Sexual Abstinence in the United States: Cohort Trends in Abstaining from Sex While Never Married for U.S. Women Born 1938 to 1983

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Abstract
In this data visualization, the authors document trends in abstaining from sex while never married for U.S. women born 1938–1939 to 1982–1983. Using data from the six most recent National Surveys of Family Growth, the authors’ estimates suggest that for women born in the late 1930s and early 1940s, 48 percent to 58 percent reported abstaining from sex while never married. Abstinence then declined rapidly among women born in the late 1940s through the early 1960s, leveling off at between 9 percent and 12 percent for more recent birth cohorts. Thus, for U.S. women born between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, roughly one in nine abstained from sex while never married.

Keywords
sexual abstinence, cohort trends, premarital sex

In this data visualization, we document trends in abstaining from sex while never married for U.S. women born 1938–1939 to 1982–1983. Obtaining empirical estimates of sexual abstinence requires choosing some age at which to assess matters, and we have chosen to evaluate abstinence at age 30, an age by which most who have sex while never married have done so. The resulting operational definition thus consists of two distinct groups that abstained from sex while never married: (1) those who were never-married virgins at age 30 and (2) those who were virgins at first marriage and who married at or before age 30. (In results not reported, we find that estimates change little when using a later age to assess abstinence.) We estimated trends using data from the six most recent National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFGs), thus differing from Wu, Martin, and England (2017), whose analyses did not include data from the most recent (2011–2015) NSFG.

It is important to note that our estimates rely on self-reports by survey respondents. This is of particular concern for the oldest birth cohorts of women, some of whom may have been particularly reluctant to reveal that they were sexually active while never married. Our estimates also rely on female data and thus should be interpreted in light of a continuing sexual double standard that views the sexual activity of never married men and women differently. Finally, these data lack information on whether some women who were sexually active while never married had sex only with the men they eventually married, which may have been especially true among older birth cohorts of U.S. women (Klassen et al. 1989).

Cohort trends in sexual abstinence are reported in Figure 1 for U.S. women born 1938–1939, 1940–1941, . . . , 1982–1983. Because we evaluate abstinence at age 30, we restrict respondents in each 2-year birth cohort to those age 30 or older when participating in the NSFG. Estimates for the earliest birth cohorts are noisy, with abstinence estimated at 48.8 percent, 58.1 percent, 46.1 percent, and 47.9 percent for those born 1938–1939, 1940–1941, 1942–1943, and 1944–1945. Abstinence then declines nearly monotonically, beginning for those born 1944–1945 through those born 1964–1965, with abstinence declining particularly rapidly

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for those born in the 1940s and 1950s. The percentage abstaining from sex then fluctuates between approximately 9 percent and 12 percent for those born 1964–1965 through 1982–1983.

Figure 1 shows that the percentage abstaining from sex has declined substantially among U.S. women. For those born in the early 1980s, which are the most recent birth cohorts in these data, roughly 11 percent were abstinent while 89 percent were sexually active while never married.

Our results thus show that sexual activity among never-married women in the United States has increased to levels that are close to universal. But we also find virtually no change in abstinence among recent birth cohorts of U.S. women—those born between the mid-1960s and the early
1980s—with roughly one in nine of these women continuing to abstain from sex while never married.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Lawrence L. Wu is a professor of sociology and director of the NYU Population Center at New York University. He is a social demographer whose research interests include fertility, family structure and family change, cohabitation, marital and union stability, and sexual and contraceptive behaviors. He is also a noted authority on event history methods.

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