

Historical Marriage Trends from 1890-2010: A Focus on Race Differences

by

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This paper is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The views expressed on statistical or methodological issues are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Introduction

- 2010 PEW Research/Time Magazine study found 39 percent of Americans think marriage is becoming obsolete, compared with 28 percent in 1978.
- Yet most Americans still marry (>90 %) (Goldstein & Kenney 2001)

Introduction

- One indicator of change in marital patterns is the median age at first marriage
 - Has risen since the mid 20th century, but a longer historical view may be instructive
 - We know marital patterns differ by race, but was there a point at which they diverged, or did they always differ?

Research questions

- How has the median age at first marriage changed from 1890 to 2010?
- How has the proportion never married by age 35 changed from 1890 to 2010?
- How has the proportion never married by age 45 changed from 1890 to 2010?

Research questions

- Trends by sex and race:
 - Median age at first marriage
 - % never married by age 35 and over
 - % never married by age 45 and over

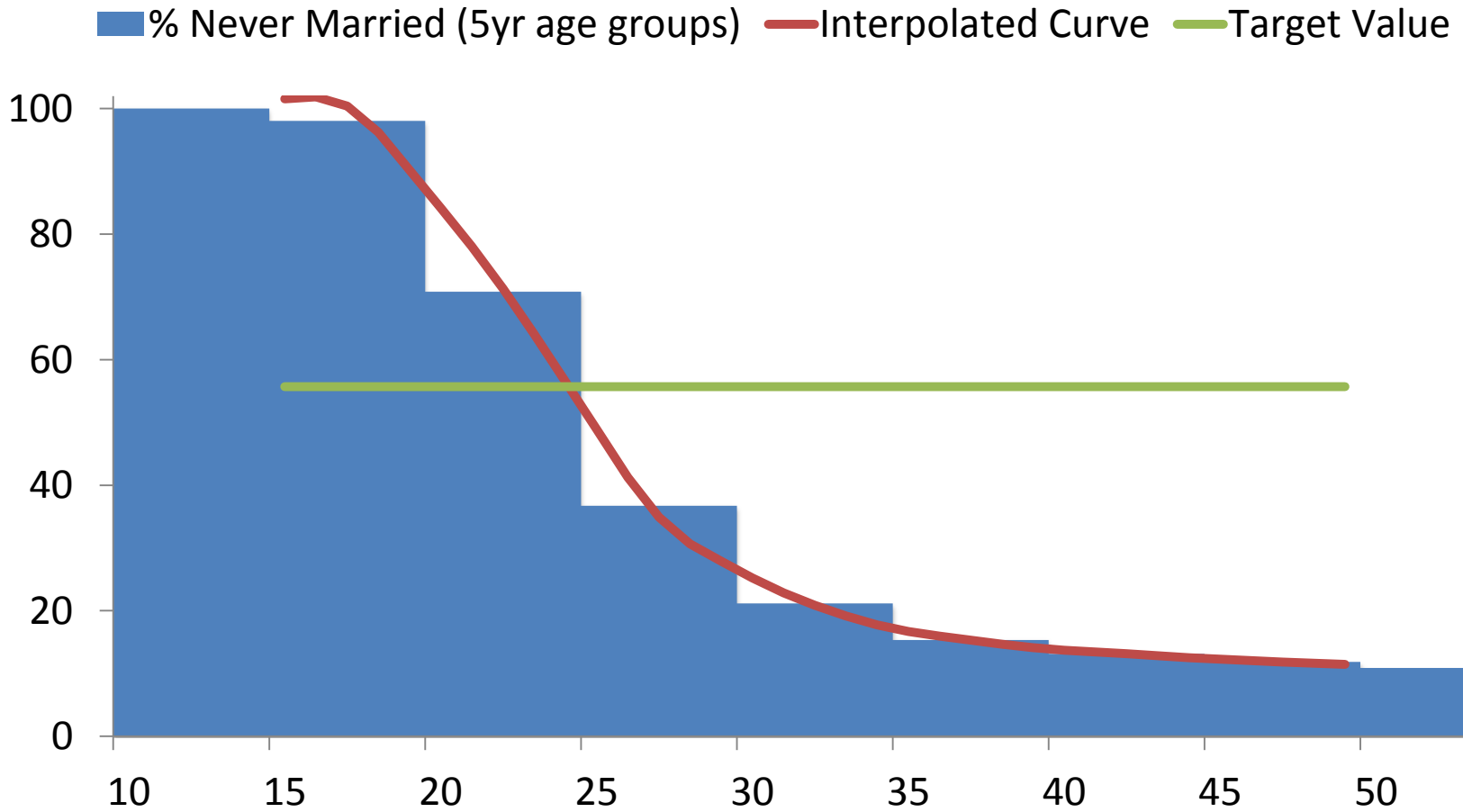
Data

- Decennial census data 1890-2000
- American Community Survey data 2010

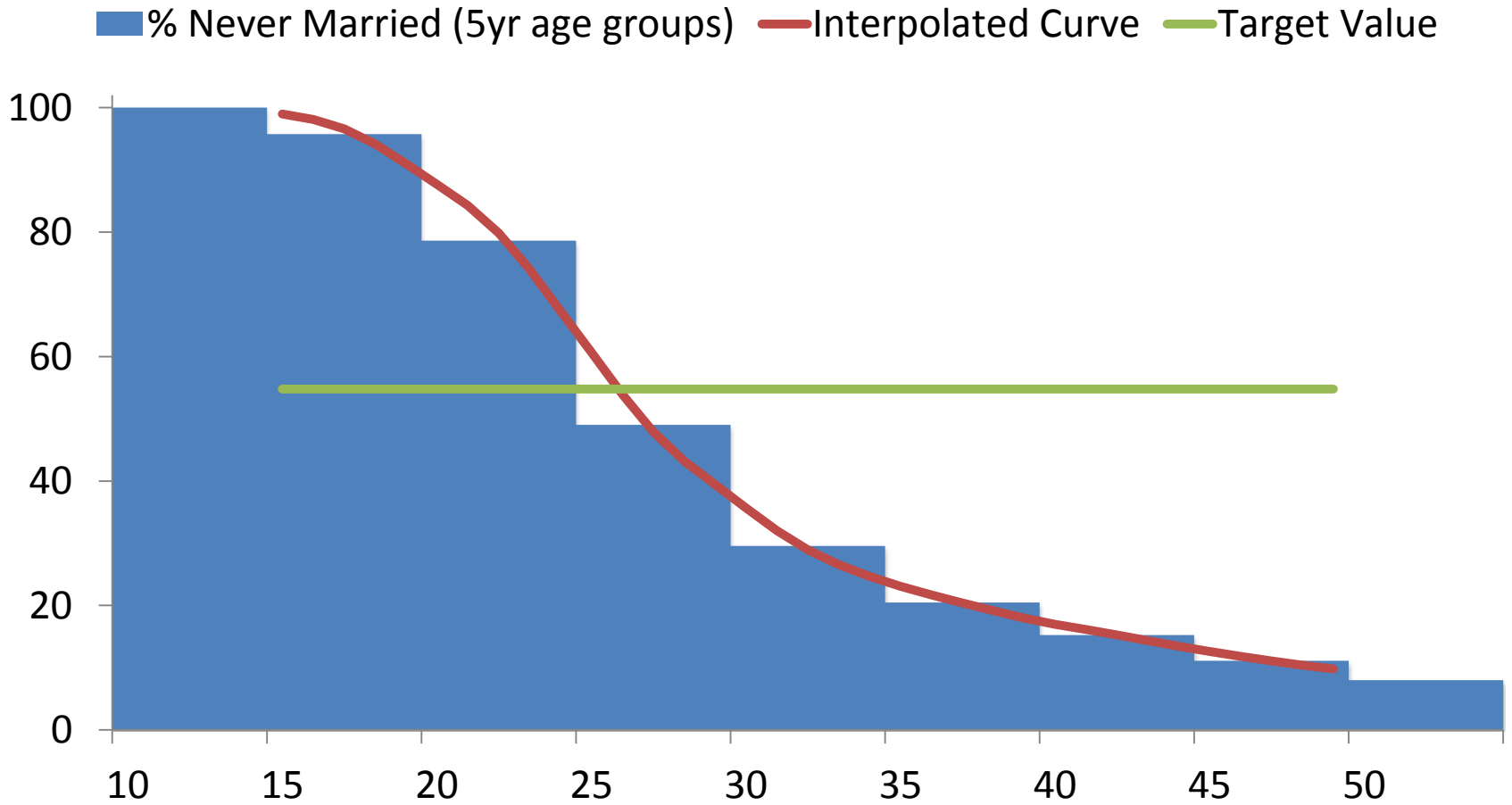
Methods

- Estimating median age at first marriage using marital status distribution by age
 - Shyrock and Siegel model (1971)
- Method uses percent never married by 5-year age groups
 - M. Brault adapted the model to 10-year groups due to data constraints

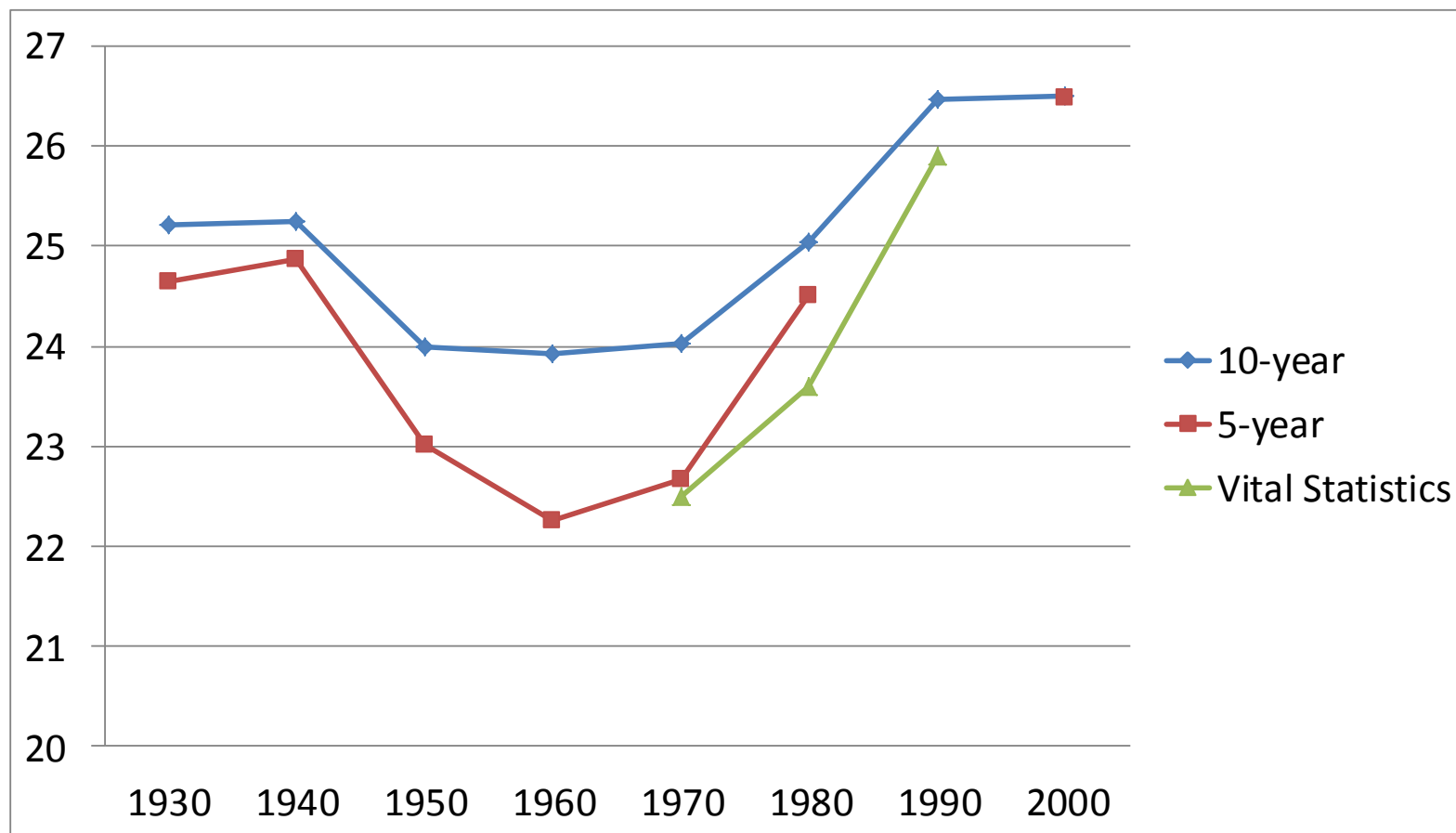
1930



2000

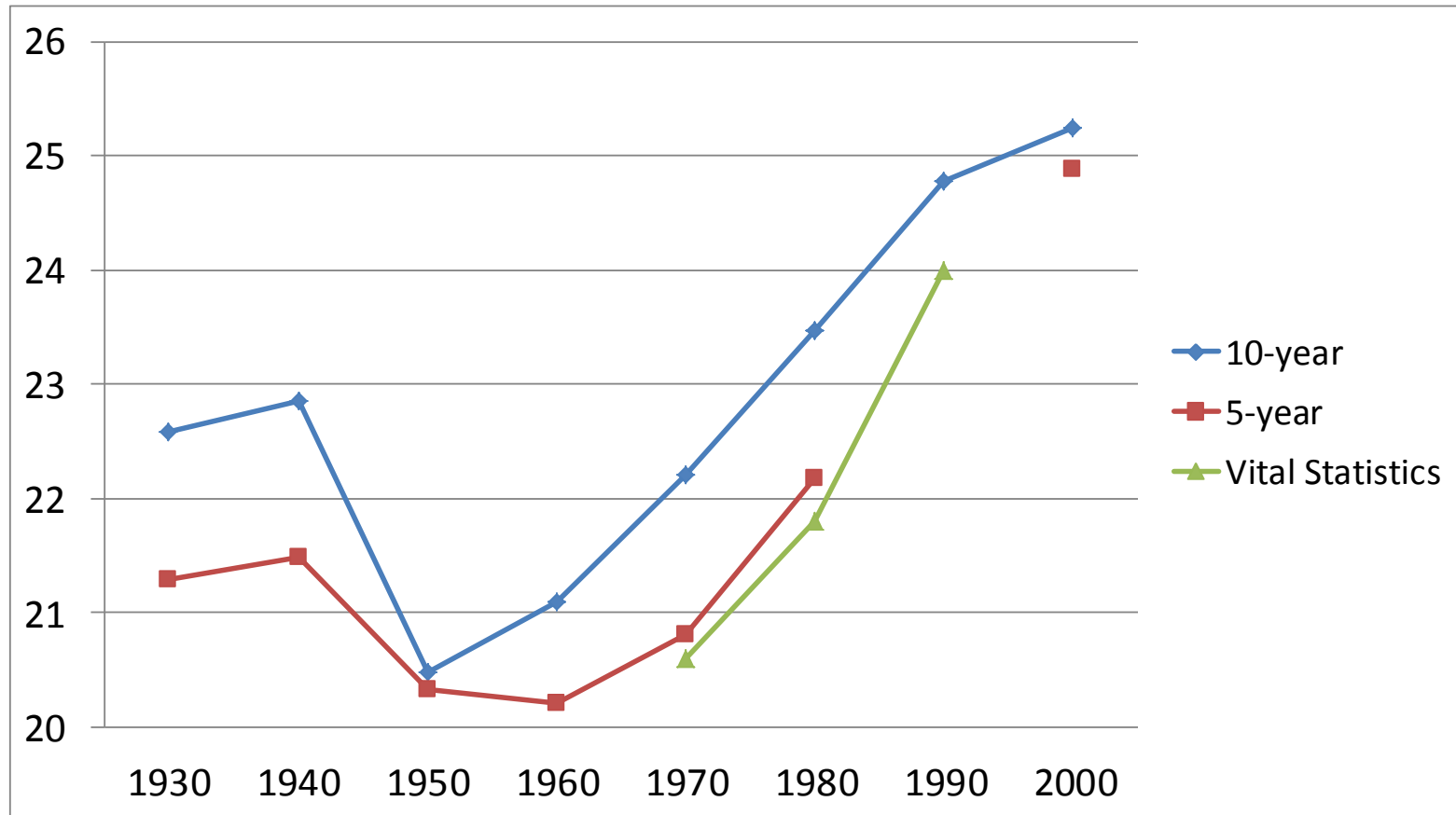


Appendix Figure 1. Comparison of Median Ages at First Marriage for Men: 10-year and 5-year Shyrock and Siegel Method of Estimation for Selected Census Years and Vital Statistics Data



Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1930-2000); National Center for Health Statistics, "Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1989 and 1990." Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Volume 43, No. 12. Supplement, 1995, Table 9.

Appendix Figure 2. Comparison of Median Ages at First Marriage for Women: 10-year and 5-year Shyrock and Siegel Method of Estimation for Selected Census Years and Vital Statistics Data

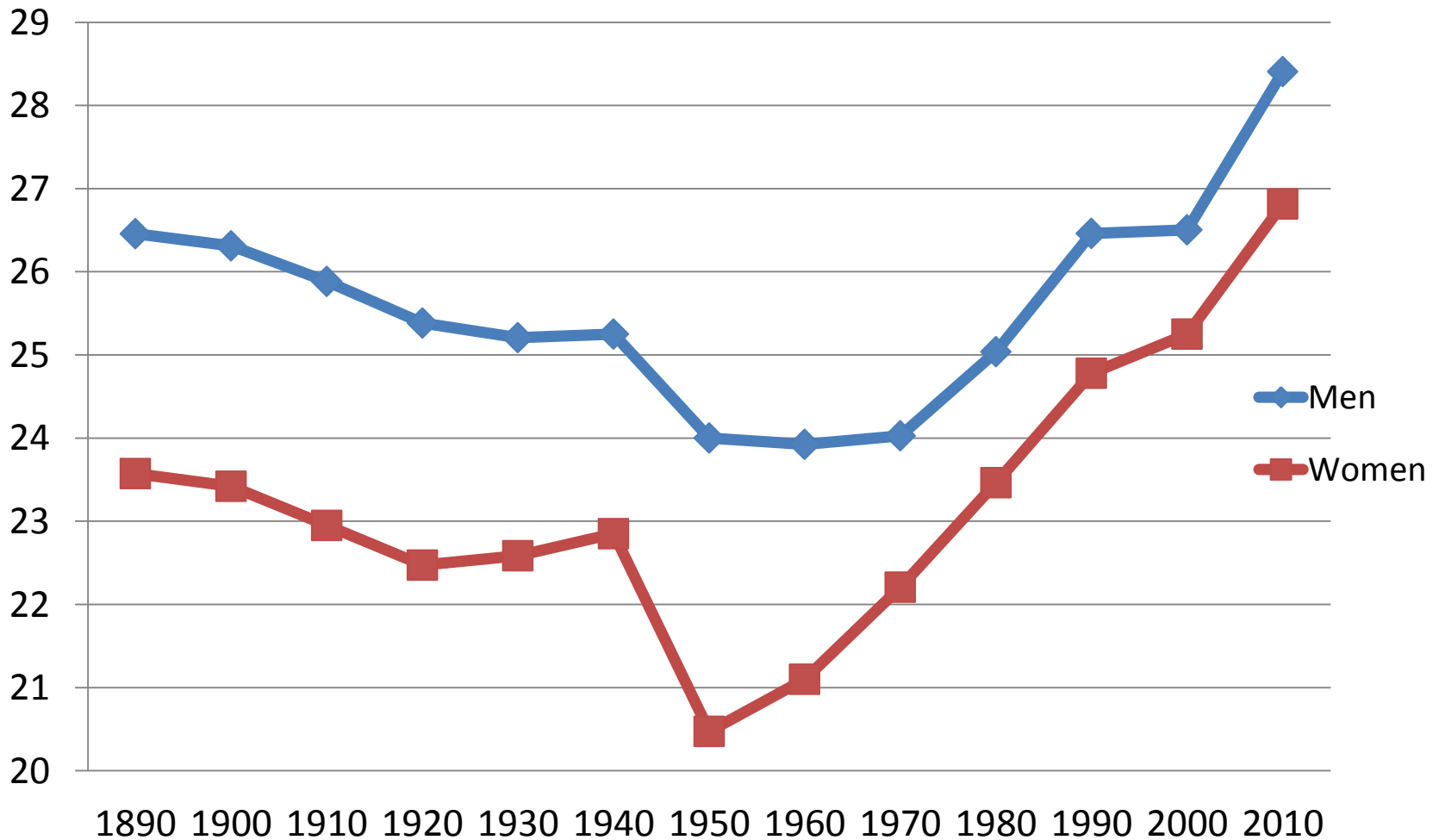


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1930-2000); National Center for Health Statistics, "Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1989 and 1990." Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Volume 43, No. 12. Supplement, 1995, Table 9.

Median age at first marriage

- Not until 1990 was the median age at first marriage at or above its 1890 value.
- The change for women was greater than that for men.

Figure 1. Median Age at First Marriage by Sex: 1890 to 2010

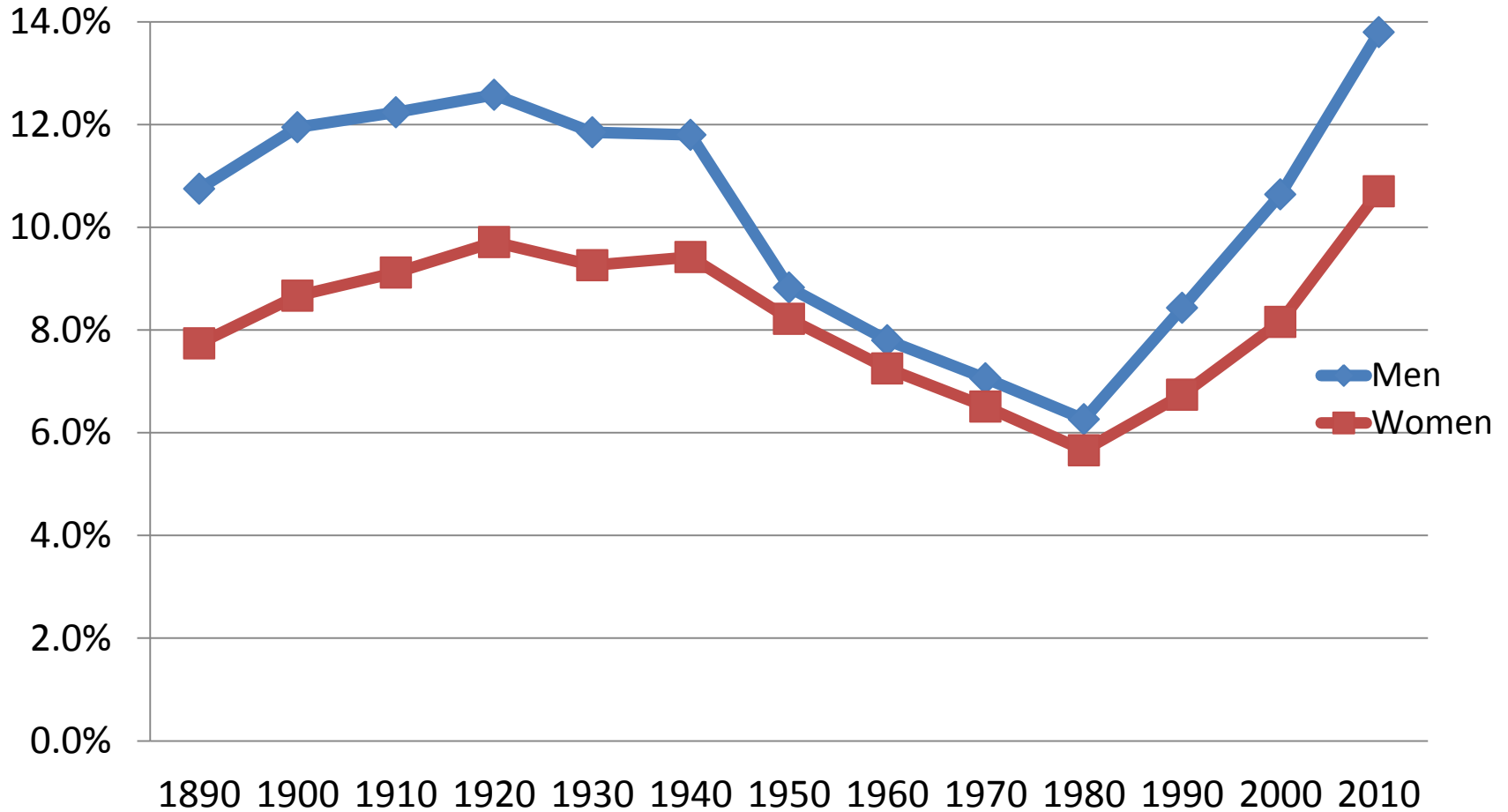


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Percent never married, by sex

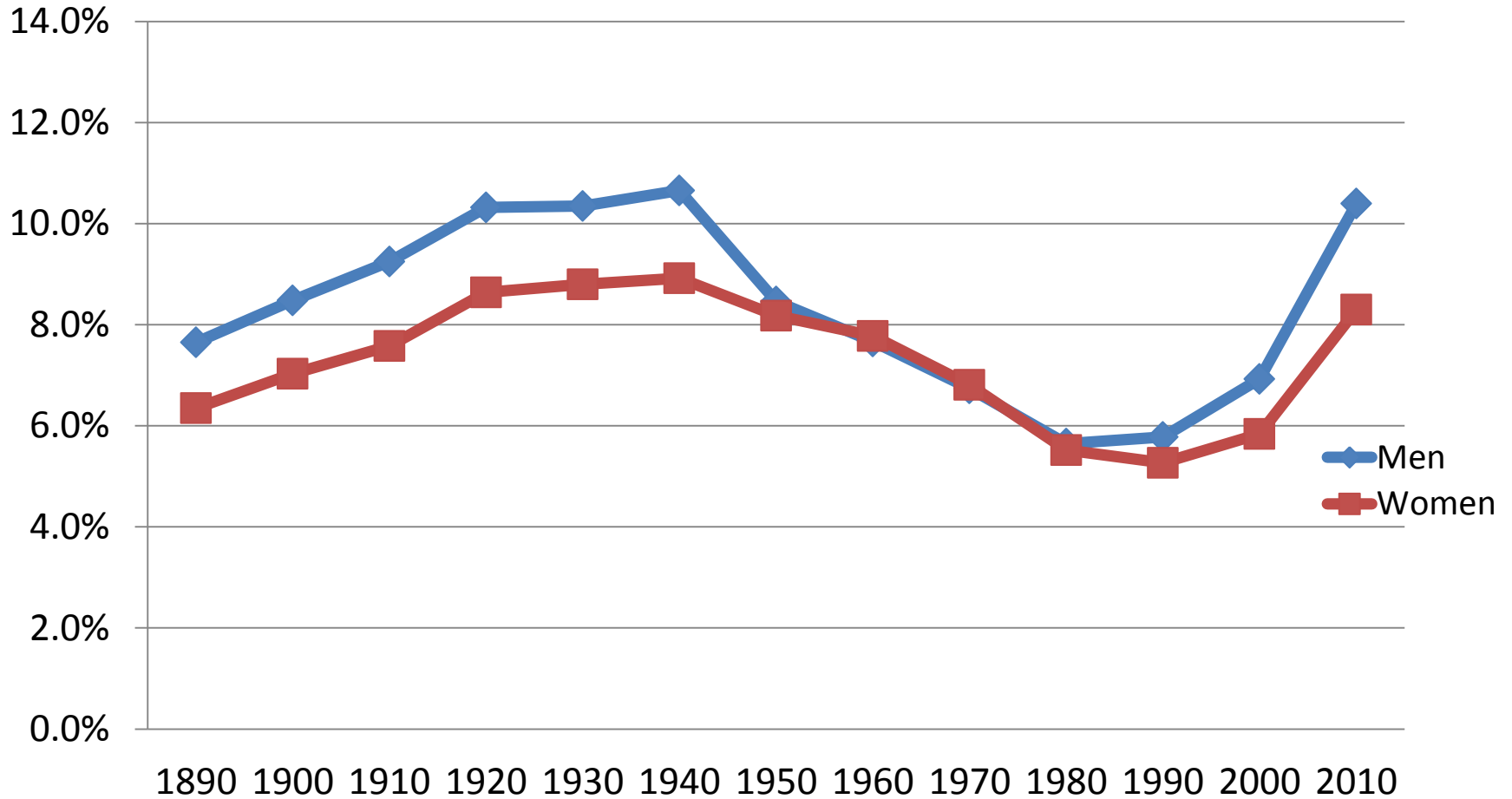
- The proportion never married was lowest around 1980.

**Figure 2. Percent Never Married among Those Aged 35 and Older by Sex:
1890 to 2010**



Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

**Figure 3. Percent Never Married among Those Aged 45 and Older by Sex:
1890 to 2010**

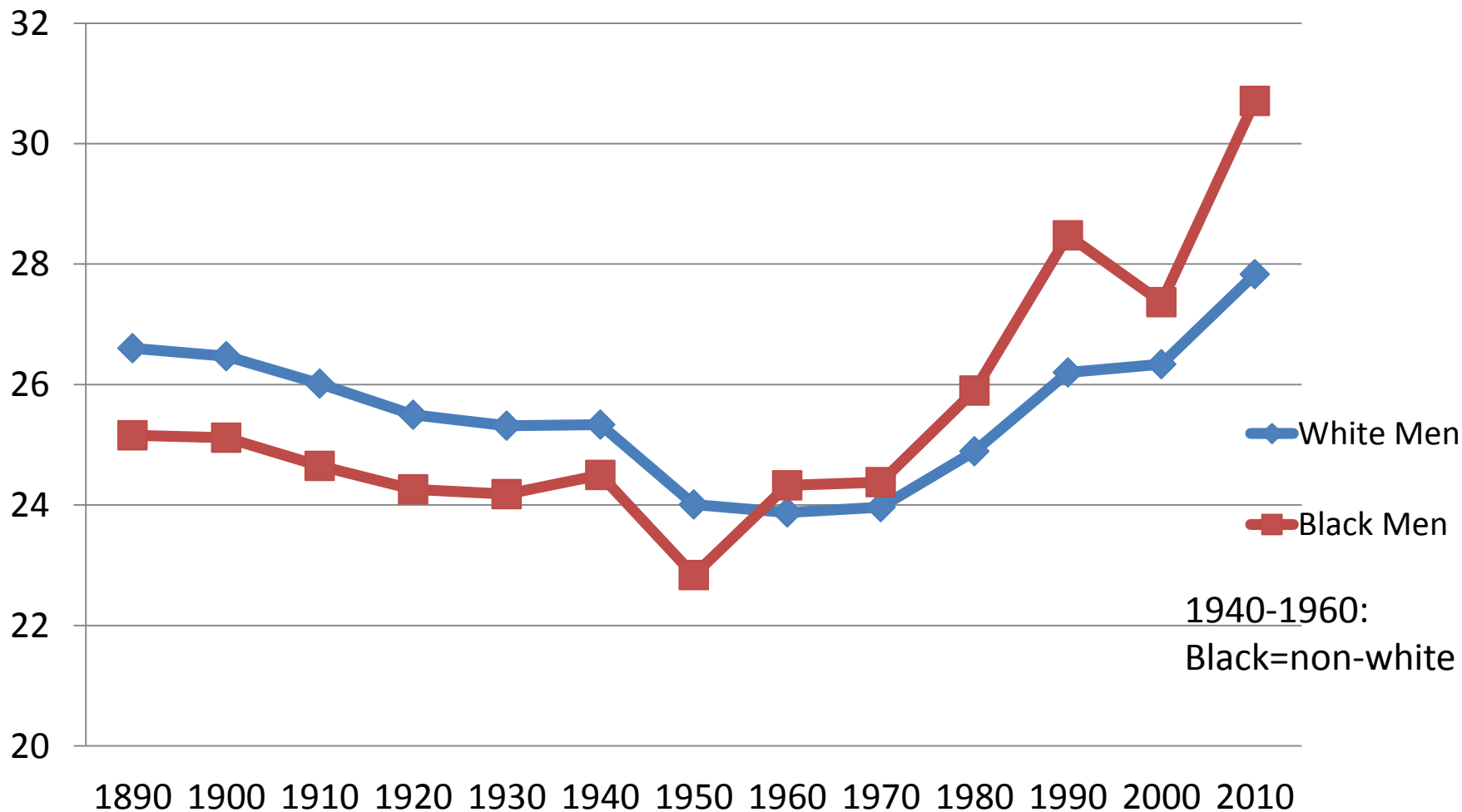


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Median age at first marriage, by race

- From 1890 through 1950 the median age at first marriage for black men was lower than for white men.
- Since 1960, the median age at first marriage has been higher for black men than for white men.
- 2010 median age at first marriage:
 - Black men 30.7 years
 - White men 27.8 years

Figure 4a. Median Age at First Marriage for Men by Race: 1890 to 2010

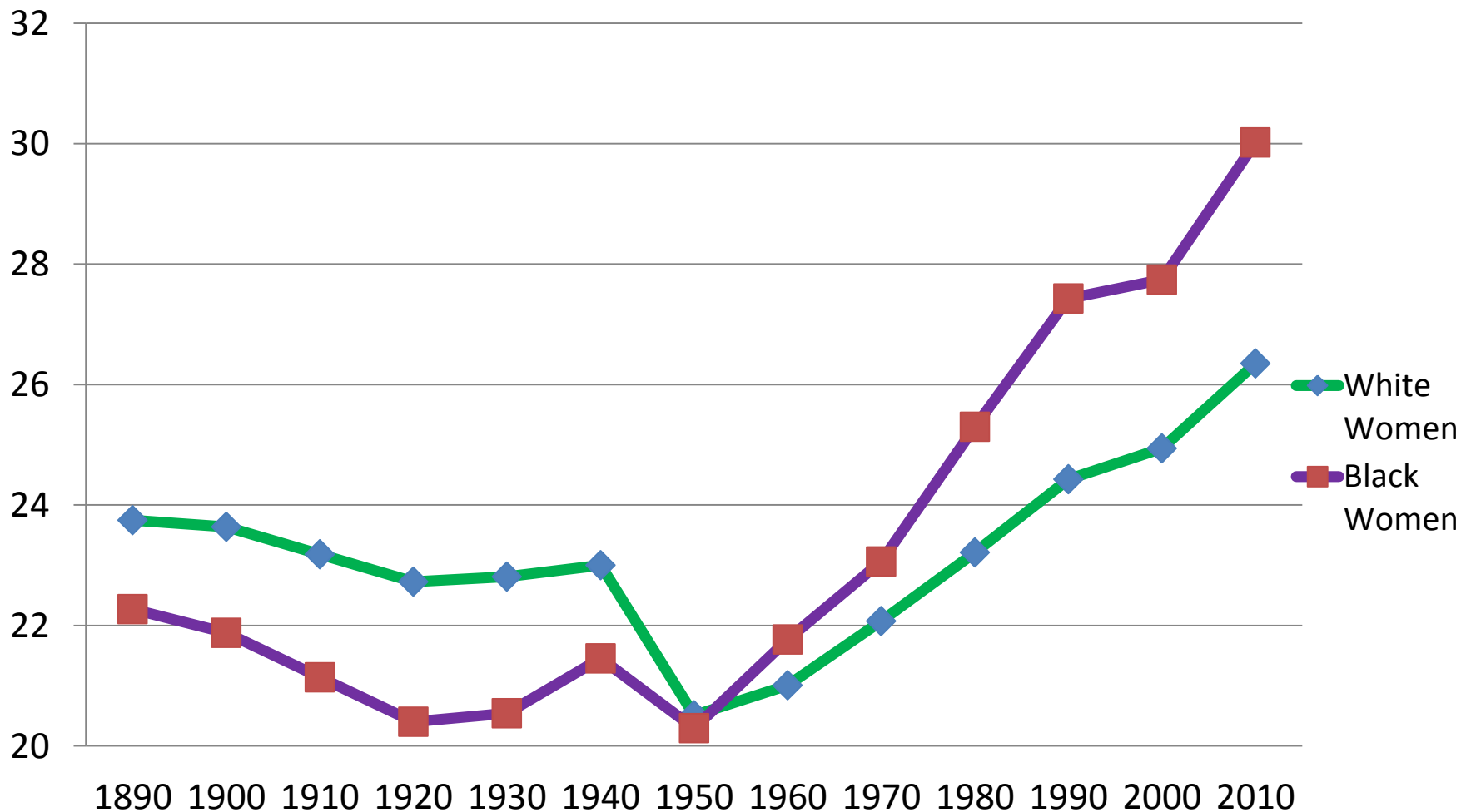


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Median age at first marriage, by race

- From 1890 through 1940, Black women had a higher median age at first marriage than White women.
- After 1950, the median age at first marriage for black women was higher than for white women.
- 2010 median age at first marriage:
 - Black women 30.0 years
 - White women 26.4 years

Figure 4b. Median Age at First Marriage for Women by Race: 1890 to 2010

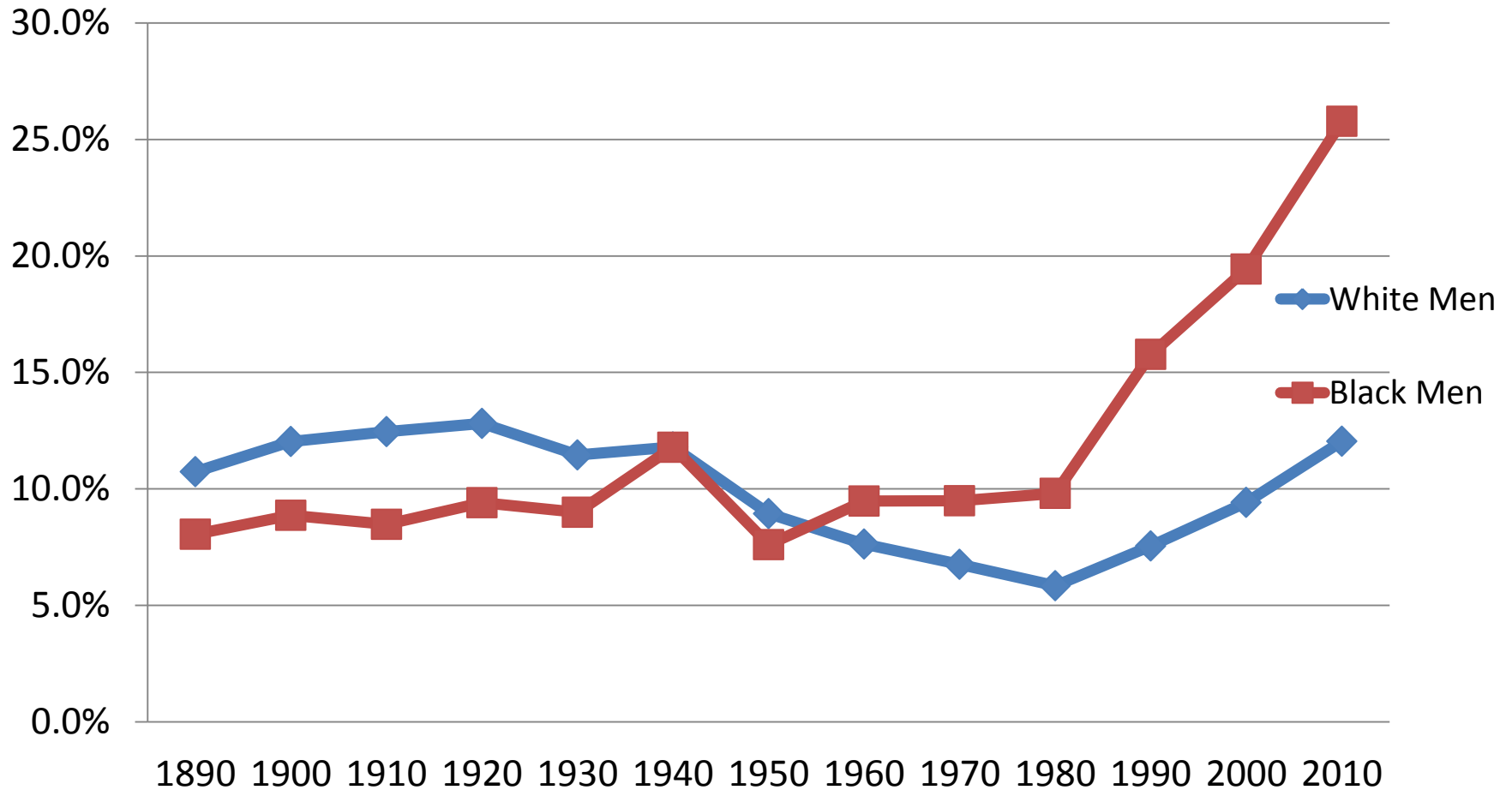


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Percent never married age 35+, by race

- The percent of those age 35 and older who were never married was higher from 1890 through 1930 for White men than Black men, but by 1960, this had reversed, with Black men age 35 and over having a higher percent never married.

**Figure 5a. Percent Never Married among Men Aged 35 and Older by Race:
1890 to 2010**

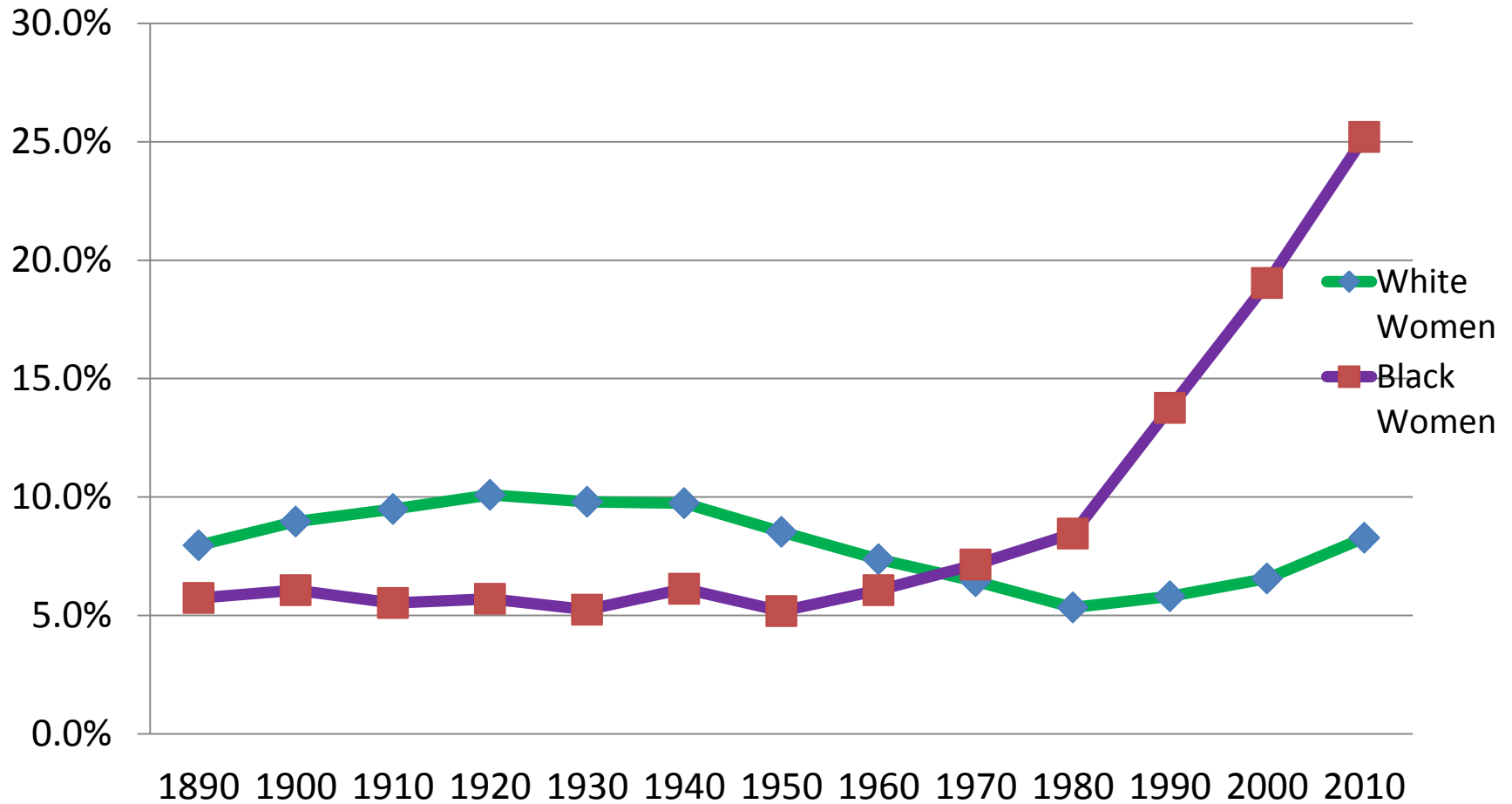


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Percent never married age 35+, by race

- Black women were more likely to have been married by age 35 than their white counterparts until 1970.
- 2010 percent never married, for 35 and over
 - Black women: 25 percent
 - White women: 8 percent

Figure 5b. Percent Never Married among Women Aged 35 and Older by Race: 1890 to 2010

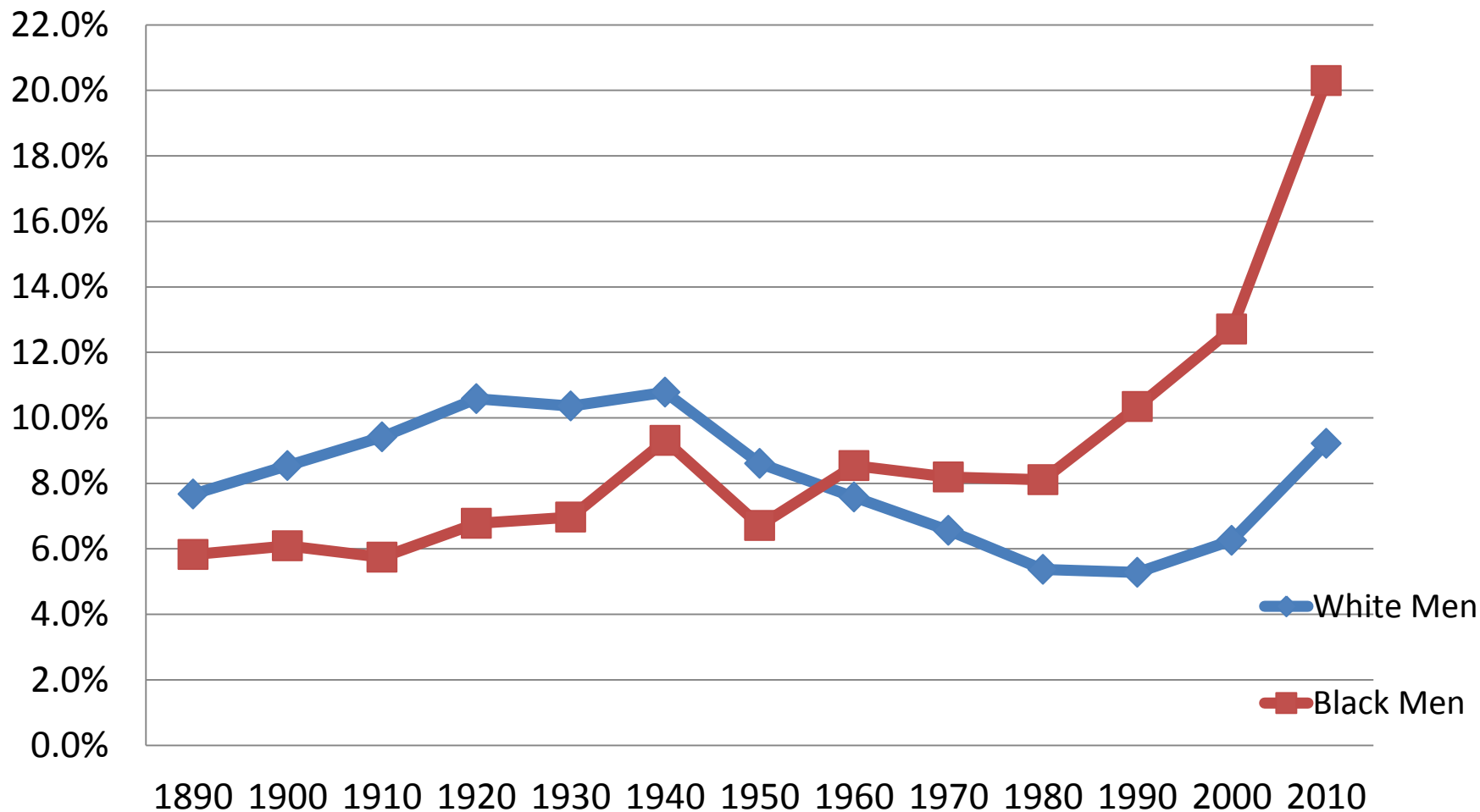


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Percent never married, age 45+, by race

- By 1960, Black men had a higher percentage age 45 and over who had never married
- 2010 percent never married, age 45 and over:
 - Black men: 20 percent
 - White men: 9 percent

**Figure 6a. Percent Never Married among Men Aged 45 and Older by Race:
1890 to 2010**

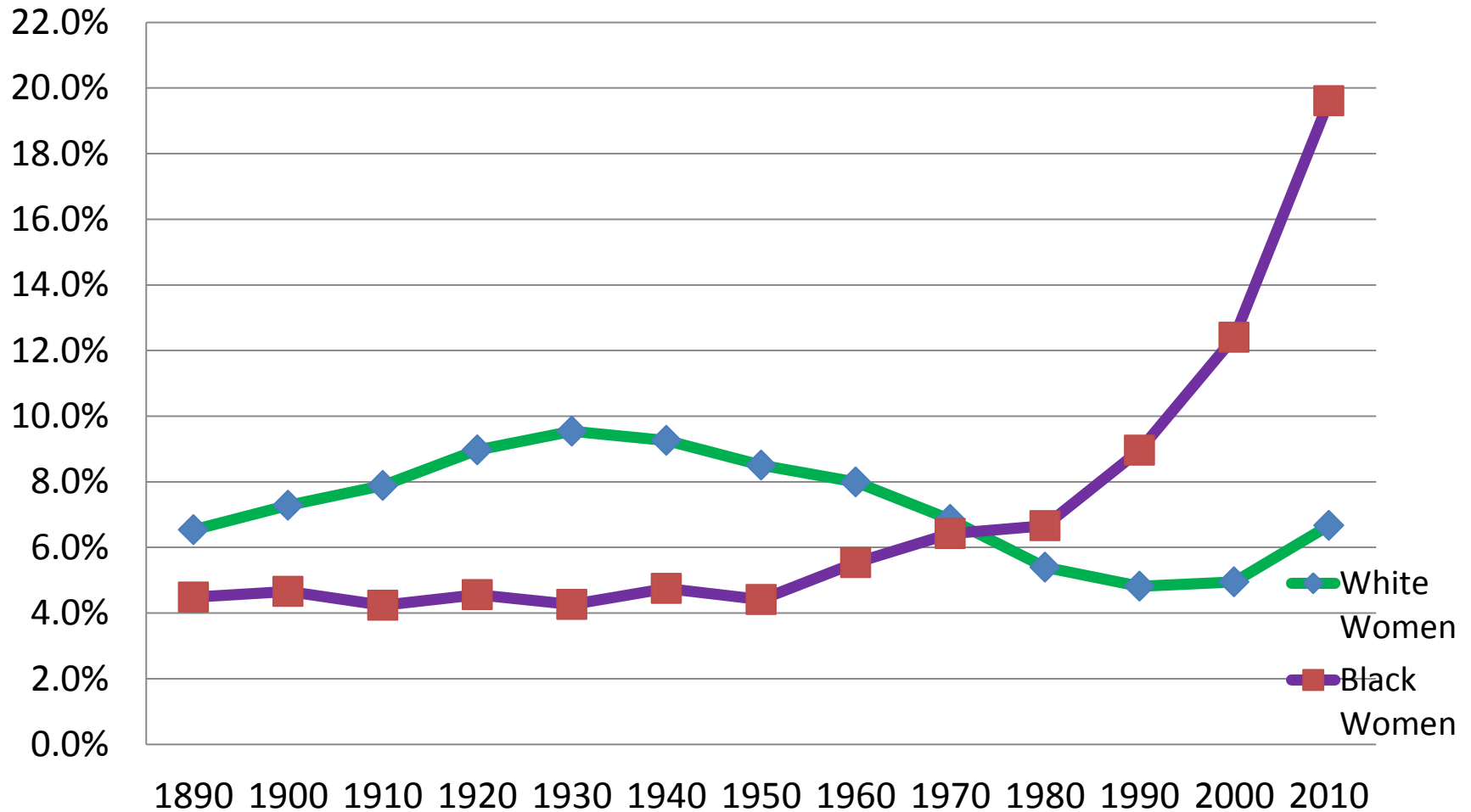


Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Percent never married, age 45+, by race

- The crossover happened in 1980, when 7 percent of black women had never married, compared with 5 percent of white women.
- 2010 percent never married, age 45 and over:
 - Black women: 20 percent
 - White women: 7 percent

Figure 6b. Percent Never Married among Women Aged 45 and Older by Race: 1890 to 2010



Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

Conclusions

- Benefits of an historical view
 - Median age at first marriage in 2010 is highest on record, but didn't exceed the 1890 value until 1990
- Sharp increases in proportion never married for Black men and women since 1980
 - Merits further investigation into the factors affecting this increase

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