

Number of unmarried couples is rising, Census Bureau says

By RICHARD WHITMIRE
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — The romance of marriage still wanes among Americans, with the number of unmarried couples continuing to rise, according to the Census Bureau.

In 1970 there was one unmarried couple for every 100 married couples; by 1995, that had risen to seven unmarried for every 100 married couples, said Arlene Saluter, the author of the bureau's annual marital status report.

About one-third of the unmarried couples have children, a sign that America is following the leads of Canada and Scandinavia, where the traditional linkage of marriage and child-bearing continues to drift apart.

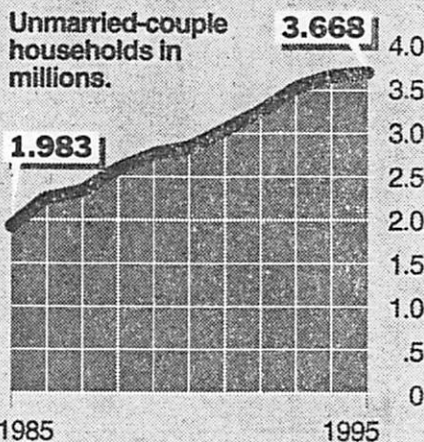
While newspaper headlines tend to focus on divorce, single parents and out-of-wedlock births, the barometer watched most closely by sociologists is the marriage rate.

"Marriage is becoming weaker as an institution," said marriage expert Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University. "It's less necessary to be married than it used to be, and it's acceptable to be an unmarried couple with children in a way it wasn't a generation ago."

The report also shows that, each year, men are waiting longer to marry. In 1995 the average age of the groom was nearly 27; 20 years ago, it was 23.5.

AVOIDING THE ALTAR

Following the lead of European countries, the number of unmarried couples in the U.S., both with and without children, continues to rise.



Source: Census Bureau

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Some sociologists point to Scandinavian countries as evidence there is little harm in the trend of cohabitating couples having children. But there is a big difference between those countries and the United States, said David Blankenhorn of the Institute for American Values.

"In America, a cohabitating father is much less likely to be a long-term, committed, co-residential father," said Blankenhorn. "In other words, there's less fatherhood."

IN PERSPECTIVE

Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks agreed. "In Europe, there are a lot more couples who look like they're married (but aren't) than in the United States," he said. "Most people in the United States are cohabitating because their relationship is fragile, not because they disapprove of marriage."

Compared with Europeans, Americans still believe in marriage, said Jencks. "Our kids still get married, just not as quickly as they used to," he said. "When they decide they're going to have a couple of kids, most get married. If we lived in Paris or Stockholm, that would not necessarily be the case."

Marriage expert Larry Bumpass of the University of Wisconsin agreed.

"It's important that this not be characterized as a rejection of marriage," said Bumpass. "A rejection of marriage implies that people don't want to get married and won't, when in fact they say they want to get married and most will."

Said Bumpass: "They just don't perceive (marriage) as necessary. The stigma associated with being unmarried and sexually active, unmarried and living with a partner, or even unmarried and being a parent has dramatically declined."