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# Understanding Racial Differences in Marital Disruption: Recent Trends and Explanations

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**Understanding Racial Differences in Marital Disruption:  
Recent Trends and Explanations\***

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## **Understanding Racial Differences in Marital Disruption: Recent Trends and Explanations**

### Abstract

We use data from the Current Population Survey to investigate racial differences in recent patterns of marital disruption. Although a leveling in the trend of disruption has occurred for White women since 1980, our results suggest less stabilization in rates of disruption among Black women. We also observe significant differences by race in the effects of key compositional factors on the risk of marital disruption, including age at marriage, education, premarital childbearing, and region of residence. Differences in population composition with respect to these characteristics, however, cannot alone explain the overall racial gap in disruption.

Key words: Divorce, Family, Race, United States

A vast body of research documents patterns of marital dissolution in the United States. Among the more intriguing findings is evidence that, after years of rising divorce rates, population trends in divorce have recently stabilized, a trend that cannot be attributed to compositional changes in the married population (Goldstein, 1999). Other studies have identified a number of important risk factors for divorce, including age at first marriage, premarital childbearing, and educational attainment (e.g. Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; White, 1990). Further evidence suggests that the effects of these risk factors on divorce have remained remarkably stable over time (Teachman, 2002).

Yet social scientists have devoted relatively little attention to documenting racial differentials in recent patterns of marital disruption, despite tremendous historical interest in understanding racial differences in family life in the United States (e.g. Cherlin, 1992; Moynihan, 1965; Wilson, 1987). This is particularly surprising given negative economic, emotional, and health outcomes associated with divorce (Amato, 2000; Holden & Smock, 1991; Waite, 1995), evidence of higher levels of disruption among Blacks than Whites (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Raley & Bumpass, 2003), and the considerable attention paid to understanding racial differences in patterns of marriage formation (e.g. Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1989; Koball, 1998; Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; Raley, 1996). Furthermore, there is ample reason to anticipate that recent trends and explanations for marital disruption may vary by race. Important racial differences exist in the context in which marriages are formed and maintained, including patterns of childbearing, economic opportunities, and family-related attitudes. Although little is known about racial differences in disruption in more recent years, a relatively greater retreat from marriage has been observed among Blacks than Whites, suggesting change in the selectivity of married populations over time. Indeed, Teachman (2002) posits that Blacks

who marry are increasingly a select group who are relatively more committed to marriage, which points to a potential source of downward pressure on rates of marital disruption for Blacks that would in turn reduce the racial differential in disruption.

The current research uses data from multiple years of the June Current Population Survey to document racial variation in recent patterns of marital disruption. We address several specific questions in this research. First, we ask whether the leveling of trends in divorce observed in the United States since 1980 was experienced both for Black and for White women. Although population-level demographic trends tend to be driven by the experience of the majority White population in the United States, social scientists and policy makers may overlook an important contributor to the economic and emotional well-being of adults and children if they erroneously assume stability in patterns of divorce among African Americans. Next, to investigate potential racial variation in the culture of marriage and divorce, we explore differences between Black and White women in the effects of potential risk factors on marital disruption. Although historical evidence suggests stability over time in the effects of risk factors on marital disruption in the aggregate U.S. population (Teachman, 2002), social scientists have not considered whether change in these effects may have occurred within particular racial subpopulations. We therefore also examine whether the effects of risk factors for divorce have changed over time for Black and White women. Finally, we investigate whether key sources of variation in the composition of populations of married Black and White women can explain observed differences in the level of marital disruption experienced by these groups in recent years, updating previous work conducted in this area (e.g., Teachman, 1986).

## **BACKGROUND AND CURRENT RESEARCH**

### **Recent Trends in Marital Disruption**

Much prior research on racial differences in marital disruption has examined the proportion of marriages which end by a given anniversary, often to increase the statistical reliability of estimates based on relatively small samples of Blacks. Such studies suggest that rates of disruption in recent decades have been considerably higher for Blacks than for Whites. Indeed, for marriages formed between 1965 and 1979, Sweet and Bumpass (1989) estimate that 18 percent of first marriages had disrupted within five years among White women, compared to 29 percent of first marriages among Black women. Rates of marital instability also increased more rapidly among Black than White women during this period (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; but see Teachman 2002). More recent estimates indicate that although approximately 31 percent of all first marriages involving White women end in separation or divorce within the first ten years, the figure is substantially higher for Black women, at 47 percent of all marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). In combination with relatively low rates of marriage and remarriage among Blacks, continuation of levels of disruption experienced during the late 1970s suggest that recent cohorts of Black women will spend only 22 percent of their lives married (Espenshade, 1985).

Although providing considerable insight into trends and differentials in patterns of marital disruption, existing cohort-based analyses cannot provide direct information about the nature of period trends in disruption in the post-1980 period. For example, Bramlett and Mosher (2002) estimate that a greater proportion of marriages ended in disruption within a decade among Black women marrying between 1980 and 1984 than among those marrying in the late 1970s. On the one hand, this finding may point to steady growth in annual rates of disruption among Black

women after 1980. On the other, this finding could result from a pattern characterized by growth in period rates of disruption through the early-1980s, but some leveling of these rates thereafter. Recent race-specific period trends in marital disruption have not been well documented, which is particularly surprising given that historical fluctuations in levels of marital disruption in the United States are generally better accounted for by period than by cohort effects (Teachman, 2002; Thornton & Rodgers, 1987; but see Ono, 1999).

### **Explanations for Racial Variation in Disruption**

One potential explanation for observed racial differences in marital disruption is that Black and White women tend to differ in their levels of exposure to risk factors for divorce. For example, some argue that Black men and women are less likely than Whites to marry and to stay married because of a relatively weaker ability to support a family, particularly among African American males (e.g. Wilson, 1987). Although the economic opportunities argument has received only mixed support (e.g. Mare & Winship, 1991; Testa & Krogh, 1995; White & Rogers, 2000), many other characteristics of married populations also differ by race. For example, Black married women are more likely to have had a premarital birth and tend to be somewhat less educated than White married women (e.g. Greenstein, 1990; Teachman, 1986; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). Premarital childbearing is associated with an increased risk of marital disruption, particularly when the marriage does not involve the child's father (Billy et al., 1986; Furstenberg, 1976; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Not only may the presence of children born before marriage place additional strain and economic pressure on unions, but also, in cases where the husband fathered the child, unions may have been entered into more hastily and with less preparation, to "legitimize" a birth (Furstenberg, 1976; Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985). Prior



research also identifies a positive relationship between education and marital stability, although this effect appears to be partially explained by an association of education with other risk factors – particularly with an early age at marriage (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989).

Not all compositional differences in risk factors for marital disruption, however, are expected to contribute to relatively higher rates of disruption among Blacks. For example, Black women tend to marry at older ages than White women (e.g. Sweet & Bumpass, 1987), which ought to *reduce* their risk of disruption relative to White women. Age is a measure of both emotional and social maturity, which in turn is related to the success of the union (Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985). Marrying young, particularly as a teenager, is associated with uncertainty in the future characteristics of one's spouse and of the marital relationship (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977). Black women also tend to be somewhat less likely to live in the Western United States than are White women (McKinnon, 2003). The West typically registers the highest disruption rates, a pattern largely attributed to distinct cultural values and attitudes in the West that are less conducive to stable marriages, although some evidence suggests this regional effect may have weakened by the mid 1980s (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Taken together, these patterns suggest that racial differences in exposure to risk factors for marital instability may have offsetting effects on the observed racial gap in disruption.

Although prior research has investigated the contribution of such compositional factors to racial differences in marital disruption, they have not fully considered the impact of key risk factors for disruption nor have they examined the period since the mid 1980s. For example, one recent such study -- an analysis of data from the 1982 and 1988 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth -- does not consider the contribution of differences in patterns of premarital childbearing or educational attainment to explaining racial differences in marital disruption

(Heaton & Jacobson, 1994). In an analysis of multiple cohorts from the National Longitudinal Surveys, Tzeng and Mare (1995) report differences in levels of educational attainment and premarital childbearing to be among the largest contributors to the racial gap in disruption, although they find that these factors together explain less than a quarter of the overall race difference. Tzeng and Mare (1995), however, assume the effects of covariates to be constant across racial groups and only consider patterns of disruption observed through 1987. Although prior research has considered the contribution of age at marriage to the racial gap in disruption, these studies have generally employed a linear specification of age (Heaton & Jacobson, 1994; Teachman, 1986; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). Evidence suggests, however, that individuals marrying as teenagers are substantially more likely to divorce than those marrying at later ages (e.g. Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989).

To the extent that compositional factors cannot adequately explain racial differences in marital disruption, social scientists have considered how the *effects* of potential risk factors for disruption may vary by race. For example, research points to historically-rooted racial differences in family norms, such as the level of stigma associated with non-marital childbearing and the conditions under which a marriage should be ended (Pagnini & Morgan, 1996). Several studies indicate that the destabilizing effect of age at marriage may be somewhat stronger among Whites than among Blacks (Heaton & Jacobson, 1994; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Teachman, 1983, 1986). Other research suggests that bearing children before marriage increases the likelihood of disruption among Whites but has weaker effects on marital instability among Blacks (Billy et al., 1986; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Teachman, 1983, 1986). Some evidence also points to racial differences in the destabilizing effects of factors such as education and region of residence (Greenstein, 1990; Heaton & Jacobson, 1994). Few prior studies conduct

formal statistical tests of racial differences in the effects of these covariates, however, or examine whether the effects of risk factors for disruption may have changed over time for Blacks and for Whites. A notable exception is Teachman's (2002) recent examination of change over time in the effects of risk factors for marital disruption, which finds, with the exception of race, remarkable stability in the effects of key covariates over time. Teachman also reports no significant improvement in model fit when the effects of a large array of risk factors are *simultaneously* allowed to vary by race. Raley and Bumpass (2003) also investigate change over time in the association between education and marital stability. However, these analyses do not investigate whether the effects of specific risk factors (other than marriage cohort) differ by race, or whether the effects of risk factors may have changed over time within racial groups.

### **The Current Research**

The current research uses updated survey information to improve our understanding of racial variation in marital disruption, both by examining within-race patterns of disruption and by investigating between-race differences in the correlates and level of disruption. We ask three sets of specific research questions. First, we ask if period trends in crude rates of marital disruption have stabilized both for White and for Black women since 1980. Second, we ask if differences exist between Black and White women in the effects of potential risk factors for marital disruption, and investigate whether these effects have themselves changed over time for each group. Third, we assess the contribution of racial differences in the composition of the married population to recent variation between Blacks and Whites in the level of marital disruption. We also investigate whether the effects of various compositional factors on the racial gap in disruption may offset one another. For example, although Black women's tendency to

marry at older ages than White women ought to *reduce* their risk of disruption relative to White women, Black women's greater likelihood of premarital childbearing ought to *increase* their relative risk of disruption.

## **DATA AND MEASURES**

Data for our research come from the 1985, 1990, and 1995 June Current Population Surveys (CPS). Data are limited to ever-married White and Black women between the ages of 15 and 65 at the time of interview. We restrict our study to women due to evidence of relatively poorer quality of male marital histories and poorer coverage of men in survey data, particularly among men who are Black or not currently married (Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991).

The CPS data are an important resource for the study of racial differences in marital disruption. Many prior studies have been limited in their ability to examine racial differences in the trends and correlates of marital disruption due to insufficient sample sizes. Large sample sizes are particularly needed to reliably document annual rates of marital disruption for racial and ethnic subpopulations. The CPS is administered to relatively large numbers of respondents, ensuring adequate sample sizes of both White and Black women for our research. For example, the 1995 June CPS sample includes approximately 1,325 Black women whose first marriages ended in separation or divorce, compared to approximately 530 Black women who experienced these events in the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth and 580 Black women (by the 1992 - 94 interview) in the National Survey of Families and Households (authors' tabulations). Pooling data from multiple CPS interview years further increases the size of our analytical sample. In addition, the CPS permits use of the date of separation rather than divorce to identify the occurrence and timing of marital disruption. This is important, given that a formal divorce may

not be obtained until at least one partner wishes to remarry, and given well-established differences between Blacks and Whites in the propensity to divorce after separation (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Espenshade, 1985; Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Indeed, Bramlett and Mosher (2001) estimate that fully one-third of Black women do not divorce within five years of separation from their first marriages, compared to only 3 percent of White women.

Although our use of the CPS restricts the array of covariates we can consider, these data do contain information on many well-established risk factors for marital disruption, including age at first marriage, having had a premarital birth, having had a premarital conception (but not a premarital birth), educational attainment, and region of residence. All measures reflect information gathered at the time of interview, although it is important to keep in mind that educational attainment and region of residence may change over the course of a marriage. We use values imputed by the Census Bureau in cases of inconsistent data or item non-response.

Table 1 displays the race-specific mean values of our key covariates in the year of marriage. Consistent with findings from other samples, Black women in the CPS tend to have married at a somewhat older age than White women and are somewhat less well educated. Black women are also substantially more likely to have had a birth before marriage, with more than 45 percent of Black women having had a birth before marriage, compared with fewer than 13 percent of White women. Approximately 11 percent of both White and Black women experience a premarital conception but marry before the birth of their child. Finally, Black women in our sample are more likely to live in the South and less likely to live in other regions of the United States than are White women.

[Table 1 about here.]

## **METHODS**

Our research proceeds in a series of three stages. In the first stage of the analysis, we document and compare crude rates of divorce and marital disruption for first marriages among representative populations of White and Black women. We define marital disruption as the self-reported date the respondent actually stopped living with her spouse, regardless of whether a legal divorce was subsequently obtained. To minimize errors in recall, we limit our analysis to periods within fifteen years of the CPS interview date, yielding a time series spanning from 1970 to 1994. Our primary question at this stage of the analysis is whether both populations of Black and White women experienced a leveling in trends of disruption after 1980, as has been found for the overall U.S. population (e.g. Goldstein, 1999).

The second stage of our analysis investigates other potential racial differences in the experience of marital disruption, and has two substantive aims. First, we investigate potential racial differences in the effects of covariates on disruption of first marriages. Second, research indicates remarkable stability over time in the effects of risk factors on marital disruption in the U.S. population (Teachman, 2002), but no recent work to our knowledge investigates whether this conclusion holds within racial subpopulations. Thus we further examine whether the effects of covariates on the risk of marital disruption have changed over time within populations of Black and White women, comparing results for the 1970 - 1979 period with those for the 1980 - 1989 and 1990 - 1994 time periods. We use the 1970 - 1979 period as the reference group for our temporal analysis largely for two reasons. First, the stabilization in divorce trends for the population as a whole began in approximately 1980, suggesting a potential turning point for patterns of disruption. Second, considerably more is known about racial differences in marital

disruption in the period before 1980 than in the years that followed, and thus our approach highlights recent change in patterns of disruption.

To achieve these aims, the second stage of our analysis uses logistic regression to estimate discrete-time survival models of marital disruption. This approach permits the estimation of effects of fixed and time-varying covariates on dissolution, and avoids the assumption of proportional hazards. We estimate separate models for Blacks and Whites, rather than the equivalent fully interactive model pooling data by race, because of the relatively greater ease in assessing the statistical significance of covariate effects *within each racial group* using the former approach. We use a standard z-statistic to test the null hypothesis of equality of Black and White coefficients (Clogg, Petkova, & Haritou, 1995).

In our analysis, historical period is treated as a time-varying covariate, whereas all other variables are fixed. Data are organized into person-year records, with one record for each year an individual was at risk of disruption (i.e. in a first marriage), including years in which a disruption was observed. All models include controls for marital duration in years. Our dependent variable is an indicator of whether disruption occurred in a particular marital duration year. We examine disruption during the first ten years of marriage, and limit the analytical sample to marriages that were formed within fifteen years of the CPS interview date. In addition to reducing recall bias, this limitation has the advantage of reducing measurement error in variables such as education and region of residence, which are fixed at the time of interview. Because patterns of marital stability are known to differ for first and higher order marriages (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Cherlin, 1978), we again limit our analysis to disruption from women's first marriages.

Finally, in the third stage of the analysis, we decompose these regression results to determine the contribution of differences in population composition with respect to age at

marriage, educational attainment, having had a premarital birth or conception, and region of residence to the overall racial gap in the level of marital disruption. We present decomposition results only for the most recent period (1990 - 1994) because to our knowledge no previously published studies have investigated the relative contribution of compositional differences to the racial differential in marital disruption observed since 1990.

We follow the approach of Jones and Kelley (1984) for decomposing the differences in group outcomes, where the difference in the expected log odds of disruption is expressed in terms of a component due to differences in group means and a component that is unexplained (see also Althausen & Wigler, 1972). This approach suggests two possible decomposition procedures, for example, one that uses White women as the standard and another that uses Black women as the standard, as shown below.

$$\Theta_w - \Theta_B = \sum_k b_k^w (X_k^W - X_k^B) + [(b_0^W - b_0^B) + \sum_k X_k^W (b_k^W - b_k^B) + \sum_k (X_k^W - X_k^B)(b_k^B - b_k^W)] \quad (1)$$

$$\Theta_w - \Theta_B = \sum_k b_k^b (X_k^W - X_k^B) + [(b_0^W - b_0^B) + \sum_k X_k^B (b_k^W - b_k^B) + \sum_k (X_k^W - X_k^B)(b_k^W - b_k^B)] \quad (2)$$

Where  $\Theta_w$  is the expected log odds of marital disruption for Whites,  $\Theta_B$  is the expected log odds of disruption for Blacks,  $b_k^w$  is the regression coefficient for variable k in the model for Whites (where k=0 indicates the regression intercept),  $b_k^B$  is the regression coefficient for variable k in the model for Blacks,  $X_k^W$  is the mean value of variable k for Whites and  $X_k^B$  is the mean value of variable k for Blacks. For both equations, the “unexplained” portion of the racial gap in disruption is enclosed in square brackets, and is composed of differences in the effects of



covariates, differences in the regression intercepts, as well as the interaction between differences in means and differences in effects of covariates. Jones and Kelley (1984) demonstrate that the component made up of the intercept difference cannot be definitively separated from that reflecting differences in estimated effects in situations where variables have arbitrary zero points, and the “interaction” component cannot be definitively attributed to differences in effects or means. Finally, the typical approach in decomposition analyses is to adopt the dominant group (e.g. Whites/males) as the standard, implicitly assuming that the process that describes the socially dominant group is optimal. Because there is no clear reason to choose one equation over the other in this application, we conduct the decomposition exercise twice to assess the sensitivity of our results to the choice of standard population.

## **RESULTS**

### **Stage 1: Descriptive Examination of Trends in Crude Rates of Marital Disruption**

We first examine trends in annual crude rates of marital disruption in the post-1970 period to determine whether the plateau in overall disruption rates since 1980 exists for the White and Black populations separately. For purposes of comparison, (see, for example, Goldstein, 1999) we conduct parallel examinations of legal divorce and disruption defined by the date of separation. Figures 1 and 2 display smoothed (three-year averages) race-specific crude divorce rates and crude disruption rates, respectively. The complete, unsmoothed data series is displayed in Appendix Table A1. Consistent with previous analyses, we find that divorce rates are higher for Blacks than for Whites throughout this period. These figures also confirm that divorce rates for White women continued to increase during the late 1970s, reaching a peak in 1979 and then stabilized, or even declined somewhat, during the 1980s. Although the level of divorce is

consistently higher for Blacks than for Whites, trends in divorce rates are similar for these groups until the mid 1980s. Beginning in the mid to-late 1980s, however, crude divorce rates for Blacks appear to drift upwards, leading to some growth in the racial gap in divorce. Indeed, the smoothed divorce rate among White women was 9 percent lower than that of Black women in 1980, but by 1993 this difference had expanded to 29 percent.

Black women's relatively lower propensity to legally divorce after separation makes the date of separation a more appropriate measure of marital disruption for our purposes. Figure 2 shows that racial differences in the level of marital disruption are considerably larger when the end of marriage is determined by the date of separation rather than by legal divorce, as expected, but the nature of trends over time are quite similar across measures of disruption (see Appendix Table A1 for the complete data series). Our results suggest that the increase in rates of marital disruption since the mid 1970s has been steeper among Blacks than among Whites. Although the disruption rate appears to level off for Whites in the post-1980 period, it begins to rise for Blacks beginning in the mid 1980s. This again raises the possibility that the leveling of period trends in marital disruption after 1980, which was demonstrated by Goldstein (1999) using formal divorce rates for the general population, may not similarly characterize trends in marital disruption among African Americans. Despite reason to expect changes in the selectivity of married populations to have placed greater downward pressure on disruption among Blacks than among Whites (Teachman, 2002), the trend lines show no evidence of such a pattern. If anything, our findings are more consistent with evidence suggesting a widening in the racial differential in marital disruption in the recent period (e.g. Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

[Figures 1 and 2 about here.]

## **Stage 2: Multivariate Analysis of Disruption within 10 Years of First Marriage**

Next, to examine racial differences in the risk factors for marital disruption, we estimate discrete-time hazard models of disruption. Given the limited value of legal divorce as a marker of the end of marriage, particularly for African Americans, we restrict these analyses to marital disruption defined by the date of separation. Our multivariate analyses are based on weighted data, as suggested by Winship and Radbill (1994) for situations when model fit is significantly improved by adding the weight variable and the full set of covariate interactions with the weight variable (see also DuMouchel & Duncan, 1983). Substantive conclusions drawn from weighted and unweighted results, however, are quite similar. We use STATA's `svylogit` procedure to obtain Huber-White robust variance estimates (StataCorp, 2001).

Table 2 presents the results of the multivariate analyses of disruption within 10 years of first marriage. Although period trends are not the primary focus of this stage of the analysis, a few points are worth mentioning. First, as shown in Table 2, we see that the odds of disruption among Whites are significantly lower in 1970-74 than in later periods. Additional Wald tests, not shown here but available upon request, indicate that the coefficients for the 1975 - 79, 1980 - 84, 1985 - 89, and 1990 - 94 periods are not significantly different from one another. This is consistent with the argument that rates of disruption have stabilized among Whites, beginning in the mid 1970s. The story for Blacks is somewhat more complicated. Although Wald tests again suggest that the coefficients for the 1975 - 79, 1980 - 84, 1985 - 89, and 1990 - 94 periods are not significantly different from one another, and we find no significant differences between the 1970 - 74 period and the 1975 - 89 periods, we see suggestive evidence (significant at the .10 level for a two-tailed test) that the odds of divorce were higher in the 1990 - 94 period than in the 1970 - 74 period. Additional evidence, using data from more recent years, will be needed to determine

whether this hint of a divergence, also suggested by the crude rates of divorce and disruption displayed in Figures 1 and 2, develops into a statistically meaningful trend.

Our primary goal at this stage of the analysis, however, is to examine the effects of potential risk factors for divorce separately for White and for Black women. Consistent with prior research, we find that age at marriage has stronger effects on marital disruption among Whites than among Blacks, as shown in Table 2. For example, White women who marry for the first time between the ages of 23 and 29 display a 55 percent lower risk of disruption than similar White women who married for the first time as teenagers. Among Black women marrying between the ages of 23 and 29, however, the risk of disruption is only 40 percent lower than similar women who married as teenagers. Our results also suggest that educational attainment is more strongly related to disruption among Blacks than among Whites. For example, having completed 16 or more years of schooling (vs. fewer than 12 years) is associated with a 20 percent reduction in the odds of disruption among whites but a 40 percent reduction in the odds of disruption among Blacks. We further observe a large racial difference in the effect of a premarital birth on marital disruption, with premarital births destabilizing marriage significantly more among Whites than among Blacks. Indeed, having had a premarital birth (versus having neither a premarital birth nor premarital conception) is associated with a 73 percent increased risk of marital disruption among White women, but has a much smaller and statistically insignificant effect among Black women. Although coefficients for premarital conception do not differ significantly by race, we see a significant effect of this covariate only among White women. Finally, we see some evidence of differing effects of region on the risk of marital disruption, with Southern residence (relative to living in the Midwest) associated with a destabilizing effect on marriage among White women but a stabilizing effect on marriage among

Black women. Furthermore, the risk of marital disruption is significantly higher for White women living in the West (relative to the Midwest), although there is no significant effect on disruption of Western residence for Black women.

[Table 2 about here.]

To examine whether the effects of risk factors for marital disruption may have changed over time within each racial group, we next estimate models with interactions for historical period. For the sake of parsimony, we focus here on three time periods: 1970 – 79, 1980 – 89, and 1990 – 94. These results are shown in Table 3. Although our results point to considerable stability in risk factors for divorce, we do find some evidence of change over time in the effects of educational attainment and region of residence. Among Whites, having at least 16 years of education (versus having less than 12 years) is associated with an 8 percent reduction in the odds of disruption in the 1970 - 79 period but a 39 percent reduction in the odds of disruption in the 1990 - 94 period. We see even stronger evidence of growth over time in the protective effect of education among Blacks. Having 12 years of schooling is associated with a 13 percent reduction in the odds of disruption for Blacks in the 1970 - 79 period, but a 67 percent reduction in the odds of disruption in the 1990 - 94 period. Having 16 or more years of schooling is associated with a 19 percent reduction in the odds of disruption in the 1970 - 79 period, but a 75 percent reduction in the odds of disruption in the 1990 - 94 period. For Whites, we also see some evidence of decline over time in regional variation in marital instability. Living in the West (relative to living in the Midwest) is associated with a 31 percent increase in the odds of marital disruption for Whites in the 1970 - 79 period, but no increase in the odds of disruption in the 1990 - 94 period.

[Table 3 about here.]

### **Stage 3: Contribution of Composition to Recent Racial Difference in Disruption**

In the final stage of the analysis, we investigate the extent to which racial differences in the level of marital disruption during the 1990 – 94 period can be explained by differences in the composition of White and Black populations of married women with respect to age at marriage, education, premarital births and conceptions, and region of residence. The contributions of differing compositions of Black and White populations of married women to the total racial gap in the expected log odds of marital disruption are displayed in Table 4. The first column of the table displays results when White women are used as the standard population for the decomposition exercise and the second column displays results when Black women are used as the standard population.

[Table 4 about here.]

As anticipated, we identify offsetting effects of population composition on the racial gap in disruption, regardless of whether the White or Black population is used as the standard for the decomposition exercise. For example, Black women's older average age at marriage reduces the racial gap in marital disruption, whereas racial differences in the composition of these populations with respect to education and having had a premarital birth increase the size of this racial gap. Yet differences in the composition of populations of married women with respect to the variables considered here cannot fully explain the overall racial difference in disruption. Such differences explain approximately 40 percent of the racial gap when White women are used as the standard population but none of the total racial gap when Black women are used as the standard population. The difference in the proportion explained, depending on whether the effects of risk factors for White or Black women are assumed, is most heavily influenced by the estimated coefficients for premarital births. Although any premarital birth increases the risk of

disruption for both White and Black women, the estimated effect is considerably greater for White women. Clearly, much of the racial differential in marital disruption remains unexplained, as found by prior analyses focusing on earlier historical periods (Heaton & Jacobson, 1994; Tzeng & Mare, 1995).

## **DISCUSSION**

Our results contribute to a growing body of evidence pointing to important differences in the family experiences of White and Black women. Although Goldstein (1999) reports a leveling in the trend of divorce in the general population, our results suggest that this new stability (measured either by divorce or by disruption) may not have been experienced equally across racial groups. Although trends over this period have not progressed in an entirely monotonic fashion, we generally find that rates for White women stabilized after the mid-1970s, but suggestive evidence that rates of disruption for Black women may have increased during the early 1990s. Investigating whether this recent divergence is meaningful, and whether it has continued to develop over time, will be an important line of inquiry for future research as more recent data become available. Although changes in the selectivity of married populations might have been expected to place greater downward pressure on disruption among Blacks than Whites (Teachman 2002), our results do not suggest such a pattern.

We also identify some important racial differences in the correlates of marital disruption. Marrying for the first time as a teenager has stronger destabilizing effects on marriage among Whites than among Blacks. A strong racial difference was also identified with respect to the effect of premarital childbearing, with births before marriage increasing the risk of marital disruption more among Whites than among Blacks. This is consistent with historical accounts

suggesting that premarital childbearing may be more acceptable among Blacks than among Whites and as a result, less likely to disrupt a union (Pagnini & Morgan, 1996). Furthermore, we identify some interesting effects with respect to geographic region. Although living in the South is associated with an increased risk of marital disruption among White women, this effect is in the opposite direction for Black women. We also find evidence that the increased risk of disruption associated with Western residence, which was observed only among Whites, has diminished considerably over time. Our finding that the effects of risk factors for marital disruption differs in important ways by race suggests that conclusions drawn about the disruption experience of Blacks, based on models estimated only for Whites or for the full population (e.g. Ruggles, 1997), should be treated with caution.

Despite large compositional differences in the populations of Black and White married women, we find that the compositional factors examined here explain little of the overall difference in recent levels of marital disruption by race. This is consistent with Schoen and Kluegel's (1988) findings for racial differences in marriage formation. Moreover, we find that the lack of explanatory power of population composition is not an artifact of offsetting effects of particular characteristics relevant to disruption. Although such offsetting effects do exist, most notably with respect to age at marriage and premarital childbearing, each contributes relatively little to the overall racial gap in disruption. It is important to keep in mind, however, that although our analysis incorporates many well-established risk factors for marital disruption, other relevant variables were not available in the CPS data. A major strength of the CPS lies in its large sample size, however, which is essential for tracking period trends in marital disruption for sub-populations. Moreover, analyses based on a variety of data sources, including the CPS, are important for replication and comparison purposes.



Still, future research should confirm and expand upon our results with a larger array of risk factors for divorce. Although constrained by smaller sample sizes, data sets such as the National Survey of Family Growth, National Survey of Families and Households, and the Survey of Income and Program Participation will be useful to this end. Given the theoretical importance of male employment prospects for marriage and marital stability (e.g. Wilson, 1987), it will be important to consider differences in the characteristics of husbands as well as local economic opportunities and other contextual characteristics when attempting to explain racial variation in marital instability. In addition, efforts to incorporate measures of attitudes towards marriage and divorce may prove useful in explaining more of the racial differences in disruption levels. Recent accounts have described in some detail the ways in which the unique history of African-Americans in this country has influenced contemporary family formation patterns, including patterns of marital disruption. For example, both historical and recent evidence suggest that Black women are more likely to leave a union if infidelity or abuse occurs, perhaps because marital disruption has traditionally carried fewer social and economic costs for Blacks than for Whites (Pagnini & Morgan, 1996; Patterson, 1998).

Another limitation of the current analysis relates to the experience of non-marital cohabitation. Some suggest that the post-1980 plateau in rates of marital disruption may be explained by the dramatic rise in non-marital cohabitation in recent years (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; but see Goldstein, 1999). Although couples who cohabit are more likely to divorce than those who do not cohabit, a large and growing proportion of cohabitators never formalize their unions through marriage (Bumpass & Lu 2000). Indeed, a majority of cohabitators report that making sure couples are compatible is an important reason to live together before marriage, suggesting that cohabitation may lead to the separation of less happy couples *before* marriage

(Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). What would race-specific trends in disruption have looked like if all (or simply more) observed unions had been formed through marriage rather than cohabitation (Goldstein, 1999)? Bumpass and Lu (2000) find that although cohabitation has increased among both Whites and Blacks since the late 1980s, the rate of increase was relatively greater among Whites during this period. Thus growth in cohabitation may have contributed to the observed racial divergence in disruption trends by placing more downward pressure on marital instability among Whites than among Blacks. Unfortunately, the CPS does not provide detailed information on cohabitation for the entire period examined here (Casper & Cohen, 2000), but future work should explore this possible explanation for racial differences in trends of disruption.

Finally, our time series extends only through the mid 1990s, and ends just before a massive overhaul of the United States welfare system was passed by Congress in 1996 as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The new law limited the length of time families could receive welfare payments and had as an explicit goal the encouragement of marriage. Although it will be difficult to distinguish the effects of welfare reform on marriage formation and dissolution in the later 1990s from the effects of a strong economy, future work should investigate whether trends in marital disruption changed after 1995, and carefully examine patterns of disruption in the early years of the 21st century, a period when a reformed welfare regime no longer overlapped with a booming economy. Such analyses may be particularly important for understanding racial differences in marital disruption, as welfare receipt rates are shown to vary by race (Moffitt & Gottschalk, 2000).

Despite the limitations of the current research, this study contributes to growing evidence of large and incompletely understood differences in the family patterns of Whites and African

Americans. Our results highlight the importance of investigating explicitly the trends and correlates of marital disruption separately across racial groups. These studies face new challenges due to recent reductions in the richness of information available on marital histories from sources such as the U.S. vital statistics system, the decennial census, and the Current Population Survey. These challenges notwithstanding, we hope this analysis spurs further research to better document and explain racial differences in family life.

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**Table 1. Mean Values of Covariates in Year of Marriage, by Race: 1985, 1990, and 1995 June Current Population Surveys**

	Whites	Blacks
<i>Period of Observation</i>		
1970 - 74	0.115	0.119
1975 - 79	0.220	0.213
1980 - 84	0.342	0.335
1985 - 89	0.216	0.221
1990 - 94	0.108	0.112
<i>Age at First Marriage</i>		
< 20 years	0.297	0.231
20 - 22 years	0.302	0.257
23 - 29 years	0.323	0.378
≥ 30 years	0.078	0.134
<i>Education</i>		
< 12 yrs	0.125	0.157
12 yrs	0.397	0.419
13 - 15 yrs	0.244	0.279
≥ 16 yrs	0.234	0.145
<i>Premarital Fertility</i>		
Premartial birth	0.124	0.457
Premarital conception (but not birth)	0.109	0.111
No premarital conception or birth	0.767	0.432
<i>Region</i>		
Midwest	0.248	0.163
Northeast	0.194	0.166
South	0.332	0.581
West	0.227	0.089
<i>N</i>	36,329	3,697

*Note:* Means are weighted.

**Table 2. Discrete-Time Logistic Regression Estimated Effects of Historical Period, Age at First Marriage, Education, Premarital Fertility, and Region of Residence on the Odds of Marital Dissolution Within 10 Years: 1985, 1990, and 1995 June CPS, by Race**

Independent Variable	Whites		Blacks	
	Odds Ratio	Coeff. / S.E.	Odds Ratio	Coeff. / S.E.
<i>Time Trends (1970 - 74)</i>				
1975 - 79	1.224 <sup>a</sup>	3.430	1.258	1.570
1980 - 84	1.206 <sup>a</sup>	3.300	1.239	1.530
1985 - 89	1.249 <sup>a</sup>	3.760	1.198	1.230
1990 - 94	1.173 <sup>a</sup>	2.410	1.314	1.660
<i>Age at First Marriage (&lt; 20 years)</i>				
20 - 22 years	0.588 <sup>a</sup>	-16.280	0.669 <sup>a</sup>	-4.500
23 - 29 years	0.447 <sup>a</sup>	-21.150	0.600 <sup>a,b</sup>	-5.820
≥ 30 years	0.395 <sup>a</sup>	-13.490	0.573 <sup>a,b</sup>	-4.600
<i>Education (&lt; 12 yrs)</i>				
12 yrs	1.036	0.920	0.850 <sup>a</sup>	-1.810
13 - 15 yrs	1.089	1.920	0.880	-1.280
≥ 16 yrs	0.796 <sup>a</sup>	-4.360	0.602 <sup>a,b</sup>	-3.890
<i>Premarital Fertility (none)</i>				
Premarital birth	1.725 <sup>a</sup>	14.510	1.140 <sup>b</sup>	1.830
Premarital conception	1.095 <sup>a</sup>	2.260	0.886	-1.100
<i>Region (Midwest)</i>				
Northeast	0.901 <sup>a</sup>	-2.720	0.794 <sup>a</sup>	-2.200
South	1.107 <sup>a</sup>	2.970	0.829 <sup>a,b</sup>	-2.140
West	1.151 <sup>a</sup>	3.690	1.036	0.260
<i>Number of person-years</i>	223,414		21,223	

*Note.* Omitted categories are shown in parentheses. Data are weighted. Models also include controls for year of marital duration, which are not shown here.

<sup>a</sup>Coefficient differs significantly from zero,  $p < 0.05$  level.

<sup>b</sup>Coefficient differs significantly by race,  $p < 0.05$  level.

**Table 3. Discrete-Time Logistic Regression Estimated Effects of Historical Period, Age at First Marriage, Education, Premarital Fertility, and Region of Residence on the Odds of Marital Dissolution Within 10 Years: 1985, 1990, and 1995 June CPS, by Race**

Independent Variable	Whites		Blacks	
	Odds Ratio	Coeff. / S.E.	Odds Ratio	Coeff. / S.E.
<i>Time Period (1970 - 79)</i>				
1980 - 89	0.908	-0.810	0.559	-1.950
1990 - 94	0.703	-1.680	0.834	-0.350
<i>Age at First Marriage (&lt; 20 years)</i>				
20 - 22 years	0.584 <sup>a</sup>	-9.070	0.575 <sup>a</sup>	-3.470
23 - 29 years	0.461 <sup>a</sup>	-10.090	0.479 <sup>a</sup>	-4.230
≥ 30 years	0.406 <sup>a</sup>	-5.620	0.431 <sup>a</sup>	-3.150
<i>Education (&lt; 12 yrs)</i>				
12 yrs	0.954	-0.650	0.870	-0.840
13 - 15 yrs	1.039	0.470	0.872	-0.720
≥ 16 yrs	0.917	-0.910	0.809	-0.900
<i>Premarital Fertility (none)</i>				
Premarital birth	1.561 <sup>a</sup>	5.410	1.154	1.010
Premarital conception	1.009	0.120	0.937	-0.360
<i>Region (Midwest)</i>				
Northeast	0.904	-1.390	0.845	-0.880
South	1.092	1.350	0.636 <sup>a</sup>	-2.860
West	1.311 <sup>a</sup>	3.820	0.758	-1.040
<b>1980 - 89 X</b>				
<i>Age at First Marriage (&lt; 20 years)</i>				
20 - 22 years	0.983	-0.240	1.238	1.080
23 - 29 years	0.970	-0.340	1.448	1.790
≥ 30 years	0.984	-0.090	1.793	1.890
<i>Education (&lt; 12 yrs)</i>				
12 yrs	1.126	1.350	1.248	1.080
13 - 15 yrs	1.029	0.290	1.224	0.870
≥ 16 yrs	0.869	-1.210	0.878	-0.440

(Continued)

**Table 3. (Continued)**

Independent Variable	Whites		Blacks	
	Odds Ratio	Coeff. / S.E.	Odds Ratio	Coeff. / S.E.
<b>1980 - 89 X</b>				
<i>Premarital Fertility (none)</i>				
Premarital birth	1.110	1.100	0.980	-0.120
Premarital conception	1.119	1.240	0.899	-0.450
<i>Region (Midwest)</i>				
Northeast	0.996	-0.050	0.875	-0.560
South	1.013	0.170	1.411	1.760
West	0.894	-1.300	1.414	1.100
<b>1990 - 94 X</b>				
<i>Age at First Marriage (&lt; 20 years)</i>				
20 - 22 years	1.134	1.050	1.079	0.230
23 - 29 years	0.999	0.000	0.989	-0.030
≥ 30 years	1.038	0.170	0.744	-0.730
<i>Education (&lt; 12 yrs)</i>				
12 yrs	1.061	0.400	0.381 <sup>a</sup>	-3.170
13 - 15 yrs	1.164	0.960	0.550	-1.920
≥ 16 yrs	0.666 <sup>a</sup>	-2.140	0.311 <sup>a</sup>	-2.770
<i>Premarital Fertility (none)</i>				
Premarital birth	1.162	1.210	0.996	-0.020
Premarital conception	1.084	0.570	0.887	-0.310
<i>Region (Midwest)</i>				
Northeast	0.987	-0.100	1.269	0.670
South	1.032	0.270	1.661	1.670
West	0.632 <sup>a</sup>	-3.330	1.828	1.250

*Note.* Omitted categories are shown in parentheses. Data are weighted. Models also include controls for year of marital duration, and interactions between period and duration, which are not shown here.

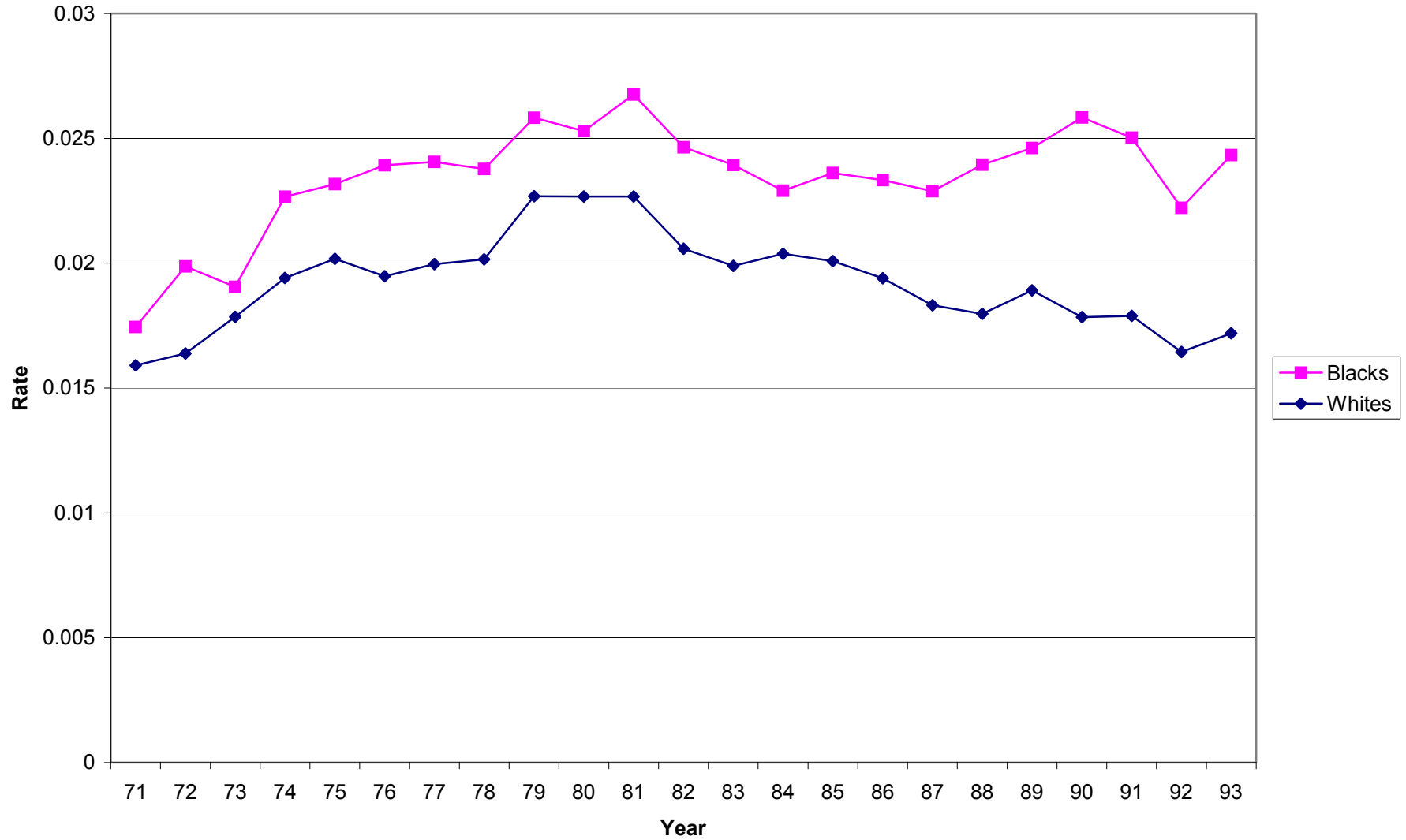
<sup>a</sup>Coefficient differs significantly from zero,  $p < 0.05$  level.

**Table 4. Decomposition of Components of Racial Difference in the Expected Log Odds of Marital Disruption Within 10 Years of Marriage, Based on Person-Years at Risk 1990-94: 1995 June CPS**

	White as Standard	Black as Standard
<i>% of Total Racial Difference Due to Difference in Key Covariate Means</i>	<b>40.20%</b>	<b>-4.06%</b>
Age at First Marriage	-13.81%	-16.26%
Education	9.20%	10.05%
Premarital Birth	34.49%	8.06%
Premarital Conception	-0.22%	0.46%
Region	10.55%	-6.37%
<i>% of Total Due to Differences in Marital Duration</i>	<b>0.31%</b>	<b>-0.48%</b>
<i>% of Total Unexplained</i>	<b>59.49%</b>	<b>104.54%</b>

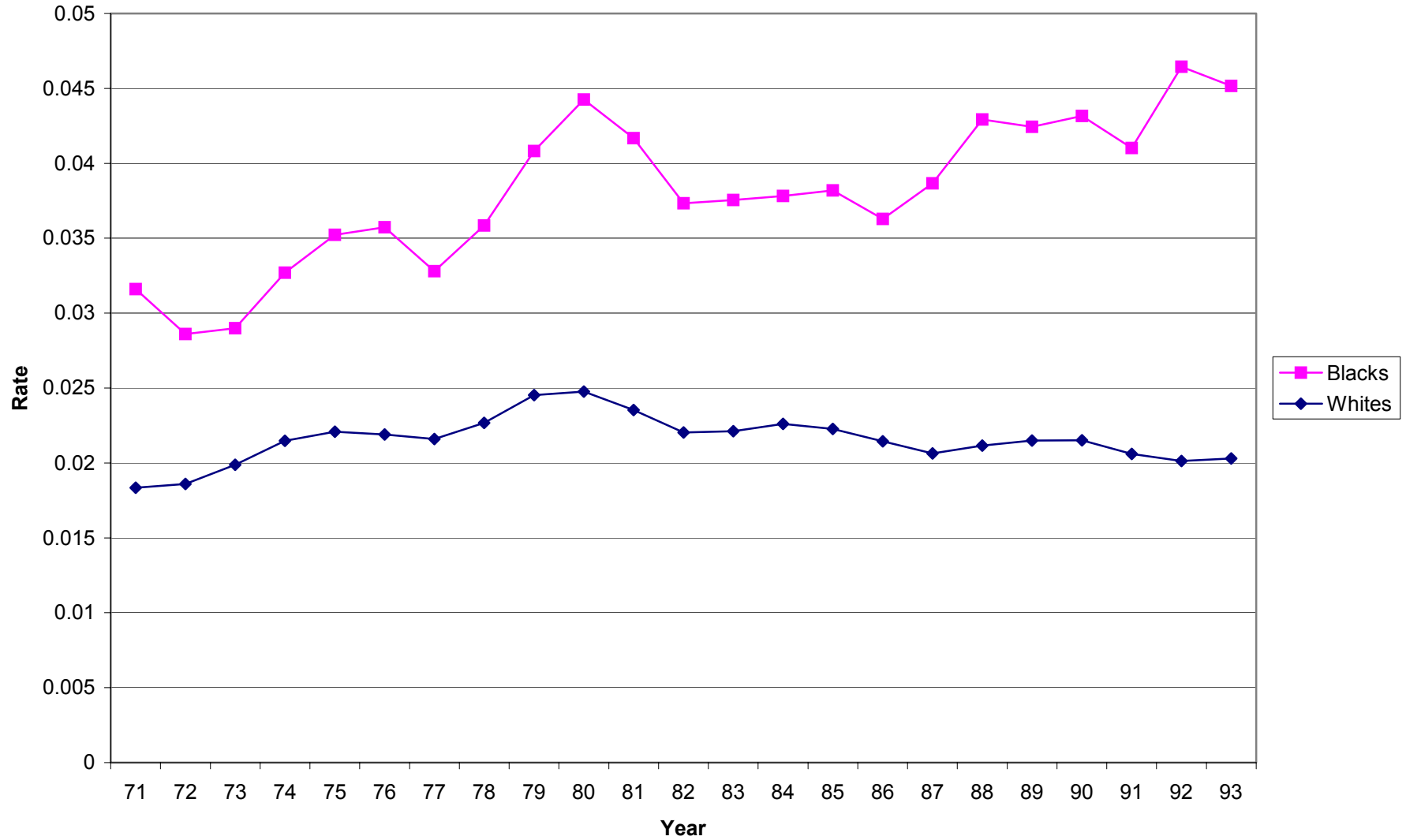
*Note.* Based on estimated parameters for 1990 - 94 presented in Table 3 and weighted means for person-years at risk from 1990 - 94, as described in the text.

Figure 1. Crude Divorce Rate (Smoothed), by Race



Note: Crude divorce rate calculated as the number of divorces per 1,000 married or separated women ages 15-65 (at mid-year).

Figure 2. Crude Marital Dissolution Rate (Smoothed), by Race



Note: Crude dissolution rate calculated as the number of divorces and separations per 1,000 married women ages 15-65 (at mid-year).



APPENDIX

**Table A1. Crude Rates of Divorce and Marital Dissolution, by Race:  
1985, 1990, and 1995 June Current Population Surveys**

Year	<u>Crude Divorce Rate<sup>1</sup></u>		<u>Crude Dissolution Rate<sup>2</sup></u>	
	White	Black	White	Black
1970	0.016	0.014	0.019	0.035
1971	0.016	0.021	0.017	0.029
1972	0.016	0.017	0.019	0.030
1973	0.018	0.022	0.020	0.026
1974	0.020	0.018	0.021	0.031
1975	0.021	0.028	0.023	0.041
1976	0.020	0.023	0.022	0.034
1977	0.018	0.020	0.021	0.032
1978	0.022	0.029	0.022	0.032
1979	0.020	0.022	0.025	0.043
1980	0.026	0.026	0.026	0.047
1981	0.022	0.027	0.023	0.043
1982	0.020	0.027	0.021	0.035
1983	0.019	0.020	0.022	0.034
1984	0.020	0.025	0.023	0.043
1985	0.022	0.024	0.023	0.036
1986	0.019	0.022	0.021	0.035
1987	0.018	0.024	0.021	0.037
1988	0.019	0.022	0.020	0.043
1989	0.017	0.025	0.022	0.048
1990	0.021	0.026	0.022	0.036
1991	0.015	0.026	0.020	0.046
1992	0.018	0.023	0.020	0.042
1993	0.016	0.018	0.021	0.052
1994	0.018	0.032	0.021	0.042

<sup>1</sup> Calculated as the number of divorces per 1,000 married or separated women ages 15 - 65 (at mid-year).

<sup>2</sup> Calculated as the number of divorces and separations per 1,000 married women ages 15-65 (at mid-year).