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25th Anniversary Mark Elusive for Many Couples

By SAM ROBERTS

Don't stock up on silver anniversary cards. More than half the Americans who might have celebrated their 25th wedding anniversaries since 2000 were divorced, separated or widowed before reaching that milestone, according to the latest census survey, released yesterday.

For the first time at least since World War II, women and men who married in the late 1970s had a less than even chance of still being married 25 years later.

"We know that somewhere between 40 percent and 50 percent of marriages dissolve," said Barbara Risman, executive officer of the Council on Contemporary Families, a research group. "Now, when people marry, everyone wonders, is this one of those marriages that will be around for awhile."

But David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, a marriage research and advocacy group, said he was struck that the percentage of people who celebrated their 15th anniversary had declined. "This seems to be saying more recent marriages are more fragile," Mr. Blankenhorn said.

About 80 percent of first marriages that took place in the late 1950s lasted at least 15 years. Among people who married in the late 1980s for the first time, however, only 61 percent of the men and 57 percent of the women were married 15 years later.

Among currently married women, non-Hispanic whites were the only group in which a majority had marked their 15th anniversary.

The survey by the Census Bureau, in 2004, confirmed that most Americans eventually marry, but they are marrying later and are slightly more likely to marry more than once.

Those trends continued, although the latest numbers suggest an uptick in the divorce rate among people married in the most recent 20 years covered in the report, 1975-1994. The proportion of all Americans who have been divorced, about one in five, remained constant, however.

"Basically, it looks like we're pretty much holding steady," said Rose Kreieder, a Census Bureau demographer. "There are not radical differences."

The survey of the civilian, non-institutionalized population found a number of disparities on the basis of race and ethnicity.

Among men over 15, the percentage who have never been married was 45 percent for blacks, 39 percent for Hispanics, 33 percent for Asians and 28 percent for whites.

Among women over 15, it was 44 percent for blacks, 30 percent for Hispanics, 23 percent for Asians and 22 percent for whites.

Among Americans married in the 1950s, about 70 percent were still married by their 25th anniversary. Only 49.5 percent of men and 46.4 percent of women who married in the late 1970s were married 25 years later.

In 2004, among people in their late 20s, a majority of men 54 percent had never married, and 41 percent of women had not. In 1996, the comparable figures were 49 percent among men and 35 percent among women.

In the latest analysis of people age 15 and older, 58 percent of women and 54 percent of men had married only once. In 1996, the figures were about 60 percent for women and 54 percent for men.

One statistical constant has been the so-called seven-year itch, as popularized in the 1950s play and film about errant husbands. Couples who separate do so, on average, after seven years and divorce after eight. The duration of first marriages that end in divorce appears to have increased slightly among men.

Among adults 25 and older who had been divorced, 52 percent of men and 44 percent of women were currently married.

On average, people who marry again typically do so in about three-and-a-half years. Second marriages that end in divorce last about 8.6 years for men and 7.2 years for women.

In 2004, 12 percent of men and 13 percent of women had married twice. Three percent each had married three or more times.

The oldest baby boomers recorded the highest divorce rates. Among people in their 50s, 38 percent of men and 41 percent of women had been divorced. In 1996, the comparable figures were 36 percent and 35 percent.

One factor that also affects the marriage trends is that people are living longer. As a result, the median age at which women in a first marriage were widowed rose from 57.8 in 1996 to 60.3 in 2004. Among men, the median age increased from 59.6 to 61.3.

Census results released last week also confirmed the finding by demographers earlier this year that more American women were living without a husband than with one. Among women 20 and older, 51.2 percent said that they were divorced, separated or their spouse was temporarily absent or that they had never been married when the American Community Survey was taken in 2006.

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Multimedia Graphic: Silver Anniversaries