

Social Science 200

Labs 3 and 4

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Lab #3: Getting Lost and Finding Your Way: Family Research on the Web

Today, we are going to use internet resources, particularly government and other statistical web sites, to answer to three simple questions about American families:

1. How has the median age at first marriage changed over the second half of the 20th century for women? For men?
2. What proportion of non-marital births are births to teenage mothers?
3. What is the current legal status of (a.) covenant marriage, or (b.) same-sex marriage in the U.S.

We will be using four basic search methods—search engines (Yahoo, Google), following directed links from UW sites, using some standard secondary sources, and following an authoritative guide to web resources (in this case, the textbook).

1. Let's begin with question #1. How has the median age at first marriage changed over time?

A. Search Engines

Log on to **Yahoo** at <http://www.yahoo.com/> or **Google** at <http://www.google.com/> or your favorite alternative engine.

Note: There are two options—type in some key words for a direct search, or follow the topics.

B. Mega-sites with directed links

Go to the Economics Department Home Page at <http://www.econ.washington.edu/> and click on “Other Resources on the Net” then
“Resources for Economists on the Internet”

This is a site widely used by economists. Try to locate an appropriate data source for marriage age by following the links on this site.

Discussion: What has happened to median age at first marriage for American men and women over the century? What about the past 20 years? What do these data tell us about

changes in family structure/behavior over time? What else would we like to know? What would be the best way to present these data series to convey the most information to the reader?

2. Now let's try question #2: What proportion of nonmarital births are teenage births?

A. Search engines: Try both search engines, as in question #1.

B. A Guide to Web Resources: The textbook contains a section at the end of each chapter called "Families on the Internet." Teenage pregnancy is discussed in Chapter 8 "Paths to Family Formation," and this section mentions a non-profit research organization called **Child Trends** at <http://www.childtrends.org>

This site has recent data, very accessible, and is a good source for this topic.

Discussion: What does the statistic you have been searching for tell us about current patterns of marriage and childbirth? What other information in this web site would help give a useful/meaningful picture of what is happening? Discuss the use of statistics in policy discussions.

3. Now let's research a question whose answer relies less on data, and where the search for authoritative sources may be a bit more difficult.

Describe the current legal status of either same-sex marriage or "covenant" marriage (a form of marriage which is more difficult to dissolve) across the U.S. Which states have passed relevant legislation? Which are seriously debating the issue?

A search on one of these topics will turn up a variety of web sites maintained by individuals, advocacy groups, political or religious organizations, rather than government agencies and research organizations. How can you tell whether the information on a web page is current, correct, or authoritative? The key is to find out as much as you can about who has written the information, and what organization is maintaining the internet site. The following set of questions should help you evaluate the information you find:

On the page:

Who wrote the article? Is it signed? What is the author's affiliation? Credentials?

Is there a date on this page? Unless the information has been updated very recently, it will not be very helpful for our current purpose.

What is the tone of the article? Is it intended as a balanced discussion of an issue, a straightforward presentation of facts, or is it clearly an opinion piece, intended to persuade more than to inform? Note that this can be a difficult judgement to make—some opinion pieces may have a very reasonable tone, yet present a biased set of facts.

Is the article scholarly—does it refer to other, authoritative sources and provide links or explicit references?

On the web site:

What organization or individual maintains this web site? Try links such as “home page” or “about us” to locate the sponsor. If an individual, what are his/her qualifications as an authority on this topic? If an organization, what do you know about it?

Is the nature of the organization clearly stated? Is it a religious or political organization, or non-partisan and non-sectarian? Who funds it?

Consider following other links, if the web site is a comprehensive one, and find out what views are expressed on other topics. Do these indicate a strong point-of-view on social topics? Does this affect your interpretation of the views/information provided on marriage?