



Rural Population Research Network

A USDA supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America

July 16, 2024

Brief #2024-2

The Rise of Nontraditional Rural Families Reflects Rural Women's Socioeconomic Disadvantage

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Traditional families, consisting of married parents and their children, are becoming less common in the United States (U.S.). Increasingly women are opting to remain single or form cohabiting partnerships rather than marry. At the same time, a growing proportion of children are being born and raised outside of marriage. What is driving these trends in family formation is subject to considerable debate among demographers, policymakers, and the public. Some argue that these trends reflect an ideological shift as more adults question the importance of marriage and prefer to form unions and raise children without formal state recognition or religious ceremonies. Others contend that these trends are driven by economic precarity, which makes marriage less financially attainable and sustainable, even for those who continue to value marriage as an institution. Understanding what is driving these changes in family formation has critical policy implications. Family change resulting from economic hardship, rather than a shift in preferences, suggests that social and economic policies are not adequately supporting adults in achieving their family goals.

KEY FINDINGS

- Marriage rates have fallen sharply among rural women between 1988 and 2018, while a growing proportion of rural women remain single or live in cohabiting partnerships.
- By 2018, rural women were 35% **more** likely to cohabit and 20% **more** likely to have children outside of marriage compared to urban women.
- Rural women's lower incomes and education are the primary reasons they are more likely to form nontraditional families.

The need to better understand family change is critical in rural areas. Despite the common impression that rural adults are more committed to marriage and to raising children within married households, there is mounting evidence of a sharp retreat from marriage and a rise in nonmarital fertility in rural areas. Whether rural families currently differ from their urban counterparts and, if so, what accounts for these differences is poorly understood. Drawing on key findings from a recent study¹, this brief draws on data for women (aged 15 to 44) and their children (aged 0 to 17) from the National Survey of Family Growth to examine rural and urban trends in family formation in the U.S. between 1988 and 2018 and to assess the factors that drive rural-urban differences in cohabitation and nonmarital childbirth in 2018.

Rural Women are Retreating from Marriage Faster than Urban Women.

Between 1988 and 2018, the percentage of rural women who were married fell by 22 percentage points from 55% to 33% (Figure 1). In contrast, over this same period, the decline among currently married urban women was only 13 percentage points. This decline in marriage was offset by a raise in both the proportion of women who have never married and those who form cohabiting partnerships. This increase in cohabitation was greater among rural than urban women, such that by 2018 rural women were 5 percentage points more likely than urban women to be in a cohabiting union.

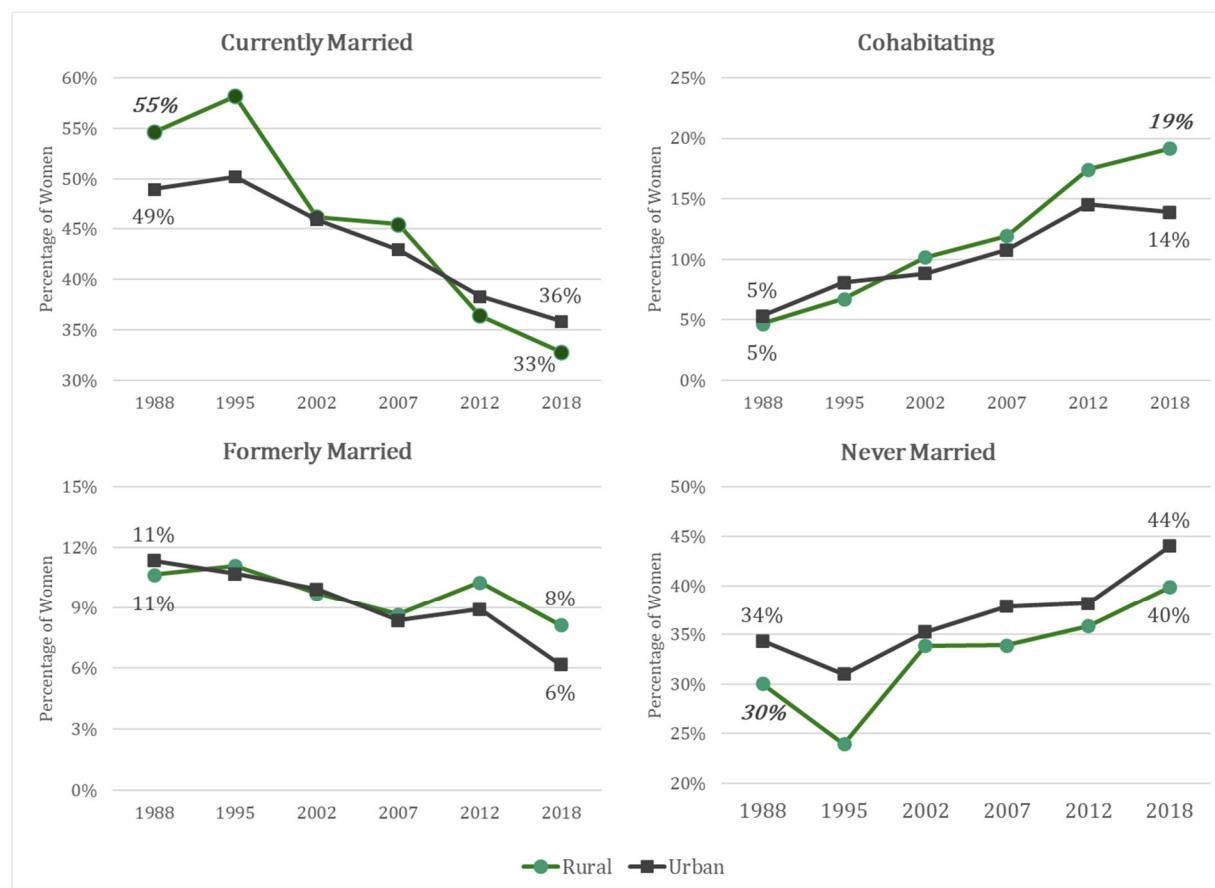


Figure 1. Women's Current Union Status in Rural and Urban Areas

Data Source: National Survey of Family Growth

Notes: Estimates in bold italics indicate significant rural-urban differences at $p\text{-value} \leq .05$

Rural Children are Almost 10 Percentage Points More Likely Than Urban Children to Be Born Outside of Marriage.

Nonmarital births have risen sharply in both rural and urban areas in the U.S. (Figure 2). This increase was steeper in rural areas, where the proportion of children born to unmarried mothers nearly tripled between 1995 and 2018. In fact, while births outside of marriage were less common in rural areas than in urban areas in 1995 (19% of rural births vs. 26% of urban births), by 2018 the opposite pattern is found. More than half of rural births (54%) compared to only 45% of urban births occur to unmarried mothers.

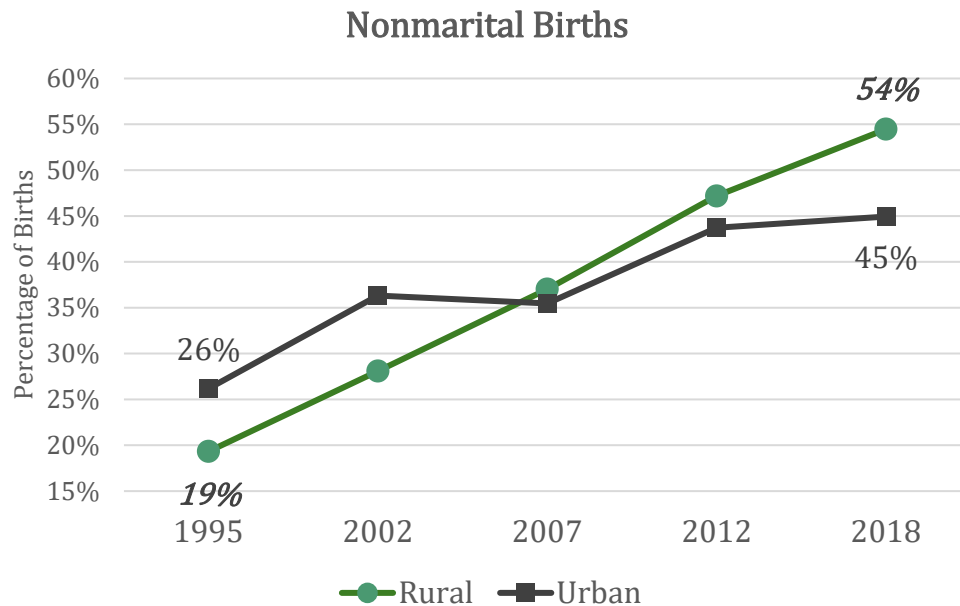


Figure 2. Nonmarital Births in Rural and Urban Areas

Data Source: National Survey of Family Growth

Notes: Estimates in bold italics indicate significant rural-urban differences at $p\text{-value} \leq .05$

Socioeconomic Disadvantage Is the Primary Reason Rural Women Are More Likely Than Urban Women to Form Nontraditional Families.

Higher rates of both cohabitation and nonmarital fertility among rural women is mainly attributed to their lower household incomes. In addition, rural women's lower educational attainment also contributes to their higher rates of childbirth among unmarried women. Other factors such as differences in age structures, racial and ethnic composition, proportions of immigrants, or levels of religiosity do not account for these differences in rural-urban families. These findings that socioeconomic factors, rather than cultural or ideological beliefs, drive the higher rates of nontraditional rural families are potentially concerning. To the extent that rural women may wish to get married and to raise children within the context of marriage, there may be a growing mismatch between rural women's family aspirations and the reality under which they form unions and have children.

Better Economic and Social Policies are Needed to Support Rural Families.

This study shows a clear link between economic disadvantage in rural areas and family formation—specifically, cohabitation and nonmarital childbirth. Prior research has shown that decades of economic restructuring, the Great Recession of 2008, and ongoing globalization have undermined many formerly robust rural economies. Recently, the dual opioid and COVID-19 epidemics have placed rural families under further personal and financial strain. Finding suitable marital partners, affording weddings, and creating economically secure households has become increasingly challenging with the decline in well-paid, full-time employment and access to benefits and childcare. Strengthening rural families requires better economic policies that revitalize rural labor markets and expand educational and training opportunities. In addition, social support programs designed to reduce child poverty, expand access to healthcare, and subsidize childcare may be especially beneficial for rural families.

Data and Methods

To examine trends in family formation, we use data from six rounds of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG): 1988, 1995, 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2018. These analyses use a representational sample of 44,310 women between the ages of 15 and 44 and 29,027 of their children aged 0 to 17 from all six waves. All estimates are weighted the person-level weights, survey strata, and cluster variables. To identify which specific demographic, socioeconomic, and religious characteristics explain rural-urban differences in family behaviors in 2018, we use decomposition techniques on a sample of 4,498 women and 4,183 children. More details about the sample and methods are available in the published paper.

References

1. Clark, Shelley, Matthew Brooks, Ann-Marie Helou, and Rachel Margolis. 2024. "Are Rural Areas Holdouts in the Second Demographic Transition?: Evidence from the U.S. and Canada." *Demography*. 61(2): 541–568. (DOI 10.1215/00703370-11237867)

Acknowledgments

Funding for this study was provided by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant number 435-2019-1117.

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Suggested Citation: Clark, Shelley and Matthew M. Brooks. 2024. "The Rise in Nontraditional Rural Families Reflects Rural Women's Socioeconomic Disadvantage" Brief #2024-2 Rural Population Research Network.

The Rural Population Research Network is a USDA NIFA supported network of scholars who conduct research on the most pressing demographic, economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by rural communities in the United States. Our current project (2022-2027) is titled 'W5001: Rural Population Change and Adaptation in the Context of Health, Economic, and Environmental Shocks and Stressors.' <https://nimss.org/projects/18897>.