

More people shun, put off marriage

By Genaro C. Armas
Associated Press

WASHINGTON—It used to be common for men and women to get a marriage certificate not too long after collecting their high school diploma. Not anymore.

Census Bureau figures for 2003 show one-third of men and nearly one-quarter of women between the ages of 30 and 34 have never been married, nearly four times the rates in 1970.

It's further evidence young people are focusing on education and careers before settling down and beginning families, experts say. Societal taboos about couples living together before marriage also have eased, said Linda Waite, a University of Chicago sociologist.

Jeni Landers, a 30-year-old law student from Boston, said she considers living together a requirement before saying "I do."

"I don't know how people got married before living together first," said Landers, who moved in with her fiance after getting engaged nearly a year ago. "This is crucial to see how you get along."

Data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey released this week show the age at which someone typically marries for the first time rose from 20.8 for women and 23.2 for men in 1970 to 25.3 and 27.1, respectively, last year. In 1970, only 6 percent of women 30 to 34 had never been married; the figure was 23 percent in 2003. The rate for never-married men in the same age group rose from 9 percent to 33 percent.

Among younger women, some 36 percent of those 20 to 24 had never been married in 1970; last year it was 75 percent. Among men in that age group, the change was nearly as dramatic: 55 percent in 1970 to 86 percent last year.

"The majority of people still want to get married, but they see it sort of as dessert now, something that's desirable rather than

necessary," said Dorion Solot, executive director of the Albany, N.Y.-based Alternatives to Marriage Project, which aims to fight discrimination based on marital status and to seek equality and fairness for unmarried people.

"People want to be more sure that they don't make a marriage mistake," Solot said.

Meanwhile, societal pressures to marry before having children have decreased, said Thomas Coleman, executive director for the Glendale-based Unmarried America, which also promotes equality for unmarried people. Among the group's concerns are tax policies which it contends are stacked against single people.

In 2003, nearly 35 percent of all births were to unmarried women, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. That's up from 11 percent in 1970, though the rate of increase has slowed since 1995, when 32 percent of births

were out-of-wedlock. Births to unmarried teens have declined since the mid-1990s.

Meaghan Lamarre, 24, a research assistant in Providence, R.I., said she and her boyfriend of 10 months "are not in a big hurry to marry." Lamarre's focus is on work and getting into an Ivy League graduate program, possibly in public policy.

"There's no time frame of when to get married. ... It's not a goal," said Lamarre, an Alternatives to Marriage Project member. "I'm not opposed to it, but I think I could live happily ever after without being married."

That kind of talk disturbs David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, a New York-based pro-marriage organization. Blankenhorn says Lamarre's philosophy is more of a concern to him than those who delay marriage to focus on school or a career.

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