

OCEAN CITY — Across New Jersey, brides are getting fitted for dresses, caterers are preparing for receptions and DJs are setting their playlists.

But according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are many fewer weddings than just a few years ago.

The Census Bureau's American Community Survey shows that the number of New Jersey residents who said they had gotten married in the past year dropped by a large margin, from 59,179 men and 55,511 women in 2008 to 49,761 men and 45,524 women in 2011. That represents a nearly 16 percent decline in the number of men getting married and an 18 percent drop in the number of women wedding.

The median age of people in a first marriage has ticked up over the same time by almost a full year for each gender — 28.5 for women and, for the first time, more than 30 for men.

At Tesi Bridal Boutique in Northfield, owner Tesi Miteva — busy fitting a mother of the groom and a grandmother of the bride in their respective weddings — said the trend can be explained by people delaying marriage for economic or career reasons.

"Girls are getting smarter," Miteva told The Press of Atlantic City. "Girls are more in tune with their careers. ... They prefer moving in and making more of a commitment before a wedding happens.

"In my experience, brides who are 28, 29, 30 years old, they actually do live together and have a life together. A lot of times, they have a house, and then they decide to make it legal. And a lot of couples pay for their own weddings, compared to back in the old days when parents would pick up the tab."

Other times, couples want the big, fairy tale wedding but just can't afford it yet. So marriage is delayed until they've saved up enough to have one.

Miteva cited the recent film "The Five-Year Engagement," saying she recently had a client with a long engagement — though that wasn't of her choice. "They basically hit a rough patch," Miteva said of the couple. "So they waited."

Michael Busler, a business professor at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and a fellow at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, said much of the drop in marriages is due to the economic downturn.

"Note that the decline started at the same time the recession started," Busler said. "When people become uncertain about their economic future, they put off marriage and having children. ... Also, from a social standpoint, you also find people tending to put off marriage as people intend to build up their career a little more solidly."

And as people delay marriage, "the average age goes up. People are living longer, too, so as a result, there's not such a rush to marry in their early 20s. People are doing everything longer," he said.

As a result of those long-term trends, he added, "Even when the economy does recover, I suspect you'll see an uptick in the number of marriages, but not quite as much an uptick as you might think."

At Tesi's, Judy Beckley, of Galloway Township, who was trying on a dress for her granddaughter's wedding, said she was married at 19, while Grace Gorman, of Cape May, said she was considered an "old bride" when she married at 27.

"Now, my son is 33 and the bride is 31," Gorman said as she examined her outfit in front of the boutique's mirrors.

Gorman's friend Suzanne Knoll, of Philadelphia, said her daughter got married at 32 to a 36-year-old.

"It's too expensive," Knoll said. "You can't afford to do it all."

At Wedding Belles, co-owner Terri Raphial said many people have decided to spend less on their weddings than before — "But they're still getting married," she said. "I think the bridal stores that did sell very expensive dresses, they're the ones that got hurt, not us."

Co-owner Tina Conklin said many weddings now are "a little more affordable, a little more intimate. ... Normally, a dress takes five to seven months (to get ready), and now people buy off the rack. And while before they were spending \$1,800 to \$2,000, now it's mostly \$1,200 to \$1,500."

Conklin said she's noticed the trend of couples waiting a few years as well.

"A lot of people the last two to three years want to have the big wedding," she said. "So they've saved up."

For her part, Christina Buch exemplified the trend of waiting and saving up for the big wedding — even, in her case, after her marriage began.

"He and I were already married at a small ceremony, and we wanted a bigger ceremony for friends and family," said Christina, whose last name is now Leps. "It's been over a year of planning, and we've known each other seven years and lived with each other for more than two years."

Leps said she was "definitely a budget-conscious bride. I'm never afraid to negotiate with vendors." So she made the last of her preparations shortly before her big wedding Friday night — and even that was a case in point.

"A wedding on Friday," she explained, "costs less than one on Saturday."