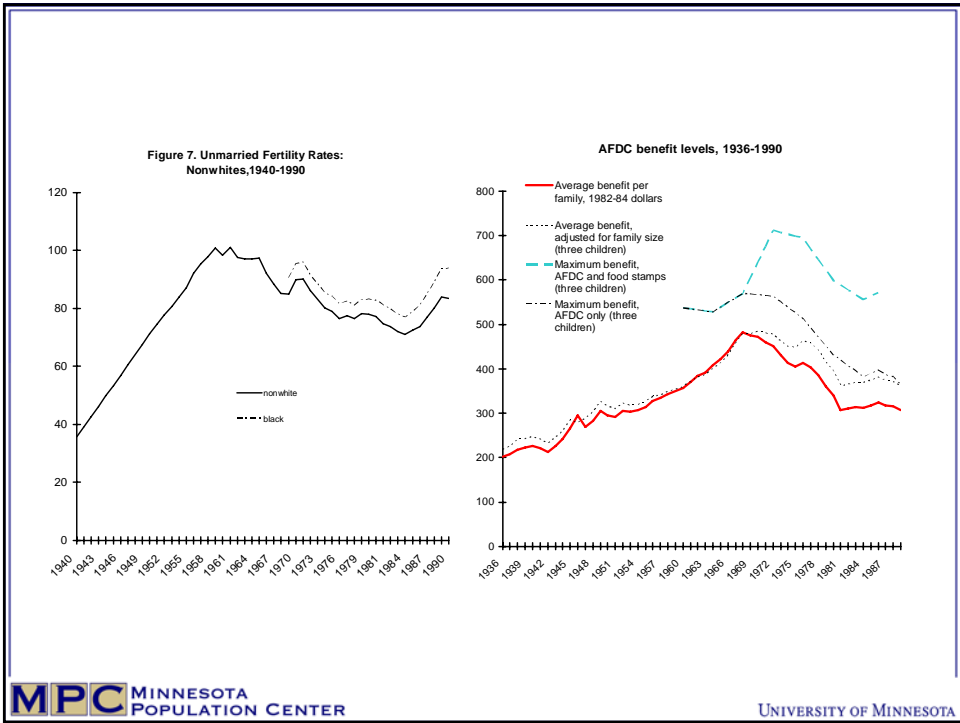
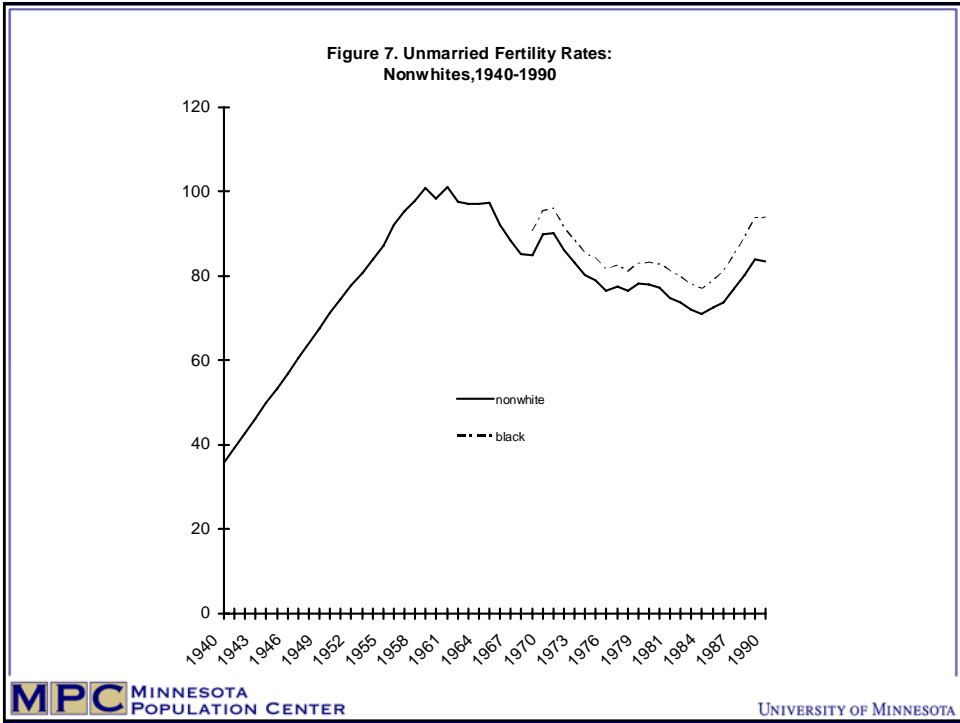


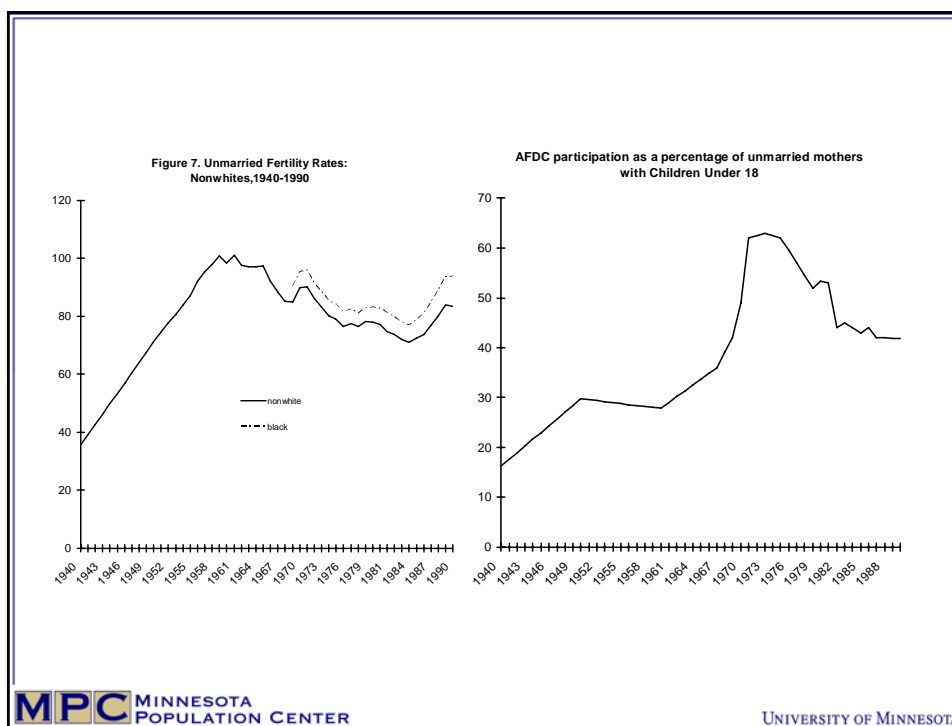
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## Conclusion on Murray/AFDC

- Rise of births out of wedlock is not correlated with AFDC benefits or participation
- Decline in unmarried fertility among blacks began around 1960, long before the peak AFDC benefit levels
- Reason for continuing rise in % of births out of wedlock is mainly decline in % married, not increase of fertility of unmarried women

## Trends in African-American Marriage Patterns

Steven Ruggles and Catherine Fitch



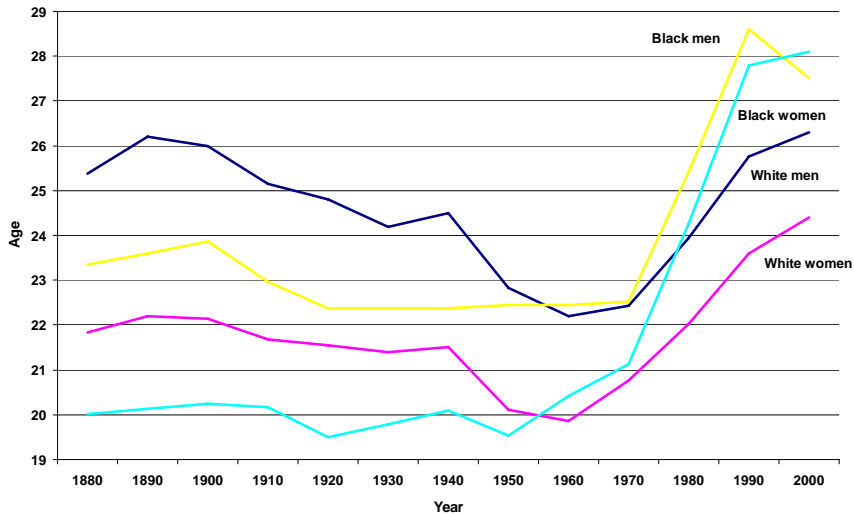
Data collection funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health



### I have three big questions:

1. Why was there no postwar marriage boom among blacks?
2. Why did black marriage age rise so rapidly after 1970?
3. Why did the traditional gender pattern of marriage age reverse among blacks after 1990?

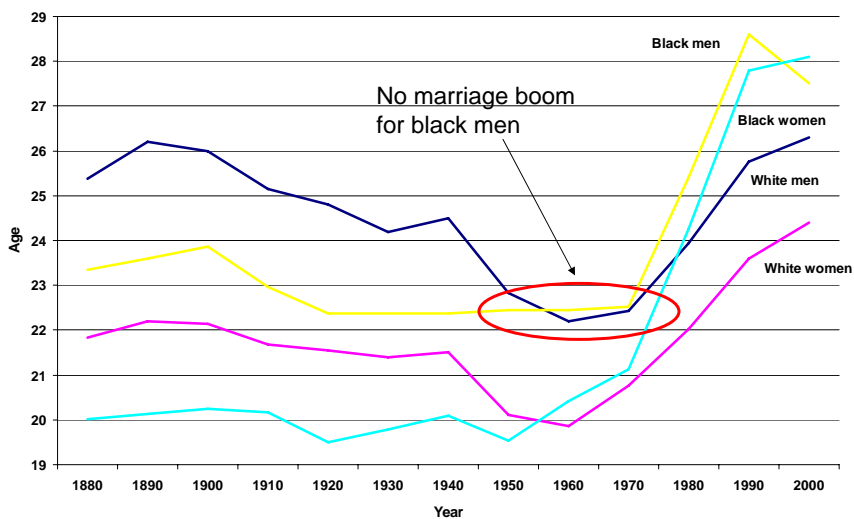
Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000



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Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000



No marriage boom for black men

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Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000

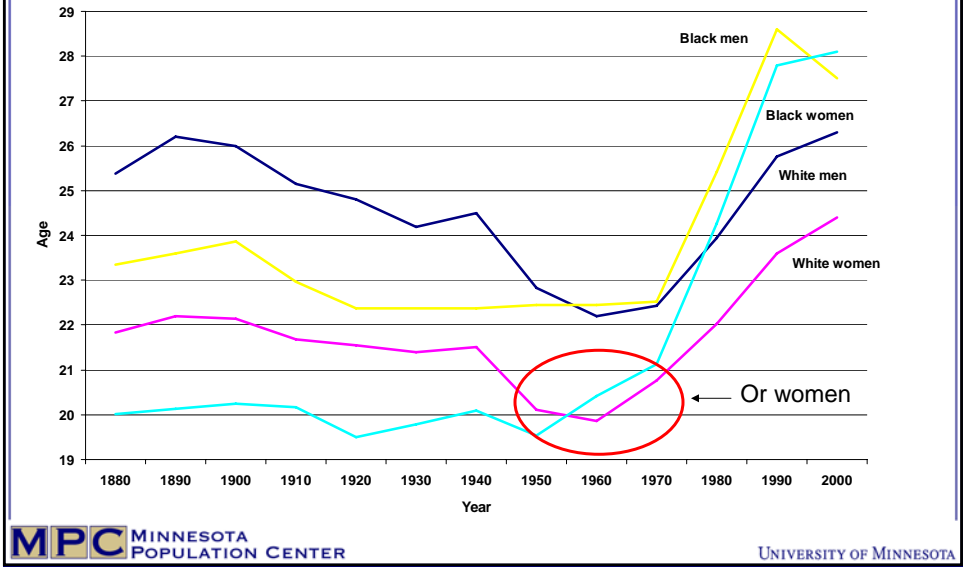
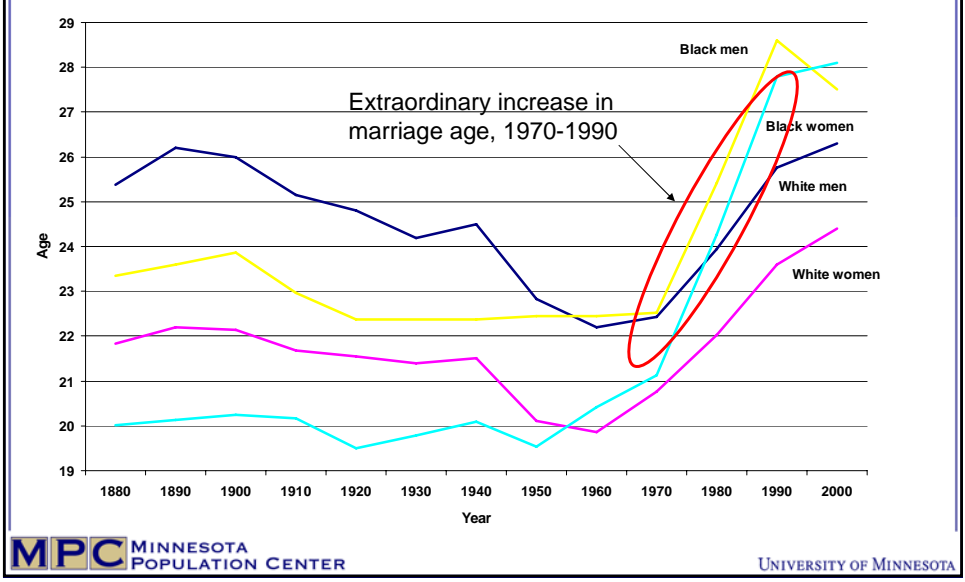
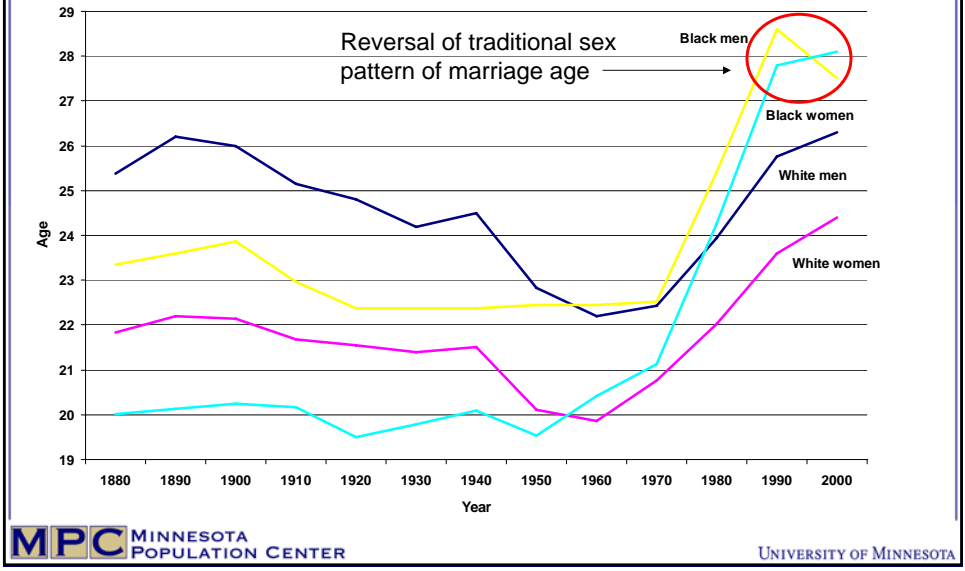


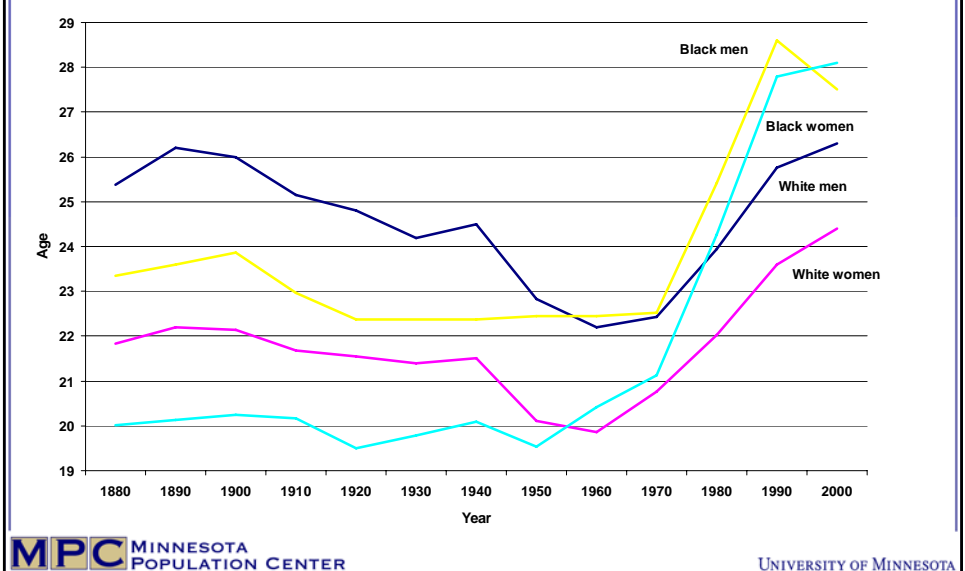
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**Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000**



**Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000**



Although we have three nice questions,  
we have fewer answers.

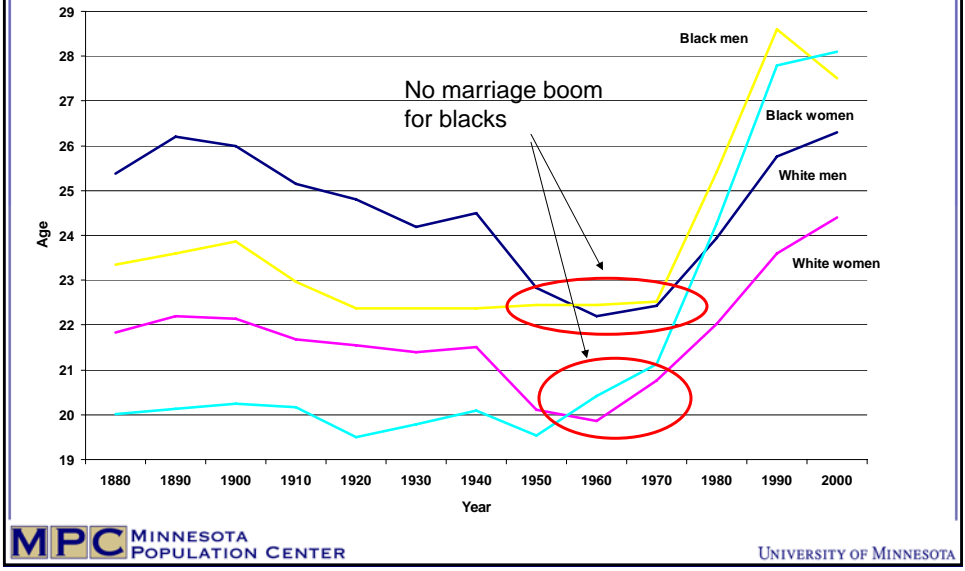
- Absence of a black marriage boom:
  - we have that one covered
- Rise of black marriage age 1970-1990:
  - I will briefly summarize our current project
- Reversal of traditional gender pattern
  - some preliminary results

**Question 1.**

**Why was there no black marriage boom?**

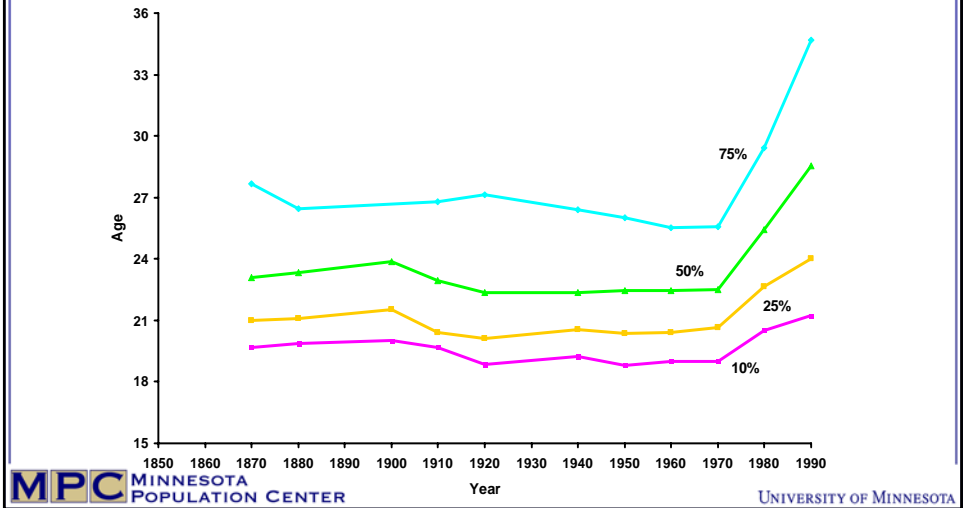


**Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000**



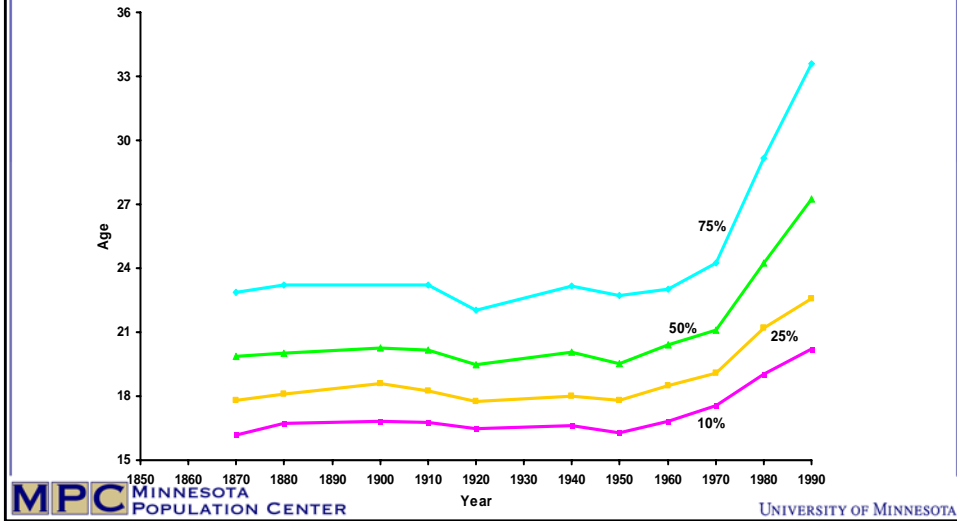
**Marriage age distribution: No marriage boom for black men**

**Figure 2. Age at which 10, 25, 50 and 75 Percent of Black Men Had Married, 1870-1990**



## Virtually no marriage boom for black women

Figure 3. Age at which 10, 25, 50 and 75 Percent of Black Women Had Married, 1870-1990



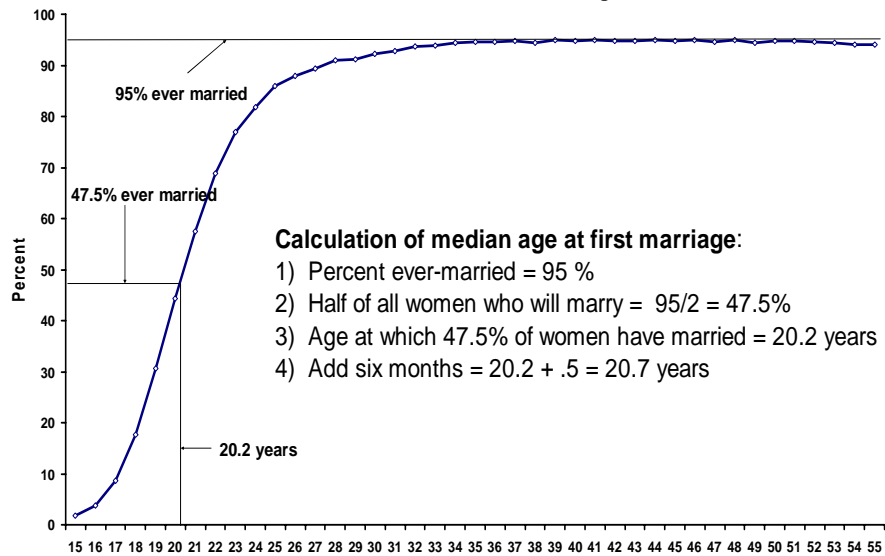
## Methodological interlude

To investigate differentials, we shift our measures from median marriage age and marriage age distribution to percent of young people never married.

- The indirect median age at marriage is unreliable in periods of rapid change (this is particularly important for answering question 3).
- It also doesn't allow us to look at differentials between most population subgroups, since people change their characteristics as they age.

Here is how the indirect median is calculated:

Figure 4. Calculating the median age at first marriage:  
Percent ever-married at each age



**Calculation of median age at first marriage:**

- 1) Percent ever-married = 95 %
- 2) Half of all women who will marry =  $95/2 = 47.5\%$
- 3) Age at which 47.5% of women have married = 20.2 years
- 4) Add six months =  $20.2 + .5 = 20.7$  years

The indirect median has been the principal measure of marriage age in the U.S. for a century, but it is now unreliable.

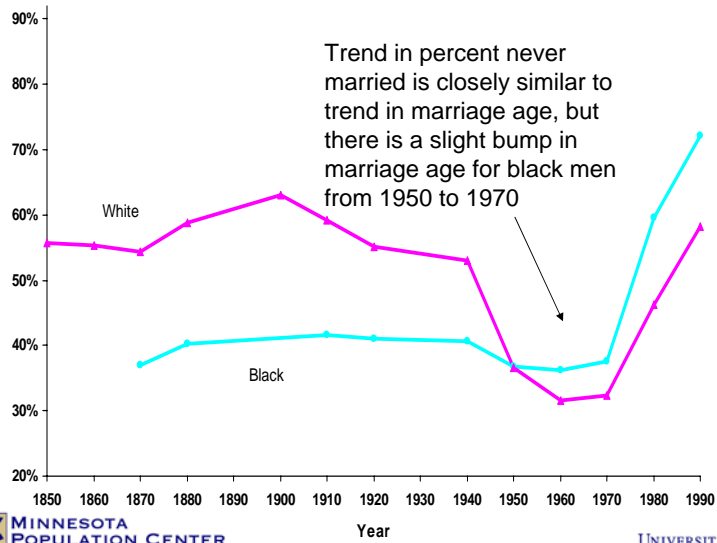
With the rapid change in marriage patterns since 1960 we cannot predict how many people will eventually marry, so estimates are increasingly biased upwards.

Also, indirect median is no good for studying differentials in characteristics that change over the life course, like socioeconomic status.

So, forget about marriage age: we will focus on percent of young people never-married.

Note: SMAM is even worse.

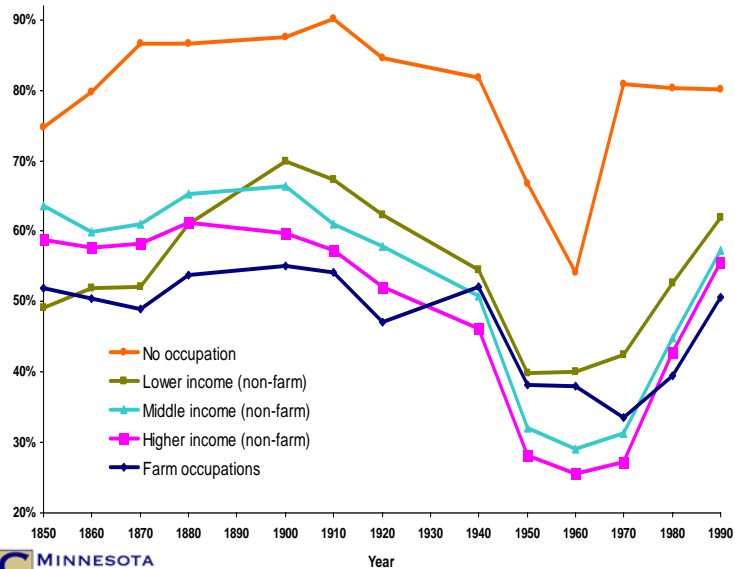
**Figure 5. Percent Never-married:  
Black and Native-born White Men ages 22-27, 1850-1990**



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**Figure 6. Percent Never-married: Native-born White Men  
Ages 22-27, by Occupational Group, 1850-1990**



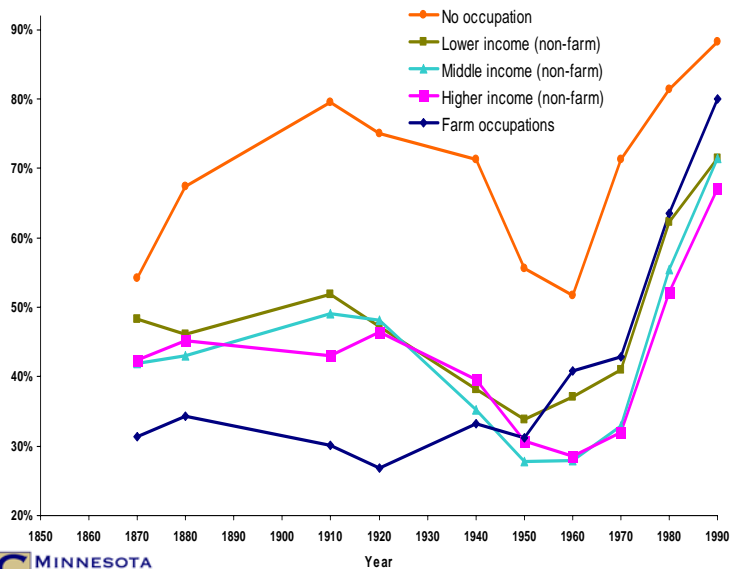
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Among white men, there was a marriage boom in every occupational group.

But check out what happens when we do the same thing for blacks:

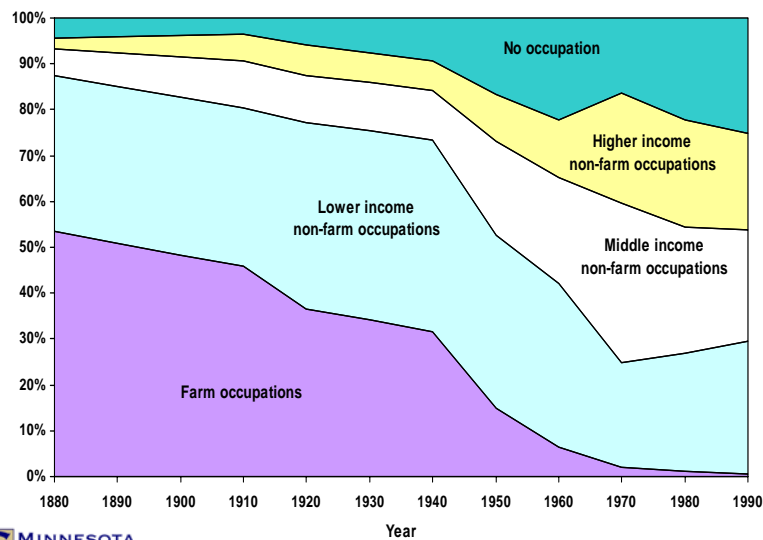
Figure 7. Percent Never-married: Native-born Black Men Ages 22-27, by Occupational Group, 1850-1990



Among black men, there was a marriage boom in every occupational group except for farming.

What was happening to the black occupational distribution?

Figure 8. Occupational Distribution of Black Men Ages 22-27, 1880-1990



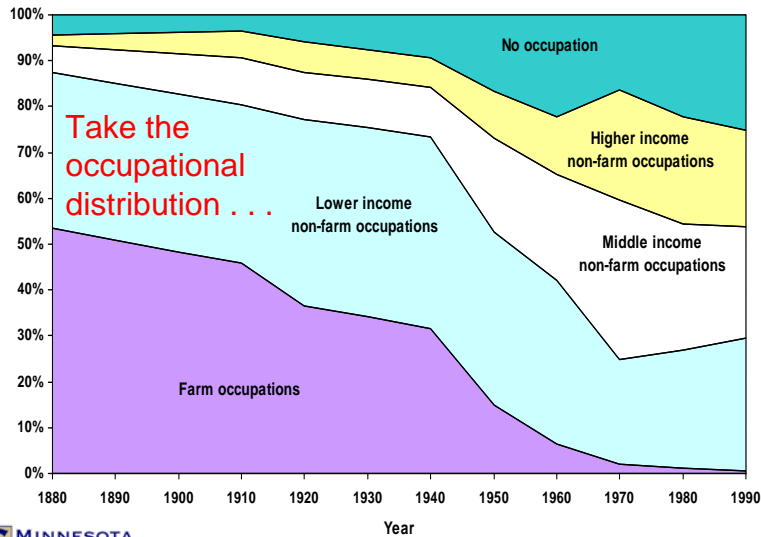
## Conclusion 1:

- After the war, blacks were forced off southern farms by mechanization and consolidation of sharecropping farms.
- This resulted in massive dislocation and a rise of young men with no occupation.
- Without the shift from farming into no occupation, there would have been a substantial black post-war marriage boom.
- There was no marriage boom for blacks because there was no economic boom for blacks.

3 key graphs again, reverse order:



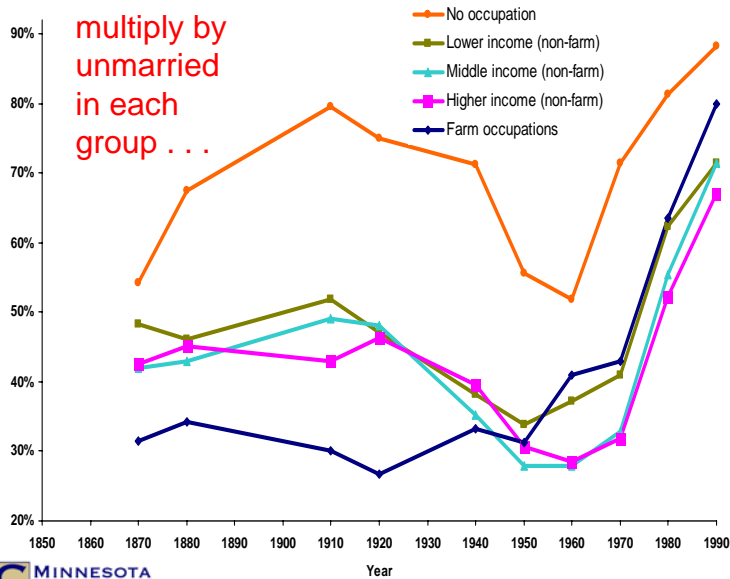
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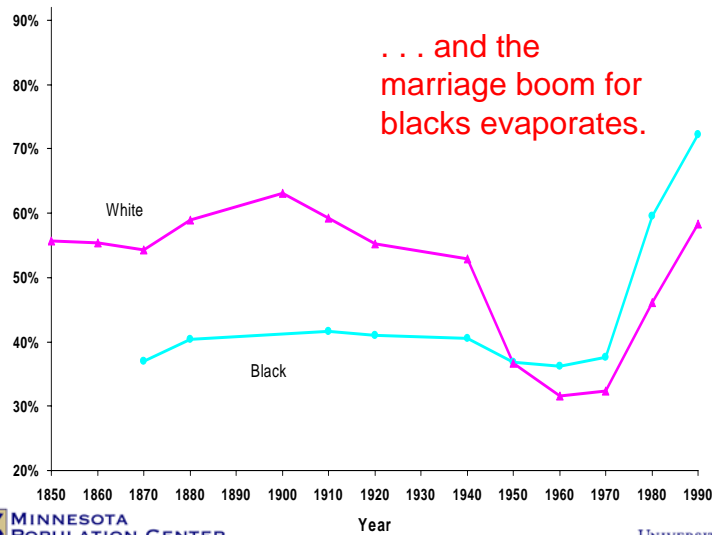
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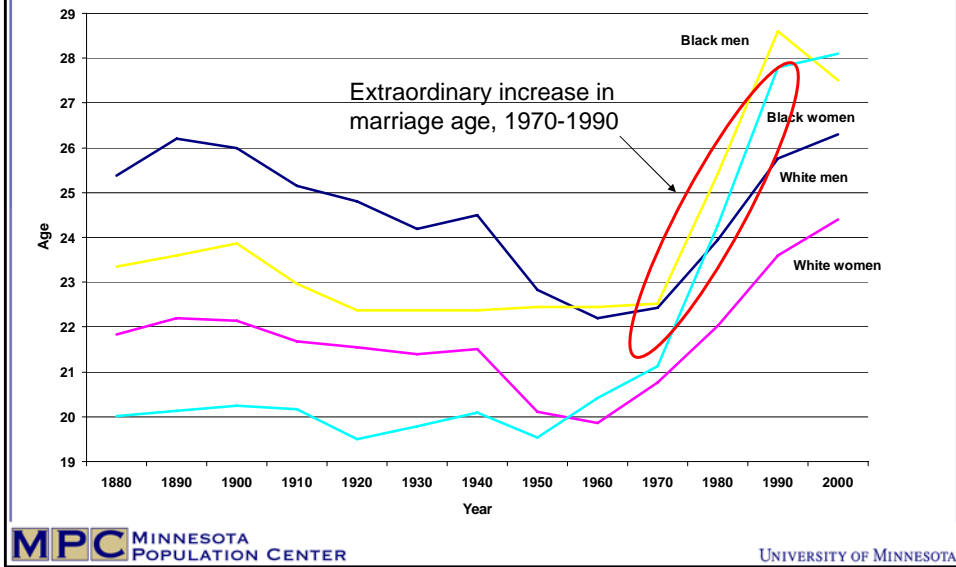
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## Question 2.

What caused the extraordinary rise of black marriage age after 1970?

Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000



### Hypothesis 1. Declining male opportunity

- Marriage boom resulted from rising prosperity, job security, optimism (Glick and Carter 1958); declining male opportunities in 1970s and 1980s, especially among blacks, reversed the trend (Wilson 1987 and many others).
- Increasing economic uncertainty (Oppenheimer 1988) and inequality (Gould and Paserman 2003) compounded the problem.

## Hypothesis 2. Rising female opportunity

- Growing economic opportunities for women increased marriage age.
  - Decreased dependence on a spouse, opened alternatives to marriage (Cherlin 1980).
  - Undermined sex-role specialization and reduced the value of marriage (Becker 1981).

## Hypotheses, continued

- These theories predict a positive association between male economic opportunity and early marriage, and an inverse association for female opportunity.
- Historically, these relationships have been strong, but recent evidence that the relationship may have reversed for women (e.g. Oppenheimer and Lew 1995)

## Hypotheses-continued

- Or, maybe it is cultural change (McLanahan 2004: The Feminist Revolution).
- Or, increasing difficulty in establishing households because of rising housing costs.
- Or, AFDC/TANF (pretty implausible as an explanation, but we will stick it in as a control).

## Hypotheses-continued

- Or, availability of potential spouses (especially non-incarcerated working spouses).
- Or, generational shifts in economic opportunity (Easterlin thesis).

Past studies that attempted to assess relationship between economic opportunities for men and women at the local level on marriage formation ran into data limitations, especially for blacks.

We need microdata to construct sensitive and comparable measures of economic opportunity and other explanatory variables, but available samples are too small and have lousy geographic information (especially before 1980).

### Fitch and Ruggles Research Proposal:

- We will use internal long-form data (1960-2000) being constructed by the Census Bureau's National Historical Census Files Project (with the support of IPUMS Redesign project).
- Long-form data provides information on between 40 and 45 million persons in each census year with full census geography.

## Fitch and Ruggles Proposal (continued)

- Research will be conducted in Census Bureau Research Data Center to ensure confidentiality.
- We will construct 1980 commuting zones (Tolbert and Killian 1987) for each census year to serve as the basis for measures of local area characteristics.

## Fitch and Ruggles Proposal (continued)

- For each commuting zone, we will construct measures of wage levels, inequality, housing, labor-force participation, and spouse availability.
- Measures calculated separately for non-Hispanic whites, blacks, and Hispanics of each sex.
- Measures standardized to control for variation in marital status and age to avoid endogeneity.

## Commuting-zone measures of wages and inequality

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### ***Wage and salary income (level and distribution)***

Median log wages

Proportion of individuals with salary below 2000 poverty threshold for a family of four (\$17,463)

Proportion of individuals with wages over three times the 2000 poverty threshold for a family of four (\$52,389)

Standard deviation of log wages

Difference in wages between 90<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles

    Difference in wages between 50<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles

    Difference in wages between 50<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles

Ratio of median wages at age 20-29 to median wages at age 40-59

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## Commuting zone measures of participation, welfare, housing, and spouse availability

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### ***Labor force participation and unemployment***

Proportion employed 35+ hours for 50+ weeks

Proportion employed part-time

Proportion unemployed

### ***Welfare generosity (state level)***

AFDC/TANF maximum benefit levels

### ***Housing***

Index of local housing costs (rental and home value)

Percent of home ownership

### ***Spouse availability***

Age-specific sex ratio

Male Marriageable Pool Index (MMPI), no income control (Lichter et al. 1992, Wilson 1987)

MMPI with income control (Lichter et al. 1992)

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## Analysis

- Mixed-effect multi-level models to assess changing impact of local economic and demographic conditions on marriage probabilities
- Separate models for each census year
- Pooled models for each pair of years, to make counterfactual predictions (estimate the net structural effects of each economic change in each decade while controlling for relevant background variables)

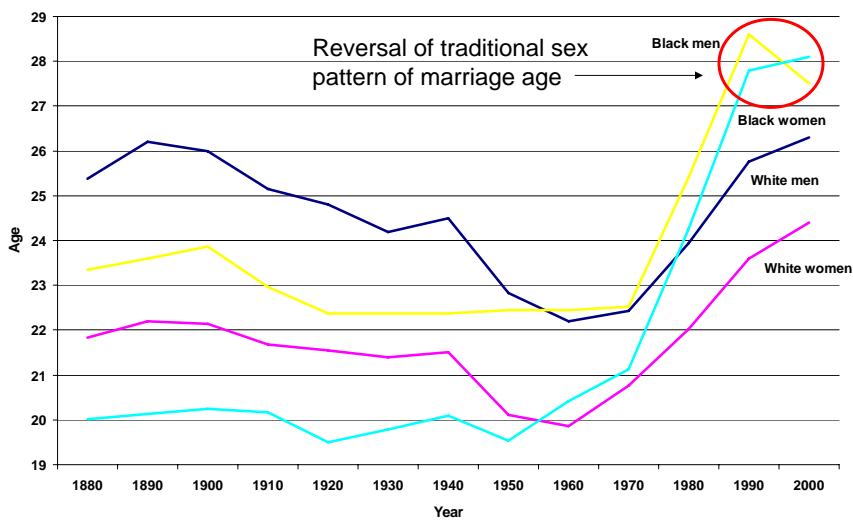
## Conclusion 2:

The sources of the unprecedented rise in black marriage age between 1970 and 1990 need further study with better data.

### Question 3.

**Why did the traditional gender pattern of marriage age reverse among blacks after 1990?**

Figure 1. Median age at first marriage: Native-born whites and blacks by sex, 1880 - 2000



The median age at marriage for black men decreased between 1990 and 2000 and is now younger than the median age at marriage for black women. We pose three questions:

- Is this change **real**? (i.e., has there been an increase in the propensity to marry among young black men?)
- What are the **proximate determinants** of the gender differences in marriage for black men and black women?
- What are **some possible explanations** for this reversal in marriage trends for black men?

*Is this change real: What about the under-enumeration of young black men?*

- Historically, young single black men have been disproportionately under-enumerated, leading to underestimated marriage age.
- Reports from Census 2000 suggest that the under-enumeration of young black men was substantially reduced.
- Therefore, errors in marriage age estimation resulting from under-enumeration are probably less severe than in previous censuses.

*Is this change real? Likely impact of changes in underenumeration*

If underenumeration of young black men had remained constant, the measured decline in black male marriage age between 1990 and 2000 probably would have been even greater.

*Is this change real: Could it be a bad measure of marriage age?*

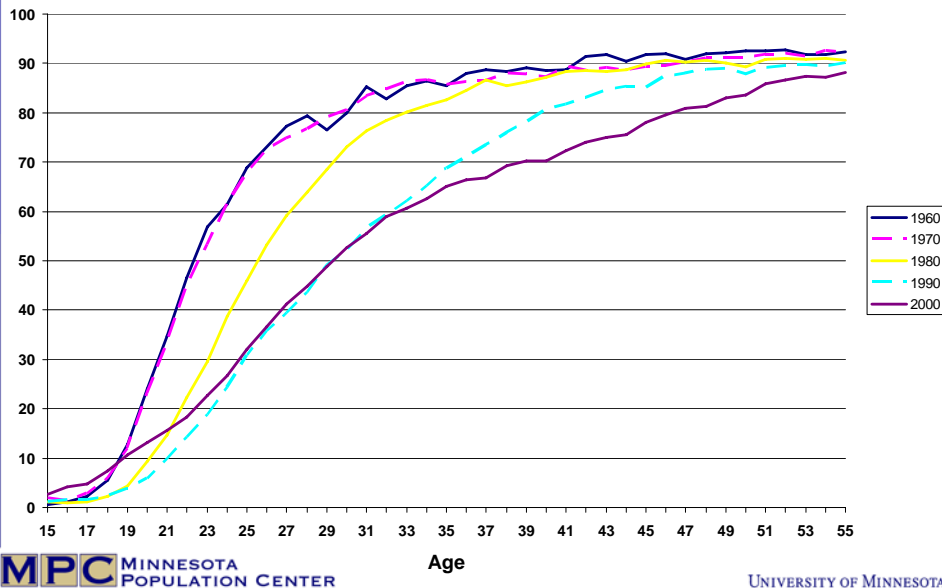
- In periods of rapid change, calculations of marriage age may be biased since we cannot predict the percent of young people who will eventually marry.
- We can avoid the problem by examining the changing age pattern of black marital status, 1960-2000.

## Black male age pattern of marriage

For men, the pattern in 2000 differs from previous years in two ways.

- First, young men (aged 17-26) are more likely to be married than in 1990.
- Second, the percent of men older than 35 years who remained never-married was higher than in any prior census year.

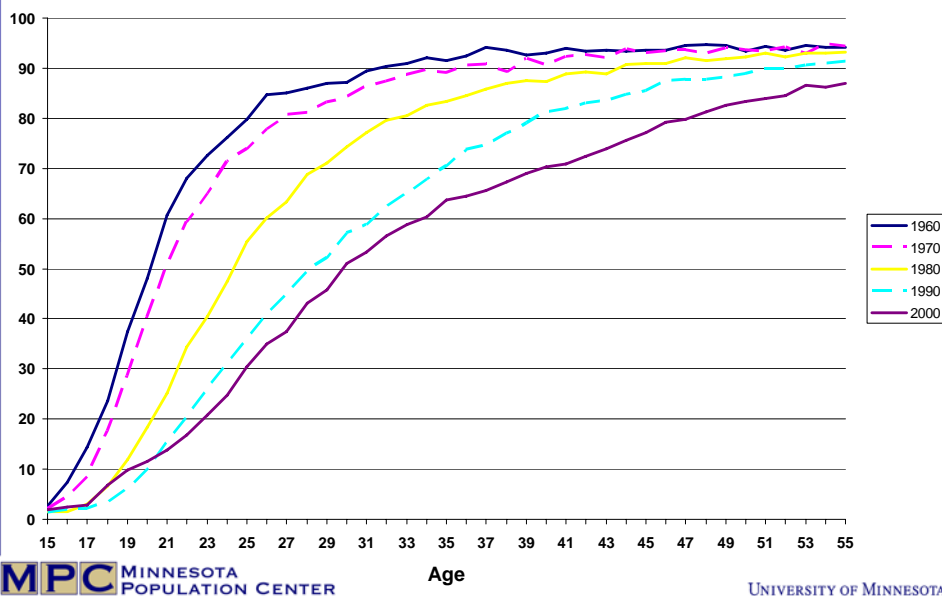
Figure 9. Percent ever-married by age: Black men, 1960-2000



## Black female age pattern of marriage

- The pattern for women in 2000 suggests a slight increase in the percent of very young women (aged 18-21) ever-married.
- There was a significant decrease in the percent of women ever-married at every other age.
- Magnitude of change since 1960 is extraordinary.

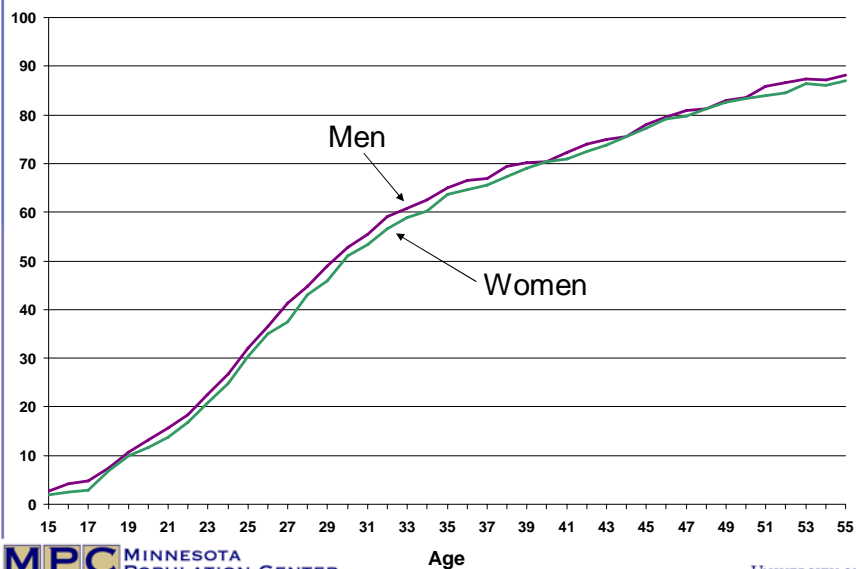
Figure 10. Percent ever-married by age: Black women, 1960-2000



## Sex differences in black age pattern of marriage, 2000

- At all ages, black men in 2000 were more often married than black women.
- This is very strange.
- For both men and women, the curve has flattened dramatically and is now almost linear.

Figure 11. Percent ever-married by age:  
Black men and women, 2000



*Is this change real? What else could be going wrong?*

- It is not due to documented Census Bureau allocation or editing procedures (i.e. those identified with flags).
- It is not due to differential immigration patterns.
- It is not due to the changes in the race question in Census 2000.

Conclusion: It looks real

- Even when we ignore indirect medians, there was a large shift in the gender pattern of marriage age.
- There was an increase in marriage for young black men, and there was not a similar increase for black women.
- At every age, the percent of black men ever-married is greater than the percent of black women ever-married.



Methodological note:  
One more point about indirect medians

The slope of the curve in the peak-marrying years was far flatter in 2000 than in any previous census, so estimates of marriage age are increasingly sensitive to errors in the percent of eventual non-marriage.

What are the **proximate determinants** of  
the gender differences in marriage for black  
men and women?

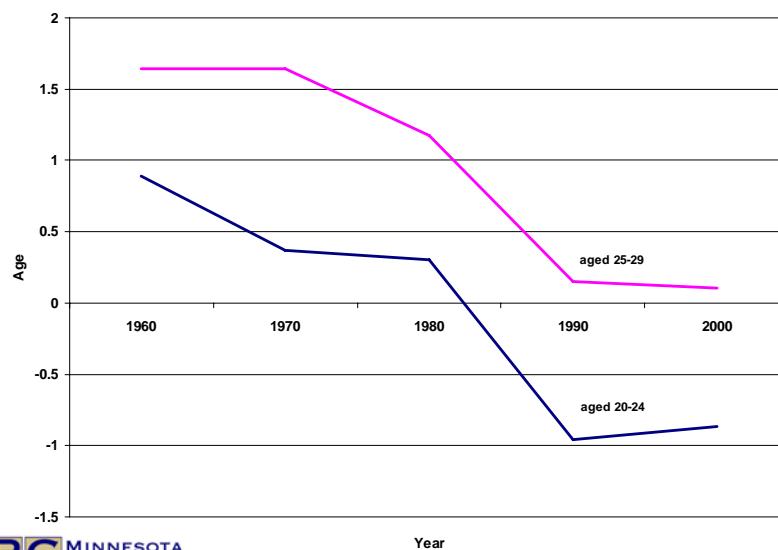
If under-enumeration, bad data, or immigration are not factors, the potential proximate determinants are:

1. Change in the average age difference between spouses
2. Change in differential rate of intermarriage for black men and black women

## Changes in mean age intervals between spouses

- In 2000, men aged 20-24 years were almost a year younger than their wives on average; men aged 25 to 29 average only a tenth of year older than their wives.
- There was not, however, a large change in mean age intervals between 1990 and 2000.

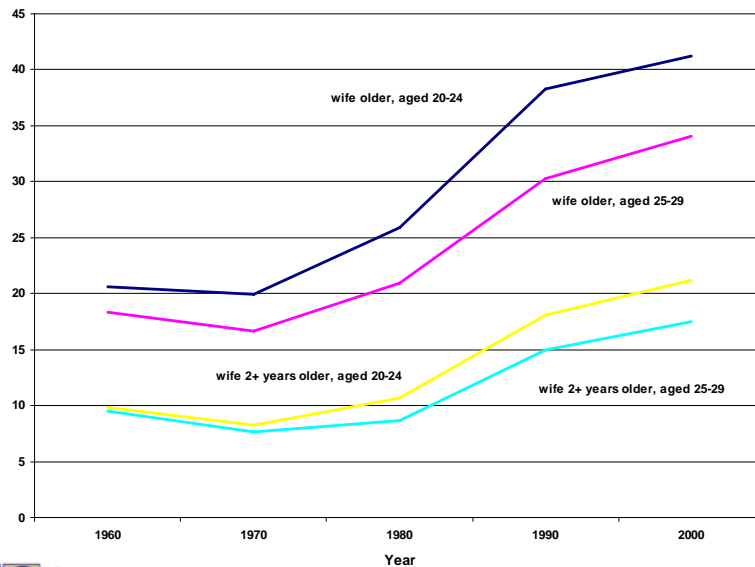
Figure 11. Average age difference between husbands and wives: Married black men by age group, 1960-2000



## Changes in percent of older wives

There was, however, an increase between 1990 and 2000 in the percent of men with older wives, particularly men with wives more than 2 years older.

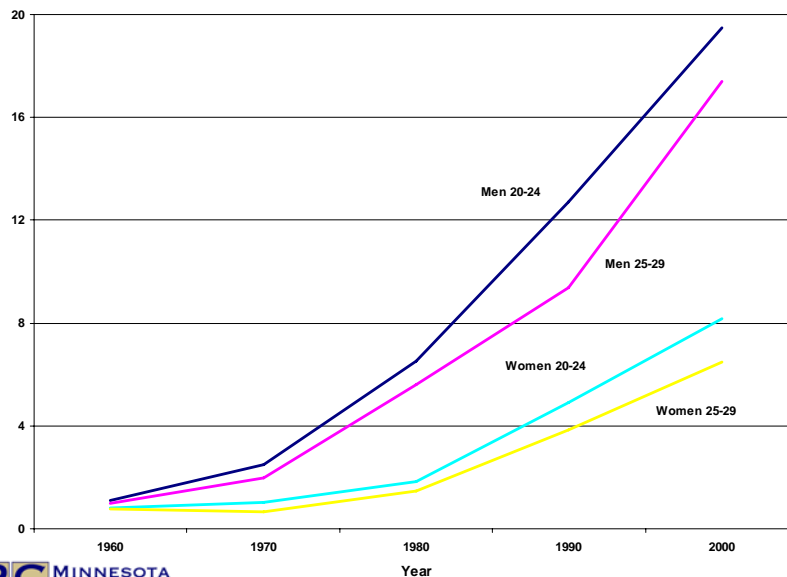
Figure 12. The percent living with older wives and with wives more than 2 years older: Married black men by age group, 1960-2000



## Intermarriage

- Young black men are out-marrying at very high rates (much higher than among women), allowing marriage formation to increase for black men and to continue to decline for black women.
- In all years and both age groups, black men married non-black women at least twice as often as black women married non-black men.
- The increase in intermarriage between 1990 and 2000 was much greater for men than for women.

Figure 13. The percent living with a non-black spouse:  
Married black men and women by age group, 1960-2000

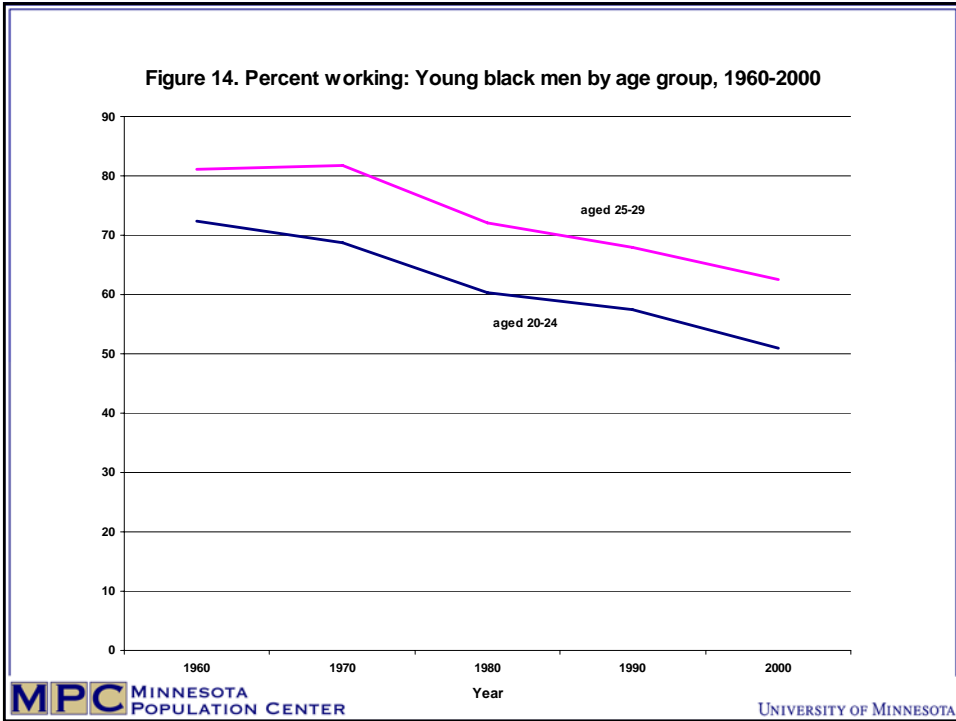


## Proximate determinants: conclusions

- The increase in marriage formation among young black men during the 1990s resulted partly from the extraordinary increase in intermarriage of young black men, reflecting shifting social norms.
- The increase in the percent of black men with older wives also contributed to the reversal in the traditional gender pattern of marriage.
- The sources of change in age intervals are murky.

## What are some possible explanations for the reversal in marriage trends for black men?

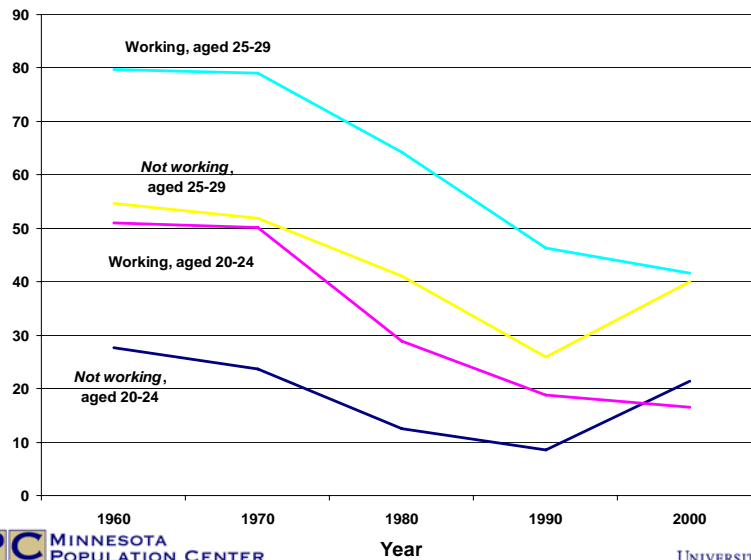
- We hypothesized that the economic boom of the 1990s increased economic opportunities for young black men, which encouraged marriage formation.
- We were wrong.
- Measured by employment, economic circumstances did not improve for young black men.



## The effect of male employment disappeared

- Even more surprising, the traditional relationship between employment and marriage disappeared in 2000.
- Among young black men who worked, marriage continued to decline between 1990 and 2000.

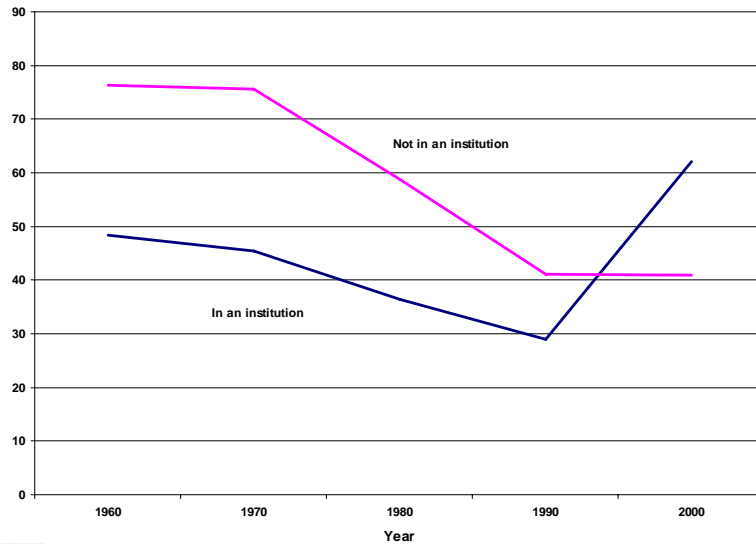
Figure 15. Percent ever-married: Young black men by age group and work status, 1960-2000



## The rise in marriage for black men was confined to those who were not employed

- Further investigation of the characteristics of the non-working married population revealed that many were living in institutions.
- In 2000, the percent ever-married among men in institutions increased dramatically, and the percent ever-married among the non-institutional population was virtually unchanged.

Figure 16. Percent ever-married: Black men aged 25-29 by institution status, 1960-2000



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The increase in black male marriage in 2000 does not appear to be related to improved economic circumstances. Marriage increased among the non-working population, particularly among institutional inmates.

***We offer a free IPUMS mug to anyone with a plausible explanation for this change.\****

*\* while supplies last*

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## Conclusions

- The absence of a post-war marriage boom for blacks is connected to the dislocation associated with the precipitous decline of farming.
- There are a lot of possible explanations for the extraordinary rise in marriage age between 1970 and 1990, and we have a plan for investigating them.
- We really don't have a clue about why there was a marriage boom after 1990 among non-employed and institutionalized black men.

Additional information about our data at

<http://ipums.org>



“Use it for good, never for evil.”

*Thank you.*

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