

COHORT ESTIMATES OF U.S. NONMARITAL FERTILITY

Lawrence L. Wu
Department of Sociology
New York University

This paper presents cohort estimates of nonmarital fertility for U.S. women born between 1915 and 1965. Much of what we know about historical trends in nonmarital fertility is based heavily on period estimates of the proportion of births occurring outside of marriage. A difficulty with such estimates is that they say little about changes in nonmarital childbearing for successive birth cohorts of women. This is a notable omission in the literature on nonmarital fertility, and one that this paper seeks to fill.

In this paper, I use retrospective fertility and marital histories for U.S. women in the June 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995 Current Population Surveys to obtain estimates for U.S. women born between 1915 and 1965. I use these data to provide estimates of cohort trends for nonhispanic white and nonhispanic black women. I examine cohort trends in completed nonmarital fertility, in the subsequent fertility outside of marriage given a nonmarital first birth, and in patterns of nonmarital fertility for those women who bear children both within and outside of marriage. I contrast cohort and period trends, and show how estimates vary under alternative definitions, for example, for births that occur after a marital separation but before the legal dissolution of a marriage, which can be classified as either marital or nonmarital births.

The analyses in this paper pool data from four surveys—the June 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995 Current Population Surveys (CPS). In these data, married women aged 15 or older and never-married women aged 18 or older were asked the dates of birth (to the nearest month and year) for their first four and most recent child. Similar information was obtained for the dates of the first two and most recent marriage—data on when their marriage began and, if a marriage ended, the dates (as relevant) of widowhood, separation, and divorce in the 1980, 1985, and 1990 June CPS. In June 1995, these marriage data were expanded slightly to encompass the first three

and most recent marriage. Thus, with these data, one can determine when a woman's marriage began, when it ended, how it ended, whether she bore children prior to a first marriage, within a first marriage, between marriages, or in a second or later marriage.

An advantage of these data are that they provide very large samples for women born between 1914 and 1980; see Table 1. However, the most recent birth cohorts of women are subject to sample truncation in that, for example, women born in 1980 will be 15 years old in June 1995. As a result, we restrict our attention to five birth cohorts of women: those born 1915–24, 1925–34, 1935–44, 1945–54, 1956–65. Note that the youngest women in the most recent cohort will be aged 30 as of the 1995 interview, an age by which most women will have largely completed their childbearing. Finally, these data lack retrospective information on cohabitation; hence, one cannot distinguish between births to married, cohabiting, or single women. Hence, these analyses can only distinguish between births that take place within or outside of marriage.

It is important to note that these birth cohorts of women span more than 50 years and provide unusually large samples; see Table 1. They also cover important historical periods in the United States. For example, those born between 1915 and 1924 reached their early adult years during the Depression era, while those born between 1925 and 1934 were in their early 20s during the prosperous post-WWII years. Similarly, those women born 1945–54 comprise the main portion of the baby-boom generation who reached their early 20s during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period marked by the Vietnam war. The oldest of the women born 1955–65 represent the tail-end of the baby boom generation, while the younger members of this cohort were in their teen years and early 20s during the Reagan and Bush administrations.

[Table 1 about here.]

To my knowledge, there are no existing cohort estimates of nonmarital fertility; hence, this paper will provide the first estimates for cohort trends in nonmarital fertility. I will use these data to examine a number of different facets of nonmarital fertility. To establish comparability, I will compare CPS and vital statistical estimates for period trends in the nonmarital fertility ratio; for

a similar exercise (but for a more restricted timeframe) see Wu, Bumpass, and Musick (2001), both under the traditional vital statistical definition of nonmarital fertility, which defines as marital births those births that occur after a marital separation but before divorce, and under a definition that treats these births as nonmarital.

Because period measures such as the nonmarital fertility ratio include births of all parities and to women of different ages, estimated trends in such a measure can reflect changes in the parity distribution, age distribution, and other changes in the composition of women over time (Ryder 1965). Because of these issues, I turn to cohort estimates of nonmarital fertility. I will begin with cohort trends in the completed number of children born outside of marriage, presenting estimates for three groups (all women, nonhispanic white women, and nonhispanic black women). I then turn to cohort trends in nonmarital first births and in cohort trends in women's age at nonmarital and marital first birth, with cohort trends again calculated separately for white and black women. Cohort trends for these quantities will be estimated in several different ways, by using life table methods, and (conditional on a first birth) by appropriate measures (mean or median age; age percentiles). I will then present cohort trends in nonmarital births to a woman conditional on the woman having had a nonmarital first birth, and in patterns of nonmarital fertility for those women who bear children both within and outside of marriage.

I have extensive experience with these data; see, for example, Wu, Bumpass, and Musick (2001), Wu and Martin (2004), Wu, Martin, and Long (2001), and Wu and Li (2004).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for white, black, and Hispanic women born 1914–1970. June 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995 Current Population Surveys.

	1914–24	1925–34	1935–44	1945–54	1955–64	total
Nonhispanic Whites						
1980	8007	7543	8247	426	525	24748
1985	3571	6281	6709	5057	5840	27458
1990	316	5603	6341	8962	9945	31167
1995	0	2616	5526	8161	9068	25371
total	11894	22043	26823	22606	25378	108744
Nonhispanic Blacks						
1980	746	862	970	44	82	2704
1985	343	758	849	629	923	3502
1990	35	617	778	1231	1540	4201
1995	0	333	703	1101	1337	3474
total	1124	2570	3300	3005	3882	13881
Hispanics						
1980	246	391	569	27	38	1271
1985	141	325	447	368	479	1760
1990	10	310	436	696	1073	2525
1995	0	162	370	674	968	2174
total	397	1188	1822	1765	2558	7730
All Women (whites, blacks, and Hispanics, excluding all other races)						
1980	8999	8796	9786	497	645	28723
1985	4055	7364	8005	6054	7242	32720
1990	361	6530	7555	10889	12558	37893
1995	0	3111	6599	9936	11373	31019
total	13415	25801	31945	27376	31818	130355

REFERENCES

- Ryder, Norman B. 1965. "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change." *American Sociological Review* 30(6): 843–61.
- Wu, Lawrence L., Larry L. Bumpass, and Kelly Musick. 2001. "Historical and Life Course Trajectories of Nonmarital Childbearing." Pp. 3–48 in L.L. Wu, and B. Wolfe (Eds.), *Out of Wedlock: Causes and Consequences of Nonmarital Fertility*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Wu, Lawrence L., and Jui-Chung Allen Li. 2004. "Historical Roots of Family Diversity: Marital and Childbearing Trajectories of American Women." Forthcoming in Richard A. Settersten, Frank F. Furstenberg, and Ruben G. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wu, Lawrence L., and Steven P. Martin. 2004. "Is There an Engine of Nonmarital Fertility?" Unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, New York University.
- Wu, Lawrence L., Steven P. Martin, and Daniel A. Long. 2001. "Comparing Data Quality of Fertility and First Sexual Intercourse Histories." *Journal of Human Resources* 36(3): 520–55.