



The **State** *of Our* **Unions** *Marriage in America* **2011**

when
baby
makes
three



*How
Parenthood
Makes Life
Meaningful
and
How
Marriage
Makes
Parenthood
Bearable*



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The National Marriage Project

P.O. Box 400766

Charlottesville, VA 22904-4766

(434) 321-8601

marriage@virginia.edu

[HTTP://WWW.STATEOFOURUNIONS.ORG](http://www.stateofourunions.org)

December 2011

Design

Alma Phipps & Associates

© Copyright 2011 by the National Marriage Project
and the Institute for American Values. All rights reserved.

THE STATE *of* OUR UNIONS

The State of Our Unions monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America. Produced annually, it is a joint publication of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values.

EDITOR:

W. Bradford Wilcox

ASSOCIATE EDITOR:

Elizabeth Marquardt

FOUNDING CO-EDITORS:

David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT

The National Marriage Project (NMP) is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative located at the University of Virginia. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability. The NMP has five goals: (1) publish *The State of Our Unions*, which monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America; (2) investigate and report on the state of marriage among young adults; (3) provide accurate information and analysis regarding marriage to journalists, policy makers, religious leaders, and the general public—especially young adults; (4) conduct research on the ways in which children, race, class, immigration, ethnicity, religion, and poverty shape the quality and stability of contemporary marriage; and (5) bring marriage and family experts together to develop strategies for strengthening marriage. The NMP was founded in 1997 by family scholars David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. The Project is now directed by W. Bradford Wilcox, associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

THE CENTER FOR MARRIAGE & FAMILIES AT THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN VALUES

The Center for Marriage and Families is located at the Institute for American Values, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. Directed by Elizabeth Marquardt, the Center's mission is to increase the proportion of U.S. children growing up with their two married parents. The Center's website, FamilyScholars.org, features emerging voices and senior scholars who blog with expertise and from varied points of view on today's key debates on the family.

TABLE *of* CONTENTS

IX *Executive Summary*

I *When Baby Makes Three: How Parenthood Makes Life Meaningful and How Marriage Makes Parenthood Bearable*

SOCIAL INDICATORS OF MARITAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

60 *Marriage*

67 *Divorce*

75 *Unmarried Cohabitation*

82 *Loss of Child-Centeredness*

87 *Fragile Families with Children*

95 *Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family*

BOARD OF ADVISORS

A Board of Advisors made up of the following distinguished scholars and professionals guides the work of the National Marriage Project.

Richard M. Campanelli, Esq.

William J. Doherty, *University of Minnesota*

Kathryn Edin, *Harvard University*

Christopher G. Ellison, *University of Texas at San Antonio*

Robert Emery, *University of Virginia*

William A. Galston, *The Brookings Institution*

Neil Gilbert, *University of California at Berkeley*

Ron Haskins, *The Brookings Institution*

G. Sim Johnston, *Author*

Linda Malone-Colón, *Hampton University*

Elizabeth Marquardt, *Institute for American Values*

David G. Myers, *Hope College*

David Popenoe, *Rutgers University, emeritus*

Isabel Sawhill, *The Brookings Institution*

Scott Stanley, *University of Denver*

Linda J. Waite, *University of Chicago*

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Institute for American Values*

James Q. Wilson, *UCLA, emeritus*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parenthood has been and remains a central aspiration among Americans. In surveys, most young Americans still say they would like to have two or more children. At the same time, a growing share of young women and men believe that a good marriage is personally unattainable, and more are raising children outside of marriage. As a culture, we remain certain about parenthood, but not so sure about marriage.

When Baby Makes Three marshals nationally representative data from three surveys—including a new survey of young married couples in America—to respond to three questions: Is it emotionally easier to parent alone in a world in which a good marriage seems increasingly out of reach? Is parenthood itself an obstacle to a good

marriage? What are the social, cultural, and relational sources of marital success among today's parents?

In this report, we find that married parents are more likely than their childless peers to feel their lives have a sense of meaning and purpose. We also find that parents who are married generally experience more happiness and less depression than parents who are unmarried.

At the same time, we find, as have previous studies, that parenthood is typically associated with lower levels of *marital* happiness. But we delve deeper, looking at the substantial minority of husbands and wives who do not experience parenthood as an obstacle to marital happiness. These women and men navigate the shoals of parenthood without succumbing to comparatively low levels of marital happiness or high levels of marital instability.

What is their secret? We were able to identify ten aspects of contemporary social life and relationships—from marital generosity to shared housework to religious faith to sexual satisfaction—that appear to boost women and men's odds of successfully combining marriage and parenthood.

We also provide a fuller portrait of contemporary marriage and parenthood by examining factors such as family size and parents' beliefs. For example, in a striking finding, we discovered that the happiest wives and husbands today are those with no children *and* those with four or more children (see the “Family Size, Faith, and the Meaning of Parenthood” sidebar to learn why).

Most Americans still want to have children and eventually do have children. Successfully rearing the next generation is crucial not

only to these families, but to our nation. For everyone's sake, we must prepare young people for the critical transition to parenthood and provide them with solid research and insights from successful couples so that they—and their children—can thrive.

W. BRADFORD WILCOX

National Marriage Project, University of Virginia

ELIZABETH MARQUARDT

Center for Marriage and Families, Institute for American Values

DECEMBER 2011

WHEN BABY MAKES THREE

HOW PARENTHOOD MAKES LIFE
MEANINGFUL AND HOW MARRIAGE
MAKES PARENTHOOD BEARABLE

Becoming a parent is one of the top priorities for today's young adults—far outpacing money, professional success, religious faith, and even a good marriage.¹

So, for today's women and men of childbearing age, what happens when a baby comes along? At least two portraits of contemporary parenthood can be found in popular culture and the media—from the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *New York* magazine, to movies like *The Switch* and *The Back-Up Plan*, to television shows like *Up All Night*.

In the first portrait—depicted in films such as *The Switch*, starring Jennifer Aniston—marriage and a man are portrayed as optional accessories for late-thirtysomething women seeking to fulfill

¹ Pew Social Trends Staff, *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change*. (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2010): <http://pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>.

their dreams of motherhood. Having a baby alone is portrayed as a savvy response to the uncertainties of contemporary romance.

Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2005, journalist Lori Gottlieb gave eloquent voice to this vision. By her account, many of today's members of Single Mothers by Choice, a group whose chapters doubled nationwide in a recent three-year period, are "mostly attractive, smart, successful thirtysomethings [who] subscribe to the 'somebody isn't always better than nobody' theory of marriage." She continued, "Many, including me, have turned down engagement rings from eligible bachelors even as our biological alarm bells started sounding. As a friend put it, we're paradoxically 'desperate but picky.'" But because Gottlieb and her peers do not want to give up on motherhood even when marriage seems remote and unappealing, they elect instead to get "knocked up by half a cubic centimeter of defrosted sperm that had been FedExed in a nitrogen tank."²

Another popular portrait of contemporary childbearing does acknowledge the possibility of marriage, but this vision seems to view parenthood mainly as an obstacle to achieving the soul-mate marriage needed to fulfill the manifold sexual, emotional, financial, and social needs of today's young adults. Journalist Jennifer Senior explored this theme in the pages of *New York* magazine in 2010. The piece chronicles the apparent legions of well-educated parents who find themselves with everything they dreamed of—an educated, attractive spouse, fulfilling work, and one or two healthy

2 Lori Gottlieb, "The XY Files," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 2005): <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/09/the-xy-files/4172/>.

children—yet nevertheless experience parenting as a burdensome chore and a threat to their marriage.

Senior opens by reflecting on how her emotionally taxing two-year-old son, charming one minute and infuriating the next, leaves her at times “guided by nerves, trawling the cabinets for alcohol.” She continues, “My emotional life looks a lot like this these days. I suspect it does for many parents—a high-amplitude, high-frequency sine curve along which we get the privilege of doing hourly surfs.” In words almost guaranteed to frighten any would-be parents who have not yet taken the plunge, Senior warns that “couples probably pay the dearest price of all” for becoming parents, because “children adversely affect relationships.”³

These two visions of parenthood suggest the degree to which marriage and parenthood have become separated in the popular imagination and how parenthood even seems to be an obstacle to a successful marriage. Such portraits beg the questions: Is it emotionally easier to go it alone as a parent in a world in which a good marriage seems more and more unattainable? And, is parenthood an obstacle to a good marriage?

The answers to these questions are important both because parenthood remains a central aspiration in American life—most young Americans still would like to have two or more children—and because a growing share of women and men are raising children outside of marriage, historically an important source of economic, social, and emotional support for parents.

3 Jennifer Senior, “All Joy and No Fun,” *New York* (July 4, 2010): <http://nymag.com/news/features/67024/>.

As this report finds, it turns out that parents who are married generally experience more happiness and less depression than parents who are unmarried, an important fact given that 41 percent of children in the United States are born outside of marriage and 34 percent of children are being raised outside of marriage.⁴ Further, husbands and wives who have children are significantly more likely to report that their “life has an important purpose,” compared to their childless peers.

But we also found that the experience of parenthood varies by the outcome studied, family size, the relationship status of the parents, and the beliefs of the parents.

At the same time that we found that married parents generally experience more individual happiness and less depression than unmarried parents, and that parents feel a greater sense of purpose than childless couples, we also found that parenthood is typically associated with lower levels of *marital* happiness. However, a substantial minority of husbands and wives in our study did *not* experience parenthood as an obstacle to marital happiness. It turns out that many men and women navigate the shoals of parenthood without succumbing to comparatively low levels of marital happiness or high levels of marital conflict.⁵ What is their secret? *When Baby Makes Three* identifies ten aspects of contemporary social life and relationships—from marital generosity to religious faith to shared

⁴ See “Social Indicators of Marital Health and Well-Being” section below.

⁵ See also Tara Parker-Pope, *For Better: The Science of a Good Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2010): 165.

housework to sexual satisfaction—that seem to boost men and women’s odds of successfully combining marriage and parenthood.

In this year’s *State of Our Unions* report, we take a look at women and men with and without children to determine how parenthood is linked to the emotional welfare of adults of childbearing age (18–46). We rely on nationally representative data from the General Social Survey and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to understand parenthood among today’s young adults. We also paint a more detailed contemporary portrait of the relationship between parenthood and marriage in the United States with results from a new, nationally representative survey of 1,630 married couples: “The Survey of Marital Generosity,” conducted by Knowledge Networks in December 2010 and January 2011 and funded by the Science of Generosity initiative at the University of Notre Dame.

In this report, we seek to answer two specific sets of questions. First: How is parenthood linked to global happiness and depression among Americans of childbearing age? Does the experience of parenthood on these outcomes vary by marital status? Second: How is parenthood linked to the quality and stability of marriage, and the sense that one’s life is meaningful, among husbands and wives of childbearing age? What are the social, cultural, and relational sources of marital success among parents today? And does the marital experience of parenthood vary by family size?

This inquiry is important because children *and* adults are more likely to flourish when the emotional climate of their family life is positive. It is also important if, as a nation, we seek to strengthen the bonds between marriage and parenthood to find better ways

to prepare couples for generally happy and meaningful family lives as they engage in one of our nation's most fundamental tasks: rearing the next generation.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

For men and women, parenthood is a transformative event. To date, existing social science research suggests that the arrival of a baby is associated with declines in global happiness and marital satisfaction for many, and increases in depression for some, as women and men adjust to the sacrifices—from loss of sleep to less disposable income—that parenting calls forth, and as they struggle or negotiate through new housework and child rearing routines and enjoy less quality time with one another.⁶ Nevertheless, after a period of time, the immediate challenges presented by what has been called the “parental emergency” may fade for many adults, and other factors besides parenthood may be more prominent in shaping their sense of well-being.

In this report, marriage appears to be one such factor among today's young adults. We found that marriage is more closely

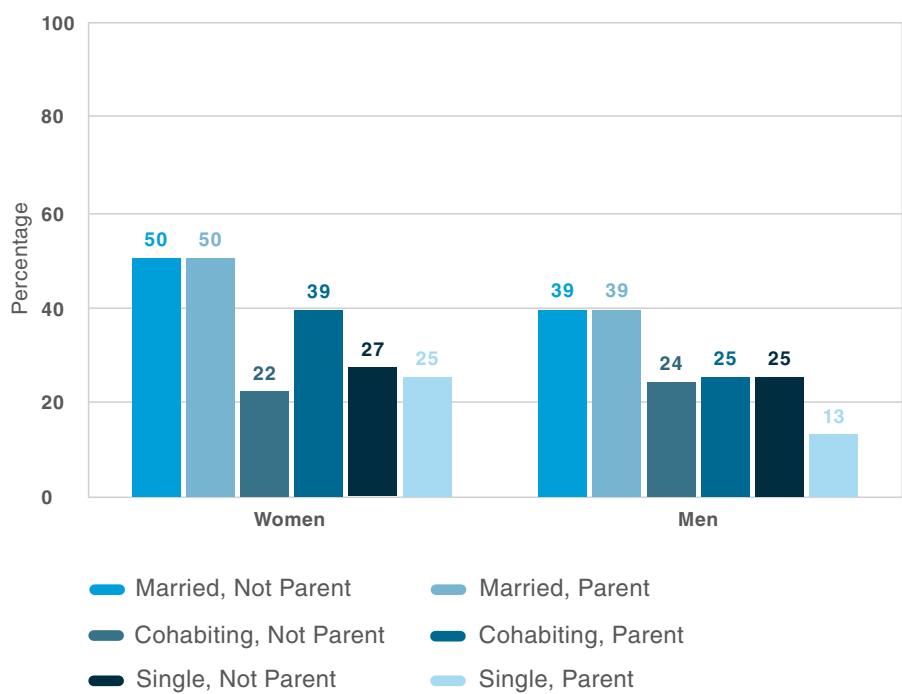
6 Jeffrey Dew and W. Bradford Wilcox, “If Momma Ain’t Happy: Explaining Declines in Marital Satisfaction Among New Mothers,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73 (2011): 1–12; Sara McLanahan and Julia Adams, “Parenthood and Psychological Well-Being,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (1987): 237–57; Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, and Craig A. Foster, “Parenthood and Marital Satisfaction: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 574–83; and Debra Umberson, Tetyana Pudrovska, and Corinne Reczek, “Parenthood, Childlessness, and Well-Being: A Life Course Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 612–29.

linked than parenthood to the emotional welfare of women and men. **Figure 1** indicates that married men and women are most likely to report that they are “very happy,” regardless of their parental status. Cohabiting parents fall in the middle of this happiness continuum among young adults. Only for single parents is parenthood associated with less happiness.

Specifically, after adjusting for socioeconomic differences between adults, the marital status gap in global happiness among young adults (18–46) evident in **Figure 1** is generally large, whereas the small parenthood gap in global happiness among young adults is neither large nor consistent.⁷ Married young adults are between 11 and 28 percentage points more likely to report that they are “very happy” with life, compared to their unmarried peers, but married parents are no less happy with life than their childless peers. In turn, cohabiting parents are happier than childless cohabiting couples, whereas single parents are between 2 and 12 percentage points less likely to report that they are very happy with life, compared to childless singles. These findings suggest that the meaning, social support, financial security, and stability afforded by marriage, and to some extent cohabitation as well, make life more enjoyable

7 Figure 1 is taken from the General Social Survey (2000–2010), which asked respondents the following question: “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Note: All figures presented in this report control for such factors as age, education, income, race, and ethnicity that might otherwise confound the association between the independent and dependent variables depicted in the figures. For more details on the multivariate regression results undergirding this report, see www.stateofourunions.org/e-appendix/2011.

FIGURE 1. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING “VERY HAPPY” WITH LIFE FOR 18–46-YEAR-OLDS, BY MARITAL STATUS AND PARENTHOOD



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: General Social Survey, 2000–2010.

for today’s parents, especially in comparison to their single peers who are parents.⁸

⁸ See also Kei M. Nomaguchi and Melissa A. Milkie, “Costs and Rewards of Children: The Effects of Becoming a Parent on Adults’ Lives,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 356–74; Debra Umberson and Walter R. Gove, “Parenthood and Psychological Well-Being,” *Journal of Family Issues* 10 (1989): 440–62; and Anna-Marie Cunningham and Chris Knoester, “Marital Status,

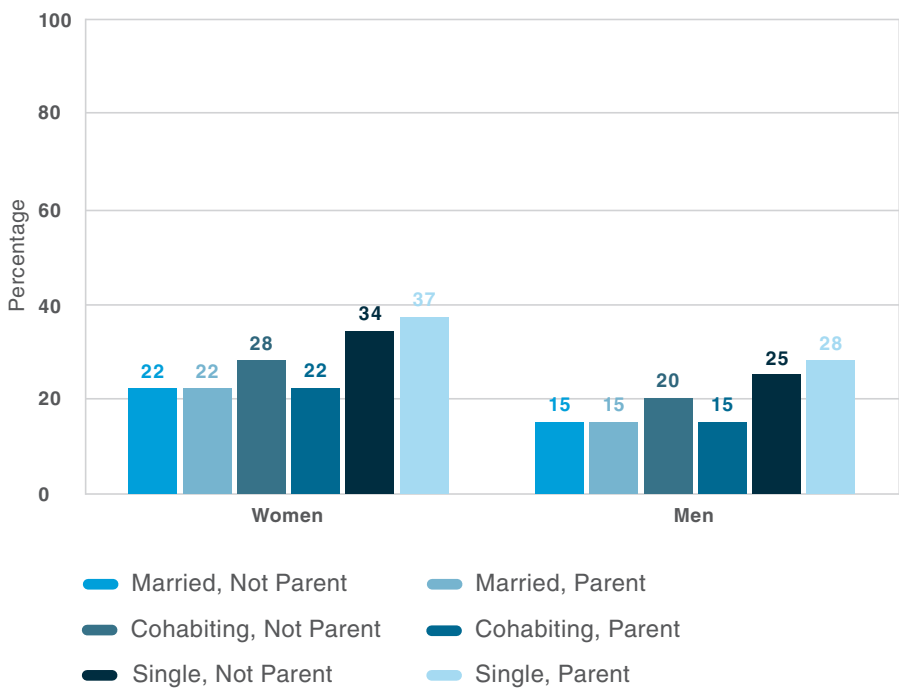
When it comes to depression, parenthood is not linked to depression among adults in their mid-twenties (24–28), so long as parenting is connected to a partnership.⁹ **Figure 2** indicates that married parents and nonparents, as well as cohabiting parents, are the least likely to report depressive symptoms.¹⁰ Furthermore, new research suggests that spouses who provide their partners with high levels of emotional support are especially likely to protect them from depression.¹¹ By contrast, single parents are most likely to report depression—indeed, they are at least 13 percentage points more likely to report depression than young marrieds and cohabiting parents.

Thus, when it comes to parents of childbearing age, **Figures 1** and **2** indicate that married parents typically have higher levels of emotional well-being than do single parents, and that cohabiting parents do almost as well as married parents. What is most striking about these two figures is that parenthood per se is not associated

Gender, and Parents' Psychological Well-Being," *Sociological Inquiry* 77 (2007): 264–87.

- 9 Hans-Peter Kohler, Jere H. Behrman, and Axel Skytthe, "Partner + Children = Happiness? The Effects of Partnerships and Fertility on Well-Being," *Population and Development Review* 31 (2005): 407–45.
- 10 For this outcome, we analyze Wave 8 of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and rely on a scale of five depression symptoms (e.g., feeling blue, feeling depressed, etc.), $\alpha = .79$ for both men and women. Young adults scoring in the top quintile of the scale are coded as depressed.
- 11 Christopher R. Beam et al., "Revisiting the Effect of Marital Support on Depressive Symptoms in Mothers and Fathers: A Genetically Informed Study," *Journal of Family Psychology* 25 (2011): 336–44.

FIGURE 2. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING DEPRESSED AMONG 24–28-YEAR-OLDS, BY MARITAL STATUS AND PARENTHOOD



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 2008 Wave.

with lower global happiness or heightened levels of depression, *so long as parents are partnered*. Evidently, the sense of support, solidarity, and meaning afforded by a co-parenting relationship more than makes up for any challenges associated with parenthood when it comes to global happiness and depression. By contrast, parenting undertaken as a solo enterprise is markedly more difficult

than parenting done as a partnership, even after controlling for socioeconomic differences between family types. This message is not being borne out in the recent spate of films, books, and magazine stories about the joys of conceiving and rearing a baby alone.

Some may be surprised to see relatively little distinction so far between outcomes for married and cohabiting parents. We caution that these results should not give the false impression that cohabitation is about as likely as marriage to make parenthood a positive experience over the long-term. Cohabiting relationships are far less stable than married ones. Cohabiting parents are more likely than their married peers to end up as single parents and—as indicated—single parents are the most likely to struggle with depression.

In the United States, cohabiting parents are more than twice as likely as married parents to break up. One recent study estimates that 65 percent of parents who had a child while cohabiting will break up by the time their child turns 12, compared to just 24 percent of parents who had a child while married.¹² While cohabitation and marriage might look similar in the short-term, when considering the emotional well-being of parents in the long-term, cohabiting parents are less likely than married parents to enjoy the perks of parenting as partners over the course of their children's lives.

Marriage's power to deliver a long-term emotional boost for parents is especially important because the average young adult in

12 Sheela Kennedy and Larry Bumpass, "Cohabitation and Trends in the Structure and Stability of Children's Family Lives" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Washington, DC, April 1, 2011).

the U.S. thinks that having two or more children is ideal.¹³ Despite the fact that voluntary childlessness has enjoyed increased public visibility since the 1970s, most Americans do not see a childless future for themselves as ideal. In fact, in the 2010 General Social Survey, only 2 percent of young adults reported that they thought that having no children was ideal for a family¹⁴ (and only 18 percent of middle-aged women today are childless).¹⁵ Given that the vast majority of Americans still aspire to have children, and will have children, the joys and challenges associated with the transition to parenthood seem best navigated with a spouse.

But what about those young marrieds who are enjoying a child-free life? What does parenthood, if it happens, portend for them? It is true, as psychologists Carolyn and Philip Cowan have observed, that “the transition to parenthood constitutes a period of stressful and sometimes maladaptive change for a significant proportion of new parents”¹⁶

¹³ Kellie J. Hagewen and S. Philip Morgan, “Intended and Ideal Family Size in the United States, 1970–2002,” *Population and Development Review* 31 (2005): 507–27; and Sam Sturgeon, “The Future of U.S. Fertility,” in *The Sustainable Demographic Dividend* (Barcelona: Social Trends Institute, 2011): 8.

¹⁴ Sturgeon, “Future of U.S. Fertility,” 8.

¹⁵ Gretchen Livingston and D’Vera Cohn, *Childlessness Up Among All Women; Down Among Women with Advanced Degrees*, Pew Social & Demographic Trends (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 25, 2010): <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/06/25/childlessness-up-among-all-women-down-among-women-with-advanced-degrees/>.

¹⁶ Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, “Interventions to Ease the Transition to Parenthood: Why They Are Needed and What They Can Do,” *Family Relations* 44 (1995): 412.

In the Survey of Marital Generosity, as **Figures 3A** and **3B** illustrate, married couples with children report less marital happiness than their childless peers. Specifically, mothers and fathers are at least 8 percentage points less likely to be “very happy” in their marriages, compared to their childless peers.

But research also suggests that childless couples and couples with children typically witness declines in marital quality that are similar over the long-term. The primary difference between the two groups is that the dip in marital happiness is more sudden for parents than it is for nonparents.¹⁷ This research suggests that parents experience a significant decline in happiness after the arrival of their first child, whereas nonparents experience a more gradual decline in marital quality. By the time both groups have been married for an average of eight years, their marital quality is not that different.

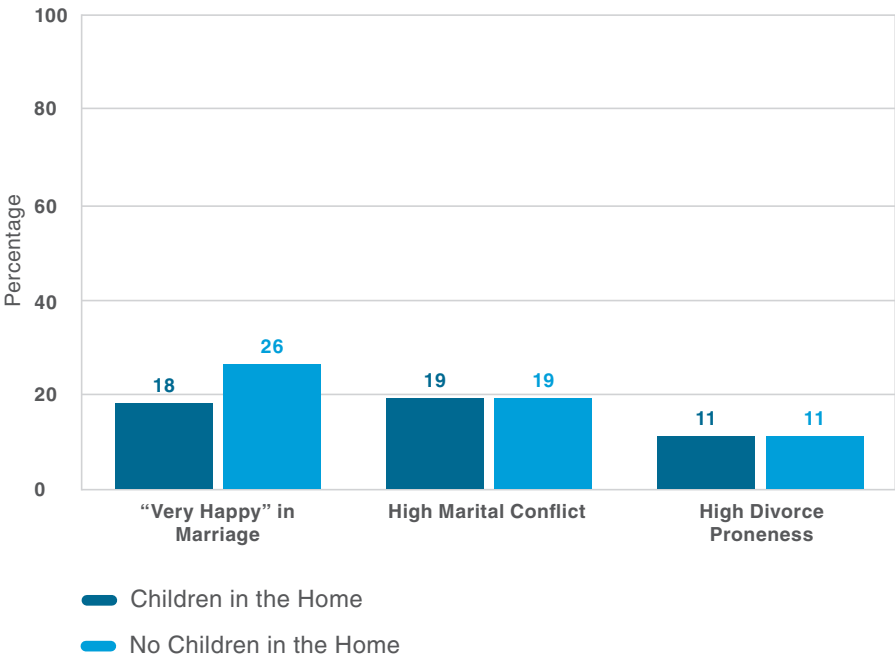
Moreover, **Figures 3A** and **3B** indicate that parenthood is not associated with high levels of marital conflict or divorce proneness.¹⁸ In fact, for the majority of mothers and fathers, parenthood is not associated with these two negative outcomes.

Finally, married parents clearly outperform their childless peers in one department: meaning (see also the “Family Size, Faith,

¹⁷ Brian D. Doss et al., “The Effect of the Transition to Parenthood on Relationship Quality: An 8-Year Prospective Study,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (2009): 601–19.

¹⁸ In the Survey of Marital Generosity, high marital conflict is defined as arguing about different marital topics several times a month or more (a “3” or higher on a scale of 1 to 6); high divorce proneness is defined as reporting a “3” or higher (on a scale of 0 to 10) regarding the likelihood that “you and your partner will eventually separate or divorce.”

FIGURE 3A. PREDICTED PROBABILITIES OF MARITAL QUALITY OUTCOMES AMONG MARRIED WOMEN AGED 18–46, BY THE PRESENCE OF CHILDREN



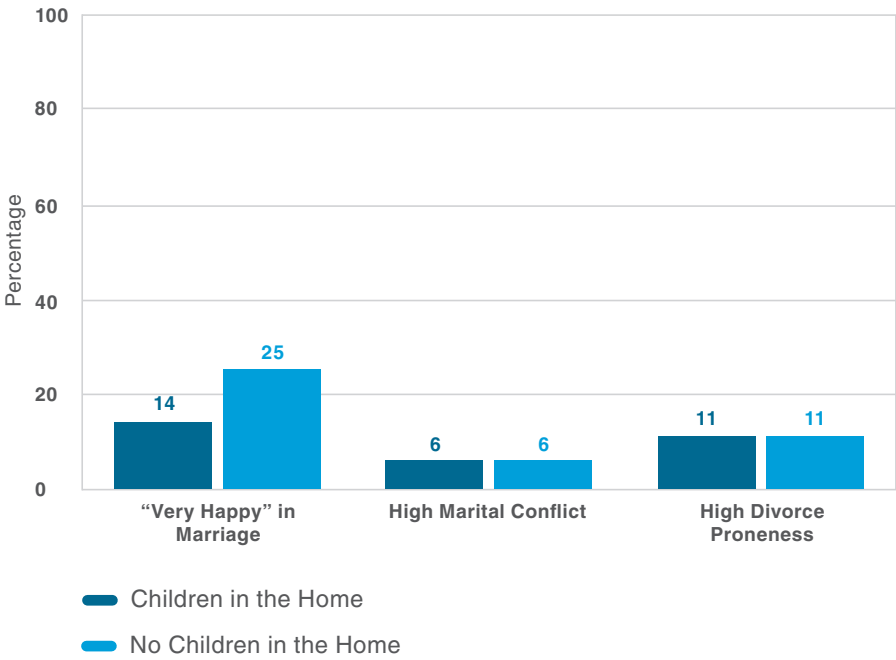
NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity. Without adjustments, 37 percent of married mothers are “very happy,” compared to 49 percent of their childless peers.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

and the Meaning of Parenthood” sidebar). Both husbands and wives—but wives especially—are more likely to report that “my life has an important purpose” when they have children, rather than are childless (see **Figure 4**).

Yes, parents have to put up with the stresses of sleepless nights, toddler temper tantrums, and teenage sullenness, not to mention

FIGURE 3B. PREDICTED PROBABILITIES OF MARITAL QUALITY OUTCOMES AMONG MARRIED MEN AGED 18–46, BY THE PRESENCE OF CHILDREN

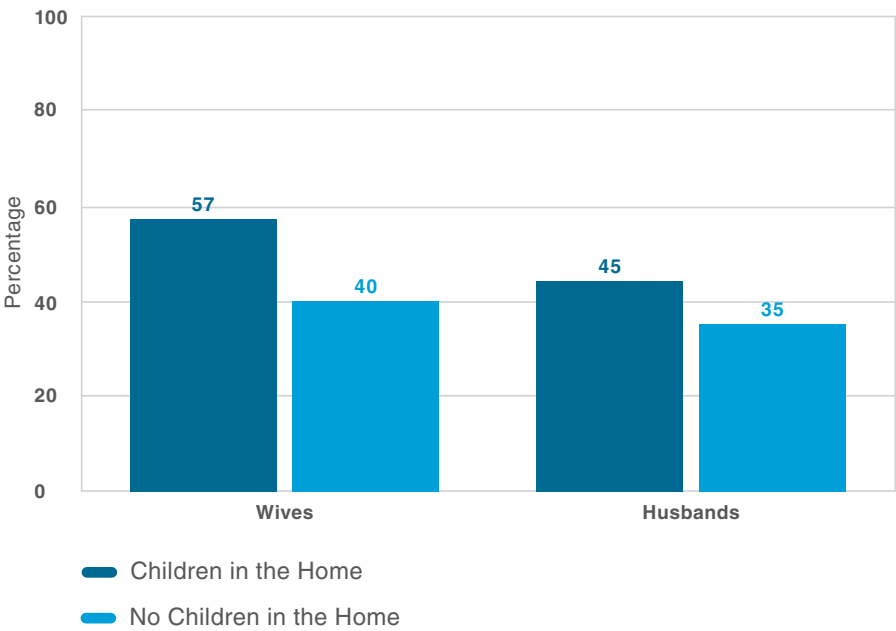


NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity. Without adjustments, 35 percent of married fathers are “very happy,” compared to 53 percent of their childless peers.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

the time and money spent on their kids, but they also get to enjoy their infant’s first smile, their two-year-old’s bedtime caress, their son’s bar mitzvah, and their daughter’s tournament-winning soccer goal. When suffering, sacrifice, toil, and treasure are expended on some great and valued purpose—including the bearing and rearing of children—difficult tasks can take on a positive meaning.

FIGURE 4. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF STRONGLY AGREEING THAT THEIR “LIFE HAS AN IMPORTANT PURPOSE” AMONG MARRIEDS AGED 18–46, BY PARENTHOOD STATUS



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

Perhaps it is for this reason that 57 percent of married mothers and 45 percent of married fathers strongly agree that their life has an “important purpose,” compared to 40 percent of childless wives and 35 percent of childless husbands.

So while it is true that parenthood may dampen day-to-day marital happiness, especially when mothers and fathers are dealing with the more challenging features of child rearing, in the short-

and long-term, marriage protects parents from the unhappiness and depression more likely to be found among parents going it alone. Further, for many parents, especially mothers, the love given to and received from one's children can kindle a deeply rewarding sense that life has ultimate meaning and purpose.

THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND RELATIONAL SOURCES OF MARITAL SUCCESS

No couple—indeed, no husband and wife—experiences marriage and parenthood in the same way. One of the striking findings of this report is that even though parenthood can add stress to a marriage, a significant minority of couples can successfully combine marriage and parenthood. Studies suggest that this minority remains “happy in their marriages or even report higher levels of marital happiness after children arrive,” as journalist Tara Parker-Pope notes.¹⁹

Which factors separate successfully married parents from the rest? Drawing on new data from the Survey of Marital Generosity (2010–2011), we identify ten sets of social, cultural, and relational factors that are associated with higher quality and more stable marriages among married parents (18–46) in America.

SOCIAL FACTORS

1. EDUCATION. Much has been made of the growing marriage divide in America between those who hold a college

¹⁹ Parker-Pope, *For Better*, 165.

degree and those who do not. In last year's *State of Our Unions* report, *When Marriage Disappears*, we reported that Americans without college degrees were about three times more likely to divorce in the first ten years of marriage, compared to their college-educated peers.²⁰ In general, marriage patterns have stabilized in recent years among more educated and affluent Americans, but not among Americans without college degrees.

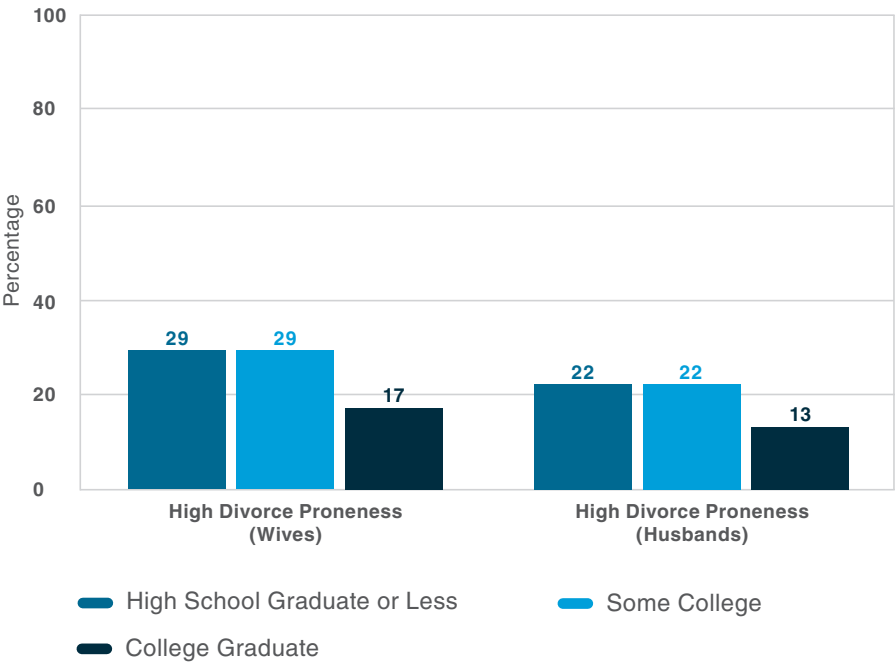
This pattern is also evident among young married parents in the United States. **Figure 5** indicates that college-educated parents are less likely to rate their future chances of separation or divorce as high. Specifically, college graduates are about 40 percent less likely to report that they see separation or divorce as a possibility for their future. But education does not predict marital happiness among married parents. Education is most consistently associated with marital stability, rather than marital bliss, among young married parents today.

In light of current research, the stabilizing effect of education on marriage is probably a consequence of the additional economic resources, social skills, and cultural support afforded marriage among college-educated couples.²¹ For instance, in

²⁰ W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, *When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2010).

²¹ Ibid. Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Knopf, 2009); and Steven P. Martin and Sangeeta Parashar, "Women's Changing Attitudes Toward Divorce, 1974–2002: Evidence for an Educational Crossover," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68 (2006): 29–40.

FIGURE 5. DIVORCE PRONENESS, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY EDUCATION



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

September 2011 the unemployment rate varied markedly by educational attainment: 4.2 percent for the college-educated, 8.4 percent for those with some college, 9.7 percent for the high school-educated, and 14.0 percent for the high school dropouts.²² Thus, this is one domain where college-educated

²² U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release, “Employment Situation,” September 2011, Table A-4, “Employment status of the civilian population 25 years and over by educational attainment”: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.to4.htm>.

Americans enjoy an advantage regarding marriage, insofar as unemployment undercuts the quality and stability of married life (see below). In sum, young married parents who are college-educated experience stronger marriages than their less-educated peers.

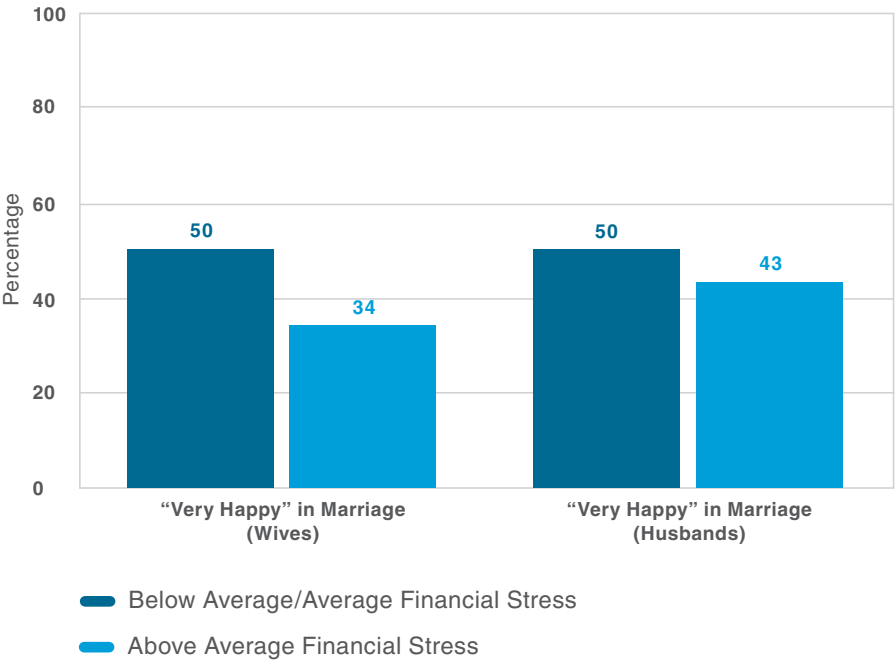
II. MONEY. Money matters in the marriages of today's young parents. Indeed, the arrival of a baby often adds new financial stresses to a marriage. But how much money couples have is less important than the level of financial pressure and debt with which they are contending.

The Survey of Marital Generosity indicates that income is not related to marital happiness. However, income is related to the likelihood that married mothers will consider or seek divorce. Wives whose household income is in the top quartile are significantly less likely to report that they are prone to separation or divorce compared to wives whose income is in the first quartile.

Married parents who report above-average levels of financial stress—that is, worrying frequently that their income will “not be enough to meet your family’s expenses and bills”—are consistently more likely to rate their chances of separation or divorce as high, and less likely to describe themselves as “very happy” in their marriages. For instance, **Figure 6** indicates that financially stressed spouses, especially wives, are at least 7 percentage points less likely to consider themselves very happy.

Consumer debt such as credit card debts and installment loans also weighs heavily on the marriages of mothers. The

FIGURE 6. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY ECONOMIC PRESSURE



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

Survey of Marital Generosity finds that consumer debt has a negative impact on the quality and stability of marriage for wives, but not husbands. **Figure 7** shows that women in marriages with more than \$10,000 in consumer debt are less likely to be happy in their marriages, and more likely to be entertaining thoughts of separation or divorce.

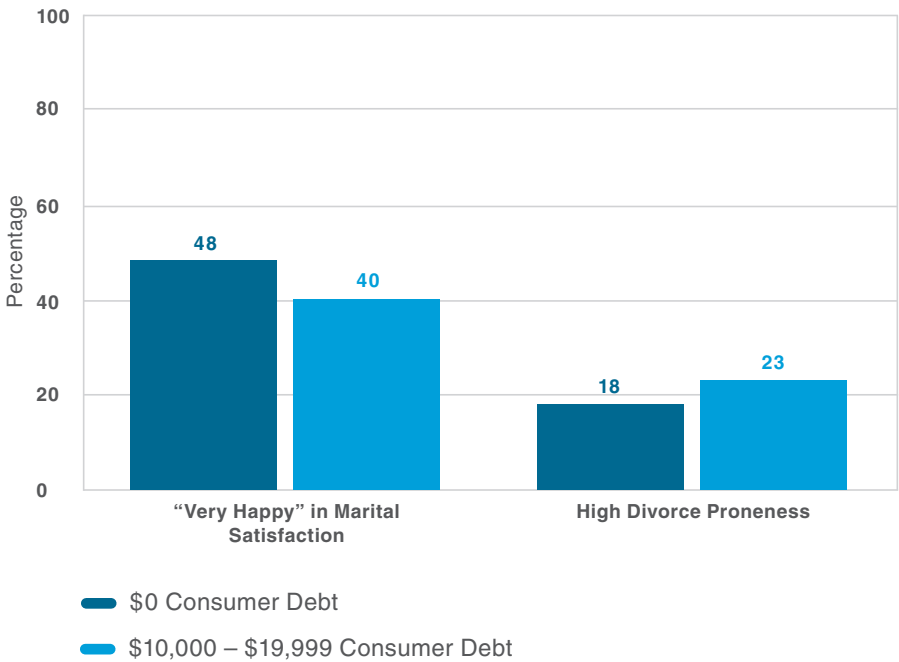
In general, it would seem that prudent spending and building a strong nest egg are likely to protect couples from the financial stresses that can erode the quality and stability of married life. Judging by this survey and the larger body of research on marriage and money, money is a particularly important issue for married mothers, who may be concerned not only with their own financial well-being but also with the financial well-being of the children in their nest.²³

III. WORK AND FAMILY. Today's young married parents have been shaped by the gender revolution of the last half-century and continue to be affected by the economic fallout associated with the Great Recession. The Survey of Marital Generosity indicates that shared housework and childcare, as well as female overemployment, now play an important role in predicting marital success among married mothers and fathers.

Both mothers and fathers are less divorce prone and happier when they report that housework (e.g., cleaning, cooking, taking out the garbage) and childcare are “shared equally.”

²³ See also Jeffrey P. Dew, “The Gendered Meanings of Assets for Divorce,” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 30 (2009): 20–31.

FIGURE 7. MARITAL SATISFACTION AND DIVORCE PRONENESS, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS, BY CONSUMER DEBT



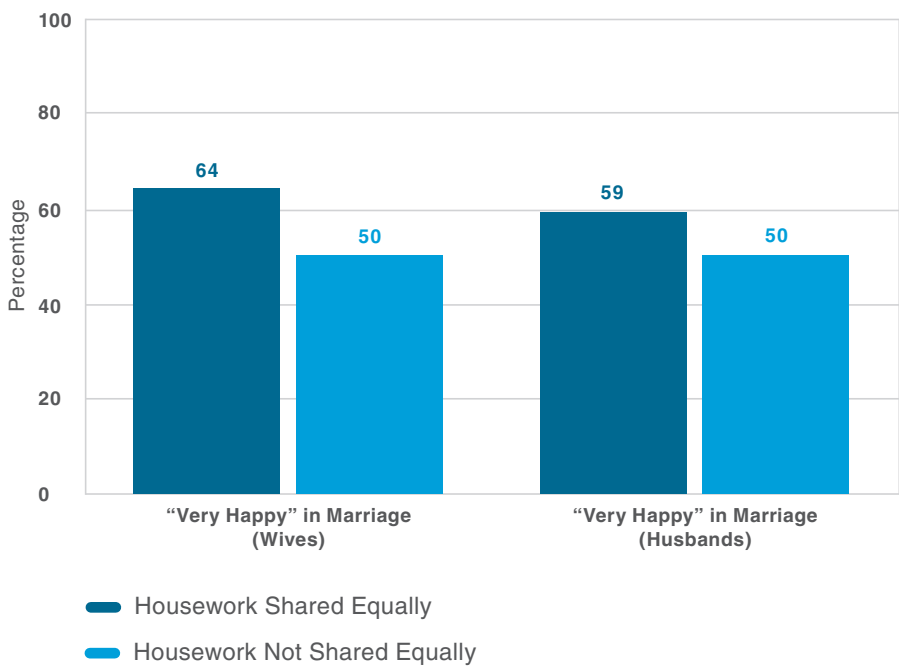
NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

Figure 8 indicates that both men and women are at least 9 percentage points more likely to report that they are “very happy” in their marriages when they share housework. Overall, in a striking turn of events, domestic equality has emerged as an important value for today’s married mothers *and* fathers.²⁴

²⁴ See also Claire M. Kamp Dush and Miles G. Taylor, “Trajectories of Marital Conflict Across the Life Course: Predictors and Interactions with Marital Happiness Trajectories,” *Journal of Family Issues* 32 (2011): forthcoming.

FIGURE 8. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY SHARED HOUSEWORK



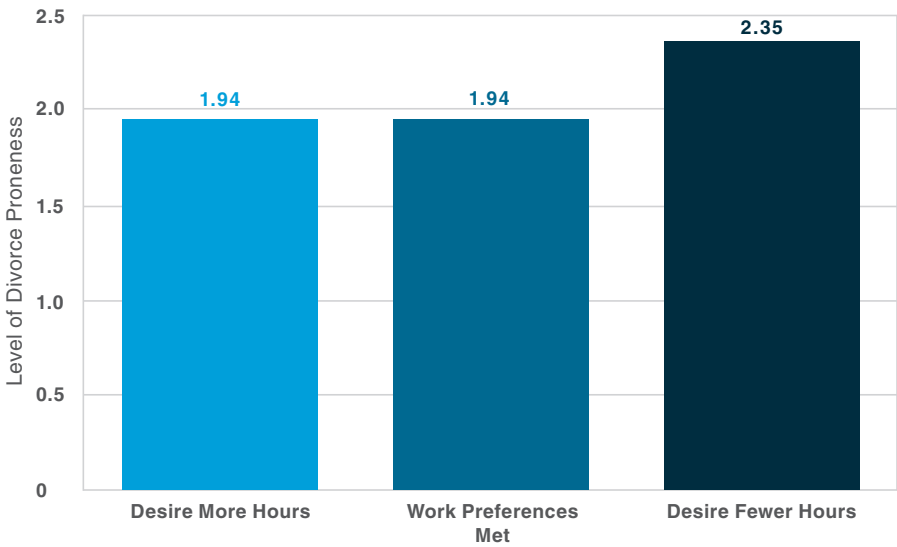
NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

Employment is also important for today’s mothers. **Figure 9** indicates that mothers who meet their employment ideals—in terms of work hours²⁵—or who work less than they would like

²⁵ For this analysis, meeting employment ideals means that respondents report that their actual working hours are within four hours of their ideal work hours. Overemployment is defined as working five or more additional hours than one’s ideal work hours, and underemployment is defined as working five or more fewer hours than one’s ideal work hours. We find no relationship here between fathers’ employment fit and their marital quality/stability.

FIGURE 9. PREDICTED LEVEL OF DIVORCE PRONENESS, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS, BY MATCH BETWEEN DESIRED AND ACTUAL WORK HOURS



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity. Divorce scale varies from 0 to 10.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

to are less prone to divorce.²⁶ But overemployed wives are more prone to divorce. For wives, working more than their ideal number of hours is also associated with lower levels of marital happiness. Of course, given that many women are working more hours in response to a husband’s job loss or underemployment

²⁶ In Figure 9, we rely on ordinary least squares regression and divorce proneness varies on a scale of 0 to 10.

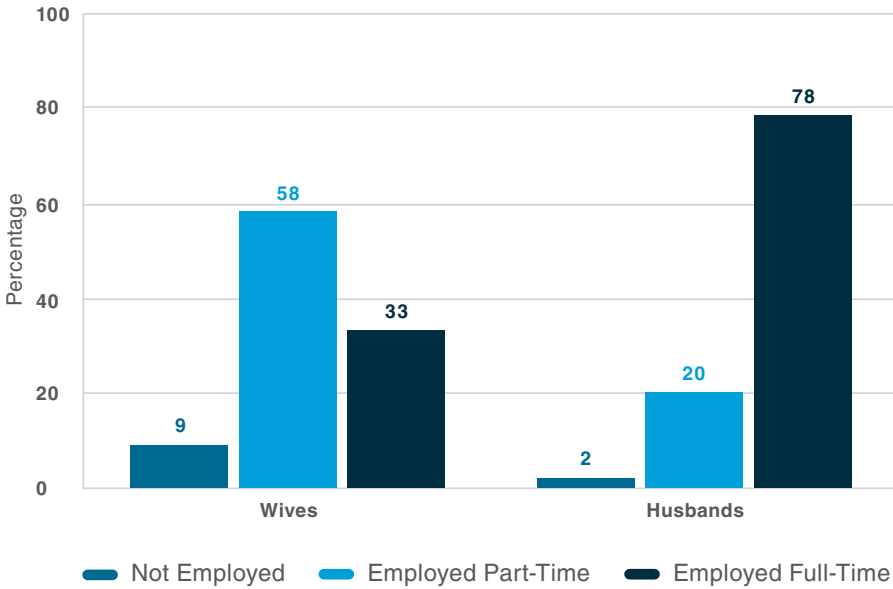
in the wake of the Great Recession, this very scenario—where wives are working more hours than they would prefer to make up for a husband’s job loss or underemployment—is probably more common for American families today.

The misfit between employment ideals and employment realities is exacerbated by the fact that married mothers typically prefer to work less than married fathers. **Figure 10** shows that married fathers are particularly likely to prefer full-time work (78 percent), whereas married mothers are especially likely to prefer part-time work (58 percent). These divergent ideals mean that the current economic climate, which has proven especially inhospitable to men, is particularly challenging for the large number of couples who wish to have the husband focus more on providing and the mother focus more on juggling part-time work and parenting.

IV. FAMILY AND FRIENDS. Marriage draws some of its distinctive meaning and social power in that it begins with a collective ritual, the wedding, which formally draws family and friends into the relationship. It turns out that the influence of such people extends well past the wedding day, as family members and friends serve as sources of support and accountability amidst the joys and challenges of married life.

In most marriages, extended family members play a central role—in ways small and large—in celebrating holidays, confronting unexpected financial problems, and loving and caring for children. Likewise, friends often play a crucial role

FIGURE 10. WORK PREFERENCES, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS



NOTE: Model is unadjusted.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

in lending an ear or a hand when times are tough, sharing formative activities such as a summer beach trip, providing ad hoc childcare, and modeling good or bad marital behavior. Research also suggests that parents who have friends or peer support groups with whom they can talk about the challenges of parenthood do markedly better than parents who go it alone.²⁷

²⁷ Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, *When Parents Become Partners: The Big Life Change for Couples* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999).

To be clear: the influence of family and friends can be for good or ill. Family and friends who are supportive and take marriage seriously tend to be helpful. By contrast, family and friends who needlessly encourage a critical spirit on the part of one spouse, or who give bad example in their own lives, can prove corrosive to the quality and stability of married life. Research suggests, for instance, that one of the better predictors of divorce is having a high number of family and friends who have divorced.²⁸

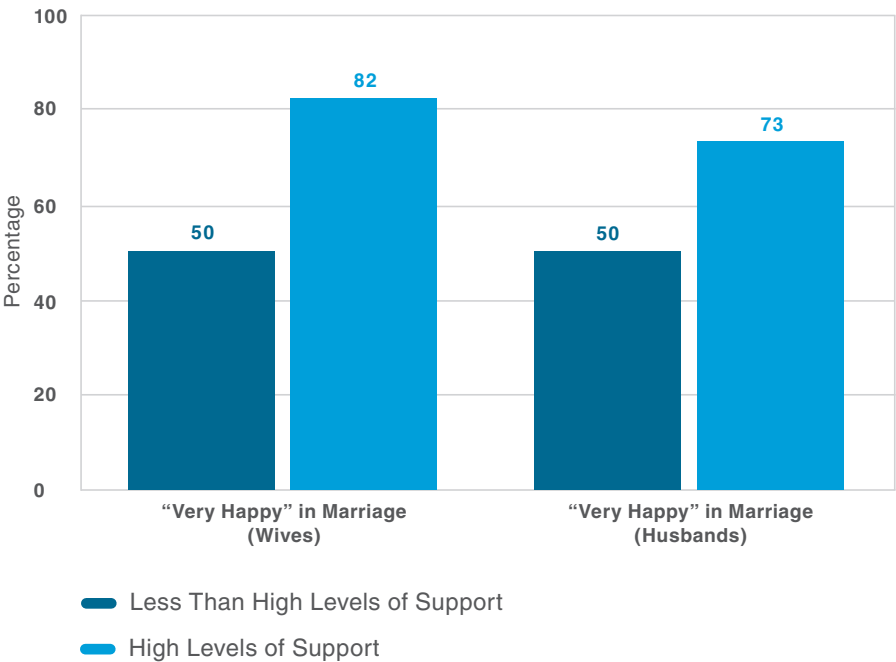
For young married parents in America, having support for their marriage from family and friends turns out to be a good predictor of marital success. The Survey of Marital Generosity scale for social support draws on two items—“my friends are supportive my marriage” and “my family is supportive of my marriage.”²⁹ Husbands and wives who report that they “always” get support from family and friends are significantly more likely to report that they are “very happy” in their marriages, and that they are not prone to separation or divorce.

Figure 11 shows that husbands and wives with high levels of social support for their marriage are at least 23 percentage points

²⁸ Rose McDermott, James Fowler, and Nicholas Christakis, “Breaking Up Is Hard to Do, Unless Everyone Else Is Doing It Too: Social Network Effects on Divorce in a Longitudinal Sample Followed for 32 Years” (working paper, Department of Political Science, Brown University, Providence, RI, 2009). See also Steven Nock, Laura Ann Sanchez, and James Wright, *Covenant Marriage: The Movement to Reclaim Tradition in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

²⁹ The alpha for the social support scale is .72 for husbands, .80 for wives.

FIGURE 11. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY SUPPORT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

more likely to report that they are very happy, or almost 50 percent more likely to be very happy in their marriages, when family and friends are invested in their marriages. Moreover, a high level of support from family and friends is one of the top five predictors of marital quality and stability for married mothers in this study (see “The Top Five Predictors of Marital Success” sidebar).

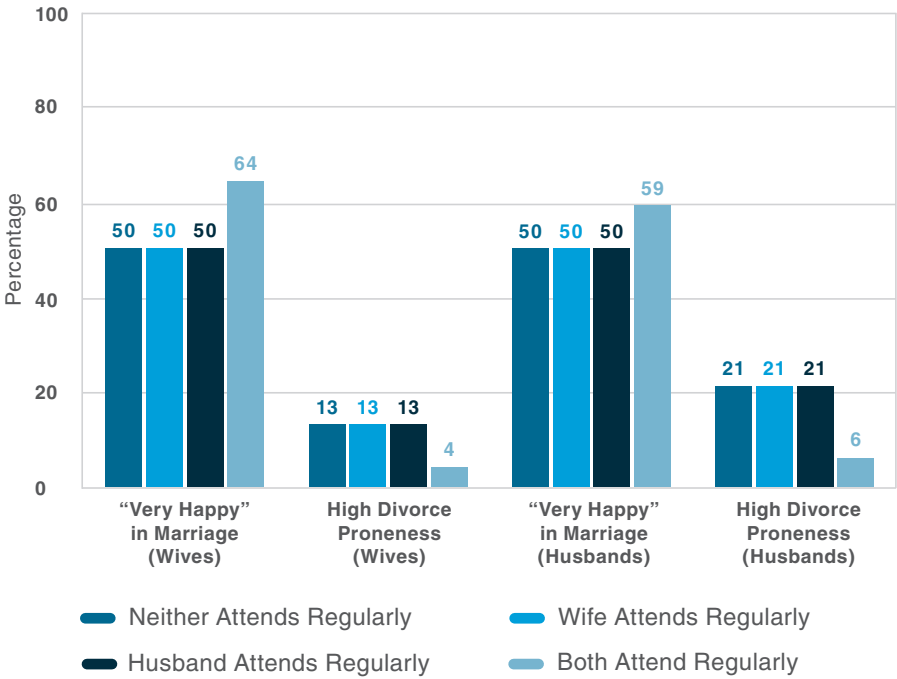
These results suggest that married couples with children should seek out friends who take them and their marriage seriously. In turn, family and friends should be reflective about whether they are a force for good or ill in the marriages of those nearest and dearest to them.

CULTURAL FACTORS

1. FAITH. From the wedding vows exchanged before a pastor, priest, or rabbi to the pastoral support extended to couples in distress, America's houses of worship have long been an important source of meaning, social support, and normative direction for marriage in America. Religion continues to be relevant to today's young married parents (see the "Family Size, Faith, and the Meaning of Parenthood" sidebar).

Although **Figure 12** indicates that religiosity itself is not uniformly associated with greater marital quality and less divorce proneness, couples who regularly attend a church, synagogue, or mosque together enjoy higher levels of marital success. Shared religious attendance is linked to an increase of more than 9 percentage points that a parent is very happy in marriage, and to a decrease of more than 9 percentage points that a parent is prone to separation or divorce. In all likelihood, the experience of sharing regular religious attendance—that is, of enjoying shared rituals that endow one's marriage with transcendent significance and the support of a community of family and friends who take one's marriage seriously—is a solidifying force for marriage in a world in which family life is increasingly fragile.

FIGURE 12. MARITAL SATISFACTION AND DIVORCE PRONENESS, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

But even more than religious attendance, the subjective sense that God is present in one’s marriage is a particularly powerful predictor of marital success among young married parents in America today. **Figure 13** shows that couples who both agree that “God is at the center of our marriage” are at least 26 percentage points more likely to report that they are “very happy” and at least 6 percentage points less likely

to report that they are prone to separation or divorce. In our analysis, this measure of marital spirituality emerges as the most powerful religious predictor of marital success.³⁰

Further analyses indicate that one reason that marital spirituality is a powerful predictor of marital success is that couples who believe that God is at the center of their marriage are also more likely to report high levels of commitment and a pattern of generous behavior toward one another, which we will say more about below.³¹ In other words, marital spirituality is linked to beliefs and behaviors that strengthen the marriage bond.

In this report, marital spirituality is one of the top five predictors of marital stability for husbands and wives; it is also a top predictor of husbands' marital happiness. In addition, shared religious attendance is a top predictor of marital stability for husbands (see "The Top Five Predictors of Marital Success" sidebar).

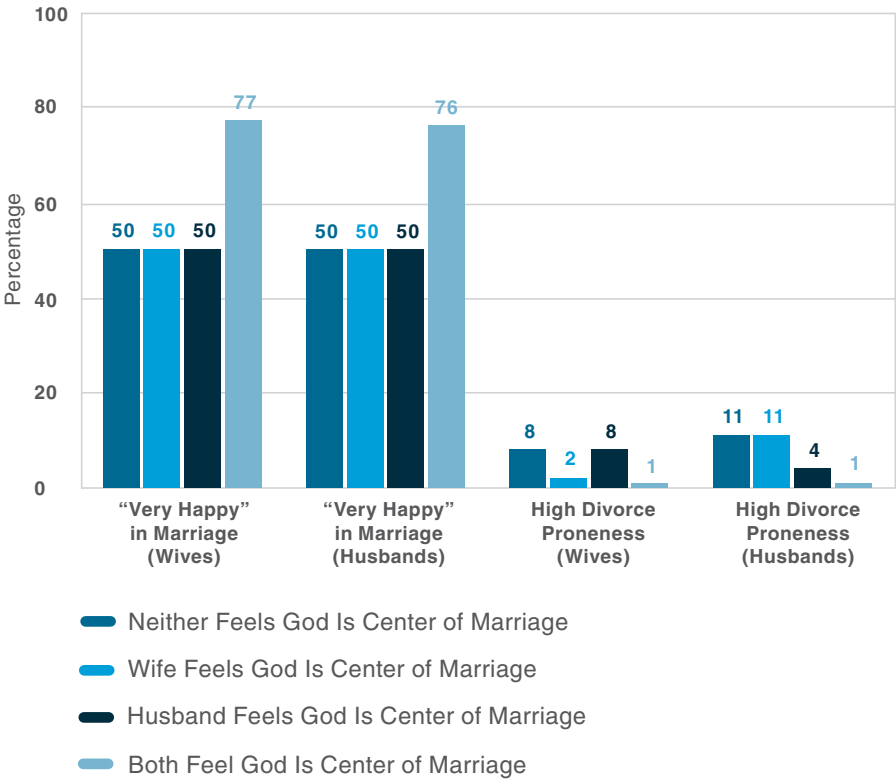
For today's mothers and fathers, couples who believe that their religious faith extends right into the heart of their marriage are more likely to experience good marriages.

II. BELIEFS. The beliefs that couples have about marriage and parenthood matter. They color the ways in which couples make sense of the joys and challenges of family life and may

³⁰ See also Annette Mahoney et al., "Religion and the Sanctification of Family Relationships," *Review of Religious Research* 40 (2003): 220–36.

³¹ Ancillary analysis of the Survey of Marital Generosity is available on request.

FIGURE 13. MARITAL SATISFACTION AND DIVORCE PRONENESS, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY GOD CENTER OF MARRIAGE



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

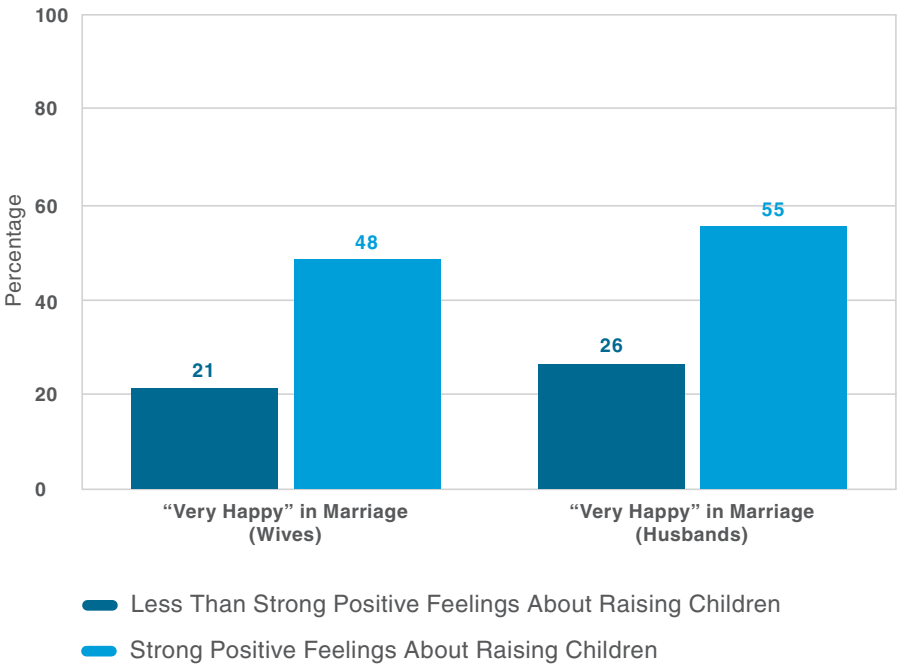
foster higher investments in married life. Research suggests, for instance, that spouses who take a more familistic, or family-centered, view of family life are more emotionally invested in one another and enjoy higher quality marriages.³² The Survey of Marital Generosity reveals a similar pattern for young married parents.

Not surprisingly, spouses who oppose divorce for couples in unhappy marriages and spouses who believe that “raising children is one of life’s greatest joys” report lower rates of divorce proneness than their peers who hold less familistic views. Likewise, parents who value raising children are also happier in their marriages. **Figure 14**, which illustrates the association between pronatalistic attitudes (or positive attitudes toward child rearing) and marital happiness among today’s married parents, reveals that mothers and fathers who see parenting as one of “life’s greatest joys” are about twice as likely to report that they are “very happy” in their marriages. We found that a pronatalistic attitude is one of the top five predictors of marital happiness for husbands and wives (see “The Top Five Predictors of Marital Success” sidebar).

Evidently, married parents who hold a more familistic view of life enjoy especially happy marriages.

³² W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven L. Nock, “What’s Love Got to Do With It? Equality, Equity, Commitment, and Women’s Marital Quality,” *Social Forces* 84 (2006): 1321–45; and Paul Amato and Stacy J. Rogers, “Do Attitudes Toward Divorce Affect Marital Quality?” *Journal of Family Issues* 20 (1999): 69–86.

FIGURE 14. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY POSITIVE FEELINGS ABOUT RAISING CHILDREN



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

1. SEX. After a baby comes along, most couples see their sexual activity and satisfaction drop, at least for a time.³³ Nevertheless,

³³ Janis E. Byrd et al., “Sexuality During Pregnancy and the Year Postpartum,” *Journal of Family Practice* 47 (1996): 305–308; and John M. Gottman and Julie Schwartz Gottman, *And Baby Makes Three: The Six-Step Plan for Preserving Marital Intimacy and Rekindling Romance After Baby Arrives* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).

our findings suggest that it is important for couples to renew the sexual dimension of their relationship as quickly as possible. The Survey of Marital Generosity results are consistent with the notion that the sexual relationship plays a signal role in fostering high-quality and stable marriages for both men and women.

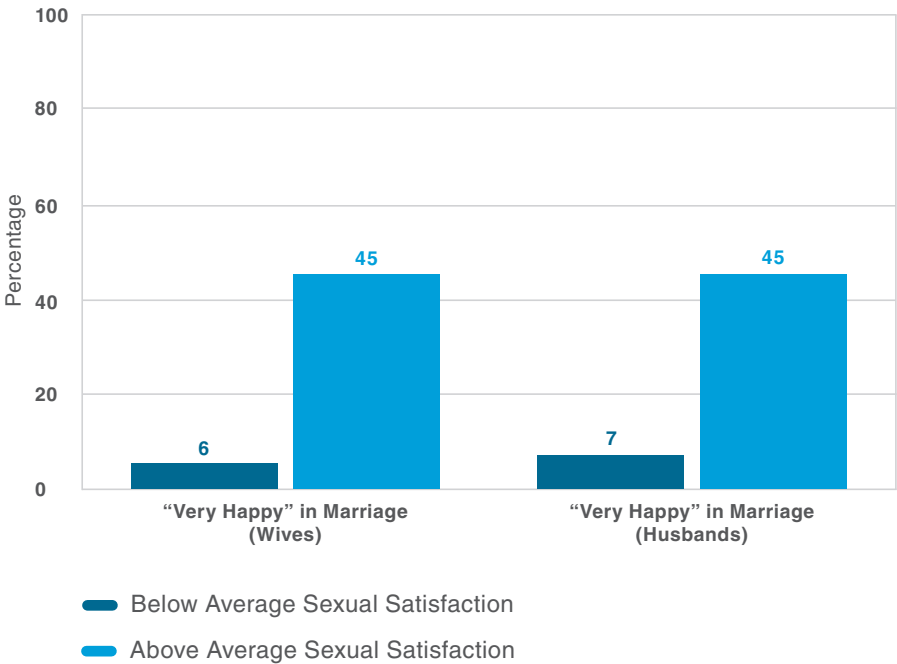
Married fathers and mothers who report above-average levels of sexual satisfaction are significantly less likely to report being prone to divorce and significantly more happy in their marriages. **Figure 15** indicates that sexually satisfied wives enjoy a 39-percentage-point premium in the odds of being very happy in their marriages, and that sexually satisfied husbands enjoy a 38-percentage-point premium in marital happiness. These are large effects. Indeed, sexual satisfaction emerges as one of the top five predictors of marital quality and stability for both mothers and fathers in today's families (see "The Top Five Predictors of Marital Success" sidebar).

Further, sexual satisfaction is more likely to emerge for women *and* men in marriages marked by high levels of generosity, commitment, religious faith, and couple-centered quality time. Moreover, women are more likely to report that they are sexually satisfied when they report that they share housework with their husbands. What happens outside of the bedroom seems to matter a great deal in predicting how happy husbands and wives are with what happens in the bedroom.³⁴

The natural sciences tell us that sex is associated with the release of "feel good" chemicals such as prolactin, oxytocin, and

³⁴ Ancillary analysis of the Survey of Marital Generosity is available on request.

FIGURE 15. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY SEXUAL SATISFACTION



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

serotonin, which foster bonding and improve mood among men and women.³⁵ Not surprisingly, sexual satisfaction also seems to strengthen the bond and mood of wedlock for today’s parents.

³⁵ See, for example, Gordon Gallup, Rebecca Burch, and Steven Platek, “Does Semen Have Antidepressant Properties?” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 31 (2002): 289–93; and Larry Young and Zuoxin Wang, “The Neurobiology of Pair Bonding,” *Nature Neuroscience* 7 (2004): 1048–54.

II. GENEROSITY. Generosity is an important and sometimes overlooked relational dimension of marriage and family life. Married fathers and mothers who make a regular practice of being generous to one another enjoy markedly higher levels of marital quality and stability.

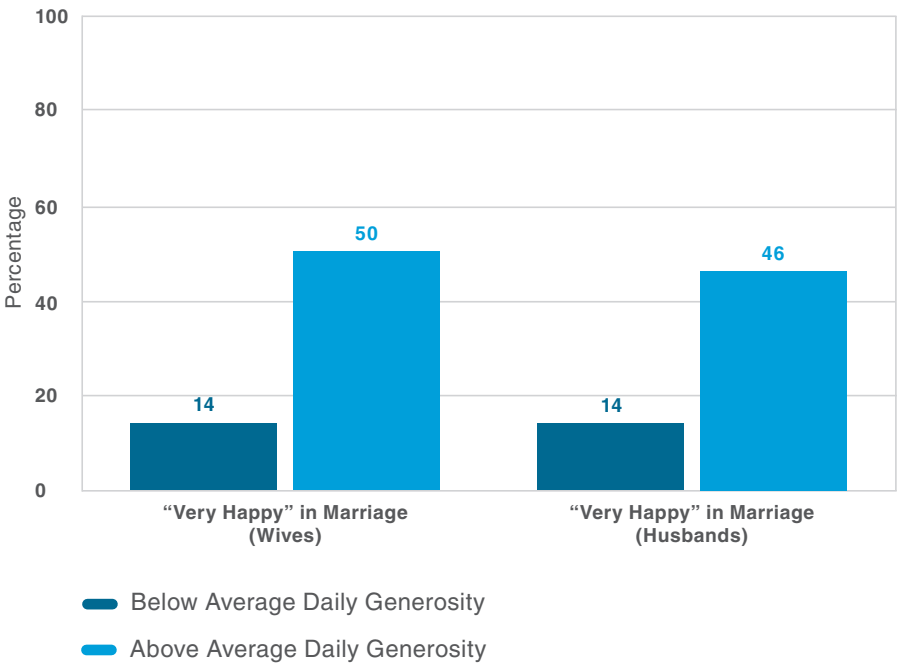
Generosity is defined here as “the virtue of giving good things to [one’s spouse] freely and abundantly,”³⁶ and encompasses small acts of service (e.g., making coffee for one’s spouse in the morning), the expression of affection, displays of respect, and a willingness to “forgive him/her for mistakes and failings.”³⁷ Husbands and wives who score high on the generosity scale—both in terms of giving and receiving in a spirit of generosity—are significantly more likely to report that they are “very happy” in their marriages and less prone to divorce.

Figure 16 reveals that spouses who score above average on the generosity scale are at least 32 percentage points more likely to report that they are very happy in their marriage. Undoubtedly, part of what is happening is that happily married husbands and wives are more inclined to embrace an ethic of generosity in their marriages. Still, it is striking that both the extension and the receipt of generosity in marriage is so highly correlated with marital success.

³⁶ Science of Generosity Initiative, University of Notre Dame, “What is Generosity?” <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/more-about-the-initiative/what-is-generosity/>.

³⁷ The alpha for the generosity scale is .84 for both husbands and wives.

FIGURE 16. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY DAILY GENEROSITY



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

Indeed, the extension of generosity to one’s spouse is one of the top five predictors of marital happiness for both husbands and wives, and one of the top five protectors against divorce proneness for men (see “The Top Five Predictors of Marital Success” sidebar). These findings parallel studies that find that positive attitudes toward sacrificing for one’s partner

MARITAL SATISFACTION & DIVORCE PRONENESS

Among Married Mothers and Fathers

WIVES

“VERY HAPPY” IN MARRIAGE:

1. Above-average sexual satisfaction
2. Above-average commitment
3. Above-average generosity to husband
4. Above-average attitude toward raising children
5. Above-average social support

NOT PRONE TO SEPARATION OR DIVORCE:

1. Above-average commitment
2. Above-average sexual satisfaction
3. Both spouses have above-average marital spirituality
(e.g., report God is at the center of their marriage)
4. Above-average social support
5. Wife has above-average marital spirituality

PREDICTORS OF

In the Survey of Marital Generosity, the following factors are the best predictors of marital happiness and of not being prone to separation or divorce among today's husbands and wives (aged 18–46) who have children in the home.¹

HUSBANDS

“VERY HAPPY” IN MARRIAGE:

1. Above-average sexual satisfaction
2. Above-average commitment
3. Above-average generosity to wife
4. Above-average attitude toward raising children
5. Both spouses have above-average marital spirituality

NOT PRONE TO SEPARATION OR DIVORCE:

1. Above-average commitment
2. Above-average sexual satisfaction
3. Both spouses have above-average marital spirituality
4. Both spouses attend religious services weekly or more often
5. Above-average generosity to wife

¹ For further details on the multivariate regression results undergirding this list, see www.stateofourunions.org/e-appendix/2011.

are associated with marital satisfaction and positive marital dynamics.³⁸

Thus, this report and other research suggest that one path to wedded bliss may be found by embracing an ethic of generosity that encompasses a spirit of service, frequent displays of affection, and a willingness to forgive the faults and failings of one's spouse. This spirit of generosity is all the more important as couples confront the challenges of parenthood together.

III. COMMITMENT: THE POWER OF “WE”

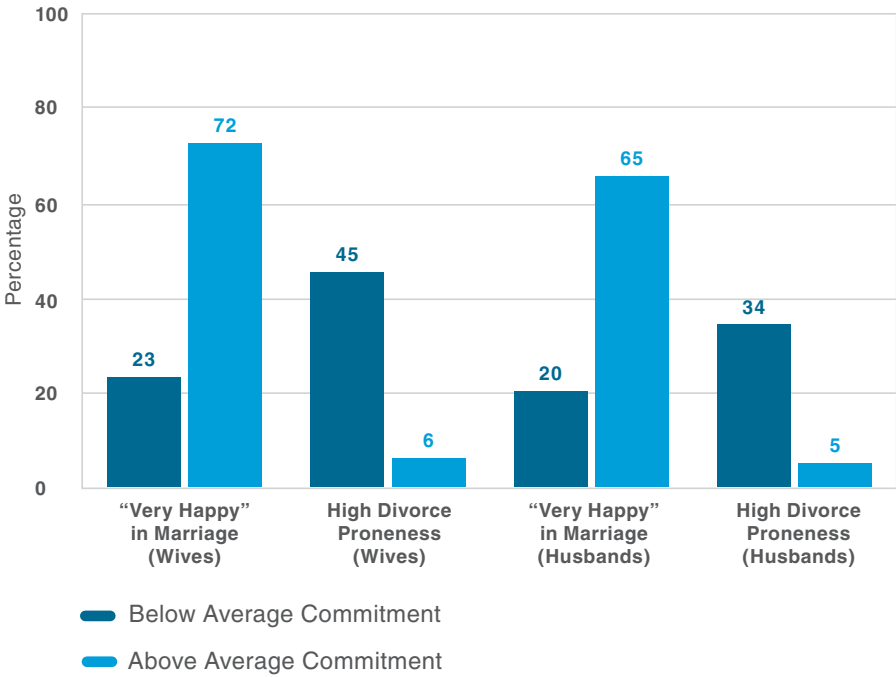
In today's throwaway society, commitment is a rare trait. Commitment is also an exceedingly powerful predictor of marital success among today's young married parents. Husbands and wives who prioritize their mutual identity as a couple do much better than their peers who seek to put their own needs first, or who regularly or even occasionally scan the social scene in search of potential new romantic options.

The commitment scale for this study specifically taps the extent to which spouses see their relationship in terms of “we” versus “me,” the importance they attach to their relationship, their conviction that a better relationship with someone else does not exist, and their desire to stay in the relationship “no matter what rough times we encounter.”³⁹

³⁸ See, for example, Scott Stanley et al., “Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes,” *Family Process* 45 (2006): 289–303.

³⁹ We used a brief form of the dedication scale from the Commitment Inventory that has an alpha in the Survey of Marital Generosity of .81 for both husbands and wives and was published in Scott Stanley and Howard Markman, “Assessing Commitment in Personal Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992): 595–608.

FIGURE 17. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY COMMITMENT



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

As **Figure 17** indicates, the association between commitment and marital success is striking. Spouses who score above average in terms of commitment are at least 45 percentage points more likely to report being “very happy” in their marriages, and 29 percentage points less likely to be prone to divorce. In other words, above-average commitment more than triples the odds of marital happiness for husbands and wives and reduces their divorce proneness sixfold. Above-average

commitment is one of the top five predictors of marital quality and stability in this study (see “The Top Five Predictors of Marital Success” sidebar).

Once again, happier couples are probably more likely to embrace the norm of commitment. But, given that other research finds that relational commitment predicts future marital success,⁴⁰ we also think it likely that young married parents who embrace the “we” ethic over the “me” ethic are especially likely to enjoy happy married lives.

IV. FAMILY TIME. Relationships require face-time to flourish. Intimacy is more likely to emerge and be sustained when couples have time for one another, especially after they transition into parenthood.⁴¹ Even though some scholars have speculated that time spent with children can put a damper on the quality of married life,⁴² this study comes to the opposite conclusion. We found that, for most married parents, time spent alone with one’s spouse and time spent with one’s children *both* predict higher levels of marital solidarity.

Specifically, couples who spend time alone together—talking or sharing an activity—are significantly more likely to be happy in their marriages and less likely to be vulnerable to separation or divorce. **Figure 18** indicates that husbands and

⁴⁰ Stanley et al., “Sacrifice as a Predictor.”

⁴¹ Dew and Wilcox, “If Momma Ain’t Happy”; Gottman and Gottman, *And Baby Makes Three*.

⁴² See, for instance, Kerry Daly, “Deconstructing Family Time: From Ideology to Lived Experience,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (2001): 283–94.

FIGURE 18. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY QUALITY TIME



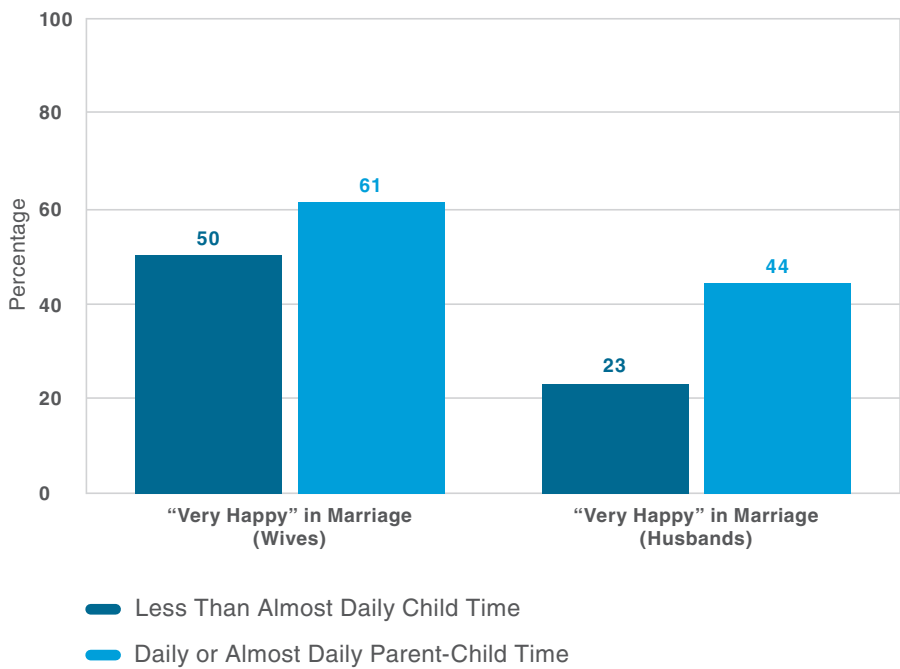
NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

wives who spend quality time with their spouses once a week or more are about 50 percent more likely to be “very happy” in their marriages. The figure also suggests that the link between couple time and relationship quality is particularly salient for wives. In other words, a regular date night appears to be part of the recipe for marital success among today’s parents.

But there does not seem to be a zero-sum relationship between time devoted to parenthood and marriage. Fathers and

FIGURE 19. MARITAL SATISFACTION, 18–46-YEAR-OLD MARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS, BY TIME WITH CHILDREN



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

mothers who spend lots of time with their children in activities such as playing, talking, or working on projects together also enjoy significantly higher levels of marital happiness and lower divorce proneness (and also enjoy more couple time with one another).⁴³ **Figure 19** shows that wives and especially husbands who devote more time to their children also enjoy higher levels of marital happiness.

⁴³ Ancillary analysis of the Survey of Marital Generosity is available on request.

Thus, a healthy mix of couple time and family time appears most likely to foster a climate of solidarity among today's married mothers and fathers.

SOUL-MATE VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL MODELS OF MARRIAGE

Almost a decade ago, *The State of Our Unions* called attention to the growing cultural power of a soul-mate model of marriage in which marriage is primarily conceived of as a couple-centered vehicle for the pursuit of individual and mutual fulfillment.⁴⁴ In the hearts and minds of today's young adults, this soul-mate model of marriage has clearly eclipsed an older, institutional model of marriage, which sees marriage not only as an expressive vehicle for the couple but also as an important source of social support, economic cooperation, and care for themselves and their children.

For instance, a recent Pew study found that only 41 percent of today's adults see parenthood as very important to a successful marriage, down from 62 percent in 1990. By contrast, over the same time, sexual fulfillment and gender egalitarianism have gained ground as important marital values in the mind of the public. For example, in 1990 only 47 percent of adults thought sharing household chores was very important for a successful marriage; more recently, about 62 percent believe that domestic equality is very important.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, *The State of Our Unions: 2002* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, 2002).

⁴⁵ Paul Taylor, Cary Funk, and April Clark, *As Marriage and Parenthood Drift Apart, Public Is Concerned About Social Impact*, Pew Social & Demographic Trends (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, July 1, 2007): <http://pewresearch.org/assets/social/pdf/Marriage.pdf>.

Yet, this cultural shift is not as complete as it might seem on first glance, especially when it comes to the reality of married life among today's young parents. It is true that domestic gender equality, sexual satisfaction, a college degree, and spousal generosity are strong predictors of marital success among married parents—all factors that seem to be aligned more closely with a soul-mate model of marriage. But it is also true that the support of family and friends, a sound economic foundation, a good job, spousal commitment, religious faith, and family time are strong predictors of marital success among married parents in contemporary America. These factors, we would argue, are more closely aligned with the institutional model of marriage.

The enduring power of some features of the institutional model of marriage also brings to mind the more sober view of marriage and parenthood that journalist Lori Gottlieb articulated in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2008, after she had some experience raising a baby on her own. She came to “realize that marriage ultimately isn’t about cosmic connection—it’s about how having a teammate, even if he’s not the love of your life, [which] is better than not having one at all.” In other words, if one can have “a decent guy who takes out the trash and sets up the baby gear, [and] provides a second income that allows you to spend time with your child instead of working 60 hours a week to support a family on your own—how much does it matter whether the guy you marry is The One?”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Lori Gottlieb, “Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 2008): <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/03/marry-him/6651/>.

Gottlieb's revisionist take on marriage and parenthood is especially poignant given that the vast majority of Americans aspire to have, will have, or do have children, and that this report shows that the emotional experience of parenthood is, on average, significantly better for adults in a married context.

Nevertheless, the message of this report is not that young men and women today must simply "settle" for a passable marriage and family life, as Gottlieb's article suggests. Rather, young men and women need to understand that paths exist in society that allow for successful navigation through the contemporary challenges of marriage and parenthood. This report suggests that, for many young adults, the best path for forming and sustaining a family is a hybrid marriage that incorporates features from the newer soul-mate model with features from the older institutional model. Such a hybrid marriage allows today's young men and women to forge a marital friendship that is more likely to be both generally happy as well as enduring, one that, over the long-term, benefits adults and children and affords women and men the opportunity to live a life that feels ultimately meaningful.

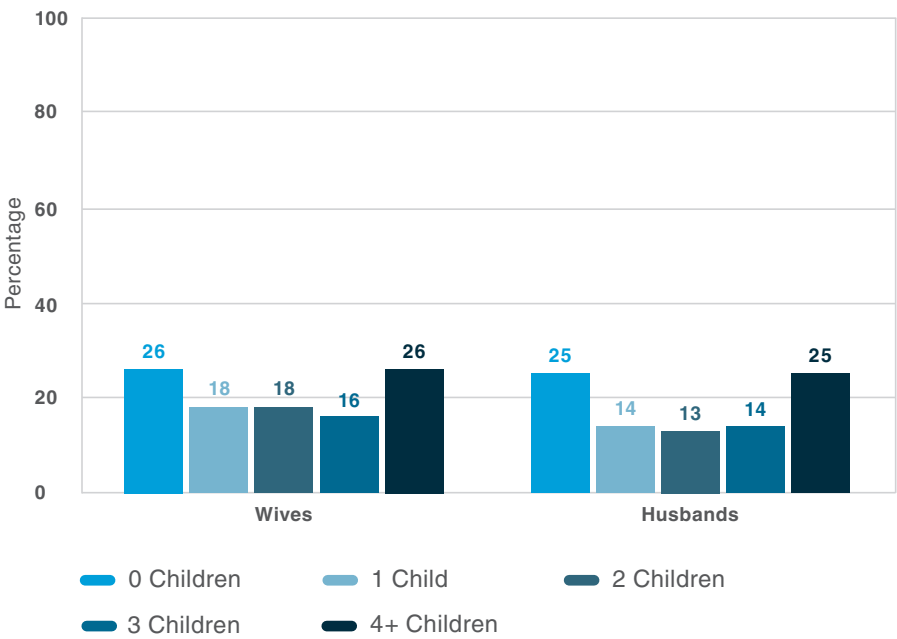
FAMILY SIZE, FAITH, AND THE MEANING OF PARENTHOOD

Given the negative association between marital happiness and parenthood, one might expect that the least happy husbands and wives would be parents of large families. Not so.

In a striking finding, it turns out that the relationship between family size and marital happiness is not linear, but curvilinear (see **Figure A1**). In other words, according to the Survey of Marital Generosity, the happiest husbands and wives among today's young couples are those with no children *and* those with four or more children.

Figure A1 reveals that about 18 percent of wives with one to three children are “very happy” in their marriage, compared to 26 percent of wives with no children or four or more children, after controlling for differences in education, income, age, race, and ethnicity. Likewise about 14 percent of husbands with one to three children are “very happy” in their marriage, compared to 25 percent of husbands with no children or four or more children, after controlling for socioeconomic differences. This means that the parents of large families are at least 40 percent more likely to be happily married than the parents of smaller families.

FIGURE A1. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING “VERY HAPPY” IN MARRIAGE, BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN AT HOME

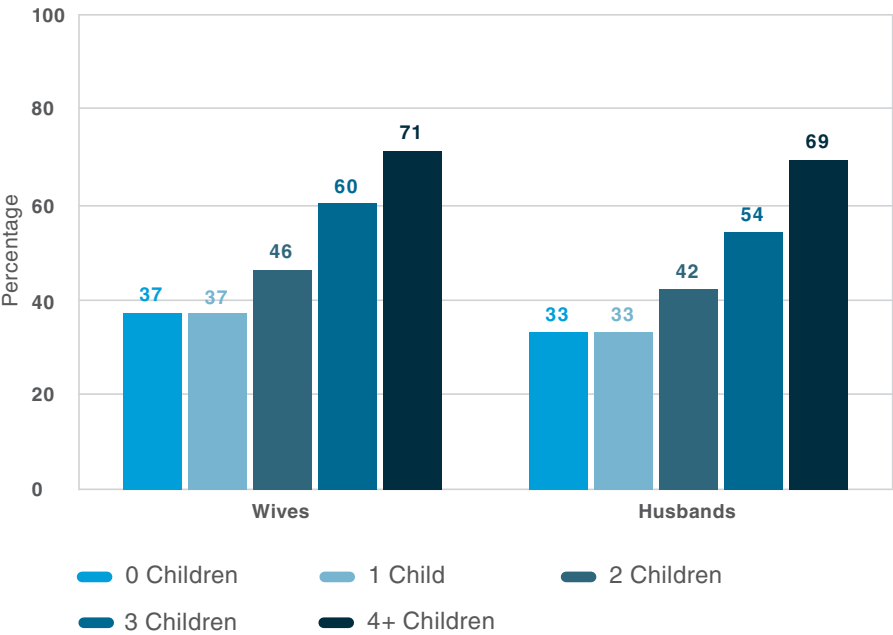


NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

What accounts for the surprisingly higher levels of marital bliss among parents of large families, given the obvious financial, practical, and emotional challenges of raising a large family in contemporary America? This finding seems to be largely a “selection” story, in which particular types of couples end up having large numbers of children, remain married to one another, and also

FIGURE A2. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF FREQUENTLY ATTENDING RELIGIOUS WORSHIP SERVICE, BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN AT HOME



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

enjoy cultural, social, and relational strengths that more than offset the challenges of parenting a large family. In this case, the Survey of Marital Generosity suggests that fathers and mothers of large families are partly happier because they find more meaning in life, receive more support from friends who share their faith, and have a stronger religious faith than their peers with smaller families.¹

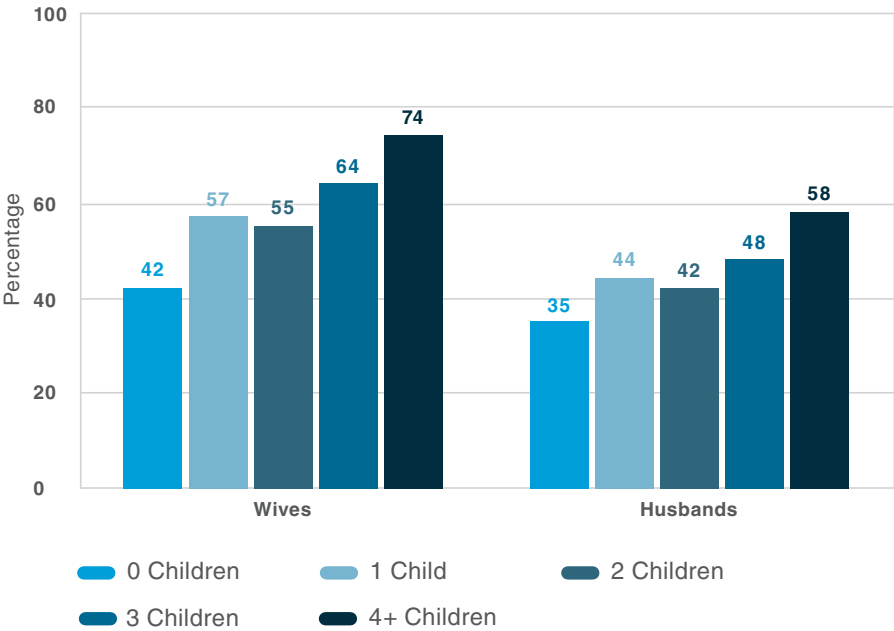
Take religious attendance. **Figure A2** shows that the parents of large families are about twice as likely to attend church, synagogue, or mosque on a weekly basis or more often. It is certainly possible that having a large family can bring some people to their knees! But it is also likely that highly religious men and women feel called by God or encouraged by their religious networks of friends and family members to have large families.²

Or take meaning. **Figure A3** shows that the parents of large families—especially mothers—are more likely to strongly agree that “my life has an important purpose,” compared to their married peers with smaller families or no children. Meaning undoubtedly flows from the additional texture that each child adds to both parents’ lives, but it’s also likely that men and women who have a strong generative sense that their lives are endowed with meaning are also more willing and interested in having many children.

1 For statistical details on the results discussed in this sidebar, see www.stateofourunions.org/e-ppendix/2011.

2 Sarah R. Hayford and S. Philip Morgan, “Religiosity and Fertility in the United States: The Role of Fertility Intentions,” *Social Forces* 86 (2008): 1163–88.

FIGURE A3. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF “STRONGLY AGREEING” THAT THEIR LIFE HAS AN IMPORTANT PURPOSE, BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN AT HOME



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

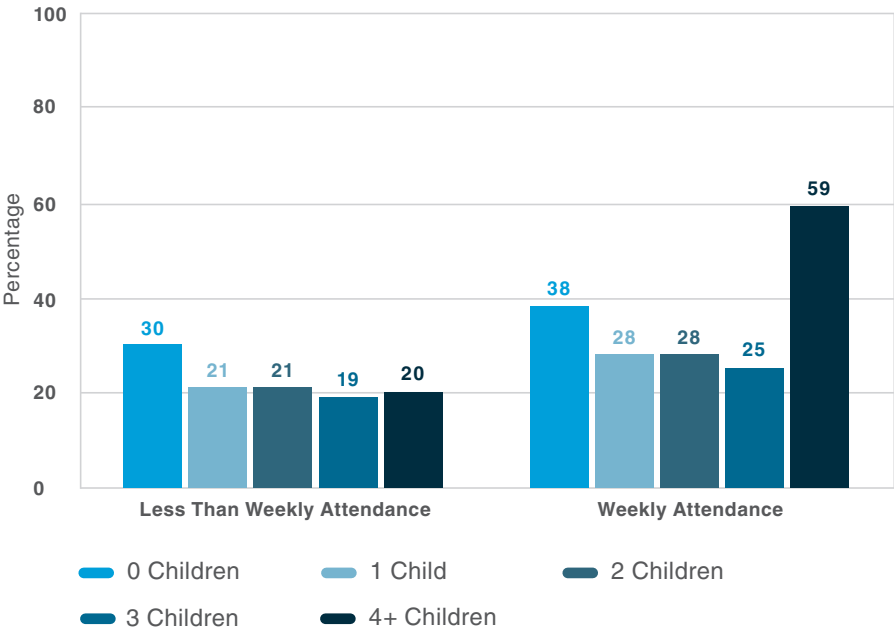
SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

Couples with large families—specifically those who are more likely to have a strong faith, a sense of meaning in life, and the social support of religious friends—also seem able to handle the challenges of parenting a large family without witnessing a drop in marital quality. The cultural and social resources at their disposal seem to make them happier spouses than peers who do not have these resources.

The role of religious faith seems to be particularly important in moderating the association between family size and marital happiness for women. Analyses of the Survey of Marital Generosity indicate that religious mothers of large families are particularly likely to enjoy high levels of marital happiness, compared both to less religious wives and to other religious wives (with fewer or no children). By contrast, religious fathers of large families are no different from other religious husbands when it comes to marital happiness.

Figure A4 shows that mothers of four or more children who are not religious are no happier than their nominally religious or secular peers who have smaller families, and they are less happy than childless wives who do not regularly attend religious services. But religious mothers of four or more children *are* markedly more likely than other wives—including other religious wives with fewer or no children—to report that they are “very happy” in their marriages. **Figure A4** indicates that 59 percent of wives with large families who attend religious services at least weekly report that they are very happy, compared to 38 percent of childless religious wives, 30 percent of childless wives who are nominally religious or

FIGURE A4. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF WIVES BEING “VERY HAPPY” IN MARRIAGE, BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN AT HOME AND RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE



NOTE: Model adjusts for age, education, income, and race/ethnicity.

SOURCE: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010–2011.

secular, slightly more than 25 percent of religious wives who have one to three children, and about 20 percent of married mothers who are nominally religious or secular.

A skeptic might speculate that religious mothers of large families have no choice but to put on rose-colored glasses when describing their own marriages, given their practical dependence upon and moral commitment to marriage. Perhaps this is true.

But, given the religious meaning, social support, and normative importance attached to marriage by men in many religious communities, it seems likely that part of what is happening is that religious mothers of large families benefit from having particularly attentive husbands.³ The Survey of Marital Generosity indicates that their husbands are more likely to engage in regular acts of generosity—such as making coffee in the morning for their wives or frequently expressing affection—and to spend more quality time with their spouses compared to other husbands.

While few Americans wish to have nineteen children, the blend of religious faith and social support depicted in *19 Kids and Counting* may come closer to the reality of today's large families than the equally exotic but ultimately tragic way of life brought to the small screen in *Jon & Kate Plus 8*.

3 W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

SOCIAL INDICATORS *of* **MARITAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING**

TRENDS OF THE PAST FIVE DECADES

MARRIAGE

DIVORCE

UNMARRIED COHABITATION

LOSS OF CHILD-CENTEREDNESS

FRAGILE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

**TEEN ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE
AND FAMILY**

MARRIAGE

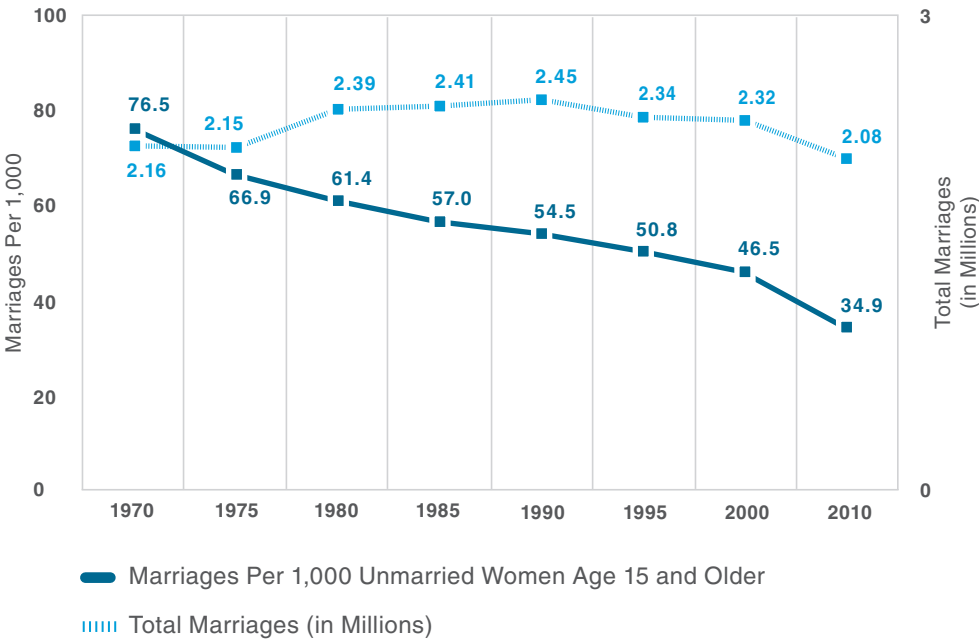
KEY FINDING: Marriage trends in recent decades indicate that Americans have become less likely to marry, and the most recent data show that the marriage rate in the United States continues to decline. Of those who do marry, there has been a moderate drop since the 1970s in the percentage of couples who consider their marriages to be “very happy,” but in the past two decades this trend has flattened out.

Americans have become less likely to marry. This is reflected in a decline of more than 50 percent, from 1970 to 2010, in the annual number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried adult women (**Figure 1**). In real terms, the total number of marriages fell from 2.45 million in 1990 to 2.08 million in 2010. Much of this decline—it is not clear just how much—results from the delaying of first marriages until older ages: the median age at first marriage went from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to about 26 and 28, respectively, in 2010. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry. Finally, U.S. Census data indicate that the retreat from marriage has accelerated in the wake of the Great Recession.

The decline also reflects some increase in lifelong singlehood, though the actual amount cannot be known until current young and middle-aged adults pass through the life course.

The percentage of adults in the population who are currently married has also diminished. Since 1960, the decline of those

FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF MARRIAGES PER 1,000 UNMARRIED WOMEN AGE 15 AND OLDER, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: We have used the number of new marriages per 1,000 unmarried women age 15 and older, rather than the Crude Marriage Rate of marriages per 1,000 population to help avoid the problem of compositional changes in the population, that is, changes that stem merely from there being more or less people in the marriageable ages. Even this more refined measure is somewhat susceptible to compositional changes. Also note that the most recent number presented for total marriages comes from 2009, not 2010.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Statistical Abstract of the United States* for 2001 (Table 117) and for 1986 (Table 124), available online at www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html; *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2009 (Table A1), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2009.html; *American Community Surveys* for 2010 (Tables S0101 and S1251), available online at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data” for 2007 (in *National Vital Statistics Report* 56) (Table 2) and for 2009 (*NVS Report* 58) (Table A), available online at www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr.htm.

married among all persons age 15 and older has been about 16 percentage points—and approximately 30 points among black females (**Figure 2**). It should be noted that these data include people who have never married and those who have married and then divorced.

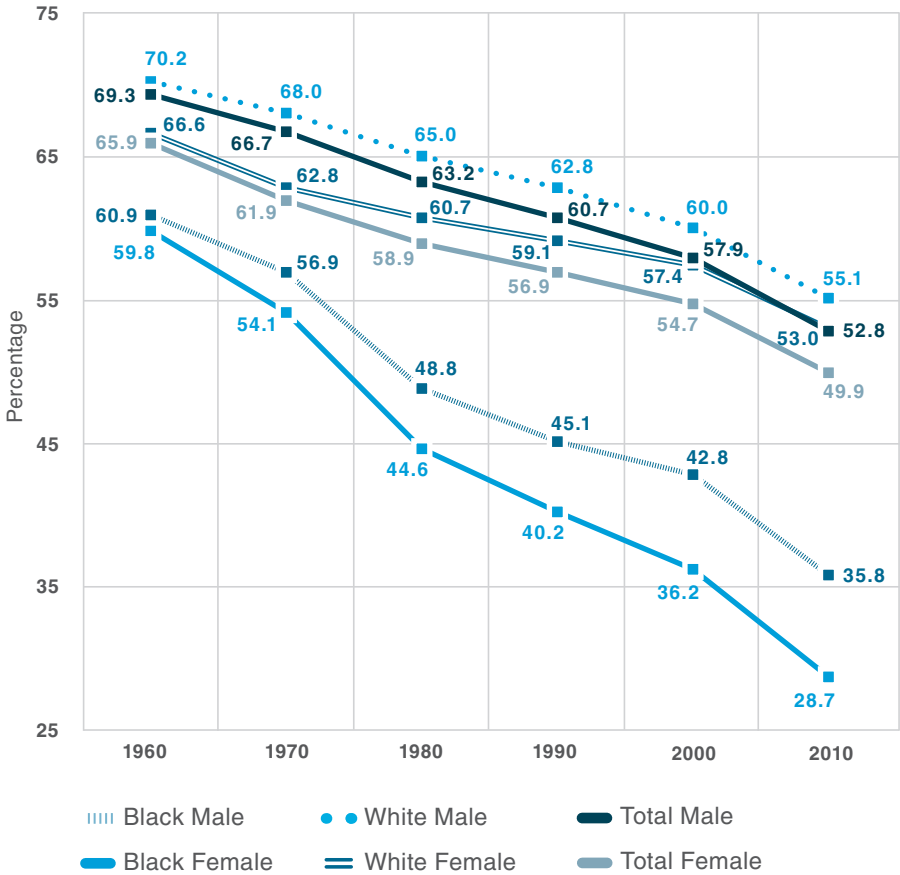
In order partially to control for a decline in married adults due solely to delayed first marriages, we have looked at changes in the percentage of persons age 35 through 44 who were married (**Figure 3**). Since 1960, there has been a drop of 23 percentage points for married men and 21 points for married women.

Marriage trends in the age range of 35 to 44 are suggestive of lifelong singlehood. In the past and still today, virtually all persons who were going to marry during their lifetimes had married by age 45. More than 90 percent of women have eventually married in every generation for which records exist, going back to the mid-1800s. By 1960, 94 percent of women then living had been married at least once by age 45—probably a historical high point.¹ For the generation of 1995, assuming a continuation of then-current marriage rates, several demographers projected that 88 percent of women and 82 percent of men would ever marry.² If and when these figures are recalculated

1 Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 10; Michael R. Haines, “Long-Term Marriage Patterns in the United States from Colonial Times to the Present,” *The History of the Family* 1 (1996): 15–39.

2 Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995,” *Population and Development Review* 27 (2001): 553–63.

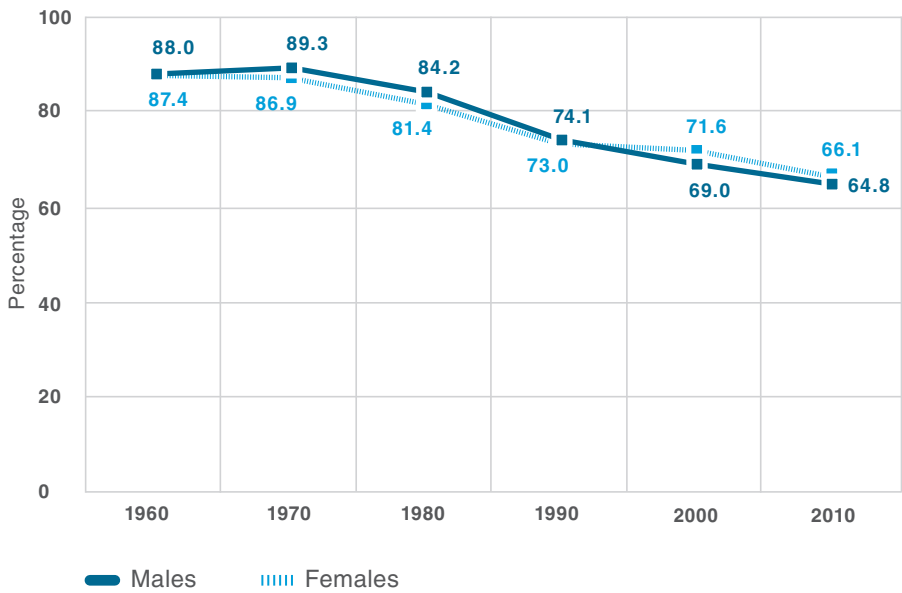
FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF ALL PERSONS AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE MARRIED, BY SEX AND RACE, 1960–2010, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Percents of total males and total females include races other than black and white. In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table UC3), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF PERSONS AGE 35–44 WHO WERE MARRIED, BY SEX, 1960–2010, UNITED STATES



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Statistical Abstract of the United States* for 1961 (Table 27), 1971 (Table 38), 1981 (Table 49), and 2001 (Table 51), available online at www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html; *General Population Characteristics* for 1990 (Table 34), available online at www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cpi/cp-i.html; *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table UC3), available online at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html>.

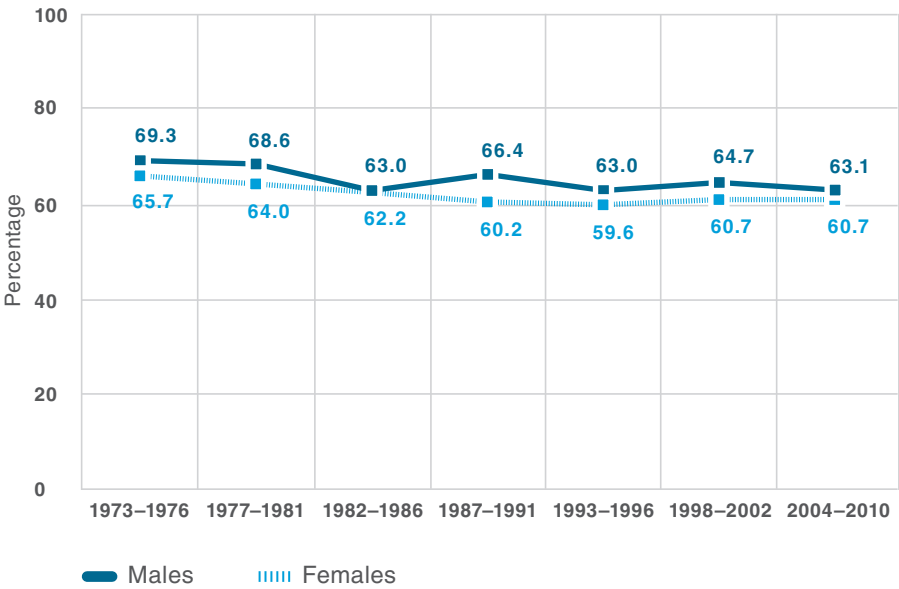
for the early years of the twenty-first century, the percentage of women and men ever marrying will almost certainly be lower.

The decline in marriage does not mean that people are giving up on living together with a sexual partner. On the contrary, with the incidence of unmarried cohabitation increasing rapidly, marriage is giving ground to unwed unions. Most people now live together before they marry for the first time. An even higher percentage of divorced persons who subsequently remarry live together first. And a growing number of persons, both young and old, are living together with no plans to marry eventually.

There is a common belief that, although a smaller percentage of Americans are marrying than was the case a few decades ago, those who now marry have marriages of higher quality. It seems reasonable to surmise that if divorce removes poor marriages from the pool of married couples and cohabitation “trial marriages” deter some bad marriages from forming, the remaining marriages should, on average, be happier. The best available evidence on the topic, however, does not support these assumptions. Since 1973, the General Social Survey periodically has asked representative samples of married Americans to rate their marriages as either “very happy,” “pretty happy,” or “not too happy.”³ As **Figure 4** indicates, the percentage of both men and women responding “very happy” has declined moderately

3 Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, this is a nationally representative study of the English-speaking, non-institutionalized population of the United States age 18 and over.

FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF MARRIED PERSONS AGE 18 AND OLDER WHO SAID THEIR MARRIAGES WERE “VERY HAPPY,” BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



NOTE: The number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 2,000—except for 1977–1981, 1998–2002, and 2004–2008, with about 1,500 respondents for each sex.

SOURCE: The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.

over the past forty years.⁴ This trend, however, has essentially flattened out over the last two decades.

DIVORCE

KEY FINDING: The American divorce rate today is nearly twice that of 1960, but has declined since hitting its highest point in our history in the early 1980s. For the average couple marrying for the first time in recent years, the lifetime probability of divorce or separation now falls between 40 and 50 percent.

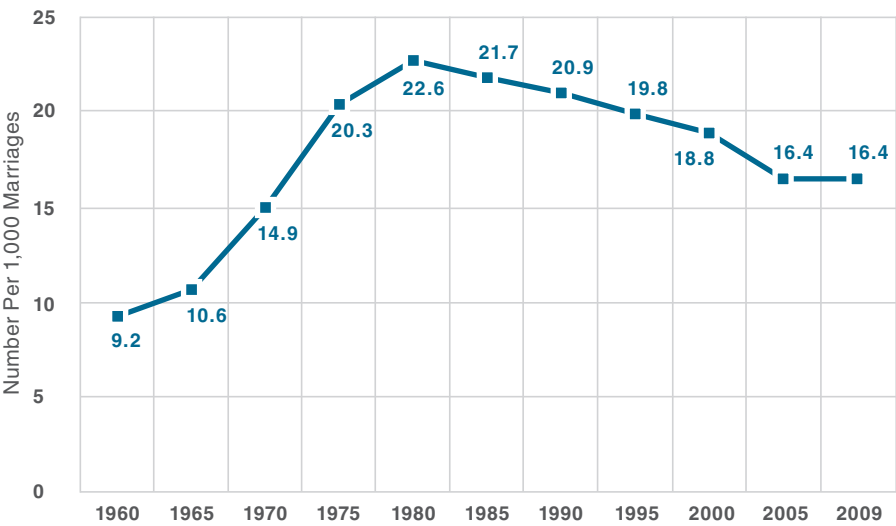
The increase in divorce, shown by the trend reported in **Figure 5**, has probably elicited more concern and discussion than any other family-related trend in the United States. Although the long-term trend in divorce has been upward since colonial times, the divorce rate was level for about two decades after World War II, during the period of high fertility known as the baby boom. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the incidence of divorce started to increase and it more than doubled over the next fifteen years to reach a historical high point in the early 1980s.

Since then, the divorce rate has modestly declined. The decline apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.⁵

4 Using a different data set that compared marriages in 1980 with marriages in 1992, equated in terms of marital duration, Stacy J. Rogers and Paul Amato found similarly that the 1992 marriages had less marital interaction, more marital conflict, and more marital problems. "Is Marital Quality Declining? The Evidence from Two Generations," *Social Forces* 75 (1997): 1089.

5 Joshua R. Goldstein, "The Leveling of Divorce in the United States," *Demography* 36 (1999): 409–14.

FIGURE 5. NUMBER OF DIVORCES PER 1,000 MARRIED WOMEN AGE 15 AND OLDER, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: We have used the number of divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, rather than the Crude Divorce Rate of divorces per 1,000 population to help avoid the problem of compositional changes in the population. Even this more refined measure is somewhat susceptible to compositional changes. Calculations for this table are by the National Marriage Project for the United States, less California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Statistical Abstract of the United States* for 2001 (Table 117), available online at www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html; *Current Population Report* for 2000 (Table 3), available online at www.census.gov/cps; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data” for 2000 (in *National Vital Statistics Report* 49) and 2009 (in *NVS Report* 58) (Table 2), available online at www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm.

Two probable reasons for this are an increase in the age at which people marry for the first time, and that marriage is progressively becoming the preserve of the well-educated. Both of these factors are associated with greater marital stability.⁶

Although a majority of divorced persons eventually remarry, the growth of divorce has led to a steep increase in the percentage of all adults who are currently divorced (**Figure 6**). This percentage, which was only 1.8 percent for males and 2.6 percent for females in 1960, had quadrupled by the year 2000. The percentage of divorced persons is higher for females than for males primarily because divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women. Also, among those who do remarry, men generally do so sooner than women.

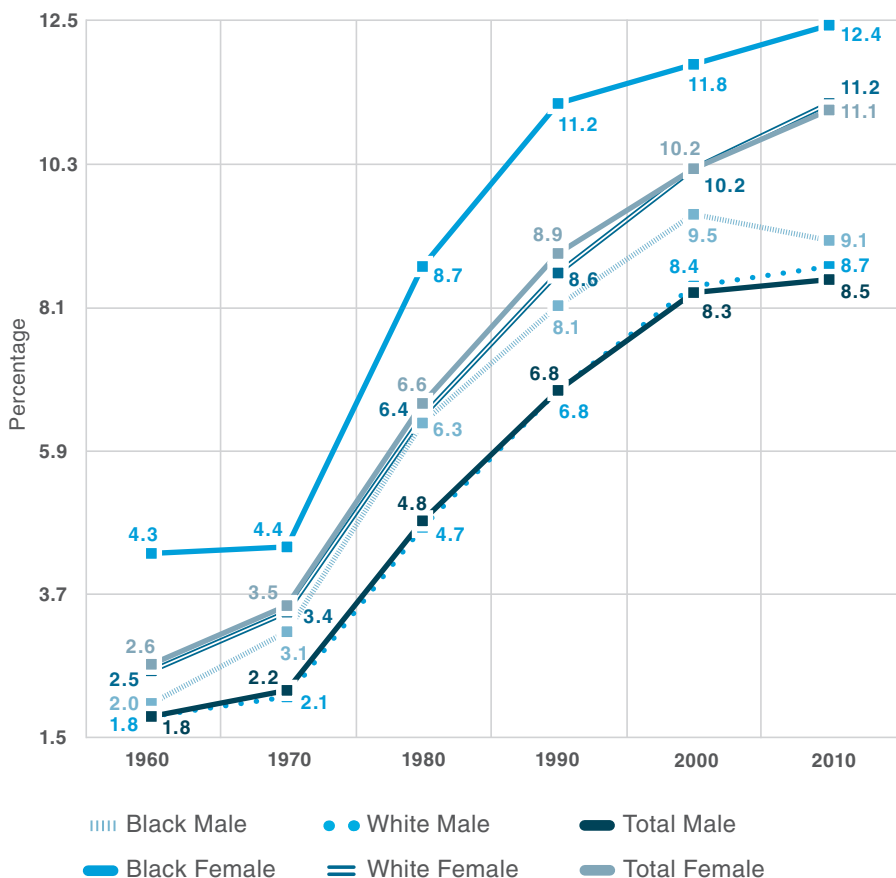
When it comes to cultural attitudes, **Figure 7** indicates that the public has become more accepting of divorce in the last decade, after turning against divorce somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s. This is a sobering development, insofar as more permissive divorce attitudes are associated in the population at large with lower-quality and more unstable marriages.⁷ Indeed, this attitudinal shift may be linked to the deceleration of the decline in divorce in the 2000s (see **Figure 5**).

Overall, the chances remain high—estimated between 40 and 50 percent—that a first marriage entered into in

6 Tim B. Heaton, “Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States,” *Journal of Family Issues* 23 (2002): 392–409; W. Bradford Wilcox, “The Evolution of Divorce,” *National Affairs* 1 (2009): 81–94.

7 See, for instance, Paul R. Amato and Stacey J. Rogers, “Do Attitudes toward Divorce Affect Marital Quality?” *Journal of Family Issues* 20 (1999): 69–86.

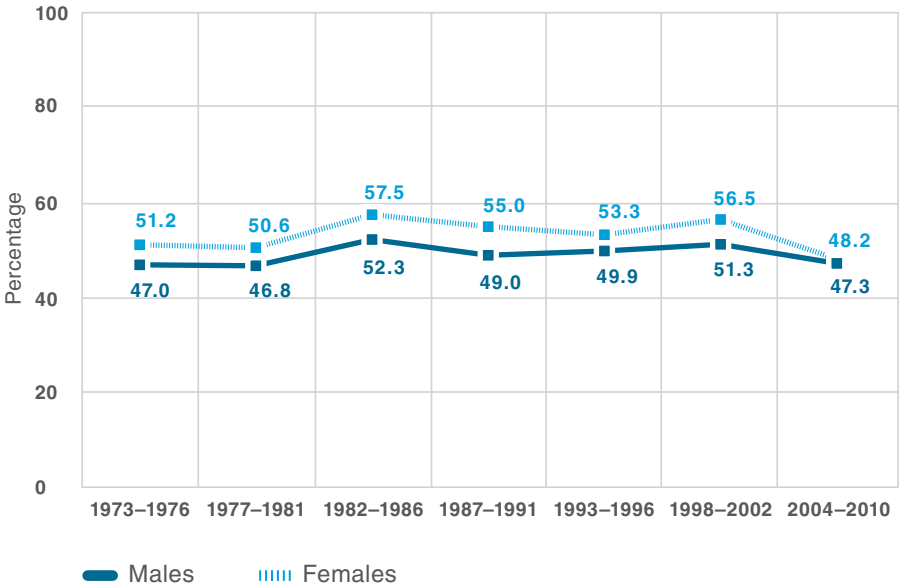
FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF ALL PERSONS AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE DIVORCED, BY SEX AND RACE, 1960–2010, UNITED STATES



NOTE: In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years. “Divorced” indicates family status at the time of survey. Divorced respondents who later marry are counted as “married.”

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table A1) and earlier similar reports. Available online from www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

FIGURE 7. PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS AGE 18–45 WHO SAID THAT DIVORCE LAWS SHOULD BE CHANGED TO MAKE GETTING A DIVORCE “MORE DIFFICULT,” BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



NOTE: The number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 2,000—except for 1977–1981, 1998–2002, and 2004–2008, with about 1,500 respondents for each sex.

SOURCE: The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.

recent years will end in either divorce or separation before one partner dies.⁸ (However, see the accompanying sidebar: “Your Chances of Divorce May Be Much Lower Than You Think.”) The likelihood of divorce has varied considerably among different segments of the American population: the figures are higher for blacks than for whites, for instance, and higher in the South and West than in other parts of the country. But these variations have been diminishing. The trend toward a greater similarity of divorce rates between whites and blacks is largely attributable to the fact that fewer blacks are marrying.⁹

At the same time, there has been little change in such traditionally large divorce rate differences as between those who marry when they are teenagers compared to those who marry after age 21 and the non-religious compared to the religiously committed. Teenagers and the non-religious who marry have considerably higher divorce rates.¹⁰ Of course, last year’s report indicates that one new trend is that there is a growing educational divide in divorce in the United States: less-educated Americans face a much higher divorce rate than their college-educated fellow citizens.

8 Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995,” *Population and Development Review* 27 (2001): 553–63; R. Kelly Raley and Larry L. Bumpass, “The Topography of the Divorce Plateau: Levels and Trends in Union Stability in the United States after 1980,” *Demographic Research* 8 (2003): 245–59.

9 Jay D. Teachman, “Stability across Cohorts in Divorce Risk Factors,” *Demography* 39 (2002): 331–51.

10 Raley and Bumpass, “Topography of the Divorce Plateau.”

YOUR CHANCES OF
DIVORCE
MAY BE MUCH
LOWER
THAN YOU THINK

By now almost everyone has heard that the national divorce rate is almost 50 percent of all marriages. This is basically true for the married population as a whole. But for many people, the actual chances of divorce are far below 50/50.

The background characteristics of people entering a marriage have major implications for their risk of divorce. Here are some percentage-point decreases in the risk of divorce or separation *during the first ten years of marriage*, according to various personal and social factors:^a

FACTORS	PERCENT DECREASE IN RISK OF DIVORCE
Annual income over \$50,000 (vs. under \$25,000)	-30
Having a baby seven months or more after marriage (vs. before marriage)	-24
Marrying over 25 years of age (vs. under 18)	-24
Family of origin intact (vs. divorced parents)	-14
Religious affiliation (vs. none)	-14
College (vs. high school dropout)	-25

So if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after age 25 without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are very low indeed.

Also, the “close to 50 percent” divorce rate refers to the percentage of marriages entered into during a particular year that are projected to end in divorce or separation before one spouse dies. Such projections assume that the divorce and death rates occurring that year will continue indefinitely into the future—an assumption that is useful more as an indicator of the instability of marriages in the recent past than as a predictor of future events. In fact, the divorce rate has been dropping, slowly, since peaking around 1980, and the rate could be lower (or higher) in the future than it is today.^b

- a Matthew D. Bramlett and William D. Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States*, Vital and Health Statistics 23 (Washington, DC: National Center for Health Statistics, 2002); and W. Bradford Wilcox, “When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America,” *The State of Our Unions: 2010* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2010). The risks are calculated for women only.
- b Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields, “Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces, 2001,” *Current Population Reports*, P70-80 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

UNMARRIED COHABITATION

KEY FINDING: The number of unmarried couples has increased dramatically over the past five decades. Most younger Americans now spend some time living together outside of marriage, and unmarried cohabitation commonly precedes marriage.

Between 1960 and 2010, as indicated in **Figure 8**, the number of unmarried couples in America increased more than seventeen-fold. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household—is particularly common among the young. It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women age 25 to 39 are currently living with a partner and an additional quarter have lived with a partner at some time in the past. More than 60 percent of first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none fifty years ago.¹¹

For many, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for others simply an alternative to living alone, and for a small but growing number it is considered an alternative to marriage. Cohabitation is more common among those of lower educational and income levels. Our 2010 report indicates that among women in the 25 to 44 age range, 75 percent of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 50 percent of college graduates. Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their

11 Sheila Kennedy and Larry Bumpass, “Cohabitation and Children’s Living Arrangements: New Estimates from the United States,” *Demographic Research* 19 (2008): 1663–92.

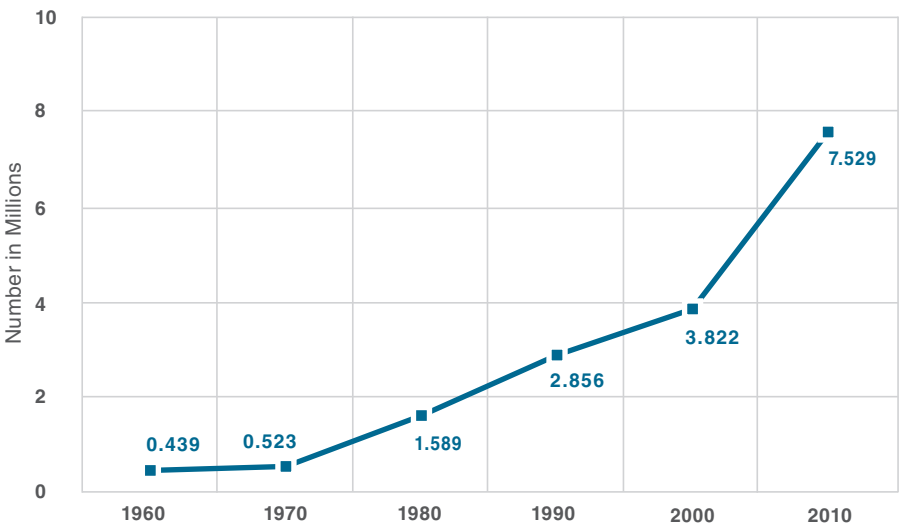
peers, those who have been divorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now over 40 percent, contain children.

The belief that living together before marriage is a useful way “to find out whether you really get along,” and thus avoid a bad marriage and an eventual divorce, is now widespread among young people. But the available data on the effects of cohabitation fail to confirm this belief. In fact, a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage.

This evidence is controversial, however, because it is difficult to distinguish the “selection effect” from the “experience of cohabitation effect.” The selection effect refers to the fact that people who cohabit before marriage have different characteristics from those who do not, and it may be these characteristics, and not the experience of cohabitation, that leads to marital instability. There is some empirical support for both positions. A recent study based on a nationally-representative sample of more than 1,000 married men and women concluded that premarital cohabitation, when limited to the period after engagement, is not associated with an elevated risk of marital problems; however, this study also found that couples who cohabited prior to engagement were more likely to have marital problems and less likely to be happy in their marriages.¹² What can be said for certain is that no published research from the United States has

¹² Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman, “The Pre-Engagement Cohabitation Effect: A Replication and Extension of Previous Findings,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 23 (2009): 107–11.

FIGURE 8. NUMBER OF COHABITING, UNMARRIED ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Prior to 1996, the U.S. Census estimated unmarried-couple households based on two unmarried adults of the opposite sex living in the same household. After 1996, respondents could identify themselves as unmarried partners.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table UC3), available online from www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

yet found that those who cohabit before marriage have stronger marriages than those who do not.¹³

¹³ For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States: An Appraisal of Research Themes, Findings, and Implications,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 1–20; David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage—A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002); and Anne-Marie Ambert, “Cohabitation and Marriage: How Are They Related?” (Ottawa, ON: The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2005).

THE SURPRISING ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE

When thinking of the many benefits of marriage, the economic aspects are often overlooked. Yet the economic benefits of marriage are substantial, both for individuals and for society. Marriage is a wealth-generating institution. Married couples create more economic assets on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples. A 2002 study of retirement data concluded that “individuals who do not participate in legal marriage (e.g., never married or cohabiting) have significantly lower wealth than those who are continuously married.” Compared to those continuously married, those who never married had a reduction in wealth of 75 percent, those who were currently cohabiting had a reduction of 58 percent, and those who divorced and didn’t remarry had a reduction of 72 percent.^a

One might think that the explanation for why marriage generates economic assets is because those people who are more likely to be wealth creators are also more likely to marry and

^a Janet Wilmoth and Gregor Koso, “Does Marital History Matter? Marital Status and Wealth Outcomes among Preretirement Adults,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (2002): 265.

stay married. And this is certainly true, but only in part. The institution of marriage itself provides a wealth-generation bonus. It does this through providing economies of scale (two can live more cheaply than one), and as implicitly a long-term personal contract it encourages economic specialization. Working as a couple, individuals can develop those skills in which they excel, leaving others to their spouse.

Also, married couples save and invest more for the future, and they can act as a small insurance pool against life uncertainties such as illness and job loss.^b Probably because of marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behavior, men tend to become more economically productive after marriage; they earn between 10 and 20 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.^c All of

^b Thomas A. Hirschl, Joyce Altobelli, and Mark R. Rank, "Does Marriage Increase the Odds of Affluence? Exploring the Life Course Probabilities," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003): 927–38; Joseph Lupton and James P. Smith, "Marriage, Assets and Savings," in Shoshana A. Grossbard-Schechtman (ed.), *Marriage and the Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 129–52.

^c Hyunbae Chun and Injae Lee, "Why Do Married Men Earn More: Productivity or Marriage Selection?" *Economic Inquiry* 39 (2001): 307–19; Sanders Korenman and David Neumark, "Does Marriage Really Make Men More Productive?" *Journal of Human Resources* 26 (1991): 282–307; Kermit Daniel, "The Marriage Premium," in Mariano Tomassi and Kathryn Ierulli (eds.), *The New Economics of Human Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 113–25.

these benefits are independent of the fact that married couples receive more work-related and government-provided support and also more help and support from their extended families (two sets of in-laws) and friends.^d

Beyond the economic advantages of marriage for the married couples themselves, marriage has a tremendous economic impact on society. Marriage trends have a big impact on family income levels and inequality. After more than doubling between 1947 and 1977, the growth of median family income has slowed in recent years. A major reason is that married couples, who fare better economically than their single counterparts, have been a rapidly decreasing proportion of total families. In this same twenty-year period, and in large part because of changes in family structure, family income inequality has significantly increased.^e

Research has consistently shown that divorce and unmarried childbearing increase child poverty. In recent years the majority of children who grow up outside of married families

d Lingxin Hao, "Family Structure, Private Transfers, and the Economic Well-Being of Families with Children," *Social Forces* 75 (1996): 269–92.

e U.S. Bureau of the Census, Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change Using the March Current Population Survey, *Current Population Reports*, P60-203 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998); John Iceland, "Why Poverty Remains High: The Role of Income Growth, Economic Inequality, and Changes in Family Structure, 1949–1999," *Demography* 40 (2003): 499–519.

have experienced at least one year of dire poverty.^f According to one study, if family structure had not changed between 1960 and 1998, the black child poverty rate in 1998 would have been 28.4 percent rather than 45.6 percent, and the white child poverty rate would have been 11.4 percent rather than 15.4 percent.^g The rise in child poverty, of course, generates significant public costs in health and welfare programs.

Marriages that end in divorce also are very costly to the public. One researcher determined that a single divorce costs state and federal governments about \$30,000, based on such factors as the increased use of food stamps and public housing as well as increased bankruptcies and juvenile delinquency. The nation's 1.4 million divorces in 2002 are estimated to have cost the taxpayers more than \$30 billion.^h

^f Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, "The Economic Risk of Childhood in America: Estimating the Probability of Poverty Across the Formative Years," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 1058–67.

^g Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill, "For Richer or For Poorer: Marriage as an Antipoverty Strategy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21 (2002): 4.

^h David Schramm, "Individual and Social Costs of Divorce in Utah," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 27 (2006): 1.

LOSS OF CHILD-CENTEREDNESS

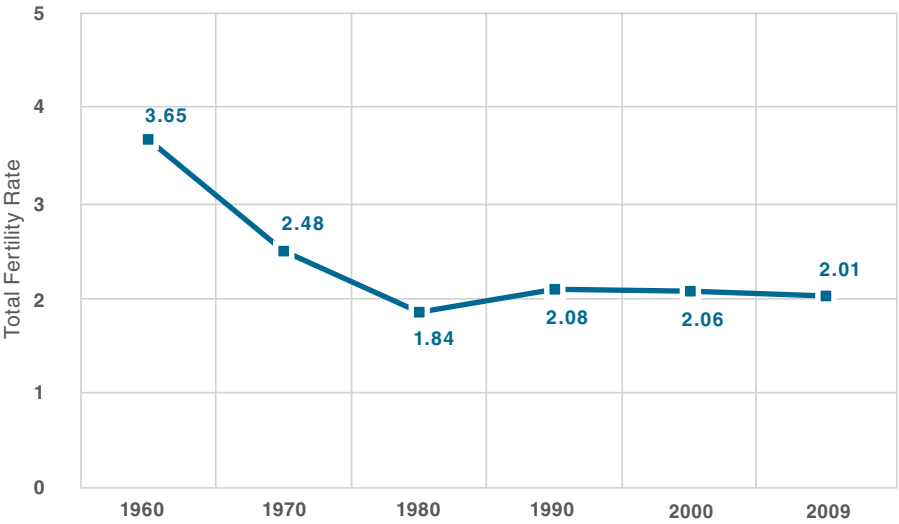
KEY FINDING: The presence of children in America has declined significantly since 1960, as measured by fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Other indicators suggest that this decline has reduced the child-centeredness of our nation and contributed to the weakening of the institution of marriage.

Throughout history, marriage has first and foremost been an institution for procreation and raising children. It has provided the cultural tie that seeks to connect the father to his children by binding him to the mother of his children. Yet in recent times, children have increasingly been pushed from center stage.

Americans on average have been having fewer children. **Figure 9** indicates the decline in fertility since 1960. It is important to note that fertility had been gradually declining throughout American history, reaching a low point in the Great Depression of the 1930s before suddenly accelerating with the baby boom generation starting in 1945. By 1960, the birth rate was back to where it had been in 1920, with the average woman having about three and one-half children over the course of her life. After 1960, the birth rate declined sharply for two decades before leveling off around 1990.

In 2009, the latest year for which we have complete information, the American “total fertility rate” (TFR) stood at 2.01, below the 1990 level and slightly above two children per woman. This rate is close to the “replacement level” of 2.1, the level at which the population would be replaced through births

FIGURE 9. FERTILITY RATES OF WOMEN AGE 15-44, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: The total fertility rate is the number of births that an average woman would have if, at each year of age, she experienced the birth rates occurring in the specified year. A total fertility rate of 2.11 represents “replacement level” fertility under current mortality conditions (assuming no net migration).

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: *National Vital Statistics Report* for 1993 and for 2001; “Births: Preliminary Data” for 2009 (in *NVS Report* 59), available online at www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm.

alone, and is one of the highest rates found in modern industrialized societies. In most European and several Asian nations the total fertility rate has decreased to a level well below that of the United States, in some countries to slightly more than one child per woman.¹⁴ The U.S. fertility rate is relatively high due in part to the contribution of our higher-fertility Hispanic population.

¹⁴ The TFR in Italy, Poland, and Spain is 1.4; in Japan and Germany it is 1.3; in South Korea it is 1.2; and in Taiwan it is 1.0. See Social Trends Institute, *The Sustainable Demographic Dividend* (Barcelona: STI, 2011): 32.

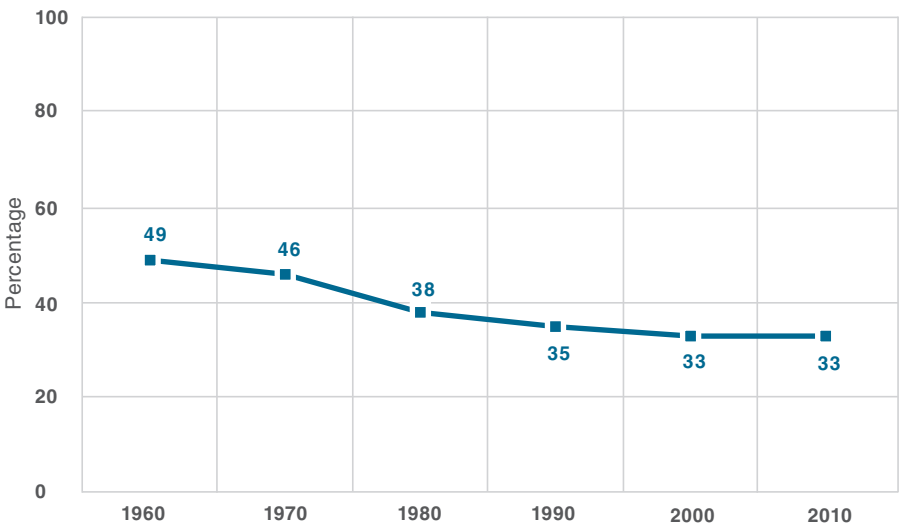
The long-term decline of births has had a marked effect on the household makeup of the American population. It is estimated that in the mid-1800s more than 75 percent of all households contained children under the age of 18.¹⁵ One hundred years later, in 1960, this number had dropped to slightly less than half of all households. In 2010, just five decades later, only 33 percent of households included children (**Figure 10**). This obviously means that adults are less likely to be living with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and that children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. It suggests that the needs and concerns of children—especially young children—may gradually be receding from our national consciousness.

Several scholars determined that in 1960 the proportion of one's life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By that year the death rate had plummeted so that fewer marriages ended through death, and the divorce revolution of recent decades had not yet begun, so that a relatively small number of marriages ended in divorce. By 1985, however, just twenty-five years later, the proportion of one's life spent with spouse and children dropped to 43 percent—the lowest in our history.¹⁶ This remarkable reversal was caused mainly by the decline of fertility and the weakening of marriage through divorce and unwed births.

¹⁵ James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1990): 588, Fig. 22.4.

¹⁶ Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken, and John Bongaarts, "Demographic Foundations of Family Change," *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 346–58.

FIGURE 10. PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH A CHILD OR CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18, 1960–2010, UNITED STATES



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Statistical Abstract of the United States* for 1964 (Tables 36 and 54), for 1980 (Tables 62 and 67), for 1985 (Tables 54 and 63), and for 1994 (Table 67), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008.html; *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Tables F1 and H1), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

In a cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, the United States ranked virtually at the top in the percentage of those disagreeing with this statement: “The main purpose of marriage is having children.”¹⁷ Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else

¹⁷ Tom W. Smith, “The Emerging 21st Century American Family,” *GSS Social Change Report* 42 (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1999): 48, Table 20.

compared, for example, to 51 percent of Norwegians and 45 percent of Italians. Consistent with this view is a dramatic change in our attitudes about holding marriages together for children. In a Detroit area sample of women, the proportion of women answering “no” to the question “Should a couple stay together for the sake of the children?” jumped from 51 percent to 82 percent between 1962 and 1985.¹⁸ A nationally-representative 1994 sample found only 15 percent of the population agreeing that “When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.”¹⁹

One effect of the weakening of child-centeredness is clear. A careful analysis of divorce statistics shows that, beginning around 1975, the presence of children in a marriage has become only a very minor inhibitor of divorce (slightly more so when the child is male rather than female).²⁰

¹⁸ Arland Thornton, “Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1989): 873–93. This change occurred among women as they grew older, but it is very unlikely to be just an age effect.

¹⁹ The 1994 wave of the General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

²⁰ Tim B. Heaton, “Marital Stability throughout the Child-Rearing Years,” *Demography* 27 (1990): 55–63; Philip Morgan, Diane Lye, and Gretchen Condran, “Sons, Daughters, and the Risk of Marital Disruption,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 110–29; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, “Children and Marital Disruption,” *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1991): 930–53.

FRAGILE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

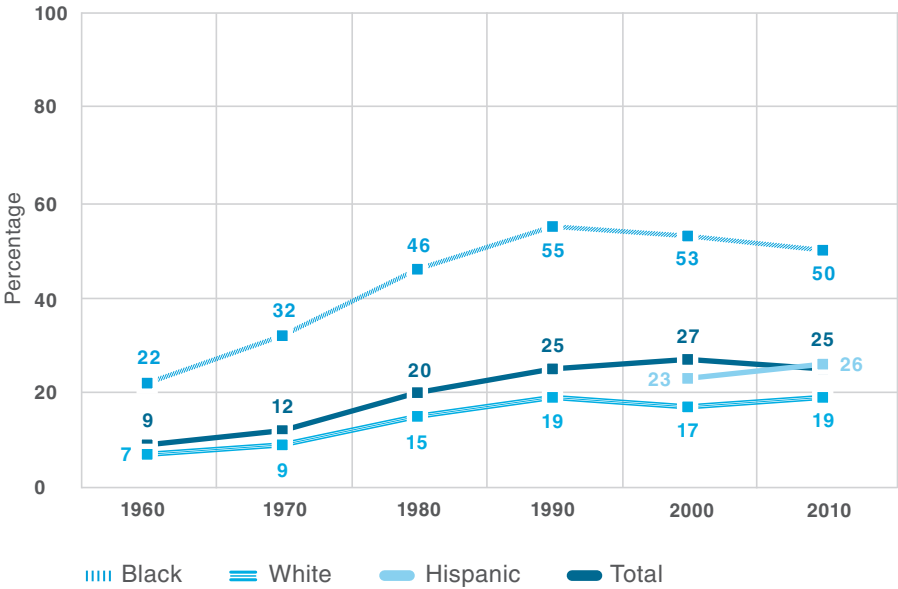
KEY FINDING: The percentage of children who grow up in fragile—typically fatherless—families has grown enormously over the past five decades. This is mainly due to increases in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and unmarried cohabitation. The trend toward fragile families leveled off in the late 1990s, but the most recent data show a slight increase.

There is now ample evidence that stable and satisfactory marriages are crucial for the well-being of adults. Yet such marriages are even more important for the proper socialization and overall well-being of children. A central purpose of the institution of marriage is to ensure the responsible and long-term involvement of both biological parents in the difficult and time-consuming task of raising the next generation.

The trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents (**Figure 11**). This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families.²¹ While in 1960 only 9 percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the twentieth century, by 2010 the percentage had risen to 25

21 Mary Parke, *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003); and W. Bradford Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011).

FIGURE 11. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 LIVING WITH A SINGLE PARENT, BY YEAR AND RACE, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Total includes blacks, whites, and all other racial and ethnic groupings. Over these decades an additional 3 to 4 percent of children, not indicated in the above figure, were classified as living with no parent. In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years. In 2000 and 2010, whites is redefined to “white, non-Hispanic,” and “Hispanic” is separated out as its own group. Prior to 2007, the U.S. Census counted children living with two cohabiting parents as children in single-parent households. See “Improvements to Data Collection about Families in CPS 2007,” available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table C3), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

percent. The overwhelming majority of single-parent families are mother-only, although the percentage of father-only families has grown recently to about 18 percent (of single-parent families). But note also that the growth in single-parent families has leveled off in the last decade.

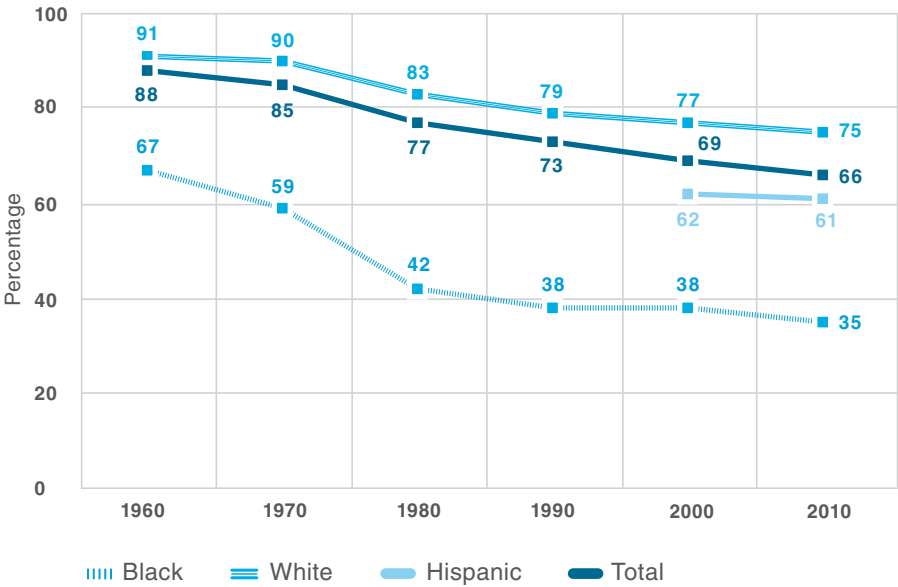
An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of children under age 18 living with two married parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by more than 20 percentage points (**Figure 12**). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while 9 percent are stepfamilies.²² The problem is that children in stepfamilies, according to a substantial and growing body of social science evidence, fare no better in life than children in single-parent families.²³ Data on stepfamilies, therefore, probably are more reasonably combined with single-parent than with biological two-parent families. An important indicator that helps resolve this issue is the percentage of children who live apart from their biological fathers. That percentage has doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to 34 percent.²⁴

22 Jason Fields, *Living Arrangements of Children: Fall, 1996*, Current Population Reports, P70-74 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

23 Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66 (2004): 351-67; and more generally, David Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Stepfamilies," in Alan Booth and Judy Dunn (eds.), *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994): 3-27.

24 Fields, *Living Arrangements of Children*.

FIGURE 12. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 LIVING WITH TWO MARRIED PARENTS, BY YEAR AND RACE, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Total includes blacks, whites, and all other racial and ethnic groupings. Over these decades an additional 3 to 4 percent of children, not indicated in the above figure, were classified as living with no parent. In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years. In 2000 and 2010, whites is redefined to “white, non-Hispanic,” and “Hispanic” is separated out as its own group. Prior to 2007, the U.S. Census counted children living with two cohabiting parents as children in single-parent households. See “Improvements to Data Collection about Families in CPS 2007,” available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table C3), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

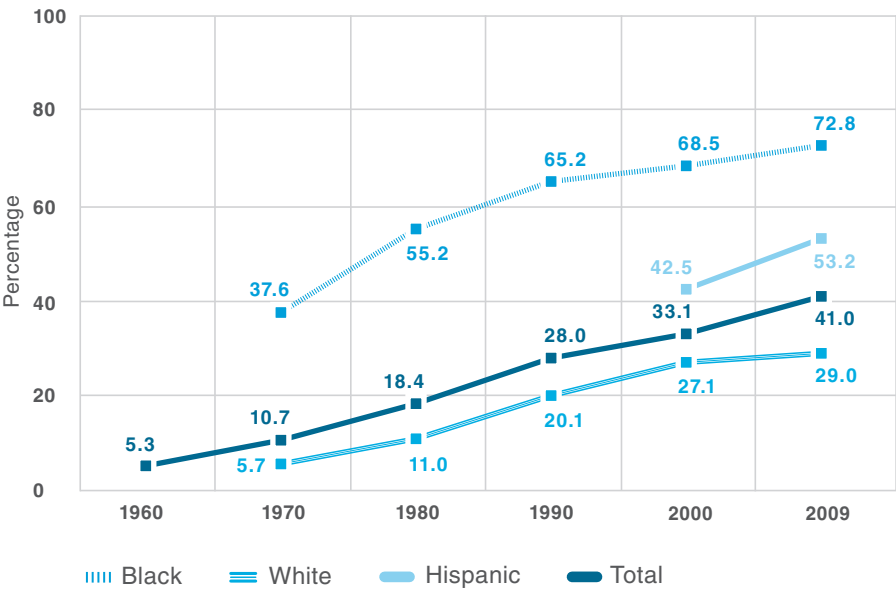
The dramatic shift in family structure indicated by these measures has been generated mainly by three burgeoning trends: divorce, unmarried births, and unmarried cohabitation. The incidence of divorce began to increase rapidly during the 1960s. The number of children under age 18 newly affected by parental divorce each year, most of whom have lost a resident father, grew from under 500,000 in 1960 to well over a million in 1975. After peaking around 1980, that number leveled off and remains close to a million new children each year. Much of the reason for the leveling off is a drop in average family size; each divorce that occurs today typically affects a smaller number of children than in earlier times.

The second reason for the shift in family structure is an increase in the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers, which suddenly and unexpectedly began to increase rapidly in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than sevenfold (**Figure 13**). More than four in ten births and more than two-thirds of black births in 2009, the latest year for which we have complete data, were out-of-wedlock.

A third and still more recent family trend that has affected family structure is the rapid growth of unmarried cohabitation. In fact, more cohabiting couples are having children, or bringing children into their relationship. Consequently, there has been about a fourteen-fold increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children since 1960 (**Figure 14**). Slightly more than 40 percent of all children are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their childhood years.²⁵

25 Kennedy and Bumpass, "Cohabitation and Children's Living Arrangements."

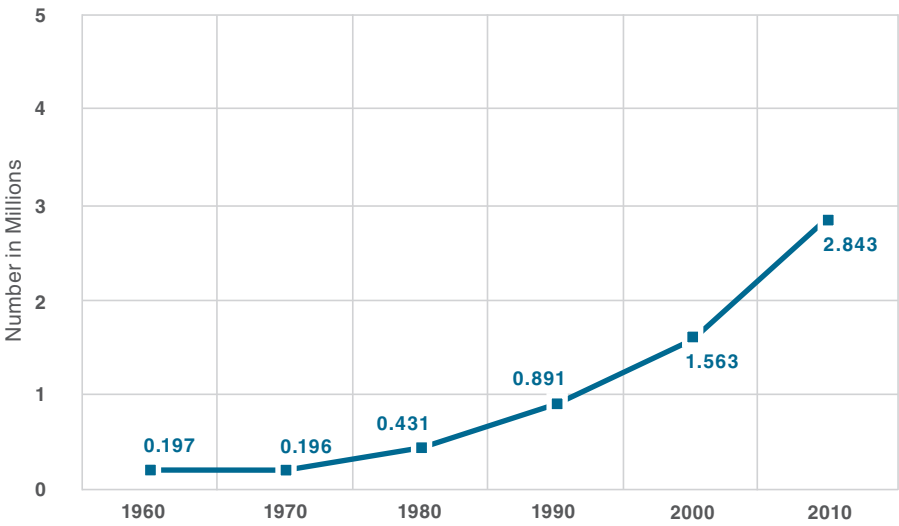
FIGURE 13. PERCENTAGE OF LIVE BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED WOMEN, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Total includes whites, blacks, and all other racial and ethnic groupings.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau: *Statistical Abstract of the United States* for 1995 (Table 94), 1999 (Table 99), 2000 (Table 85), and 2001 (Table 76), available online at www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: *National Vital Statistics Report*, “Births: Preliminary Data” for 2009 (in *NVS Report* 59) (Table 1), available online at www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm.

FIGURE 14. NUMBER OF COHABITING, UNMARRIED, ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX LIVING WITH ONE CHILD OR MORE, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



SOURCE: Prior to 1996, the U.S. Census estimated unmarried-couple households based on two unmarried adults of the opposite sex living in the same household. After 1996, respondents could identify themselves as unmarried partners. The Census also identified households with children under 15 until 1996 when they began identifying children under 18.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements” for 2010 (Table UC3), available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html.

In 2000, about 40 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18.²⁶ For unmarried couples in the 25 to 34 age group, the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.²⁷ Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.²⁸ Indeed, if one includes cohabitation in the definition of stepfamily, almost one half of stepfamilies today would consist of a biological parent and unrelated cohabiting partner.²⁹

Children who grow up with cohabiting couples tend to have worse life outcomes compared to those growing up with married couples.³⁰ The primary reasons are that cohabiting couples

²⁶ Tavia Simmons and Martin O'Connell, *Married-Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000*, Census 2000 Special Reports, CENSR-5 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

²⁷ Wendy D. Manning and Daniel T. Lichter, "Parental Cohabitation and Children's Economic Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 998–1010.

²⁸ Larry Bumpass, James A. Sweet, and Andrew Cherlin, "The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage," *Demography* 53 (1991): 913–27.

²⁹ Larry L. Bumpass, R. Kelly Raley, and James A. Sweet, "The Changing Character of Stepfamilies: Implications of Cohabitation and Nonmarital Childbearing," *Demography* 32 (1995): 425–36.

³⁰ Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being"; Wendy Manning, "The Implications of Cohabitation for Children's Well-Being," in Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (eds.), *Just Living Together* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002): 121–52; Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters*; Robin Fretwell Wilson, "Evaluating Marriage: Does Marriage Matter to the Nurturing of Children?" *San Diego Law Review* 42 (2005): 848–81; and Sandra L. Hofferth,

have a much higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower level of household income, and higher levels of child abuse and domestic violence. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children is declining, a decline sadly predictive of increased problems for children.³¹

TEEN ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

KEY FINDING: The desire of teenagers of both sexes for “a good marriage and family life” has remained high over the past few decades. Boys are almost ten percentage points less desirous than girls, however, and they are also a little more pessimistic about the possibility of a long-term marriage. Both boys and girls have become more accepting of lifestyles that are alternatives to marriage, including unwed childbearing and premarital cohabitation.

To find out what the future may hold for marriage and family life it is important to determine what our nation’s youth are saying and thinking, and how their views have changed over time. Are these products of the divorce revolution going to continue the family ways of their parents? Or might there be a cultural counterrevolution among the young that could lead to a reversal of current family trends?

“Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being: Investment Versus Selection,” *Demography* 43 (2006): 53–77.

31 Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the U.S.,” *Population Studies* 54 (2000): 29–41.

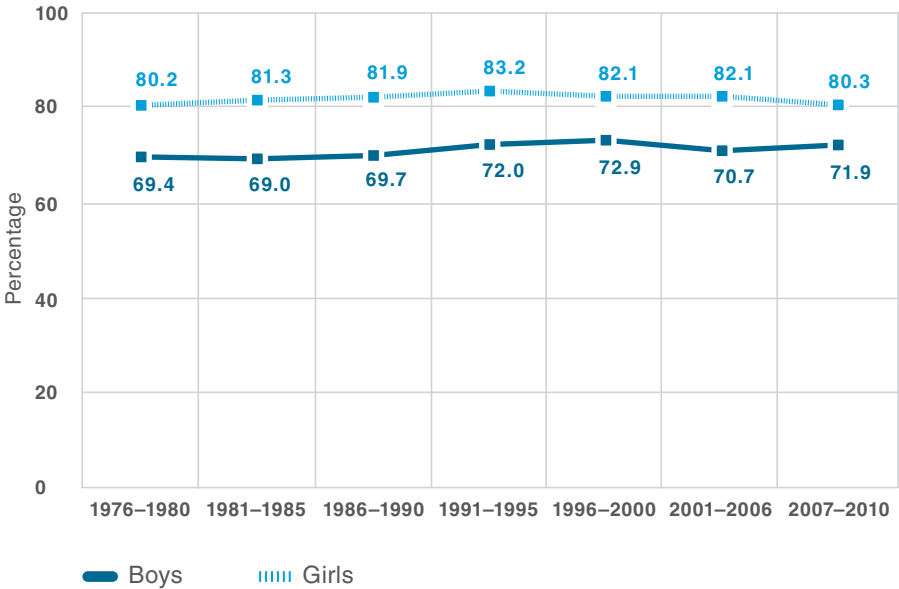
Fortunately, since 1976 a nationally representative survey of high school seniors aptly titled “Monitoring the Future,” conducted annually by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, has asked numerous questions about family-related topics.³² Based on this survey, the percentage of teenagers of both sexes who said that having a good marriage and family life was “extremely important” to them has remained high over the decades. Eighty percent of girls stated this belief in the latest period, with boys lagging behind at 72 percent (**Figure 15**).

Other data from the “Monitoring the Future” survey show a moderate increase in the percentage of teenage respondents who said that they expect to marry (or who are already married), recently 84.5 percent for girls and 77 percent for boys.³³ Among teenagers, boys are a little more pessimistic than girls about the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime. But this difference has recently diminished and, since 1986 to 1990, the trend has flattened out (**Figure 16**).

32 The first survey was conducted in 1975, but because of changes in the ordering of the questions, the data from this survey are not comparable with the data from later surveys.

33 In the 1976 to 1980 period, 73 percent of boys and 82 percent of girls said they expected to marry (or were already married); by 2001–2004, that percentage jumped to 77 for boys and to 84.5 for girls. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13 to 17 found an even larger percentage who thought they would marry someday—88 percent compared to 9 percent who expected to stay single. Gallup has undertaken a youth poll several times since 1977 and the proportion of youth expecting to marry someday has not varied much through the years. See Robert Bezilla (ed.), *America’s Youth in the 1990s* (Princeton, NJ: The George H. Gallup International Institute, 1993).

FIGURE 15. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A GOOD MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IS “EXTREMELY IMPORTANT,” BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: “Monitoring the Future” surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

At the same time, there is widespread acceptance by teenagers of nonmarital lifestyles. Take, for example, agreement with the proposition that “Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone” (**Figure 17**). Less than a third of the girls and only slightly more than a third of the boys seem to believe, based on their response to this statement, that marriage

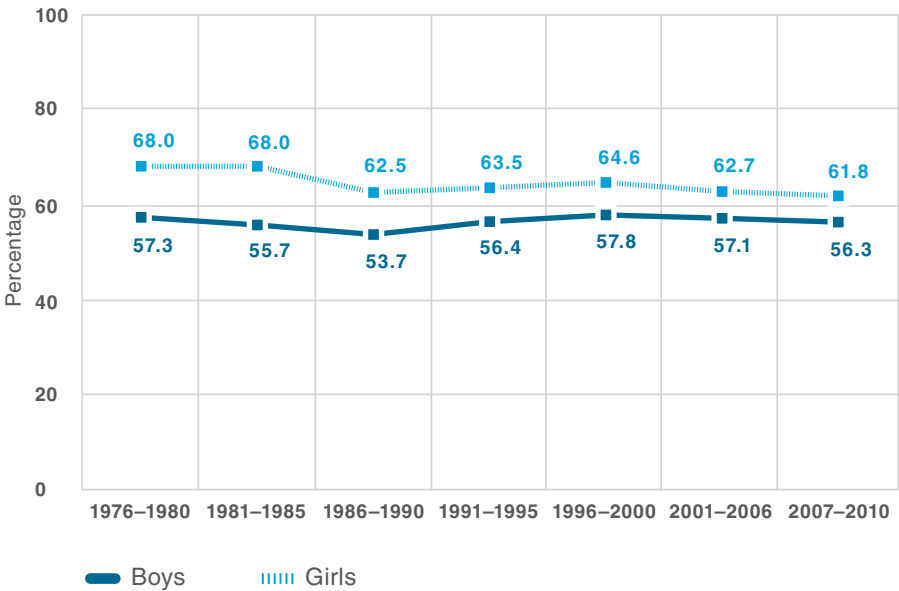
is more beneficial to individuals than the alternatives. Note also that young women have seen their faith in marriage's capacity to deliver happiness fall markedly over the last thirty years. Yet this belief is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.³⁴

Witness the remarkable increase in recent decades in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing among teens (**Figure 18**). And note that whereas in the 1970s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, now they are about the same. With more than 50 percent of teenagers now accepting out-of-wedlock childbearing as a “worthwhile lifestyle,” at least for others, they do not yet seem to grasp the enormous economic, social, and personal costs of nonmarital childbearing.

Another remarkable increase is in the percentage of teenagers who are accepting of living together before marriage—now well over half of all teenagers (**Figure 19**). In this case, girls remain more traditional than boys. The growing cultural acceptance of cohabitation among high school seniors is congruent with the growth in cohabitation demonstrated earlier in this report.

³⁴ For instance, see Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); David G. Myers, *The American Paradox* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, “Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60 (1998): 527–36; and Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*

FIGURE 16. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL STAY MARRIED TO THE SAME PERSON FOR LIFE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES

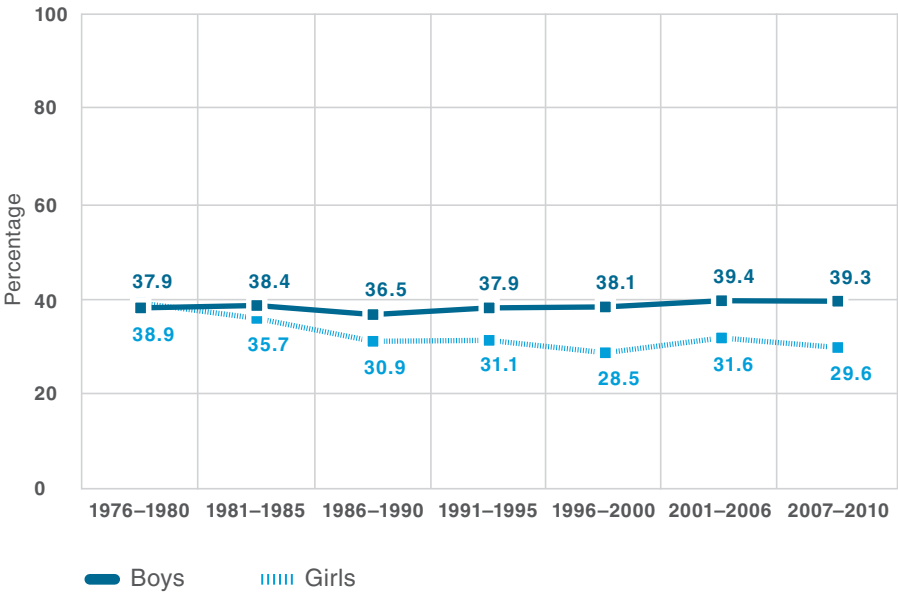


NOTE: Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: “Monitoring the Future” surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

In summary, marriage and family life remain very important goals for today’s teenagers. Nevertheless, teens are also increasingly accepting of a range of nonmarital lifestyles that stand in tension with these goals. Given the ambiguous character of teenage attitudes regarding marriage, there are no strong signs yet of a generational cultural shift that could lead to a reversal of the nation’s recent retreat from marriage.

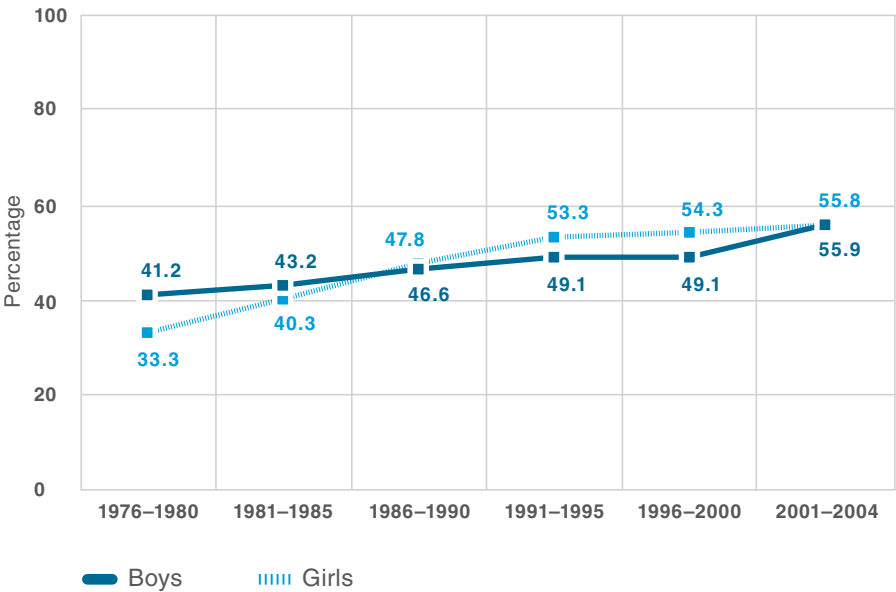
FIGURE 17. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO AGREED OR MOSTLY AGREED THAT MOST PEOPLE WILL HAVE FULLER AND HAPPIER LIVES IF THEY CHOOSE LEGAL MARRIAGE RATHER THAN STAYING SINGLE OR JUST LIVING WITH SOMEONE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: “Monitoring the Future” surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

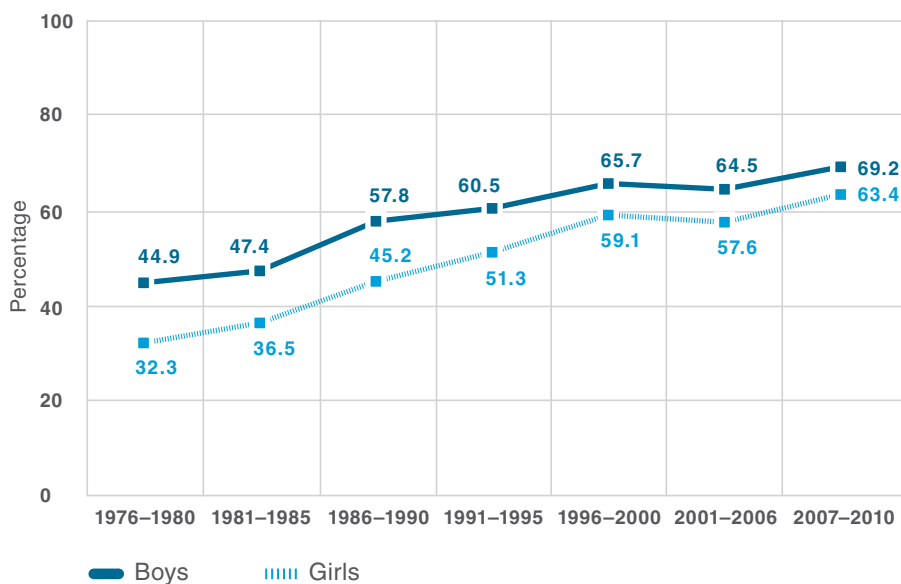
FIGURE 18. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A CHILD WITHOUT BEING MARRIED IS EXPERIMENTING WITH A WORTHWHILE LIFESTYLE OR NOT AFFECTING ANYONE ELSE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001–2004, for which it is about 4,500. This question was not asked between 2007–2010.

SOURCE: “Monitoring the Future” surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

FIGURE 19. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO AGREED OR MOSTLY AGREED WITH THE STATEMENT: “IT IS USUALLY A GOOD IDEA FOR A COUPLE TO LIVE TOGETHER BEFORE GETTING MARRIED IN ORDER TO FIND OUT WHETHER THEY REALLY GET ALONG,” BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: “Monitoring the Future” surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their valuable substantive, methodological, and editorial comments and criticisms of the lead essay in this report, W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt would like to thank David Blankenhorn, Andrew Cherlin, Jeffrey Dew, David Lapp, Scott Stanley, and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. Thanks also to Jeffrey Dew for analyzing the data. Wilcox and Marquardt are responsible for the arguments and analyses found therein.

The editor and associate editor would like to thank copy editor Felicia Chernesky, art director Alma Phipps, and the staff of the National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values for their tireless efforts on behalf of this report.

We are very grateful to the Church Communities Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the William E. Simon Foundation for their generous support of this publication. The Survey of Marital Generosity was made possible by a grant from the Science of Generosity Initiative, with funding from the John Templeton Foundation.



1841 Broadway, Suite 211

New York, NY 10023

Tel: (212) 246-3942

Fax: (212) 541-6665

Email: info@americanvalues.org

Web: www.americanvalues.org



The National Marriage Project

University of Virginia

P.O. Box 400766

Charlottesville, VA 22904-4766

(434) 321-8601

marriage@virginia.edu

<http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/>