

# An update on partnership formation trends: What does the 2006 Census suggest?

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In the first and second series of *Relationships Quarterly*, we outlined trends in couple formation, couple dissolution and overall rates of partnership (Weston & Qu 2006a, 2006b). The analyses indicated that first marriages occurred at increasingly older ages, while marriage rates had fallen for all age groups in recent decades. On the other hand, cohabitation (or 'de facto marriage') rates had increased. In addition, we showed that cohabitation continued to be an unstable arrangement: most couples in cohabiting unions tend to marry or separate within the first five years of the relationship. But whereas couples that began living together in the 1970s were very likely to marry, the chance of marriage had fallen over the years and the chance of separation had increased, so that those who began living together in the early 1990s were almost as likely to separate as to marry. Divorce rates, on the other hand, had remained at a high plateau. The net effect of these trends was that partnership rates had fallen across all age groups.<sup>6</sup>

This article provides an update of these trends, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

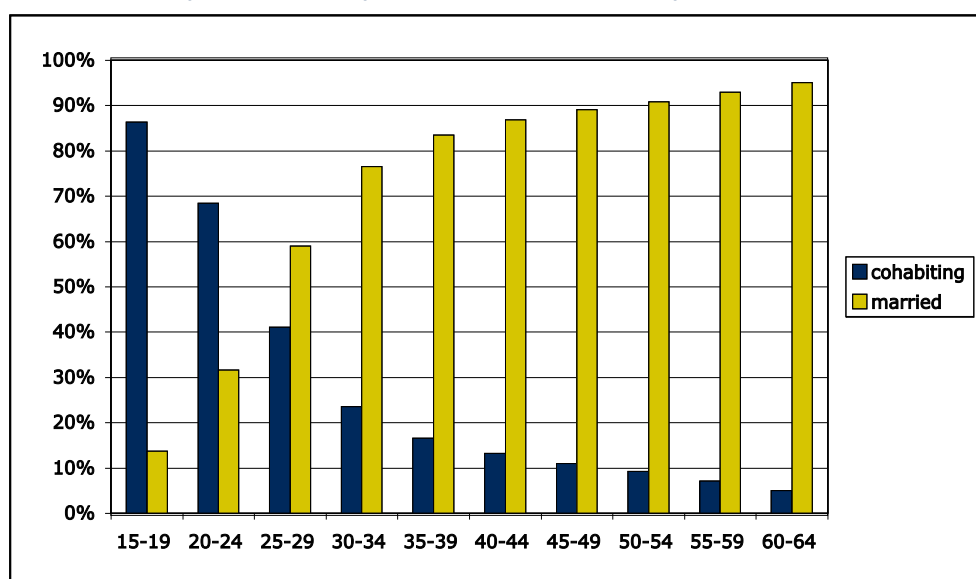
## Marriage and cohabitation

The 2006 Census indicates that cohabitation has continued to rise. For each Census period from at least 1986 to 2006, the proportion of all 'living together' couples who were cohabiting rather than married increased by two or three percentage points (6% in 1986; 8% in 1991; 10% in 1996; 12% in 2001; and 15% in 2006).

In our previous discussion of couple formation trends in *Family Relationships Quarterly* (Weston & Qu 2006a), we showed that cohabitation typified most unions of those under the age of 25 in 2001, while for older age groups marriage was more common than cohabitation, with the prevalence of marriage increasing with age. This turning point in union status occurring for those in their mid-twenties is also apparent in 2006 Census, as shown in Figure 1.

In 2006, the union status of partnered Australians aged 20–24 years is a virtual mirror image of the status of those aged 25–29 (68.4% of those aged 20–24 were cohabiting, while 69.5% of those aged 25–29 were married; 31.6% of the younger partnered individuals were married, while 30.5% of those in the elder group were cohabiting).

Figure 1. Persons living with a partner: per cent cohabiting or married, 2006



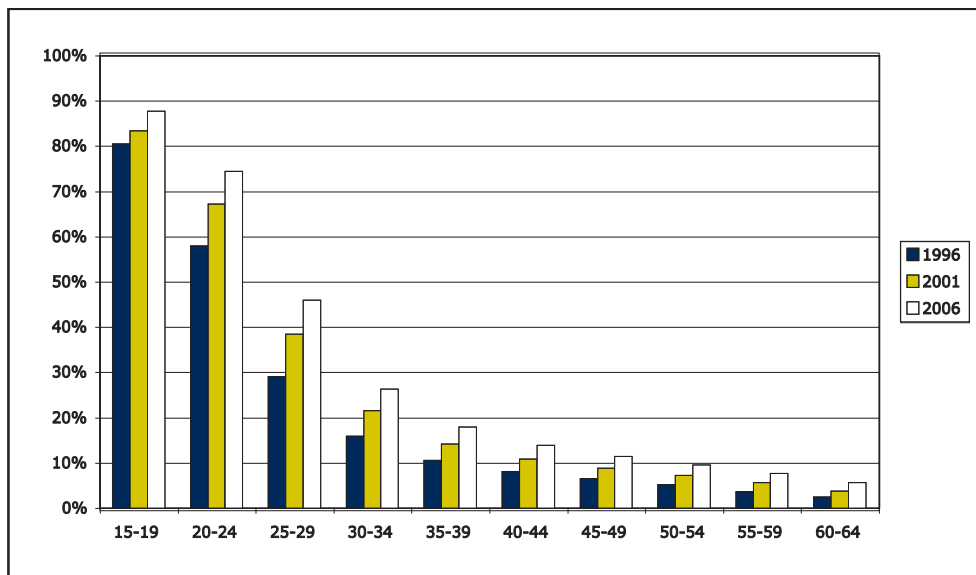
Note: Based on place of usual residence.

Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue No. 2060.0.

6 Such trends would also be influenced by the proportion of people who never form a partnership.

Figure 1 focuses on the prevalence of cohabitation versus marriage of individuals who were living with a partner in 2006, whereas Figures 2 and 3 depict the age-specific cohabitation rates of all partnered men and women (respectively) for the Census years 1996, 2001 and 2006.

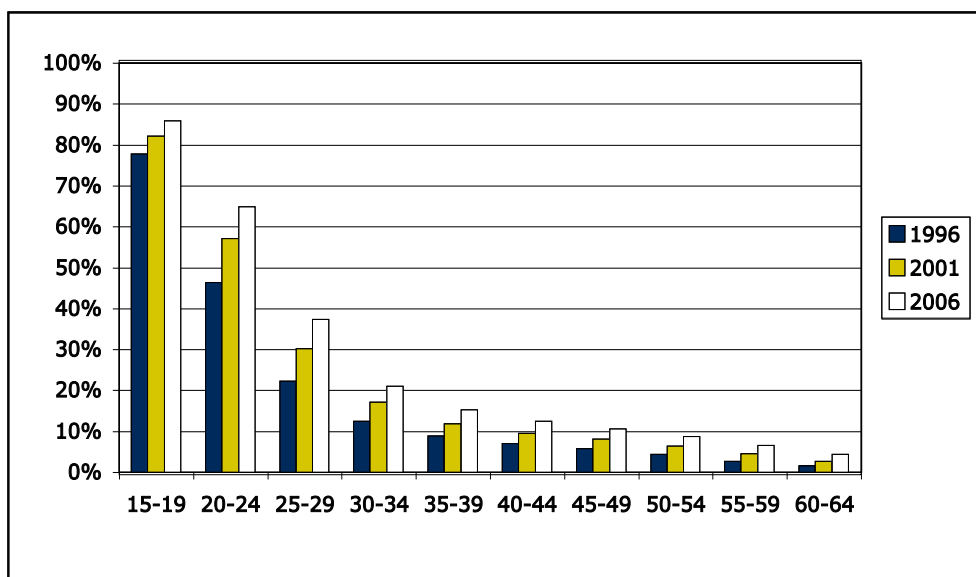
**Figure 2. Men living with a partner: per cent cohabiting, 1996, 2001 and 2006**



Note: Based on place of usual residence

Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue No. 2060.0.

**Figure 3. Women living with a partner: per cent cohabiting, 1996, 2001 and 2006**



Note: Based on place of usual residence

Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue No. 2060.0.

Clearly, cohabitation rates have increased across all age groups. However, marked changes are particularly apparent for those in their early and late twenties. In 1996, nearly 60% of the partnered men and nearly half the partnered women aged 20–24 years were cohabiting (rather than married) (58% and 46% respectively), whereas in 2006 cohabitation applied to 75% of the partnered men and 65% of the partnered women in their early twenties. While cohabitation was less common than marriage among partnered individuals in their late twenties, this was only marginally the case for the men in 2006 (46% were cohabiting rather than married – up from 38% in 2001 and 29% in 1996). Thus, if cohabitation continues to rise over the next five years at the same rate that has been apparent over the last five years, then a higher proportion of partnered men in their late twenties will be cohabiting rather than

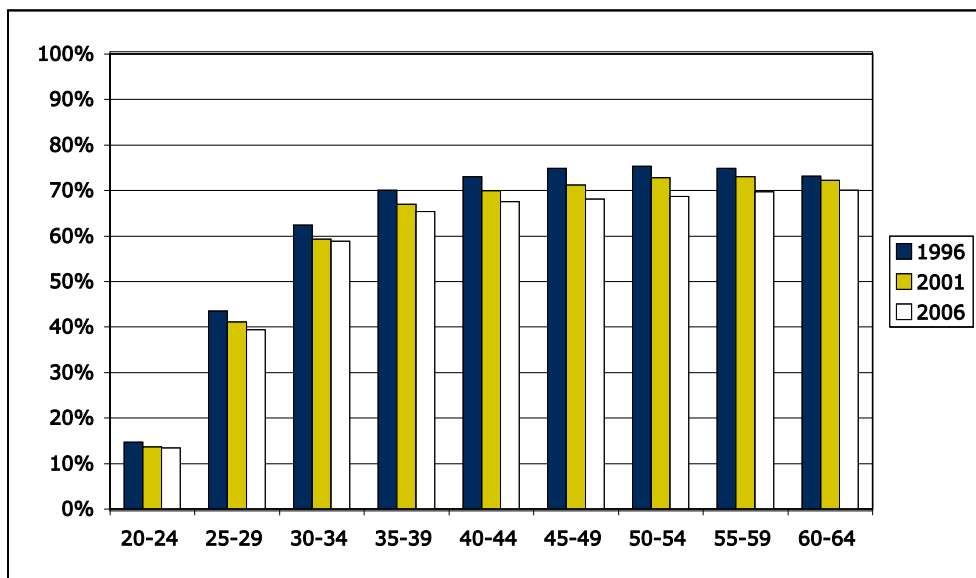
married at the time of the next Census. Of the women of this age, 37% were cohabiting in 2006 – up from 30% in 2001, and 22% in 1996.

However, the rate of increase in cohabitation for these young partnered groups may be slowing. That is, the difference in the cohabitation rates between 1996 and 2001 was slightly smaller than that apparent between 2001 and 2006. For example, the difference in cohabitation rates for partnered men in their early twenties was 9.4 percentage points between 1996 and 2001, and 7.2 percentage points between 2001 and 2006; for partnered women of this age, the differences were 10.8 and 7.8 percentage points respectively.

## Partnered individuals

In Weston & Qu (2006a) we showed that the proportion of men and women who had a partner had fallen. Figures 4 and 5 show that partnership rates continued to fall for most age groups. The rate of fall was lower between 2001 and 2006 than in the earlier five-year period for men and women under 40 years.

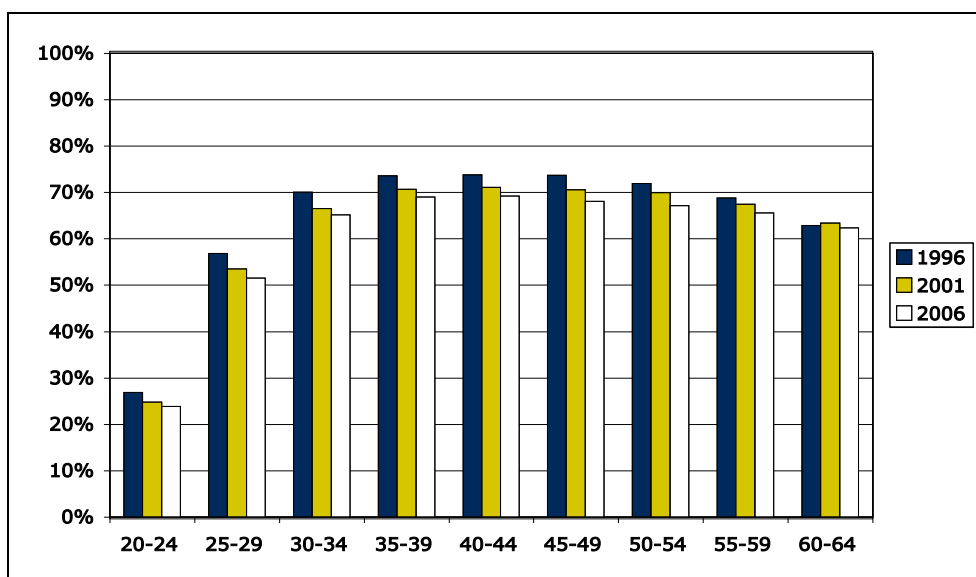
Figure 4. Men: Per cent living with a partner 1996, 2001 and 2006



Note: Based on place of usual residence

Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue No. 2060.0.

Figure 5. Women: Per cent living with a partner 1996, 2001 and 2006



Note: Based on place of usual residence

Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue No. 2060.0.

