

Saying No to 'I Do,' With the Economy in Mind

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The United States crossed an important marital threshold in 2009, with the number of young adults who have never married surpassing, for the first time in more than a century, the number who were married.

A long-term decline in marriage accelerated during the severe [recession](#), according to new data from the [Census Bureau](#), with more couples postponing marriage and often choosing to cohabit without tying the knot.

“People are unsure about their job security, and a lot of people lost their jobs,” said Mark Mather of the Population Reference Bureau, a private research group that [analyzed census figures](#). “Getting married is obviously a big step and if you’re not comfortable about your future, it makes sense that you’d postpone a big decision like this.”

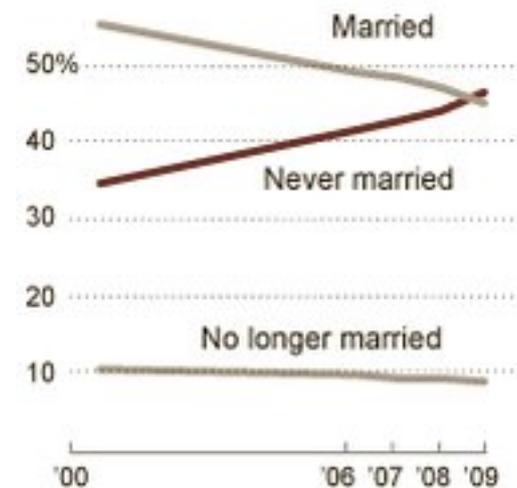
Will McElroy, 26, of Atlanta, has been dating his girlfriend, Ann, for three years. They have discussed marriage, but he lost his job as a computer programmer this year and is now more focused on looking for work than planning for the future.

“Yeah, it definitely takes money to get married,” he said, and “being married probably means eventually buying a house and having kids, right?”

Rapid Reversal

The number of young adults who have never married now exceeds the number married.

Proportion of U.S. 25-34-year-olds



Source: Census

Among the total population 18 and older, the share of men and women who were married fell from 57 percent in 2000 to 52 percent in 2009 — again, the lowest percentage since the government began collecting data more than 100 years ago. The share of adult women who were married fell below half, to 49.9 percent.

Society could be in store for a brief marriage bump if economic good times return, sociologists said, but it is likely to be a temporary reversal, at best, of a long-term downward slide.

Two factors contribute to the decline in marriage among adults ages 25 to 34, said Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University: less marriage and more cohabitation, which has become far more socially acceptable, even with children.

“It’s a mistake to think of all unmarried people as single,” Dr. Cherlin said. “Lots are living with partners.” This is especially true, he said, among those without college degrees, who often wait until they feel economically secure enough to marry.

Joel Greiner, 31, director of counseling for the Journey, an interdenominational church in the St. Louis area, said about a third of the couples in his congregation who attend premarital classes live together before marriage, telling him they are “testing out the waters to see if it will work and wanting to save money.”

But Mr. Greiner says the talk of economics may be cloaking the primary issue. “It’s more a fear of intimacy and fear of marriage,” he said.

According to the federal data, the share of young adults who have never married climbed from 35 percent at the start of the decade to 46 percent in 2009.

There have long been large racial differences in marriage rates, with blacks far less likely to marry than whites, but that difference has been

shrinking as cohabiting becomes more popular with whites, Dr. Cherlin said. And many young adults, he said, are postponing marriage rather than forgoing it altogether.

Mr. McElroy in Atlanta said he would definitely start thinking about a wedding once he gets a new job and the economy picks up.

“Not very romantic, is it?” he said with a laugh.

Robbie Brown contributed reporting from Atlanta, and Malcolm Gay from St. Louis.

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