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Characteristics of Young Adult Relationships: The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health

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OVERVIEW

Much has been written about the delayed timing of many events that mark the transition to young adulthood in developed countries.¹ This historical change is especially important for romantic partnerships because the type and the choices made within these relationships can have a lasting impact on adult health and well-being.^{2,3}

The relationship context involving closeness, trust, concurrent partners and even violence varies across relationship types. Moreover, the quality and diversity of these relationships shape trajectories for psychosocial well-being and future relationship quality.²

In this research brief, we describe the demographic patterns and quality of contemporary young adult relationships and address the following three questions:

1. What types of romantic relationships do young adults have, and how many are not currently in a relationship?
2. What are the demographic characteristics, in terms of gender, age differences, and race/ethnicity, of these relationships?
3. What is the quality of different types of young adult relationships, as indicated by relationship closeness, concurrent partners, and intimate partner violence?

Data and Measures

We constructed two sub-samples utilizing data from Waves I and IV of Add Health [see “About Add Health” box, page 8]. The first sample was used to answer question 1, describing the types of young adult relationships (see Figures 1 and 2). It contains **12,566 respondents** whose sexual orientation identity was heterosexual as reported at the Wave IV interview, and who are not missing information about race/ethnicity, relationship status, and sampling weight.⁴ This includes 10,138 individuals (80.68%) in a current relationship, 232 individuals (1.85%) who have never had a relationship, and 2,196 individuals (17.47%) who have had one or more previous relationships. The second sample is a subset of the first sample, has **9,905 respondents**, and was used to answer questions 2 and 3. The second sample only includes individuals in current relationships who have complete data on all variables of interest in this research brief. Results from this research brief are weighted, accounting for the non-probability of sample selection, and all statistics are adjusted for the clustered sample design.

The constructed relationship status variable has two versions corresponding to the two samples described above. The first one has four categories: currently married, currently cohabiting, currently dating or pregnant with a

romantic partner, and no current relationship (referring to those who only reported a previous relationship or those never had a relationship). It was used for summary statistics addressing question 1, including Figures 1 and 2. The second version excludes the category of no current relationship and was used for the rest of the analysis (questions 2 and 3).

The relationship status variable was created based on data from relationship sections 16 and 17 of Wave IV. Detailed information (section 17) was only collected about one relationship, with a current relationship being the priority. If respondents reported more than one current relationship (section 16), the following priorities were used to select the one partnership examined in greater detail: marriage partner, cohabitation partner, pregnancy partner (who is not a spouse or cohabitation partner), and dating partner. If two or more partners fell into the same category, the longer/longest relationship was selected. If two partners fell into the same category and relationship durations were the same lengths of time, the respondent was asked to select the partner they cared about the most. Out of the complete Wave IV sample of 15,701 respondents, 136 (0.87%) were missing relationship data and are excluded from our subsamples.

Data on respondents' race/ethnicity were derived from Add Health Wave I questionnaire responses. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were of Hispanic origin and then to self-select up to five different races: white, black or African American, American Indian or Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, and other. By coupling the responses to the Hispanic origin and race questions, we construct a "single race" variable with mutually exclusive categories. More details on the creation of this variable are available on the Add Health website.⁵

The remaining variables come from the Wave IV in-home survey. This includes the respondent's age, gender, relationship status, report about partner's concurrent sexual partners and trust in the partner's fidelity, assessment of their closeness to the current partner, partner's age and race/ethnicity, and intimate violence victimization.

Three age group categories were created to examine potential differences by age: 24-27, 28-29, 30-34. The partner age difference is constructed by using the partner's age minus the respondent's age. The continuous version is recoded into three categories: partner 3+ years younger, partner-respondent age difference within 3 years, and partner 3+ years older.

Respondents were asked to rate the statement "I trust/trusted my partner to be faithful to me" on a 5 point scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. This was then converted into a new variable with strongly agree and agree assigned a value of 1, while neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree were assigned a value of 0. Respondents were also asked if their partners have had any other sexual partners during their relationship.

The respondent's assessment of closeness to their current partner is a scale ranging from 1 to 7 (see Figure 7). We re-classify this scale into four categories: somewhat independent (picture 1-3), somewhat close (picture 4 & 5), close (picture 6), very close (picture 7). We also construct a summary variable of partner violence by the respondent's report on any incident of: (1) threatened, had things thrown at them, or were pushed or shoved by their current partner; (2) slapped or kicked by the partner, or (3) made to have sexual relations with the partner.

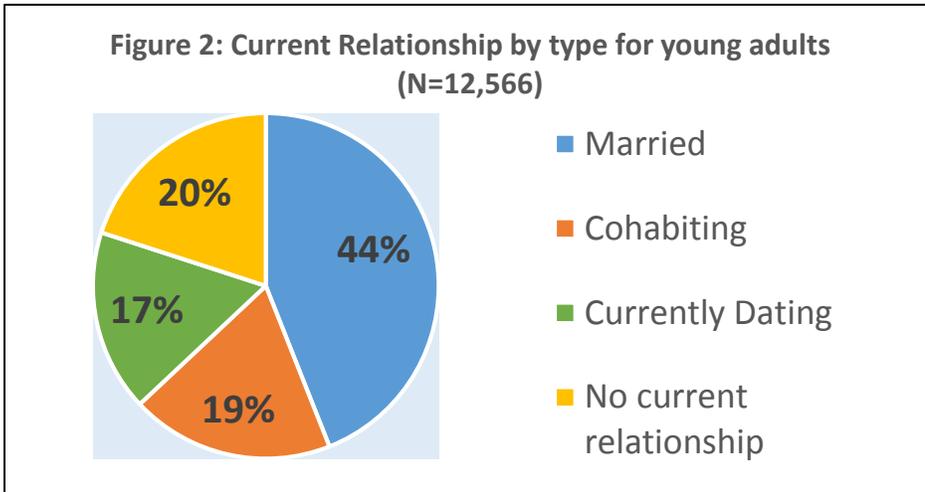
Young Adult Relationship Summary

This summary section is based on data from sub-sample 1, 12,566 respondents, as described in the data and measures section.

Figure 1:



Young adults reported a variety of relationship types. Approximately 80% of young adults in the sub-sample of 12,566 reported at least one current relationship. The remaining 18.5% provided information on their most recent relationship or previous relationship, with 1.5% reporting that they have never been in a relationship. 44% of sub-sample 1 respondents were married [Figure 1], 19% were living with a partner (cohabiting), and 17% reported currently dating [Figure 2].



We find an expected age pattern of shifting prevalence from less serious, more temporary relationships (i.e., dating, cohabiting) to more permanent, stable relationships (i.e., marriage) as young adults age. Among the three age groups, the 30-34 year-olds had the highest occurrence of marriage (39%), compared to 27% for the 24-27 year-olds.

Cohabitation was more common among the 24-27 year-olds (44%),

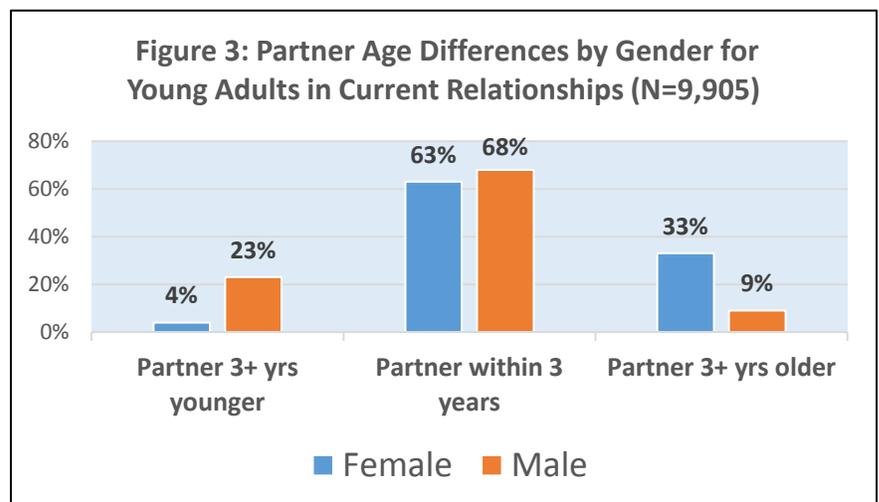
and declines as age increases, with only 26% of 30-34 year olds currently cohabiting. Similarly, 40% of the 24-27 year-olds were currently dating, while 25% of the 30-34 year-olds reported currently dating.

Whites were the most likely to be married (49%), while Blacks were least likely (26%). Blacks were also most likely to be currently dating (26%) compared to Whites (14%). 40% of Asians and 43% of Hispanics reported being married. Asians were least likely to report cohabiting with a partner (13%).

Women were more likely to report being married (49% compared to 39%), while men were more likely to be cohabiting or currently dating, reflecting the earlier age transition to marriage among women compared to men.

Partner Characteristics

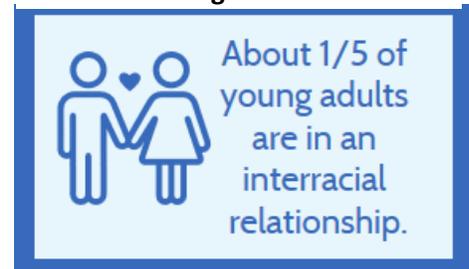
This section and all sections following are based on sub-sample 2, the 9,905 respondents who reported a current relationship at Wave IV. Consistent with historical patterns, age differences between partners in relationships vary by gender. Men were nearly seven times more likely to report that their partner was three or more years younger. Women were three times more likely than men to report having a partner who was three or more years older (33% compared to 9%) [Figure 3]. However, the majority of men and women have partners within 3 years of their own age.



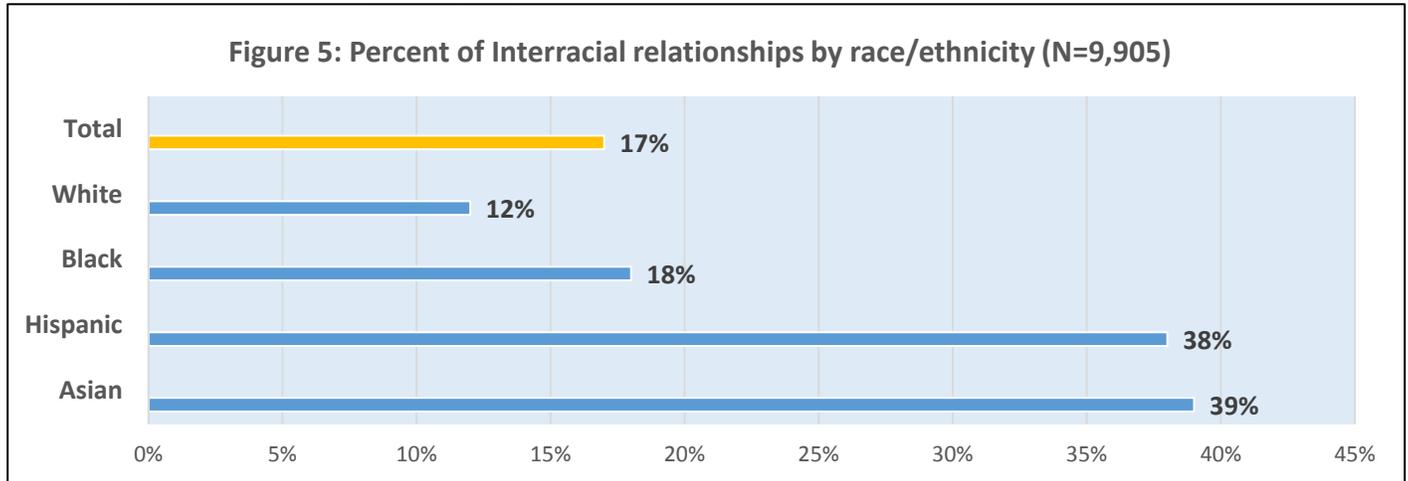
Married adults were more likely to have a partner within 3 years of their age, while those currently dating were more likely to have partners who are 3+ years younger than them.

Almost one in five young adults were in an interracial relationship as 17% of young adults across all relationship types reported that their partner was of a different race/ethnicity than their own [Figure 4]. However, 15% of married young adults reported having a spouse of a different race/ethnicity compared to 20% of cohabiting adults and 22% for those currently dating.

Figure 4

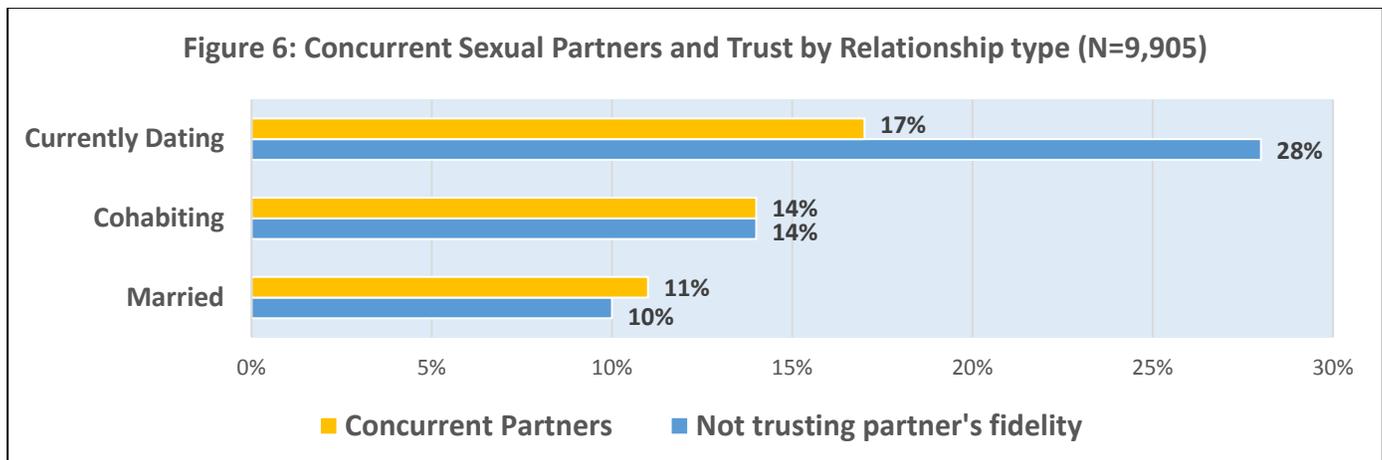


White respondents were least likely to report a partner of a different race (12%), while Hispanics and Asians were most likely (38% and 39%, respectively) [Figure 5]



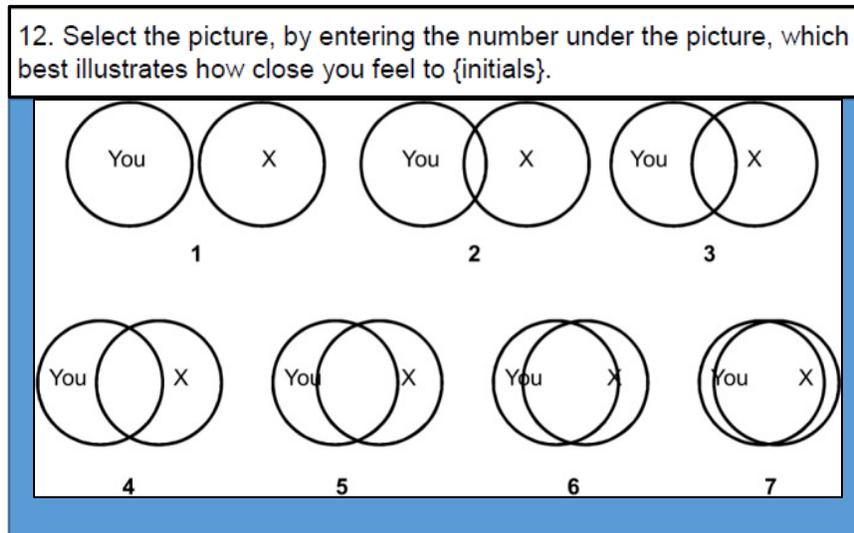
Relationship Quality: Concurrent Partners and Closeness

Respondents were asked about relationship fidelity and whether they trusted their partner to stay faithful to them. They were also asked if their partners had concurrent partners during their current relationship. For married and cohabiting respondents, reports of their partners having concurrent partners were equal or nearly equal to reports that they did not trust their partner to be faithful to them. However, those in currently dating relationships were more likely to report not trusting their partner to remain faithful, compared to the actual report of concurrent partners (28% vs. 17%) [Figure 6]. Currently dating partners also had higher reports of partners with concurrent partners (17%) compared to cohabiting (14%) and married (11%) young adults.



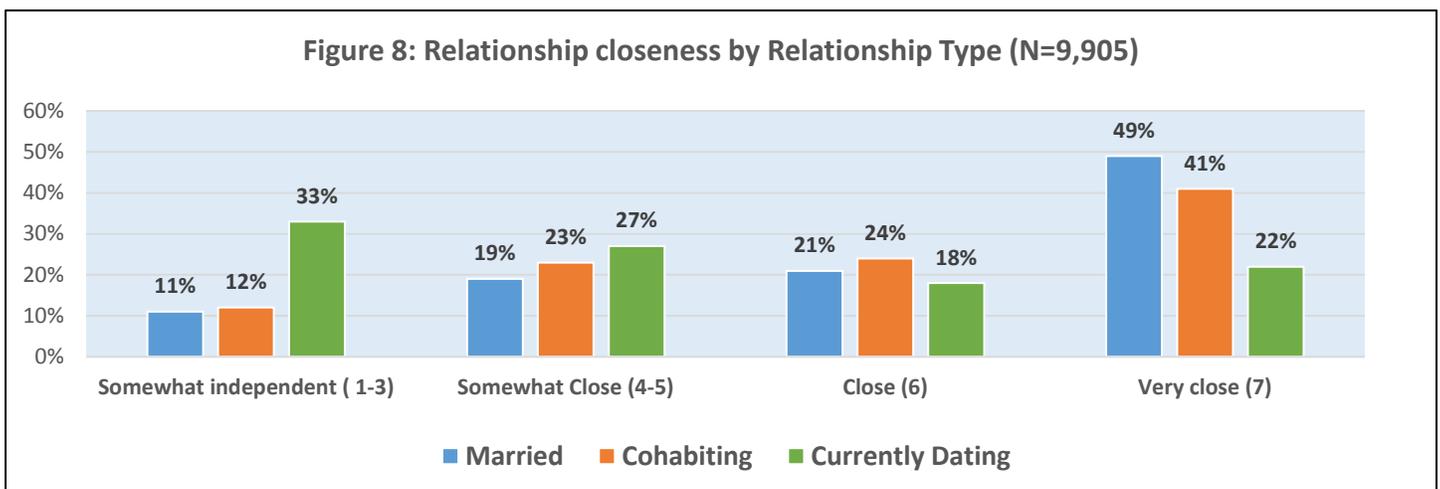
Respondents were also asked to assess their closeness to their current partner using the diagrams depicted in **Figure 7**.⁶ This scale was adapted from the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale⁶.

Figure 7: Relationship Diagram



The first diagram depicts a high level of relationship independence and sense of self within a partnership compared to the seventh diagram, which depicts a high level of dependence and overlap between self and partner.

Figure 8 shows that married respondents were more likely to indicate relationship dependence than currently dating and cohabiting respondents. Respondents who were currently dating were the largest group represented in the most independent category [**Figure 8**]. Married and cohabiting respondents were more likely than dating respondents to select diagrams 4-7, indicating higher levels of relationship dependence. 49% of married respondents identified with diagram 7 in the figure compared to 22% of dating respondents. The data show currently dating individuals were most likely to select the highly independent relationship models (1-3).



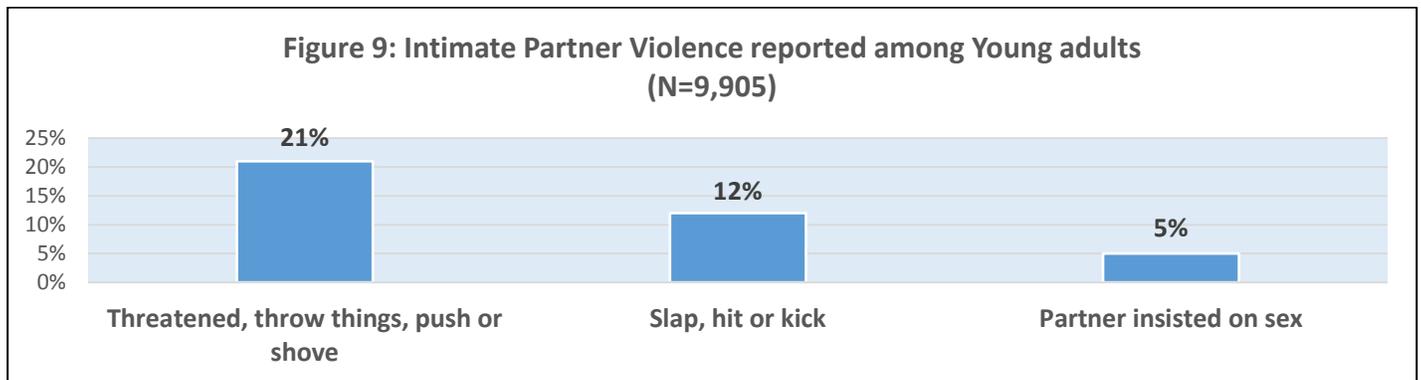
Intimate Partner Violence & Sexual Coercion

Young adult relationships also contained relatively high levels of intimate partner violence. Respondents were asked about different types of relationship violence over the course of their relationship, ranging from threatening/throwing/pushing/shoving to slapping/hitting/kicking to fights between partners causing more serious injury. Respondents were also asked if their partner physically forced them to have sex.

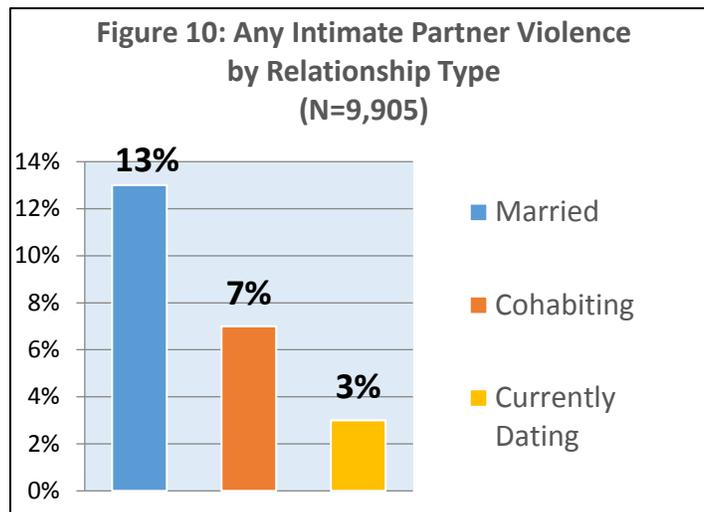
21% of young adults reported that they were threatened, had things thrown at them, or were pushed or shoved by their current partner at least once [Figure 9]. The prevalence of these types of violence varies greatly by race. Hispanics and Blacks were most likely to report victimization (31% and 24%, respectively), while Whites and Asians were least likely (18% and 19%, respectively).

12% of young adults reported they had been slapped/hit/kicked by their current partner at least once [Figure 9]. Married and cohabiting respondents were more likely to report these types of violence (13% and 17%, respectively) in their relationships than respondents in current dating relationships (7%).

5% of young adults reported that their partner physically forced them to have sex [Figure 9]. Sexual coercion did not vary by relationship status and its prevalence was relatively low compared to other forms of violence in the relationship. Reports of sexual insistence were also nearly the same by gender, 4% of men and 5% of women reported their partner insisted on sex.



Married young adults were more likely to report some kind of intimate partner violence during their relationship (13%) while currently dating respondents were the least likely (3%), possibly reflecting the duration of these relationships [Figure 10].



CONCLUSION

This Research Brief examined current romantic relationships of a cohort of young adults who were in their late twenties and early thirties in 2008. The findings reflect the lengthening transition from adolescence to adulthood, and demonstrate that there is variation in the types of relationships young adults have, particularly across the three age categories we used for analysis. As the Add Health cohort has aged 6-7 years since last interviewed at Wave III in 2001-02, we document a two-fold increase in the proportion of currently married respondents compared to reports of relationship status at Wave III when the cohort was aged 18-25 (20% to 44%).⁷

Over 60% of the cohort (63%) reported being in a co-residential relationship (married or cohabiting), while a fifth (20%) reported not being in a current relationship.

Fewer young adults reported being in an interracial relationship (17%) at Wave IV than Wave III (20%) when respondents were ages 18-26.⁷ As young adults moved out of their early 20s and into their early 30s and perhaps into more permanent relationships, the age and racial diversity of their relationships decreased. This pattern has been recognized in the literature.⁸

About a fifth of young adults reported that they had experienced physical violence in their relationship. The findings support other research that violence is less likely to be experienced in dating relationships than it is married or cohabiting relationships.⁹ This trend is also reflective of the duration of the relationship. Intimate partner violence at the early dating stage can end a relationship, while it can be hidden over time in long-term cohabitation and marriage partnerships.

This Research Brief explored the context of romantic relationship by type and found that young adults in a currently dating relationship report more independence, lower report of intimate partner violence, higher occurrence of partners having concurrent partners, partners that are younger and more racially diverse relationships. The married and cohabiting young adults were more likely to be older, more likely to report intimate partner violence, express a higher level of closeness and trust in their relationships, report a lower occurrence of partners having concurrent partners, and report less racial diversity in their relationships. Individuals in the less permanent and stable relationships in this young adult cohort were most likely to be individuals in their middle-to-late twenties, Black and male. Overall, we see substantial diversity in relationship characteristics between individuals in their middle-to-late twenties and early thirties with movement towards more permanent and trusting partnerships.

We will continue to track relationship characteristics and quality in Wave V, when all of the respondents will be transitioning into middle adulthood, ages 32-42, when relationship patterns and dynamics will change further.



Stay tuned for new data

Add Health plans to trace, locate, and re-interview cohort members in a Wave V follow-up during the period 2016-2018 to collect social, environmental, behavioral, and biological data with which to track the emergence of chronic disease as the cohort members move through their fourth decade of life.

The Wave V survey will include content that covers the research areas highlighted in this brief. The survey will feature questions on characteristics of romantic relationships including relationship characteristics about the current or most recent partner. Please see our [Wave V webpage](#) for more information.

We will release a constructed current relationship variable for Wave IV data, which will be available through the restricted-use contract. For information on future data release, please visit <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/data/data-releases>

Q ABOUT ADD HEALTH

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7-12 in the United States during the 1994-95 school year. The Add Health cohort has been followed into young adulthood with four in-home interviews, the most recent in 2008, when the sample was aged 24-34. Add Health combines longitudinal survey data on respondents' social, economic, psychological and physical well-being with contextual data on the family, neighborhood, community, school, friendships, peer groups, and romantic relationships, providing unique opportunities to study how social environments and behaviors in adolescence are linked to health and achievement outcomes in young adulthood. The fourth wave of interviews expanded the collection of biological data in Add Health to understand the social, behavioral, and biological linkages in health trajectories as the Add Health cohort ages through adulthood.

For more information about the study and the datasets available, please visit the Add Health website at: <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth>

Acknowledgments

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