

# MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE IN SWEDEN, 1881-1953

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THE published vital statistics of most countries, including the United States, are not adequate for the study of changes that may have taken place in the median age at first marriage over a considerable period of time. Sweden, along with the other Scandinavian countries and Finland, affords a rare example of accurate marriage records long maintained. From published official records, it is possible to compute the median age at first marriage in Sweden from 1881 to 1953. This paper presents the results of that computation.<sup>2</sup>

Official vital statistics in Sweden date from a law enacted in 1748 requiring the clergy to make tabular compilations from the church registers. Baptismal, wedding, and death registers had long been kept by parish priests, and the Statistical Commission created in 1756 was able to utilize not only the services but also the experience of the clergy in standardizing and improving the preparation and maintenance of birth, death, marriage, and divorce records. This was probably the world's first national bureau of vital statistics.

Since 1881, official statistics have been published in Sweden that not only give for the entire country the ages at which males and females marry but also distinguish between first marriages and remarriages. Where this distinction is not made, the remarriage of the widowed and divorced introduces a source of possible misinterpretation that may be of considerable importance.

For the period from 1881 to 1900, it is necessary to make computations from data recorded in five-year age groups. The median ages computed from grouped data in this period are based, therefore, on the assumption that there was an equal

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<sup>2</sup> For comparable data on Finland see an article by the present writer entitled "Contributions of the Vital Statistics of Finland to the Study of Factors that Induce Marriage" in *American Sociological Review*, February, 1957, 22, pp. 38-48.

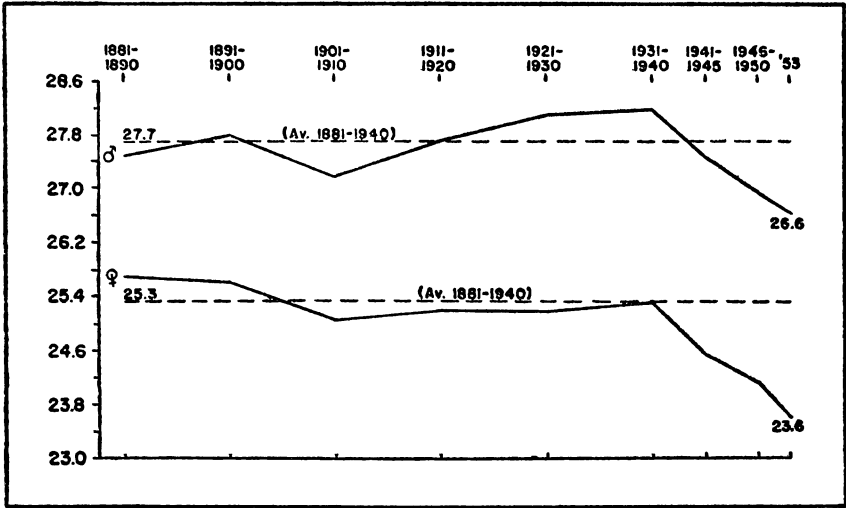


Fig. 1. Median age at first marriage in Sweden, 1881–1953.

distribution of marriages by year for the five-year period. Since 1901, the published tables have given first marriages by age in years. Consequently, the median ages computed from grouped data for the period 1881–1900 are not exactly comparable with those computed for ungrouped data for the period 1901–1953. It does not appear, however, that this minor change in method of computation, made necessary by the change in the form in which the official statistics are available, has an appreciable influence on the trend pattern described in this paper.

The Central Bureau of Statistics has published for the period 1861–1950 tables showing marriages by sex and age per 1,000 single persons, and for the same period computations of the *average*<sup>3</sup> age at first marriage for both sexes. These summary tables are presented in Appendix Tables 1 and 2. It was not until 1945, however, that the annual official publication of vital statistics began to include a computation of the median age at first marriage. As an expression of the central tendency in age at first marriage, the median has advantages that justify its computation where that is possible. Figure 1 and Table 1 show

<sup>3</sup> In Swedish statistics *average* represents an *arithmetic mean*.

YEARS	MALE	FEMALE
1881-1890	27.5	25.7
1891-1900	27.8	25.6
1901-1910	27.2	25.1
1911-1920	27.7	25.2
1921-1930	28.1	25.2
1931-1940	28.2	25.3
1941-1945	27.5	24.5
1946-1950	26.9	24.1
1951	26.7	23.8
1952	26.7	23.7
1953	26.6	23.6
Average 1881-1940	27.7	25.3

Table 1. Median age at first marriage in Sweden, 1881-1953.

the median age at first marriage in Sweden from 1881 to 1953.<sup>4</sup> These utilize ten-year periods to 1940 and two subsequent five-year periods. Medians for each single year during 1881-1953 are presented in Appendix Table 3.

*Comments.* In these data, the total number of males who married for the first time, excluding the year 1953 for which figures were not available, was 2,627,654 and of females was 2,743,149. Thus, there were 115,495 more females than males in the first marriages recorded in these data. Obviously, some persons marrying for the first time take husbands or wives who had contracted a prior marriage, but these figures show that in Sweden, as seems to be the case generally, a widowed or divorced man is more likely to marry a maiden than is a widowed or divorced woman to marry a bachelor. In every year, the number of females marrying for the first time was larger than the number of males marrying for the first time.

The male age at first marriage shows only slight fluctuations from 1881 to 1941. Then began a decline that lasted during the war years. By 1946 the median age at first marriage for males was 26.9 years. There has been little change since

<sup>4</sup> Since 1880, the age at marriage reported in the vital statistics of Sweden has represented age at *last* birthday. The median ages computed in this paper would, therefore, be more realistic if one half-year were added to the medians as shown. This has not been done because official Swedish publications containing for recent years computations of median ages at first marriage do not make this refinement.

that date, but the age at first marriage for males has not increased; in fact, it has decreased slightly to 26.6 years in 1953. This is the youngest age for males shown in these computations by year for the seventy-three years covered by this study. Swedish males are now entering marriage a full year earlier on the average than was the usual custom from 1881 to 1940. Although the change since 1940 is a relatively slight one, it is the most pronounced change that has occurred since 1881 at least. Furthermore, it has been consistently towards earlier marriage and reverses a trend from 1901 to 1940 towards later marriage. While it is yet much too early to evaluate the change, it may indicate that Sweden's deliberate efforts to make marriage more attractive are beginning to show results.

Changes in the median age at first marriage for females correspond very closely with those that have occurred among males, except for a greater decrease in the marriage-age of females. The difference of approximately three years between the ages of males and females at marriage that has existed since early in this century has been maintained. It is interesting to observe that the age difference was only about two years or even less during the first twenty-five or thirty years covered by this study.

In 1953, males in Sweden married for the first time at the median age of 26.6 years, which was about one year younger than was the average between 1881 and 1940, and females married for the first time at the median age of 23.6 years, which was 1.7 years younger than was the average between 1881 and 1940.

Appendix Table 1. First marriages per 1,000 single persons, by age.

YEAR	15-19 YEARS	20-24 YEARS	25-29 YEARS	30-34 YEARS	35-39 YEARS	40-44 YEARS	45-49 YEARS	50 — YEARS
<i>Males</i>								
1861-1870	0.1	42.3	104.4	106.2	72.1	48.9	26.4	6.3
1871-1880	0.1	45.3	113.2	120.2	85.1	51.0	28.9	7.5
1881-1890	0.2	45.4	104.5	101.7	71.0	43.3	25.3	6.4
1891-1900	0.2	44.5	101.3	92.6	65.9	41.8	23.7	6.0
1901-1910	0.3	42.5	100.2	88.9	60.7	37.4	21.7	5.3
1911-1920	0.3	37.1	101.5	91.5	60.7	38.1	22.4	5.7
1921-1930	0.2	33.0	95.3	94.4	62.9	37.4	20.9	5.2
1931-1940	0.4	40.7	110.8	107.7	70.2	41.0	22.1	5.3
1941-1950	2.8	70.6	145.0	113.9	68.8	39.6	23.0	5.7
<i>Females</i>								
1861-1870	8.4	65.8	98.1	83.1	53.4	29.6	14.5	2.1
1871-1880	8.8	70.4	104.6	83.8	53.0	30.5	15.5	2.9
1881-1890	9.1	66.6	95.9	71.4	43.6	24.8	14.2	2.2
1891-1900	9.3	69.8	93.5	67.5	40.2	23.6	12.1	2.0
1901-1910	10.1	73.1	92.5	62.5	34.9	19.4	10.7	1.7
1911-1920	9.5	74.1	93.7	61.3	33.4	17.9	9.7	1.7
1921-1930	9.7	72.4	94.7	61.5	32.1	17.1	9.1	1.6
1931-1940	13.9	95.4	123.3	77.2	38.5	18.8	9.5	1.7
1941-1950	27.5	154.7	171.2	98.0	51.6	25.4	13.5	2.4

SOURCE: HISTORISK STATISTIK FÖR SVERIGE, I, BEFOLKNING, Tab. B 6, p. 50.

Appendix Table 2. Average age at first marriage.

YEAR	MALES	FEMALES
1861-70	28.82	27.12
1871-80	28.80	27.05
1881-90	28.51	26.77
1891-1900	28.78	26.84
1901-10	28.66	26.39
1911-20	29.06	26.45
1921-30	29.39	26.51
1931-40	29.44	26.50
1941-50	28.69	25.92

SOURCE: HISTORISK STATISTIK FÖR SVERIGE, I, BEFOLKNING, Tab. B 7, p. 51.

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Appendix Table 3. Median age at first marriage in Sweden for each year from 1881 to 1953.

YEAR	MALE	FEMALE	AGE DIFFERENCE
1881	27.46	25.56	1.90
1882	27.42	25.56	1.86
1883	27.41	25.54	1.87
1884	27.47	25.66	1.81
1885	27.41	25.56	1.85
1886	27.41	25.57	1.84
1887	27.35	25.64	1.71
1888	27.37	25.75	1.62
1889	27.59	25.95	1.64
1890	27.65	26.04	1.61
1891	27.75	26.02	1.73
1892	27.86	26.11	1.75
1893	27.83	26.02	1.81
1894	27.82	25.77	2.05
1895	27.79	25.66	2.13
1896	27.76	25.55	2.21
1897	27.78	25.44	2.34
1898	27.56	25.37	2.19
1899	27.38	25.18	2.20
1900	27.36	25.12	2.24
1901	26.97	25.20	1.77
1902	27.00	25.00	2.00
1903	27.17	25.14	2.03
1904	27.32	25.10	2.22
1905	27.36	25.19	2.17
1906	27.34	25.05	2.29
1907	27.26	24.98	2.28
1908	27.28	24.91	2.37
1909	27.42	25.02	2.40
1910	27.45	25.02	2.43
1911	27.45	25.15	2.30
1912	27.48	25.17	2.31
1913	27.54	25.10	2.44
1914	27.61	25.19	2.42
1915	27.67	25.16	2.51
1916	27.82	25.34	2.48
1917	27.68	25.10	2.58
1918	27.74	25.23	2.51
1919	27.84	25.26	2.58
1920	27.77	25.09	2.68
1921	27.90	25.27	2.63
1922	27.87	25.28	2.59
1923	27.99	25.34	2.65
1924	28.08	25.26	2.82
1925	28.03	25.19	2.84