

# PewResearchCenter

## *Social & Demographic Trends*

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## The Rise of Intermarriage

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### Executive Summary

This report analyzes the demographic and economic characteristics of newlyweds who marry spouses of a different race or ethnicity, and compares the traits of those who “marry out” with those who “marry in.” The newlywed pairs are grouped by the race and ethnicity of the husband and wife, and are compared in terms of earnings, education, age of spouse, region of residence and other characteristics. This report is primarily based on the Pew Research Center’s analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) in 2008-2010 and on findings from three of the Center’s own nationwide telephone surveys that explore public attitudes toward intermarriage. For more information about data sources and methodology, see Appendix 1.

#### Key findings:

- **The increasing popularity of intermarriage.** About 15% of all new marriages in the United States in 2010 were between spouses of a different race or ethnicity from one another, more than double the share in 1980 (6.7%). Among all newlyweds in 2010, 9% of whites, 17% of blacks, 26% of Hispanics and 28% of Asians married out. Looking at all married couples in 2010, regardless of when they married, the share of intermarriages reached an all-time high of 8.4%. In 1980, that share was just 3.2%.
- **Gender patterns in intermarriage vary widely.** About 24% of all black male newlyweds in 2010 married outside their race, compared with just 9% of black female newlyweds. Among Asians, the gender pattern runs the other way. About 36% of Asian female newlyweds married outside their race in 2010, compared with just 17% of Asian male newlyweds. Intermarriage rates among white and Hispanic newlyweds do not vary by gender.
- **At first glance, recent newlyweds who “married out” and those who “married in” have similar characteristics.** In 2008-2010, the median combined annual earnings of both groups are similar—\$56,711 for newlyweds who married out versus \$55,000 for those who married in. In about one-in-five marriages of each group, both the husband and wife are college graduates. Spouses in the two groups also marry at similar ages (with a two- to three-year age gap between husband and wife), and an equal share are marrying for the first time.
- **However, these overall similarities mask sharp differences that emerge when the analysis looks in more detail at pairings by race and ethnicity.** Some of these differences appear to reflect the overall characteristics of different groups in society at large, and some may be a result of a selection

process. For example, white/Asian newlyweds of 2008 through 2010 have significantly higher median combined annual earnings (\$70,952) than do any other pairing, including both white/white (\$60,000) and Asian/Asian (\$62,000). When it comes to educational characteristics, more than half of white newlyweds who marry Asians have a college degree, compared with roughly a third of white newlyweds who married whites. Among Hispanics and blacks, newlyweds who married whites tend to have higher educational attainment than do those who married within their own racial or ethnic group.

- **Intermarriage and earnings.** Couples formed between an Asian husband and a white wife topped the median earning list among all newlyweds in 2008-2010 (\$71,800). During this period, white male newlyweds who married Asian, Hispanic or black spouses had higher combined earnings than did white male newlyweds who married a white spouse. As for white female newlyweds, those who married a Hispanic or black husband had somewhat lower combined earnings than those who “married in,” while those who married an Asian husband had significantly higher combined earnings.
- **Regional differences.** Intermarriage in the United States tilts West. About one-in-five (22%) of all newlyweds in Western states married someone of a different race or ethnicity between 2008 and 2010, compared with 14% in the South, 13% in the Northeast and 11% in the Midwest. At the state level, more than four-in-ten (42%) newlyweds in Hawaii between 2008 and 2010 were intermarried; the other states with an intermarriage rate of 20% or more are all west of the Mississippi River. (For rates of intermarriage as well as intra-marriage in all 50 states, see Appendix 2.)
- **Is more intermarriage good for society?** More than four-in-ten Americans (43%) say that more people of different races marrying each other has been a change for the better in our society, while 11% say it has been a change for the worse and 44% say it has made no difference. Minorities, younger adults, the college-educated, those who describe themselves as liberal and those who live in the Northeast or the West are more disposed than others to see intermarriage in a positive light.
- **Public’s acceptance of intermarriage.** More than one-third of Americans (35%) say that a member of their immediate family or a close relative is currently married to someone of a different race. Also, nearly two-thirds of Americans (63%) say it “would be fine” with them if a member of their own family were to marry someone outside their own racial or ethnic group. In 1986, the public was divided about this. Nearly three-in-ten Americans (28%) said people of different races marrying each other was not acceptable for anyone, and an additional 37% said this may be acceptable for others, but not for themselves. Only one-third of the public (33%) viewed intermarriage as acceptable for everyone.
- **Divorce.** Several studies using government data have found that overall divorce rates are higher for couples who married out than for those who married in – but here, too, the patterns vary by the racial and gender characteristics of the couples. These findings are based on scholarly analysis of government data on marriage and divorce collected over the past two decades.

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## Notes and Terminology

In this report, the terms “intermarriage” and “marrying out” refer to marriages between a Hispanic and a non-Hispanic (interethnic) or marriages between non-Hispanic spouses who come from the following different racial groups (interracial): white, black, Asian, American Indian, mixed race or some other race. “Intra-marriage” and “marrying in” refer to marriages between spouses of the same race or ethnicity.

“Newly married” or “newlyweds” refer to couples who got married in the past 12 months prior to the survey date (American Community Survey). Newlywed couples in 2008-2010 combines three years’ data for newlyweds. Even though labeled as “newlyweds,” 42% of newly married couples in 2008-2010 have been married before (either husband or wife or both). Newlyweds are a subset of the “currently married” population, which includes individuals whose marital status is “married, spouse present.”

When comparing characteristics of detailed groups of newlyweds by race/ethnicity as well as gender patterns, only intermarried couples involving a white spouse are analyzed, and they represent about 68% of all intermarried newlywed couples between 2008 and 2010. For illustration purposes, “/” (not specifying gender) and “-” (specifying gender) are used to indicate different types of couples. For example, “White/Asian” indicates intermarried couples between whites and Asians. “White-Asian” means that the husband is white and the wife is Asian, in that order.

The term “Asian” includes native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders. “American Indian” includes Alaska Natives. The terms “black” and “African American” are used interchangeably in this report. All references in this report to whites, blacks, and Asians refer to the non-Hispanic portions of those groups. Hispanics are of any race. For more details, see Appendix 1.

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## About the Report

This report was researched and written by Wendy Wang, research associate at the Social & Demographic Trends project of the Pew Research Center. Jeffrey S. Passel, senior demographer at the Pew Research Center, participated in the initial planning of the project and prepared the couple-level ACS datasets for the analysis. Paul Taylor, director of the Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends project, provided the editorial guidance and also edited the report. Kim Parker, associate director of the Social & Demographic Trends project, provided valuable comments and suggestions. Research Assistants Eileen Patten and Seth Motel did the number checking, and Marcia Kramer copy-edited the report.