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First cohabiting relationships: recent trends in France

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In the 1960s, couples rarely lived together without being married. Since then, premarital cohabitation and consensual unions have become more widespread, although marriage has by no means disappeared. Drawing upon a recent survey whose initial findings are presented here, Wilfried Rault and Arnaud Régnier-Loilier reveal how young people today experience their first cohabiting relationship, and look at how behaviours have changed over time.

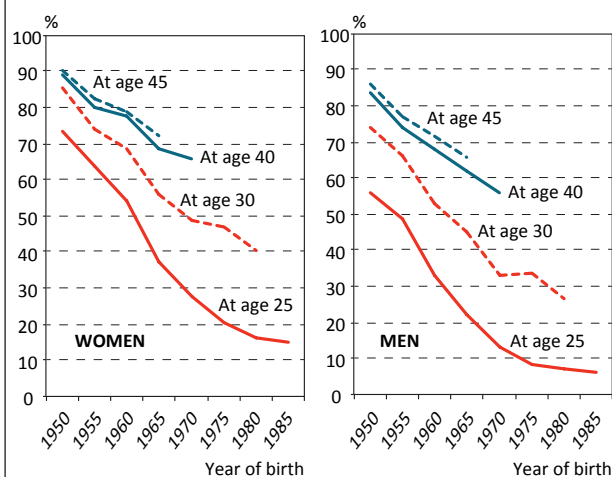
The development of premarital cohabitation and consensual unions in the 1970s dealt a blow to the institution of marriage, the traditional locus of conjugality, sexuality and reproduction. Until then, people who lived together, separated or engaged in sexual relations outside marriage were strongly stigmatized, women especially. While the conjugal norm remains strongly embedded, it has evolved on several levels, as shown by the first findings of the recent survey entitled *Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux* (Study of individual and conjugal trajectories; see Box).

Fewer, later marriages

The traditional cornerstone of conjugal life, marriage now takes place later and later, if at all (Figure 1). Most people in the post-war birth cohorts (born between 1953 and 1957) had already married by age 30 (74% of women and 66% of men), and even at age 25 (64% and 49%, respectively). Among those born 25 years later (1978-1982), only 16% of women and 7% of men were ever-married at age 25. Marriage now occurs much later, and is less universal. [1]

Religious marriage is in even steeper decline. While more than nine in ten first marriages in the early 1970s were celebrated religiously, the proportion was just six in ten 35 years later.

Figure 1. Proportions of women and men ever-married at different ages, by cohort (%)



(W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* n° 521, 2015).

Sources: INED-INSEE, ÉPIC, 2013-2014.

Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 in 2013.

Interpretation: 27% of men in the 1980 cohort (born in 1980) had already married on their 30th birthday.

Notes: Proportions calculated for exact ages (taking account of month of birth and month of wedding). Each cohort presented (e.g. 1950) corresponds to the average of five cohorts (1948 to 1952).

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The ÉPIC survey^(a)

The ÉPIC survey (*Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux*) was conducted in metropolitan France in 2013-2014 on a sample of 7,825 women and men aged 26-65. Interviews were held mainly in the respondents' homes and in some cases by telephone (9%). The retrospective dimension of the questions was an important component of the survey. Each couple relationship or serious intimate relationship ("which counts or counted in the past, even if no longer today") is described in detail, including the dates of the events (start of the relationship, moving in together, marriage, civil partnership, childbirth, separation, divorce, etc.), meeting place, first sexual intercourse, partners' characteristics at the start of the relationship, etc. The results presented here are based mainly on the description of the first cohabiting relationship.

When the respondent was in a couple or an intimate relationship at the time of the survey, his/her partner was also interviewed (60% of partners took part). This second component of the survey is not analysed here.

Remark: In the figures presented in this text, each cohort (for example, persons born in 1950) corresponds to the average for five cohorts (1948 to 1952).

(a) : The ÉPIC survey was conducted by INED and INSEE with the support of the Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (CNAF), the Direction de la recherche, de l'évaluation, des études et des statistiques (DREES) and the Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR, CECHIC project: Corpus pour l'étude de cent ans d'histoire du couple en France).

Age at first union is no longer increasing

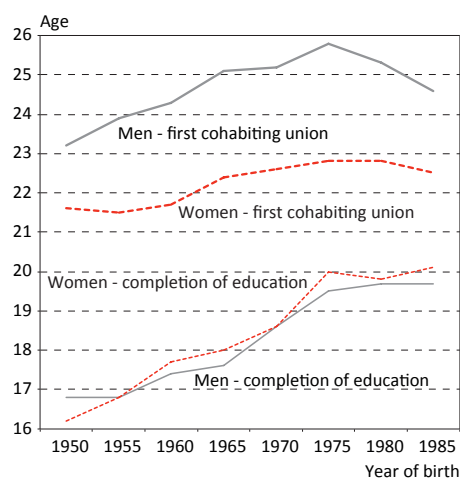
The age at which people experience their first cohabiting union has evolved in two stages (Figure 2). The first stage took the form of a delay in first unions. While half of the women and men born in the early 1950s had already lived with a partner at ages 21.6 and 23.2 years, respectively, this median age rose to 22.8 for women and 25.8 years for men in the cohorts born in the mid 1970s. This change is explained mainly by the increase in time spent in education and by rising unemployment. [2]

However, this trend reflects a postponement of the first union rather than a movement away from cohabitation per se. Indeed, while the cohorts born in the 1970s are less likely to have been in a cohabiting union before age 25 than the post-war cohorts, the contrast is less marked at age 30 and disappears at ages 40 and 45 (Figure 3).

For the youngest cohorts (1978-1987), time spent in education is no longer increasing and the age at first union is now levelling off, or even decreasing for men. At age 25, these men have more frequently lived with a partner than their immediate elders (Figure 3), perhaps due to the abolition of military service (Act passed in November 1997) which freed up all cohorts born after 1979.

(1) In the 1978-1997 cohorts, the man is 2.3 years older than his partner on average.

Figure 2. Median age at first cohabiting union and completion of education, by sex and cohort



(W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* n° 521, 2015).

Sources: INED-INSEE, ÉPIC, 2013-2014.

Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 in 2013.

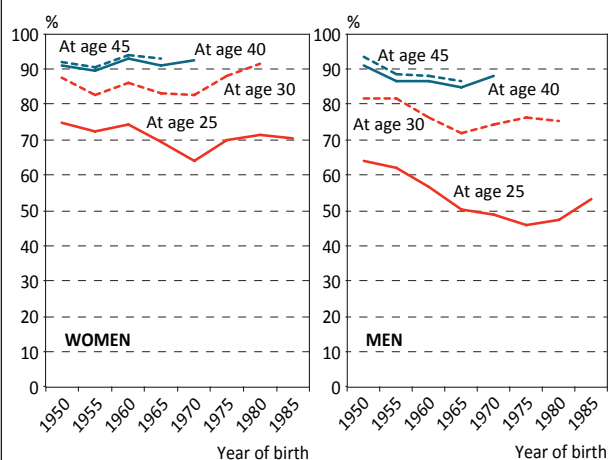
Interpretation: Half of the men born in 1950 had already lived with a partner at age 23.2.

Despite slightly more time spent in education, women still tend to enter their first union at a younger age than men, and the age difference between partners, while gradually narrowing, still persists.⁽¹⁾ [3] Age at first union also varies by educational level. It is highest among the highly educated: in the 1978-1987 cohorts who left school before obtaining their high-school diploma (*baccalauréat*), the age at first union is 21.5 years for women and 24 years for men, versus 23.6 and 26.3 years, respectively, for those with at least 3 years of higher education.

Fewer couples than before move together into a new home

In the post-war cohorts, the two partners were often both already in employment at the start of their relationship. This was the case for 66% of the women and 54% of the men born around 1950 (Table 1). In later cohorts, the proportions are lower (34% of women and 31% of men born between 1978 and 1982), and a growing number of young people are still students when they meet their partner (around one-quarter for the youngest cohorts). The persistent age gap between partners combined with the lengthening of women's education means that many new couples are now formed between a working man and a female student (27% of situations mentioned by men and 24% of those reported by women in the 1978-1982 cohorts). The reverse configuration – male student, female in employment – remains rare (3%). This asymmetry is reflected in the way in which new couples set up home.

Figure 3. Proportions of women and men with experience of a cohabiting relationship at different ages, by cohort



(W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* n° 521, 2015).
Sources: INED-INSEE, ÉPIC, 2013-2014.
Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 in 2013.
Interpretation: 92% of women in the 1980 cohort had already lived with a partner by their 30th birthday.
Note: Proportions calculated for exact ages.

Fewer couples than in the past move into a new dwelling, while cases where the woman moves into the man's home are now more frequent (around a quarter of women and men born around 1980). Couples also more frequently move into the woman's home than in the past, but this choice is still less common (16% in the 1978-1982 cohort).

A quarter of first unions are with a partner who has already been in a cohabiting relationship

Fewer and fewer people form a union with their first sexual partner. The trend is particularly striking among

women, whose age at first intercourse is now closer to that of men: for more than three-quarters of the women born in 1948-1952, the first cohabiting partner was also the first sexual partner; the proportion was just 38% among those born 30 year later.

The first partner also more frequently has experience of a previous union: while just 9% of women and 5% of men born in 1948-1952 had a first partner with past experience of a cohabiting relationship, the proportion has risen to over a quarter for both sexes among the youngest cohorts (1978-1982). There is no increase, however, in the proportion of first partners who already have children. There is a growing dissociation between partnership experience and parenthood: the first cohabiting relationship is not necessarily the one which produces children.

At age 40, one in five people have had at least three serious intimate relationships

At age 30, the proportions of individuals in the different survey cohorts with experience of living with a partner were quite similar, although their partnership trajectories were not identical. In the 1948-1952 cohorts, very few people had had two cohabiting relationships by age 30 (5% of women and 3% of men), but the proportions have increased over time (19% of women and 16% of men in the 1978-1982 cohorts).

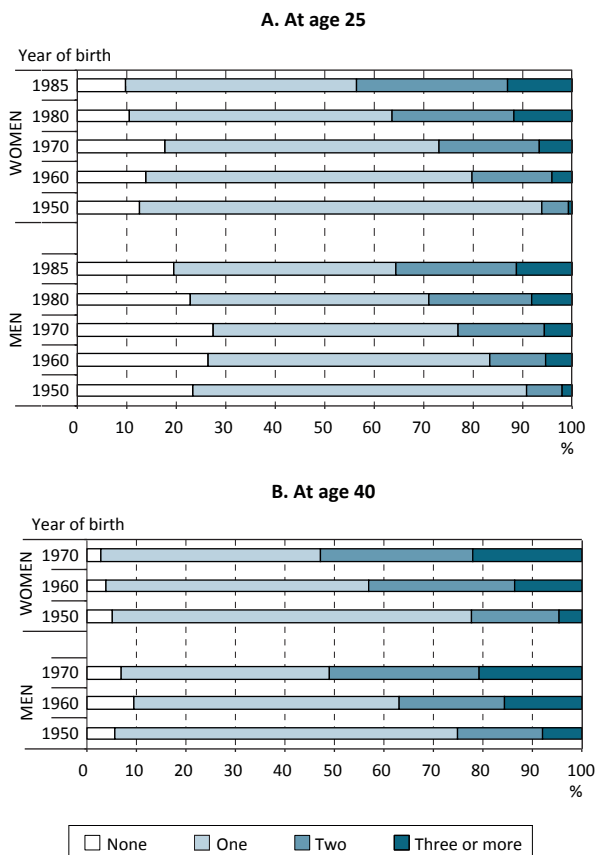
At age 40, the proportions are even higher: 26% of women and 23% of men in the 1968-1972 cohorts, versus 12% and 11%, respectively, in the 1948-1952 cohorts. The ÉPIC survey provides information on all the respondents' relationships, whether cohabiting or otherwise. Very few people born in the 1950s (6% of women and 9% of men in the 1948-1952 cohorts) reported having had more than one serious intimate

Table. Characteristics of the first cohabiting relationship (%)

Year of birth	Employment and educational status of partners when they met				Couple's place of residence		Share of first cohabiting relationships with the first sexual partner	Partner's conjugal history	
	Both students	Both in employment	Respondent in education, partner in employment	Respondent in employment, partner in education	At man's home	In a new dwelling		Previous experience of a union	Already had children
Women									
1950	10.0	65.7	9.4	4.1	10.9	67.6	76.6	9.4	5.4
1960	12.0	42.5	24.6	2.6	20.5	56.2	48.8	17.1	8.0
1970	20.2	34.8	22.6	2.8	21.2	57.2	39.7	20.9	6.6
1980	27.0	34.2	23.6	3.1	25.5	50.9	37.6	26.8	4.4
Men									
1950	17.7	54.2	5.4	11.7	14.7	67.1	40.6	5.2	3.1
1960	18.6	36.5	2.8	22.9	19.4	58.9	31.4	13.6	5.1
1970	25.1	29.4	4.5	20.2	19.9	53.3	16.4	22.8	5.0
1980	26.8	30.9	2.7	26.9	27.0	49.7	22.7	25.8	4.7

Sources: INED-INSEE, ÉPIC, 2013-2014.
Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 in 2013 who reported at least one cohabiting union, different-sex couples.

Figure 4. Number of serious intimate relationships or cohabiting relationships experienced at ages 25 and 40



(W. Rault, A. Régnier-Loilier, *Population & Societies* n° 521, 2015).
Sources: INED-INSEE, ÉPIC, 2013-2014.
Coverage: Men and women aged 26-65 in 2013.
Interpretation: 14.3% of women in the 1985 cohort had experienced at least three serious intimate relationships or cohabiting relationships by age 25.

relationship (cohabiting or otherwise) at age 25, and experience of three such relationships was exceptional (Figure 4A). The situation has changed among the younger cohorts, however, with 36% of women and 29% of men born between 1978 and 1982 reporting experience of at least two relationships at that age.

This might reflect the fact that younger cohorts tend to qualify relationships as “serious” more readily than older cohorts. Although this might be the case, the phenomenon should not be overestimated. Observation at older ages (40 years) gives some hindsight with respect to behaviours

at younger ages and confirms that experience of several relationships does indeed become more frequent over cohorts (Figure 4B). More than half the women and men born in 1968-1972 reported experience of more than one serious relationship by age 40, and more than one person in five reported at least three.

Since the first changes observed in the 1960s, conjugal behaviour in France has evolved in several ways. Forms of union are now more diverse, with a decline in marriage, religious marriage especially, and, more recently, the growing popularity of civil partnerships (PACS unions) and the opening of marriage to same-sex couples. The number of intimate relationships experienced in a lifetime is also increasing. The first cohabiting relationship today, often between partners who are still students, increasingly takes the form of a “lifestyle experiment”, with little thought to the future prospect of marriage or family formation.

References

[1] Mazuy M., Barbieri M., d’Albis H., 2014, “Recent demographic trends in France: The number of marriages continues to decrease”, *Population*, English Edition, 69(3), pp. 273-322.
 [2] Prioux F., 2005, “L’âge à la première union en France, une évolution en deux temps”, in Lefèvre C., Filhon A. (eds.), *Histoires de familles, histoires familiales*, INED, p. 201-221.
 [3] Vanderschelden M., 2006, “L’écart d’âge entre conjoints s’est réduit”, *Insee Première*, 1073.

Abstract

The ÉPIC survey of individual and conjugal trajectories (*Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux*, 2013-2014) confirms that many of the recent observed trends in conjugal behaviours are continuing, with some changes along the way. Fewer and fewer couples are opting for marriage, and age at marriage is still increasing. Age at first union is levelling off, however. While in the past, both members of a couple were already working when they moved in together, today, in one-quarter of cases, the man is working and woman is still a student. A quarter of first unions are with a partner who has already been in a cohabiting relationship.