



the state *of* our unions

2000

the social health of marriage in America

Social Indicators of Marital Health & Wellbeing

- Marriage
- Divorce
- Unmarried Cohabitation
- Loss of Child Centeredness
- Fragile Families with Children
- Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family

SPECIAL REPORT

**Sex Without Strings, Relationships without Rings:
Today's Young Singles Talk about Mating and Dating**



THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT



The National Marriage Project

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The project is financially supported by the university in cooperation with private foundations.

The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing.

The National Marriage Project has five goals: (1) annually publish *The State of Our Unions*, an index of the health of marriage and marital relationships in America; (2) investigate and report on younger adults' attitudes toward marriage; (3) examine the popular media's portrait of marriage; (4) serve as a clearinghouse source of research and expertise on marriage; and (5) bring together marriage and family experts to develop strategies for revitalizing marriage.

Leadership

The project is co-directed by two nationally prominent family experts. David Popenoe, Ph.D., a professor and former social and behavioral sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of *Life Without Father*, *Disturbing the Nest* and many other scholarly and popular publications on marriage and family. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D., an author and social critic, writes extensively on issues of marriage, family and child wellbeing. She is the author of *The Divorce Culture* and the widely acclaimed *Atlantic Monthly* article "Dan Quayle Was Right."

We extend special thanks to Norval Glenn for his assistance in preparing the social indicators portion of this report.

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For more information:



The National Marriage Project
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1181
(732) 932-2722
marriage@rci.rutgers.edu
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu>

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Key social indicators of marital health and wellbeing are little changed this year. Available evidence indicates that marriage is declining as a first living together experience for couples and as a status of parenthood. New indicators added this year suggest that a loss of child centeredness in our nation is an additional factor contributing to the weakening of the institution of marriage. A special report on young unmarrieds in their twenties, based on focus groups in five major metropolitan areas, finds that the dating culture is now more oriented to seeking low-commitment relationships than to finding a marriage partner.



Amid reports of America's improving social health, we hear little about the state of marriage. How is marriage faring in American society today? Is it becoming stronger or weaker? Sicker or healthier? Better or worse?

Answers to these questions from official sources have been hard to come by. The federal government issues thousands of reports on nearly every dimension of American life, from what we eat to how many hours we commute each day. But it provides no annual index or report on the state of marriage. Indeed, the National Center for Health Statistics, the federal agency responsible for collecting marriage and divorce data from the states, recently scaled back this activity. As a consequence, this important data source has deteriorated. Neither the Congress nor the President has ever convened a bipartisan commission or study group to investigate and report on the state of contemporary marriage. And no private agency, academic institution or private foundation has stepped forward to take on the task of monitoring the indices of marital health.

The neglect of marriage is all the more remarkable because mating and marrying behavior has changed dramatically in recent decades. Although some measures of these changes, such as the rise in unwed childbearing, have been duly noted, discussed and monitored, the state of marriage itself has been slighted. Why this is so remains a great puzzle. Marriage is a fundamental social institution. It is cen-

tral to the nurture and raising of children. It is the "social glue" that reliably attaches fathers to children. It contributes to the physical, emotional and economic health of men, women and children, and thus to the nation as a whole. It is also one of the most highly prized of all human relationships and a central life goal of most Americans. Without some sense of how marriage is faring in America today, the portrait of the nation's social health is incomplete.

The National Marriage Project seeks to fill in this missing feature in our portrait of the nation's social health with *The State of Our Unions*. This report includes what we consider the most important annually or biennially updated indicators related to marriage, divorce, unmarried cohabitation, loss of child centeredness, fragile families with children and teen attitudes about marriage and family. For each area, a key finding is highlighted. These indicators will be updated annually and will provide opportunities for fresh appraisals each June.

We have used the latest and most reliable data available. We cover the period from 1960 to the present, so these data reflect historical trends over several decades. Most of the data come from the United States Bureau of the Census. All of the data were collected by long-established and scientifically reputable institutions that rely on nationally representative samples.

David Popenoe
Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

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Sex Without Strings, Relationships Without Rings

Today's Young Singles Talk About Mating and Dating

by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe



Key Findings

■ The young men and women in this study expect their future marriages to last a lifetime and to fulfill their deepest emotional and spiritual needs. Yet they are involved in a mating culture that may make it more difficult to achieve this lofty goal. Today's singles mating culture is not oriented to marriage, as the mating cul-

ture was in the past. Instead, based on the reports of these singles, it is best described as a low-commitment culture of "sex without strings, relationship without rings."

■ The women participants are more pessimistic than the men about their chances of finding a suitable marriage mate. Women in their late twenties are more pessimistic about men and their chances for marriage than women in their early twenties.

■ Both women and men favor living together as a way of gathering vital information about a partner's character, fidelity and compatibility. However, the women in this study are more wary of low-commitment cohabiting relationships than the men.



■ About half of the women in this study say that they consider unwed motherhood an “option,” if they are unable to find the right man to marry.

■ Although the empirical evidence suggests that marriage creates important economic benefits, especially for less well-educated young adults, these noncollege men and women see marriage as a form of economic exposure and risk, largely due to the prevalence of divorce.

■ Although highly critical of divorce, these young adults are pessimistic about the likelihood of changes in the law or the culture. They look to education as the principal means for increasing their chances of marital success. They would like to learn how to communicate more effectively and how to resolve conflict in relationships.

The Neglected Noncollege Majority

About a year ago, as part of its Next Generation program, the National Marriage Project began a study of mating and dating among not-yet-married heterosexual men and women in their twenties. Surprisingly, given the popular interest in young singles and their love lives, there has been little recent research on this topic. Except for studies of cohabitation and dating violence, social science research has generally neglected investigations of contemporary patterns of mating and mate selection among today’s young singles.

Moreover, what we do know about the not-yet-married young tends to come from studies of college students and four-year college graduates. Almost entirely overlooked in the research are noncollege singles in their twen-

Young men and women today want to marry a **best friend** and “**soul mate.**”

ties. Yet noncollege men and women (those who do not currently attend or hold degrees from four-year colleges) represent a clear majority of young adults in their twenties, and their mating choices will play a crucial role in determining future trends in cohabitation, marriage and divorce. Also, noncollege men and women represent a population that, in the past, has relied on marriage as a way of getting ahead economically. So the mating and marrying behavior of today’s noncollege young adults is likely to have important future economic consequences as well.

To begin to address this research deficit, we set out to conduct a small qualitative study of noncollege young adults in their twenties, as a first step toward a larger and statistically representative survey. Our purpose was to gather descriptions of the contemporary dating scene from noncollege men and women and to explore the reasoning behind their views on mate selection, cohabitation and future marriage. We convened ten focus groups of not-yet-married heterosexual men and women, ages of 21 through 29, in five major metropolitan areas: Northern New Jersey, Atlanta, Dallas, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In each area, we divided men and women into separate groups. Participants came from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds, generally representative of their geographic area.

“Women fought for the right to work, so now men expect you to work.”

Most of the men and women in this study have some education beyond high school but do not currently attend four-year colleges or hold four-year college degrees. Most are working full-time in service, sales and technical jobs. The men and the women have similar incomes, with most falling into the \$10-30,000 range. None has ever married. Except for one young man, no participant reports ever having had a child.

This report highlights several key findings in this study. These findings are impressionistic and should not be taken as a statistically representative description of attitudes among the population of noncollege young adults. However, what we learned from this initial study may offer valuable leads for further research into mating and dating patterns among this important but neglected group.

High Aspirations, Low Expectations for Successful Marriage

The young men and women in this study aspire to marriage and expect their marriages to last a lifetime. Even in the face of the combined impact of the divorce revolution, sex revolution, and the feminist revolution, they express their deep desire for a happy and lasting marriage. Nor have these young people cynically rejected the ideal of love and friendship in

marriage. If anything, they’ve raised this standard to a higher level. Young men and women today want to marry a best friend and “soul mate” who will share and understand their most intimate feelings, needs and desires.

However, despite the strongly held aspiration for marriage and the ideal of a lifelong soul mate, young people, and especially young women, are not confident that they will achieve this goal. Their lack of confidence may be justified. The evidence gathered in this study suggests that the singles mating culture may pose obstacles to reaching the goal of soul-mate marriage.

Getting Ahead Before Getting Wed

These twentysomething noncollege men and women are not single-mindedly bent on looking for someone to marry. (See Social Indicators: Marriage) They are working to get ahead on their own. For many, this is not easy. Most of the men and women in this study describe their economic status as “getting by.” In order to get ahead, they have to pay off debts, get more education or find a better job.

Putting financial independence ahead of marriage is not new for young men. Traditionally, men have had to prove to themselves and to others that they were able to make a living, or at least had the education or training to make a good living, before they could take on the responsibilities of supporting a family.

For women, however, and especially for less well-educated women, the goal of achieving individual financial and residential independence before marriage is relatively new. In this study, we found that women are just as committed as men to making it on their own and getting a place of their own before marriage.

Indeed, compared to their male peers, these noncollege women are even more fiercely determined “to take care of myself.” They cite the high rate of divorce, their past experience of failed relationships, and their desire to avoid the same mistakes their mothers made, as reasons why they are intent on independence. For African-American women, the determination to “do for yourself” is especially strong. As one young African-American woman put it: “We have to take care of ourselves, we have to go back to college, we have to do what we have to do, because our men are strung out on drugs, they’re not finishing college, so we are stepping up and taking the initiative.”

Moreover, these single women say, they are taking their cues from single men who “expect us to take care of ourselves.” “Women fought for the right to work, so now men expect you to work,” one woman remarks. And that view is borne out by the men in this study. One of the most frequently cited qualities men say they seek in a girlfriend is “independence.”

Where Did Love Go?

The mating culture for today’s twentysomethings is not oriented to marriage, as it has been in times past, nor is it dedicated to romantic love. Based on the reports of these noncollege singles, it is perhaps best described as a culture of sex without strings and relationships without rings.

The men and women in these focus groups rarely volunteer the word “love” or use the phrase “falling in love.” Instead of “love,” they talk about “sex” and “relationships.” This double language reflects the two separate spheres of unwed coupling.

Sex is for fun. It is one of the taken-for-granted freedoms and pleasures of being



young and single. Both men and women regard casual sex as an expected part of the dating scene. Only a few take a moralistic stand against it. Both men and women also agree that casual sex is no-strings-attached sex. It requires no commitments beyond the sexual encounter itself, no ethical obligation beyond mutual consent. When men and women hook up for sex, they say, it’s assumed that one’s partner is likely to lie about past sexual history. Accordingly, the conventional wisdom is: “Trust no one.” Indeed, these men and women see lying, cheating, and dumping as unremarkable behavior in casual sexual hookups.

Compared to casual sex, relationships require greater investments of time and effort. If you are “in a relationship,” say these young



He Lies, She Lies: The Rules of Sexual Engagement

For the young singles in this study, sex isn't entirely carefree. The threat of HIV/AIDS looms large over the dating scene. Everyone is scared of AIDS. However, although both men and women fear AIDS, they do not take equal responsibility for protecting against it. These young women say that they are the ones who must take the initiative and responsibility for "protection." If we don't insist, they say, the guys won't voluntarily use a condom. The men seem to agree that the responsibility for "protection" belongs to women. Moreover, although both men and women "talk the talk" about using condoms, at least a few admitted that this might be less than accurate description of their real behavior. "You know none of us follow these rules," one young man says, after listening to other men's testimonies of regular condom use. A woman in another group acknowledges: "When you're drunk, you'll let him do anything."

These working singles say they are most likely to go to clubs to socialize with similar-aged peers. However, both men and women



adults, you are expected to spend time together and to go out as a couple. You have to know what pleases your partner, do "the little things," and act with concern for his or her interests. For example, a young man "in a relationship" says his girlfriend shows she cares for him "financially and emotionally" when she suggests a candlelight dinner at home rather than an expensive dinner out. Being "in a relationship" also requires higher ethical standards than casual sex. Trust, honesty and sexual fidelity are expected. If you depart from these standards, these young people say, you jeopardize the relationship.

see the club scene as a place for drinking, fun and casual sexual hookups rather than for finding a serious love interest. Men especially say they go to clubs for easy sex and when they get it, they have no more responsibility to the woman. As one young man explains: “You’ve already had your fun.” The men have contempt for the women they meet at a club. “You don’t go to a club to find a wife,” one young man says. Another puts it bluntly: “Club girls are trash.” Women have similarly low opinions of the club scene and the men they find there. The men lie, they say, and they’re only looking for sex.

In seeking a relationship, these young men and women say, you should look for a partner through church, friends or school. Work sometimes offers opportunities for finding a mate, but both men and women express reservations about workplace relationships. “If you have a fight,” one participant says, “you still have to see each other the next day.”

Getting into a relationship usually means postponing sex until you get to know each other, according to both men and women in this study. As one young man explains: “When I met the woman I thought I would spend the rest of my life with, we didn’t have sex for a month and a half . . . we went out to dinner the movies, clubs – all the stuff a guy is supposed to do, pamper the woman and all that. I wanted to find out about her.”

However, according to some of the men, sex isn’t put off for very long. They say that sex on the third date (or after a couple of weeks of meeting) is typical for a more serious relationship. “If you wait too long,” says one, “they think you’re not interested.”

A relationship also differs from a sexual hookup in the accepted standards for “using

Instead of **love**, these young men and women talk about **sex and relationships.**

protection.” A relationship carries the expectation, or at least the hope, of mutual sexual fidelity. Therefore, before getting seriously involved, these young adults say, a couple gets tested for HIV/AIDS. One woman says she knew her boyfriend was interested in a serious relationship when he spontaneously called up the testing laboratory and handed her the phone to hear his test results. Once a couple can prove to each other that they have recently tested negative, they can be less vigilant about using condoms. “Once we’re tested, I can go bareback,” one young man says.

Getting to Know You: Cohabitation, or the “24/7” Relationship

Another popular form of “being in a relationship” is cohabitation. Indeed, cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together union for today’s young adults. (See Social Indicators: Unmarried Cohabitation) Moreover, surveys indicate, a majority of young people think it is a good idea to live together before marriage. The participants in our study fit this profile. Slightly less than half of the men and women in this study are currently cohabiting or have cohabited in the past. No one expresses blanket disapproval of cohabitation, and most of our participants see it in a favor-

“You can think you know someone, but there’s a lot of stuff you find out when you live together.”

able light. Indeed, almost all the men agree with the view that you should not marry a woman until you have lived with her first.

The men and women in this study offer several reasons for cohabiting relationships. First, they hope to find out more about the habits, character, and fidelity of a partner. These young men and women reject traditional courtship as a way of finding out about a person’s character. They see dating as a “game,” full of artifice and role-playing, while living together is more natural, honest and revealing. Accordingly, they believe that the only way to truly know your partner is to see him or her “24/7,” that is, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. “If his head is on your pillow,” says one woman, “you know he’s being faithful.”

Second, they want to test compatibility, possibly for future marriage. Young adults view marriage principally as an emotional and spiritual union, and this vision of marriage has set new standards of fitness for marriage. A prospective marriage partner’s fitness used to be evaluated, at least in part, by certain objective characteristics and behavior, such as having a good reputation in the community or going to church every Sunday. Today, the measure of

marital fitness is far more subjective and individualistic. A couple must connect at a deep emotional and spiritual level, and each person’s emotional needs are as unique as a fingerprint. This more subjective and individualistic standard puts the propensity to cohabit in a broader context. Since a relationship, and especially, marriage is idealized as a soul-mate union, then, the reasoning goes, there must be extensive round-the-clock testing to evaluate the emotional fitness and capacities of a mate for this special kind of intimate friendship.

According to these men and women, cohabitation also allows more careful scrutiny of a domestic partner over time. Many of these young men and women believe that a partner cannot be trusted to stay the same. “I know people who’ve gotten married and they didn’t know what that person was like when you woke up in the morning,” says one young man. “You can think you know someone but there’s a lot of stuff you find out when you live together,” a young woman remarks.

Third, these young men and women say they live together as a way of avoiding the risks of divorce or being “trapped in an unhappy marriage.” Here, they are very much influenced by their parents’ failed or unhappy marriages; as one young woman says, “my mother is on her third marriage. If she had lived with them before she married, then she would not have had so many divorces.”

Other reasons for living together include losing a lease, saving money on rent, building a nestegg for the purchase of a house, working on personal “issues” before deciding to marry; and, in one person’s opinion, “having the last adventure.” And for some, living together may simply provide a way to mark time, until an-

other partner or a new adventure comes along.

However, despite their general approval of cohabitation, the women in this study are much more likely than the men to express reservations about living together as a way to nudge a less committed partner toward marriage. At least one woman expresses the view that cohabiting women should not have to deliver the ultimatum “marry me or move out” in order to exact a proposal of marriage. Most agree with the young woman who says “if you want to get married in the long run, you should wait until you get that ring if that is what you are going for.” Also, women are more likely than men to be critical of a long-term, uncommitted cohabiting relationship. “It can go on indefinitely. A lot of people will say we’ll see how it goes and one year turns into five years and you see people on Ricki Lake with five kids and there’s still not commitment.” A few women believe that men get lazy and overdependent in cohabiting partnerships. “Men get too comfortable letting their girlfriend take care of them,” notes one. Another comments: “I worked two jobs, he didn’t work any.” For all these reasons, women think that some cohabiting partnerships can be a “waste of time.” Still, the women say that living together can be positive if you know what you want to get out of it.

A substantial number of these young women have already lived with and broken up with a cohabiting partner. Although most agree that breaking up is hard and often painful, they believe that it provides valuable life lessons. Living together is a learning experience, according to these young women. It helps you make a better choice for the future.

Optimistic Men, Pessimistic Women

Men and women enter their twenties with nearly identical goals. Their first priority is to achieve independence by getting a decent job and a place of their own. Like men, women in their early twenties are in no rush to marry. “People live a lot longer today,” one woman explains as the reason for putting off marriage, while another adds: “People change a lot from 20 to 30.” However, by the second half of their twenties, men’s and women’s timetables for marriage begin to diverge. Men are content to continue the pattern established in their early twenties. They are not yet ready to make commitments and to settle down. Many are still trying to establish themselves in decent jobs. And



they are reluctant to give up the freedom of single life. At the same time, these men remain optimistic that they will be able to find the right woman when they are ready to marry.

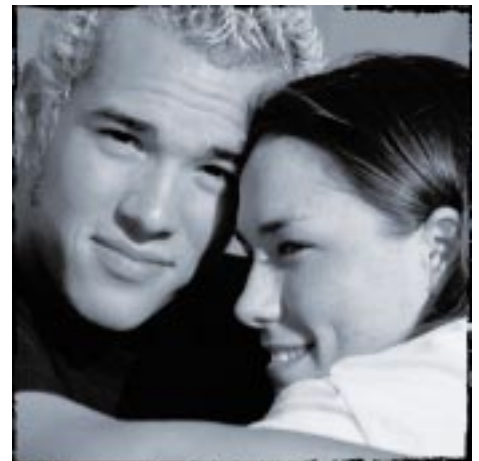
On the other hand, single women approaching their late twenties become more serious about the search for a marriage partner. They've gained confidence in their capacity to "make it on their own," and they are ready to think about marriage. However, many say the "men aren't there," they're "not on the same page," or they're less mature. The more they advance into their twenties, the more disenchanted these young women seem to become about the pool of prospective mates and the likelihood of finding a husband



A marital readiness gap?

One possible reason for women's pessimism is that they may be reaching a stage of readiness for marriage before their male peers. In this study, men and women are similarly matched in education, income and occupation as well as age. However, the women in these groups appear more "together" than the men – more confident, articulate, responsible and mature. They also exhibit a higher degree of goal-oriented job behavior. They have clear and generally realistic plans for moving up the career ladder. Many have plans to finish or extend schooling; for example, one young woman who works as a Licensed Practical Nurse is going back to school part-time to get her RN. Others are contemplating plans, or taking first steps, toward starting businesses in fields allied to their current job. (At the conclusion of one focus group, several women exchanged business cards.)

The men in this study, on the other hand, are less able to articulate clear goals. And, when articulated, their goals are often unserious, unfocused or unrealistic. For example, when



asked what they hope to accomplish in the short-term, some men say their goals are “get out of bed in the morning,” “own an island,” “hit the lottery,” or “train for the marathon.”

Of course, there is nothing new in a male/female gap in readiness for marriage. As the age differences between a groom and bride at first marriage have narrowed to little more than two years and as peer marriage has become a social norm, there is often a noticeable disparity between a twentysomething woman’s level of maturity and that of her twentysomething mate. What may be new today for these noncollege men and women is not the “marital readiness gap” itself, but the incentives for men to marry when similar-aged women are ready. Today, as compared to earlier times, there are almost no pressures on young men in their twenties to get married in order to meet women’s desires, expectations, or timetable.

“The emotional baggage problem”

Another reason for women’s greater pessimism may be the experience of prolonged exposure to the singles mating culture. This mating culture is oriented to men’s appetites and interests, according to the young women in this study. Indeed, at least a few women observe that their sex lives are following a male script. “I’m turning into a man in some respects,” one woman says. “I can go out there and dog them the way they do to me.” More commonly, noncollege women complain bitterly about a harsh new double standard: men expect them to be submissive *and* strong, faithful *and* independent, while “he’s doing what he wants to do.” Perhaps because of the prevalence of casual sex, the women in this study have a low

“...one year turns into five years. . . you see people on Ricki Lake with five kids and . . . no commitment.”

opinion of men’s fidelity and trustworthiness. Moreover, they say, although men expect them to be independent, the men are hardly exemplars of independence themselves. They are often unfocused, unmotivated, and still live at home “with Mom.” Overall, noncollege men are most likely of all young men and women in their twenties to live with parents.

A prolonged period of sexually active singlehood also exposes young women to the risks of multiple failed relationships and breakups. Because most young people have first sexual intercourse at younger ages than in the past, they are increasingly unlikely to marry, or even enter a long-term relationship, with their first sexual partner. This often means multiple sexual relationships and breakups before entry into marriage. The prevalence of cohabitation compounds the risks of breakup, since, by recent estimates, only about one-sixth of cohabiting relationships last three years, and only one-tenth last five years or more.

Since breaking up is a painful and distressing experience for young lovers, it is desirable for such breakups to be relatively few and far between in the course of seeking a mate. However, today, a young single woman may expe-

Noncollege women complain bitterly about a harsh new double standard.

rience several breakups during her late teens and twenties, and these breakups seem to have a cumulative negative impact on subsequent relationships. The women in this study say they feel burned, angry, betrayed when they are dumped. They say they are more mistrustful of the next guy who comes along. Moreover, the experience of multiple breakups can lead to a global mistrust and antagonism toward men. Women say they become more suspicious and wary of all men over time. And finally, for some women, mistrust of men has to do with the example set by their mothers. As one woman explains: “I’ve lived with my mother bouncing from man to man to man, living with all the guys she’s with . . . I’m having a terrible time with trusting . . .”

Young women become more pessimistic about men and their chances for marriage as they advance through their twenties. For this reason, some say they are willing to contemplate forming a family without a husband if they reach their thirties and are unable to find a suitable mate. The young noncollege women in this study, and increasingly all younger women today, see single motherhood as a distinct possibility and socially acceptable “option,” though not ideal. These single women, and some of the men as well, point to women family members who have raised children “on their own” as evidence that it is something that

others do, and therefore, that can be done.

According to the young men in this study, a single mother with a child is a “big turnoff” and likely to be rejected as a potential marriage partner. Therefore, single motherhood may further diminish the chances of finding a husband.

Soul-Mate Marriages vs. Being Married

Despite doubts and difficulties, young men and women have not given up on the ideal of finding a soul mate to marry. On the contrary, they are dedicated to the goal of finding a lifelong best friend and kindred spirit. However, their ideals of soul-mate marriage contrast sharply with personal experience - as well as the popular culture’s portrait - of married people. Both media images and real-life models of marriage tend to be more negative than positive. Many in this study have grown up with unhappily married or divorced parents. They know exactly what a bad marriage is, but they are less sure of what a good marriage looks like. Some can only describe a good marriage as “the opposite of my parents.” Moreover, a number of study participants say they receive no advice or mainly negative advice about marriage from their parents and relatives.

In addition, although young men and women idealize marriage, they see the experience of *being married* as hard and difficult. “Marriage is a full-time job. Period. It’s work,” says a young man. For many participants in this study, the idea of married life as hard work suffers in comparison to the idea of the single life as freedom and fun. Young men, especially, see their twenties as a time to “drink, go to school, have fun, buy things.” Thus, soul mate marriage and “marriage as hard work” coexist in the minds

of some of these study participants. Though very different, both conceptions of marriage are daunting. Perhaps this is one reason why these young men in their twenties are happy to stay single for a time.

Haunted by Fears of Divorce

The noncollege men and women in this study are deeply influenced by the experience of growing up in a high divorce society. (See Social Indicators: Divorce) As noted previously, they cite the risk of divorce as a key reason for cohabiting before marriage or as an alternative to marriage.

Fear of divorce has also dramatically eroded their confidence in the permanence of marriage and thus of marriage's value as an economic stepping stone. Although study after study demonstrates the economic benefits of marriage, especially for the less well-educated, these noncollege men and women generally reject the idea that marriage is a principal way to get ahead economically. On the contrary, they tend to see marriage as exposing them to economic risk and possibly jeopardizing their hard won individual independence.

The men say that marriage puts them at risk because a wife can divorce at will and "take you for all you've got." The women are even more likely than the men to see marriage as economically risky. Some say that any woman who trusts in a man and marriage for economic security is a fool, given the high rate of divorce and the evidence of many women's economic freefall after divorce.

Possibly because young adults enter marriage later, often with some individual financial assets, both the men and women in the study are more fearful of the economic consequences of post-divorce property settlements



than they are of no-fault grounds that make divorce so easy. Indeed, these noncollege young adults do not favor changing the no-fault divorce laws, nor do they believe that parents who do not "get along" should stay together for the sake of the children. Their tolerance of divorce involving children seems contradictory at first, given many of these young adults' childhood experience of divorce and their determination to avoid it in their future lives. However, the belief that parents who don't get along should divorce is consistent with their idea of marriage as an intensely emotional relationship between a man and a woman. Most do not see marriage as an institution designed to hold a mother and father together in a family household. (See Social Indicators: Loss of Child-Centeredness)



Will Today's Twentysomethings "Save" Marriage?

Some social commentators believe that today's young adults will reject divorce, nonmarital childbearing and other trends that contribute to the weakening of marriage. They point out that a culture shift may be occurring among the young, in reaction to high levels of family instability. On the other hand, most social demographers predict a continuation of the current trends. They argue that these trends are persistent and pervasive across advanced western societies and therefore unlikely to change. Who's right?

Since today's young adults are putting off entry into marriage until later ages, it is obviously too soon to tell. As our study of

noncollege twentysomethings suggests, some evidence indicates a deepening of the current marriage-weakening trends. A longer period of singlehood before marriage, combined with a youthful mating culture oriented to sex and low-commitment relationships, may make it more difficult for young men and women to find suitable marriage mates. Women's growing pessimism about men and marriage, combined with their increasing willingness to contemplate single motherhood as an acceptable option to marriage, may lead more young women to choose single motherhood if they cannot find a suitable husband. High levels of cohabitation and acceptance of cohabitation among young adults are also likely to contribute to the further weakening and deinstitutionalization of marriage. And many young men and women, including those in this study, exhibit a more individualistic orientation to future marriage, with an emphasis on self-investment and protecting oneself against relationship failure. This "hedge-your-bets" approach to marriage may weaken the sense of mutual dedication and commitment that is an important component of successful marriage.

However, there are some hopeful signs. The trend toward later age at first marriage may contribute to lower levels of divorce in the future. Also, young adults' persistent aspiration for marriage and their desire to avoid divorce may lead to a greater commitment to address and repair problems in marriage before they become insurmountable. Many of the participants in our study say they favor marriage preparation and education as a way to prevent divorce as well as unhappy marriages. They say they would like to develop skills that might help them resolve problems that arise in marriage.

Such help is increasingly available. Churches in more than a hundred communities have joined together to establish a common set of premarital counseling standards and practices for engaged couples. Two states, Arizona and Louisiana, have passed covenant marriage laws, designed for couples who want the choice of entering marriages with stronger legal and counseling supports than are currently available in standard marriage. A few states - Oklahoma, Utah and Arkansas - are launching broad-based initiatives aimed at reducing the divorce and nonmarital birth rates. Florida has passed a law requiring marriage education for high school students. A number of schools across the country are integrating relationships and marriage skills education into sex education and family life curricula.

Changing the Mating Culture?

Yet, as our study suggests, it may prove difficult to strengthen marriage unless today's mating culture can somehow be changed. There is a large gap between the aspiration for successful marriage and the pathways available for getting there. Are there ways to encourage a mating culture more oriented to suc-

Some can only describe a **good marriage** as “the opposite of my parents.”

cessful mate selection? Is it possible to move today's mating culture away from breakup and failure and toward commitment and marriage?

Clearly, this is not a task that lends itself to social engineering. Any positive shift in contemporary patterns of mating and dating is likely to come about as the result of broad-based changes in cultural attitudes about sexual behavior and marriage. At the same time, such changes are possible. Unlike technological change, cultural shifts are more open to modification by concerted social movements, as we have seen in areas of race, women's roles, gay rights, and environmental issues over recent decades. Characteristically, attitudinal changes in these areas began among a small, dedicated and often radical counterculture and then spread to the mainstream in more moderate and diffuse forms.

Our study suggests two possible avenues for positive change of the mating culture. One is broad-based public education about the factors that may hinder mating success. The noncollege young in this study are ignorant or misinformed about the likely effects of some common contemporary mating practices. For example, they believe that living together before marriage increases the chances for having a happy marriage, although no evidence exists to support this belief, and some evidence suggests that cohabiting before mar-



riage increases the likelihood of divorce. Some believe that multiple failed cohabiting relationships lead to better future mate selection, though no evidence exists to support this idea. Others believe that the way to avoid divorce is to seek relationships having only limited commitment.

A second and potentially more important avenue for changing the mating culture rests with

parents. Contrary to the popular notion that the media is chiefly responsible for young people's attitudes about mating and marriage, available evidence strongly suggests that young people get many of their ideas and models of marriage from parents and the parental generation. The noncollege men and women in our study consistently mentioned family influences as the source of both hopes and fears about future marriage. Yet, according to the participants in our study, many parents have had almost nothing good to say about marriage, and often say nothing at all. Much of this negativism may be due to the parental generation's own marital problems and failures.

Whatever their personal disappointments, parents do have a huge stake, both economic and emotional, in the success of their children's future marriages. Very few parents look forward to their adult child's first divorce, or eagerly await a grandchild's first custody hearing. If mothers and fathers, as well as grandparents, realized how much their attitudes mattered, they might take it upon themselves to begin talking to children early on about what to look for in a marriage mate and what it takes to have a good marriage. At minimum, parents might consider investing as much time and attention to helping their children think wisely about marriage as they now devote to helping their children think carefully about education and career.

Social Indicators of Marital Health And Wellbeing

Trends Of The Past Four Decades

- Marriage
- Divorce
- Unmarried Cohabitation
- Loss Of Child Centeredness
- Fragile Families With Children
- Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family



THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT

Marriage

KEY FINDING: Marriage trends in the United States in recent decades indicate that Americans have become less likely to marry, and that fewer of those who do marry have marriages they consider to be “very happy.”

Americans have become less likely to marry. This is reflected in a decline of more than one third, from 1970 to 1996 (the latest year for which this measure is available), in the annual

number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women (Figure 1). Some 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 25 and 27, respectively, in recent years. (See “Age at First Marriage: What’s Best?”) Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry. The decline also probably reflects an actual increase in lifelong singlehood, though this will not be known for sure until current young and middle-aged adults pass through the life course.

The percentage of adults in the population who are married has also diminished. Since 1960, the decline of those married among all persons age 15 and older has been more than ten percentage points—and more than 23 points among black females (Figure 2). It should be noted that these data include both people who have not ever married and those who have married and then divorced.

In order partially to control for a decline in married adults simply due to delayed first marriages, we have looked this year at changes in the percentage of persons age 35 through 44 who were married (Figure 3). Since 1960, there has been a drop of 19 percentage points for married men and 15 points for married women. Although we typically think of the United States today as “the most marrying country,” we actually rank relatively low among the industrialized nations in this age group. In 1998, for example, we had a lower percentage of married women than Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands.¹

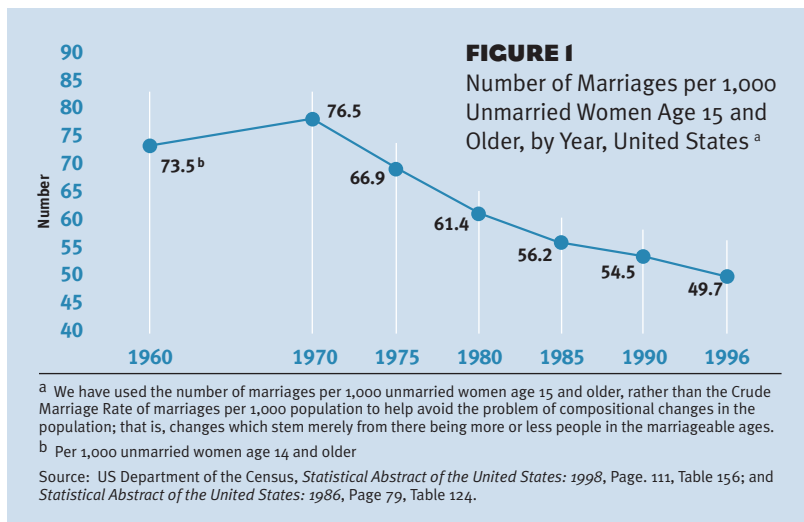


FIGURE 2
Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Married, by Sex and Race, 1960-1998, United States

Year	Total	MALES		FEMALES		
		Blacks	Whites	Total	Blacks	Whites
1960	69.3	60.9	70.2	65.9	59.8	66.6
1970	66.7	56.9	68.0	61.9	54.1	62.8
1980	63.2	48.8	65.0	58.9	44.6	60.7
1990	60.7	45.1	62.8	56.9	40.2	59.1
1998	58.0	41.4	60.2	54.8	36.3	57.5

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-514; *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1998* (Update) and earlier reports.

¹ Comparative data from Rodger Doyle, “The Decline of Marriage,” *Scientific American*, December 1999:36

Age at First Marriage: What's Best?

A frequently asked question is, how old should one be before getting married? What do the data suggest?

A large body of evidence indicates that marriages of very young people, that is, teenagers, are much less stable and successful on average than are first marriages of persons in their twenties and older. Indeed, age at marriage is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of marital stability ever found by social science research. The probable reasons are fairly obvious; at older ages people tend to be more emotionally and intellectually mature, established in their jobs and careers, and usually better able to know what they want in a lifetime mate.

The median ages at first marriage have risen considerably in recent decades and now stand at 25 for women and 27 for men, the oldest such ages in American history. While most current marriage trends seem clearly detrimental to marriage as an institution, the increase in the median age at first marriage appears to have had a strongly positive effect. One new study by a prominent demographer, as yet unpublished, has found it to be by far the single most important factor accounting for the recent leveling off of divorce rates. A second important factor, the increase in education, was a distant runner-up. In fact, this study calculated that if age at first marriage had not increased, the divorce rate would not have leveled off.^a

On the other hand, there are some social as well as personal disadvantages to the trend for young adults to postpone marriage until much older ages. According to the evidence, marriage inhibits dangerous and antisocial behavior among young adult males.^b Crime rates, for example, are highly correlated with a large percentage of unmarried young males in the population. And, in general, marital delay leaves young adults with an increased exposure to the hazards of nonmarital sex and childbearing, sexual exploitation, loneliness, and lack of social integration.

The question of the optimum age at which to marry, then, is still open. It would certainly seem best to wait until the early twenties, but how much beyond that can not be answered definitively with current data. According to the new study mentioned above linking age at first marriage with divorce rates, the major benefit for later marital stability comes from delaying marriage from the teenage years into the early twenties. No additional benefits were found from further delaying marriage to the late twenties or thirties. It should also be noted that the “best age” might be different for women and men.

^a Tim B. Heaton, “Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States.” Unpublished manuscript. Center for Studies of the Family, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

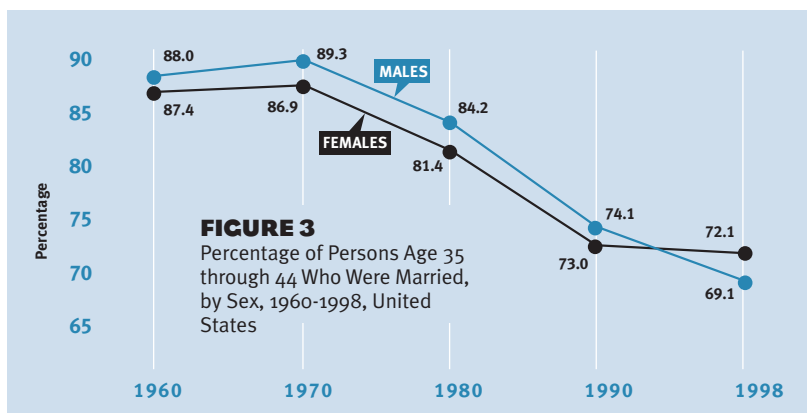
^b For instance, see John H. Laub, Daniel S. Nagin, and Robert J. Sampson, “Trajectories of Change in Criminal Offending: Good Marriages and the Desistance Process,” *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998): 225-238.

Marriage trends in the age range of 35 to 44 are suggestive of lifelong singlehood. In times 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 married eventually in every generation for which records exist, going back to the mid-1800s. By 1960, 94 percent of women then alive had been married at least once by age 45—probably an historical high point.² If

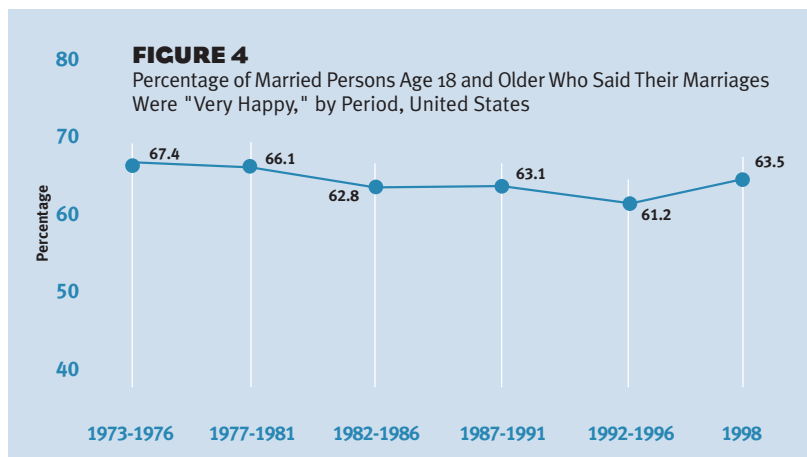
the present marriage trend continues, some demographers are predicting that fewer than 85 percent of current young adults will ever marry.

It is important to note that 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 those divorced who subsequently remarry live together first. And a still small but growing number of persons, both young and old, are living together with no plans for eventual marriage.

There is a common belief that, although a smaller percentage of Americans are now marrying than was the case a few decades ago, those who marry have marriages of higher quality. It seems reasonable 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 on average should 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 saying “very happy” has



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1961, Page 34, Table 27; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1971, Page 32, Table 38; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, Page 38, Table 49; and calculated from data from U.S. Bureau of the Census, General Population Characteristics, 1990, Page 45, Table 34; and data from Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Page 58, Table 63.



Source: The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago. Data are weighted by number of persons age 18 and older in the household. Trend is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

² 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* 1-1 (1996): 15-39.

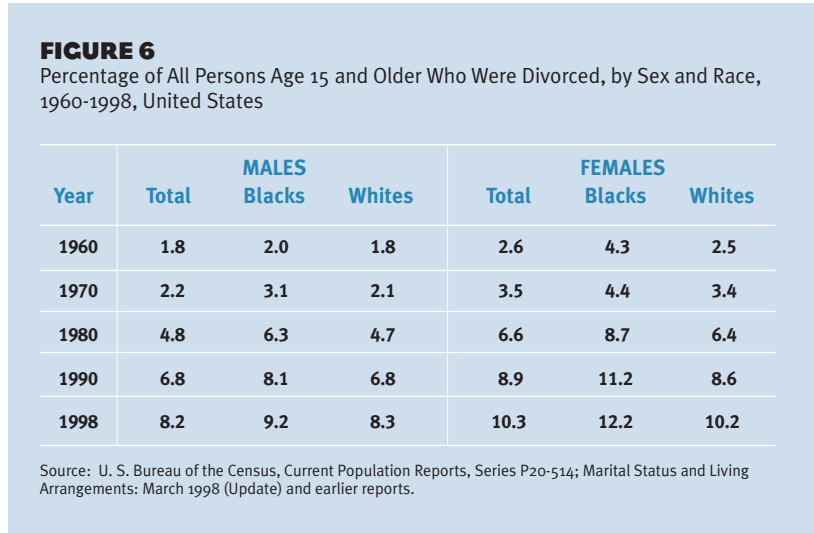
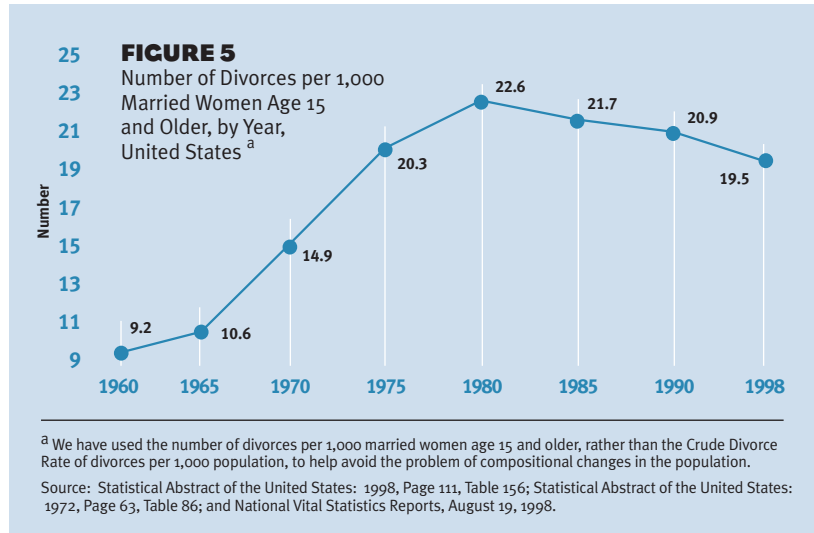
³ Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, this is a nationally representative study of the English-speaking non-institutionalized population of the United States age 18 and over.

declined moderately over the past 25 years.⁴ This trend has shown a turnaround since reaching a low point in 1994, but it is too soon to know whether this represents a longer-lasting change of direction.

Divorce

KEY FINDING: The American divorce rate today is more than twice that of 1960, but has declined slightly since hitting the highest point in our history in the early 1980s.

The increase in divorce, shown by the trend reported in Figure 5, probably has 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 an historical high point in the early 1980s. Since then the divorce rate has modestly declined, a trend described by many experts as “leveling off at a high level.” The decline in the 1980s may be attributable partly to compositional changes in the population, for example the aging of the baby boomers and a decrease in the number of people of marriageable age. The continuing



decline in the 1990s, however, apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.¹

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

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

¹ Joshua R. Goldstein, “The Leveling of Divorce in the United States” *Demography* 36 (1999): 409-414

for males and 2.6 percent for females in 1960, more than quadrupled from 1960 to 1998. The percentage of divorced 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.

Overall, the chances remain very high—between 40 and 50 percent—that a marriage started today will end in either divorce or permanent separation. (See “What Are Your Chances of Divorce?”) The likelihood of divorce has varied considerably among different segments of the American population, being higher for Blacks than for Whites, for instance, and higher in the West than in other parts of the country. But these and many other variations, such as in social class level, 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. Divorce rates in the South and Midwest have come to resemble those in the West, for reasons that are not well understood, leaving only the Eastern Seaboard and the Central Plains with significantly lower divorce.

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 later, and the non-religious compared to the religious. Both teenagers and the non-religious who marry have considerably higher divorce rates.

Unmarried Cohabitation

KEY FINDING: The number of unmarried couples has increased dramatically over the past four decades. Most younger Americans now spend some time living together outside of marriage.

Between 1960 and 1998, as indicated in Figure 7, the number of unmarried couples in America increased by close to 1000 percent. 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 25-39 are currently living with a partner and an additional quarter have lived with a partner at some time in the past. Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none earlier in the century.¹

For some, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for others, an alternative to marriage, and for still others, simply an alternative to living alone. Cohabitation is more common among those of lower educational and income levels. Recent data show that among women in the 19 to 44 age range, 60% of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 37% of college graduates.² Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers, those who have been di-

¹ Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the U. S.” CDE Working Paper No. 98-15, 1998. Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

² Bumpass and Lu, 1998.

What are Your Chances of Divorce?

One often hears it said that “a marriage today has about a 50 percent chance of ending in divorce.” This statement is so frequently invoked—and disputed—that it is useful to discuss its derivation. First, what it does not refer to is a simple comparison of the number of divorces in one year with the number of marriages that same year, because the people who divorced that year are in most cases not the same people who married.

What the statement does refer to is the percentage of marriages entered into during a particular year that are projected to end in divorce before one spouse dies. Thus a 50 percent chance of divorce would mean that half of all marriages are expected to end in divorce before the marriages break up through death. Such projections typically assume that the divorce and death rates in that year will continue indefinitely into the future, and because of this unlikely assumption this divorce measure is not an accurate prediction but is intended as the best estimate possible on the basis of current data.¹

No one to our knowledge has calculated these projections over time using consistent methods, so trends in the chances of divorce using this measure cannot be given. However, projections made using rates prevailing in the early 1980s consistently yielded marital breakup chances of well over 50 percent, some as

high as 60 percent, while in more recent years the chances have been lowered to around 45 percent. It should be noted that the projected chances of breakup for all marriages are somewhat higher than for first marriages, because second and subsequent marriages have a higher divorce rate. And, of course, the percentage of marriages projected to break up is higher if permanent separation as well as divorce are included in the measure of marital termination.

In summary, any statement about the percentage of marriages today projected to end in divorce is useful primarily as an indicator of the instability of marriages in the recent past. In view of the lowering of divorce rates in the last few decades, the statement “50 percent of all marriages will end in divorce” may no longer be accurate. If the divorce rates of the late 1990s were to persist into the future, not much more than 40 percent of today’s first marriages would end in divorce, and less than 50 percent of all marriages would end in either divorce or permanent separation.

¹ Computed with techniques similar to but more complicated than those used by demographers to calculate life expectancies, this measure ideally would be based on the exact divorce rates, death rates, and ages of persons who married during the base period. But complete and accurate data of the kind needed are never available, and the projected percentages vary in their validity according to the estimates used and the necessary compromises made in the calculations.

vorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now more than one third, contain children.³

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, 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. What can be said

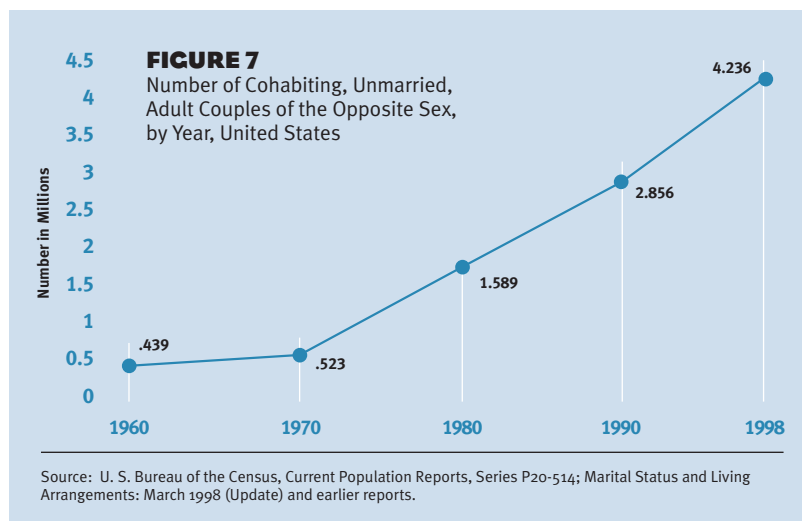
for certain is that no evidence has yet been found that those who cohabit before marriage have stronger marriages than those who do not.⁴

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 hold the father to the mother-child bond. Yet in recent times, children increasingly have been pushed from center stage.

Americans have been having fewer children. Figure 8 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 De-



³ Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (forthcoming, 2000).

⁴ For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Smock, 2000; and 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* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999).

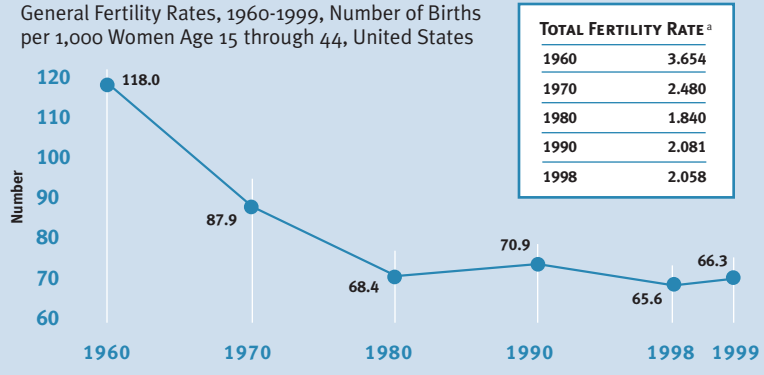
pression of the 1930s, before suddenly accelerating with the baby-boom generation starting in 1945. By 1960 the birth rate was back to where it had been in 1920, with the average woman having about three and one half children over the course of her life. Since 1960 the birth rate has mostly been down sharply, although it increased some in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s. Part of the recent upswing can be explained by an increase in the number of women entering childbearing years. Because these women tend to be the children of the early baby-boomers, this phenomenon has been dubbed the “echo boom.”

In 1998 the American “total fertility rate” stood at 2.058, or about two children per woman, and it has been at that level for several decades. In most European nations, on the other hand, the fertility rate has continued to drop, in some countries to only slightly more than one child per woman. Many observers believe that the United States birthrate will decline further in future decades to become more like that of Europe today.

The decline of births has had a marked effect on the household makeup of the American population. It is estimated that in the middle of the 1800s more than 75 percent of all households contained children under the age of 18. One hundred years later, in 1960, this number had dropped to slightly less than half of all households. Now, just four decades later, only 34 percent of households include children (Figure 9). 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—gradually may be receding from our consciousness.

FIGURE 8

General Fertility Rates, 1960-1999, Number of Births per 1,000 Women Age 15 through 44, United States

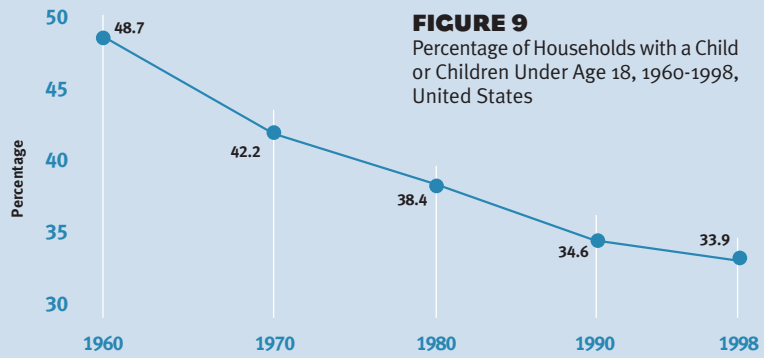


Source: National Vital Statistics Report, 1993, Pages 1, 2, 10 and 11; National Vital Statistics Report, 1999, 48:1; National Vital Statistics Report, 2000, 48:3; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Pages 75, 76 and 78, Tables 91, 93 and 96.

^a The number of births that 1,000 women would have if, at each year of age, they experienced the birth rates occurring in the specified year. A total fertility rate of 2,110 represents “replacement level” fertility under current mortality conditions (assuming no net migration).

FIGURE 9

Percentage of Households with a Child or Children Under Age 18, 1960-1998, United States



Source: Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1976, Page 40, Table 53; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, Page 46, Tables 66 and 67; and Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Page 62, Table 73.

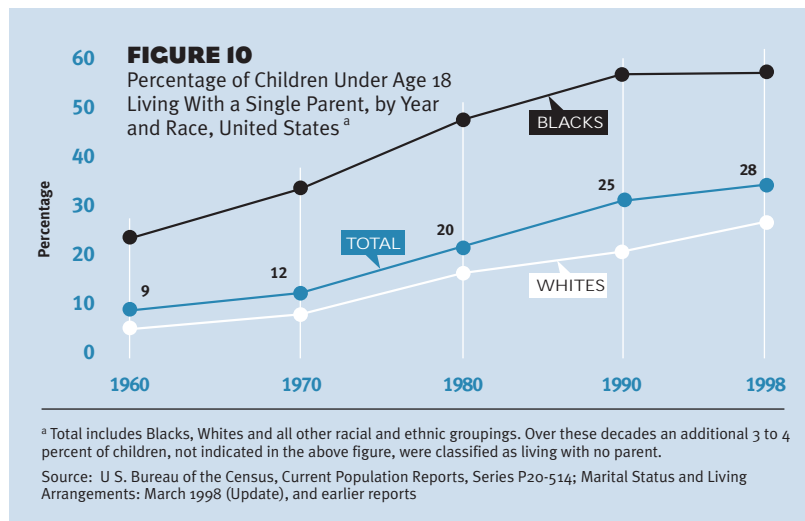
Several scholars determined that in 1960 the proportion of one’s life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By that year the death rate had plummeted so that fewer marriages ended through death, and the divorce revolution of recent decades had not yet begun, so that a relatively small number marriages ended in divorce. By 1985, however, just 25 years later,

the proportion of one's life spent with spouse and children dropped to 43 percent—which was the lowest in our history.¹ This remarkable reversal was caused mainly by the decline of fertility and the weakening of marriage through divorce and unwed births.

In a recent cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, the United States ranked virtually at the top in the percentage disagreeing with this statement: “the main purpose of marriage is having children.”² Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else compared, for example, to just 51 percent of Norwegians or 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 1985.³ 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.”⁴

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 than female).⁵



¹ Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken and John Bongaarts, “Demographic Foundations of Family Change” *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 346-358.

² Tom W. Smith, “The Emerging 21st Century American Family,” GSS Social Change Report 42, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1999: Table 20, 48.

³ Arland Thornton, “Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1989):873-893. This change occurred among women as they grew older, but it is very unlikely to be just an age effect.

⁴ The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

⁵ 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):110-129; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, “Children and Marital Disruption” *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1991):930-953

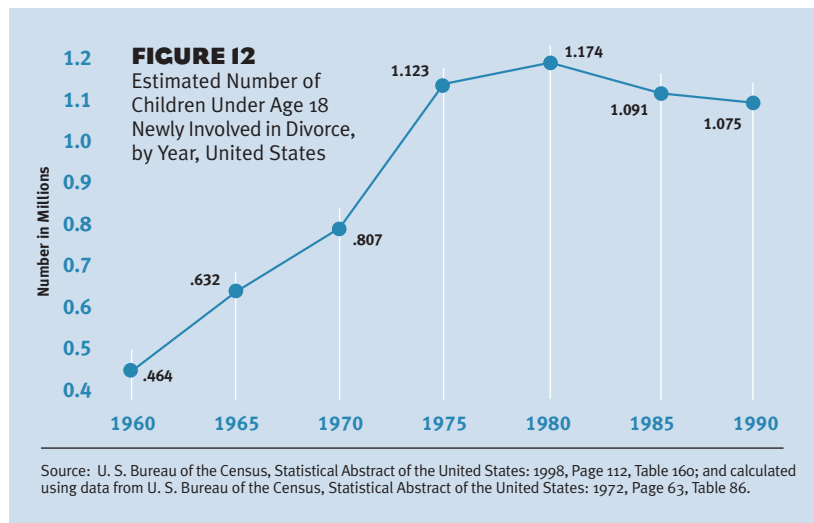
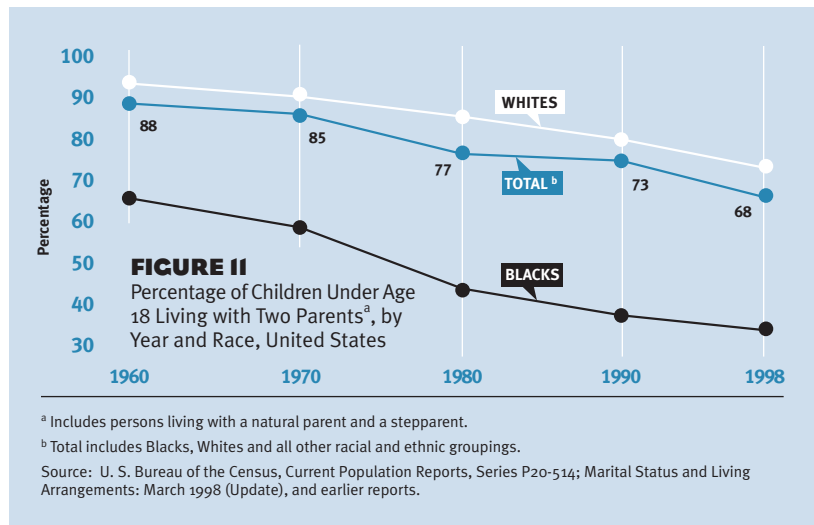
Fragile Families With Children

KEY FINDING: The percentage of children who grow up in fragile — typically fatherless — families has grown enormously over the past four decades. This is mainly due to increases in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and unmarried cohabitation.

There is now ample evidence that stable and satisfactory marriages are crucial for the wellbeing of adults. Yet such marriages are even more important for the proper socialization and overall wellbeing 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 10). 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. While in 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the 20th century, by 1998 the percentage had jumped to 28 percent (55 percent for Blacks). Although the number of father-only families recently has grown, the overwhelming majority of single-parent families are mother-only. (See “What is a Single-Parent Family Today?”)

An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of persons under age 18 living with



two parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by 20 percentage points (Figure 11). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some twelve or thirteen percent of American children live with a stepparent. The problem is that children in stepfamilies, according to a substantial and

What is a Single-Parent Family Today?

Of the 19.8 million children under 18 found by the 1998 Census to be living in single-parent families, 84 percent lived with their mother and 16 percent lived with their father. Father-headed single-parent families have been increasing rapidly; in 1970, the percentage was only nine. This phenomenon is so recent that not much yet is known about how father-headed single-parent families differ from those headed by mothers.

In mother-headed single-parent families there has been an enormous increase in the percentage of mothers who have never been married, from 4 percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 1998. In earlier times, most single mothers were divorced or widowed. Indeed, today the number of never-married single mothers is higher than that of divorced single mothers.

A major reason never-married single mothers have become so common is because single-motherhood has become a

permanent status for many women. In times past most out-of-wedlock births were to mothers who later married and went on to have marital children. For women born in the 1930s who ever had children when unmarried, no more than a quarter had *only* out-of-wedlock children. Becoming a single mother through unwed childbirth at that time was typically only a temporary status. For women born in the 1960s who have had children when unmarried, however, fully 70 percent have only out-of-wedlock children.^a And for women born more recently the percentage is probably higher still. This is another remarkable indication of the weakening of marriage and of the enormous changes taking place in the modern family structure.

^a Saul D. Hoffman and E. Michael Forster, "Nonmarital Births and Single Mothers: Cohort Trends in the Dynamics of Nonmarital Childbearing" *The History of the Family* 2-3 (1997): 255-275.

growing body of social science evidence, fare no better in life than children in single-parent families.¹ Data on stepfamilies, therefore, probably are more reasonably combined with single-parent than with biological two-parent families. An important indicator that helps to resolve this issue is the percentage of children who live apart from their biological fathers. That percentage has more than doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to more than 35 percent.²

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 di-

¹ See: David Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Stepfamilies" in A. Booth and J. Dunn (eds.) *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994) 3-27.

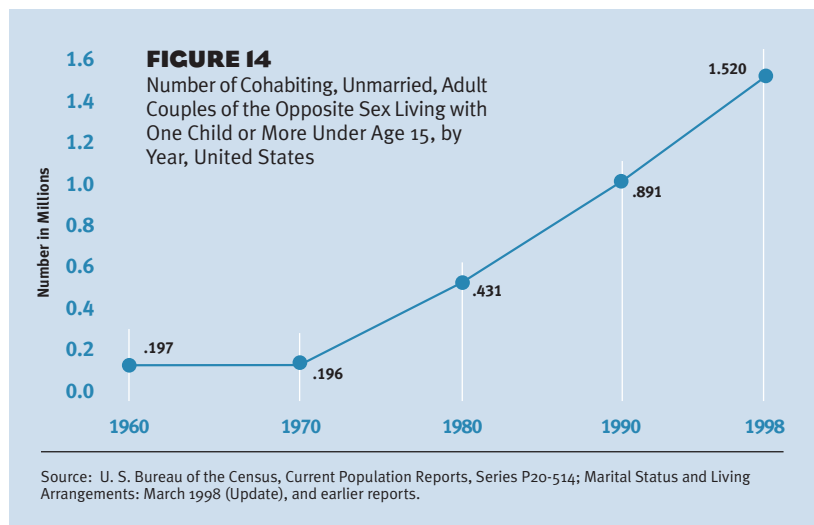
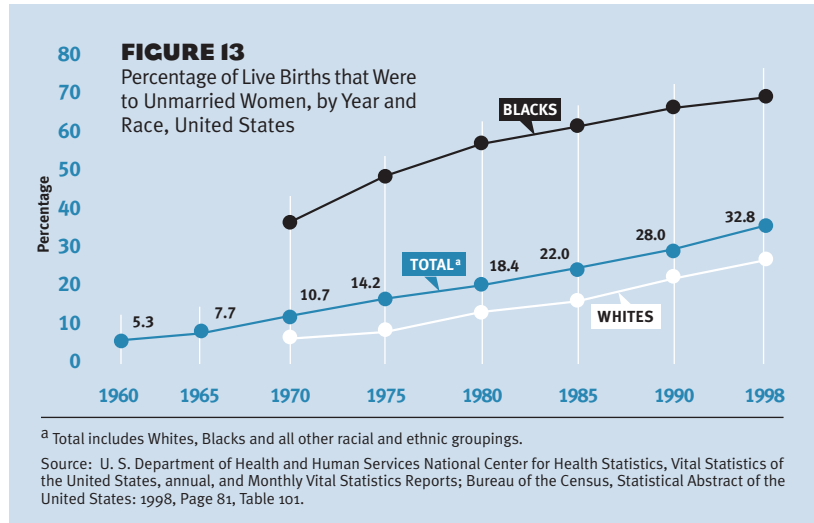
² This difficult to calculate measure is based on estimates from various U. S. Census Bureau documents. See: Wade F. Horn, *Father Facts*, Third Edition (Gaithersburg, MD: The National Fatherhood Initiative, 1998) 12.

voiced each year, most of whom have lost a resident father, went from under 500,000 in 1960 to well over a million in 1975 (Figure 12). After peaking around 1980, the 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 six fold (Figure 13). The number of births to unmarried women in 1998 was the highest ever recorded. About a third of all births and more than two-thirds of black births that year (the latest for which data are available) were out-of-wedlock.

A third and still more recent family trend that has affected family structure is the rapid growth of unmarried cohabitation. Especially as cohabitation has become common among those previously married as well as the young and not-yet-married, there has been a nearly 800 percent increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children (Figure 14). An estimated 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their growing up years.³

In 1998 about 36 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18, a steep increase from

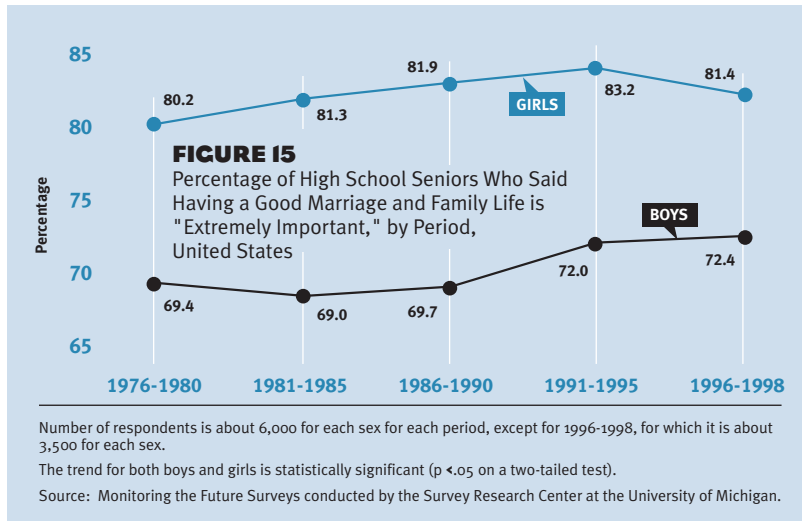


around 20 percent a decade earlier.⁴ For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.⁵ Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple

³ Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S.," CDE Working Paper 98-15, 1998. Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, 1999, Madison, WI.

⁴ US Bureau of the Census, Marital Status and Living Arrangements, March, 1998, Series P20-514

⁵ 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.



households are the children of only one partner.⁶ Indeed, if one includes cohabitation in the definition of stepfamily, almost one half of stepfamilies today would consist of a biological parent and an unrelated cohabiting partner.⁷

Children living with cohabiting couples tend to be disadvantaged compared to those living with married couples. Prominent reasons are that cohabiting couples have a much higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower

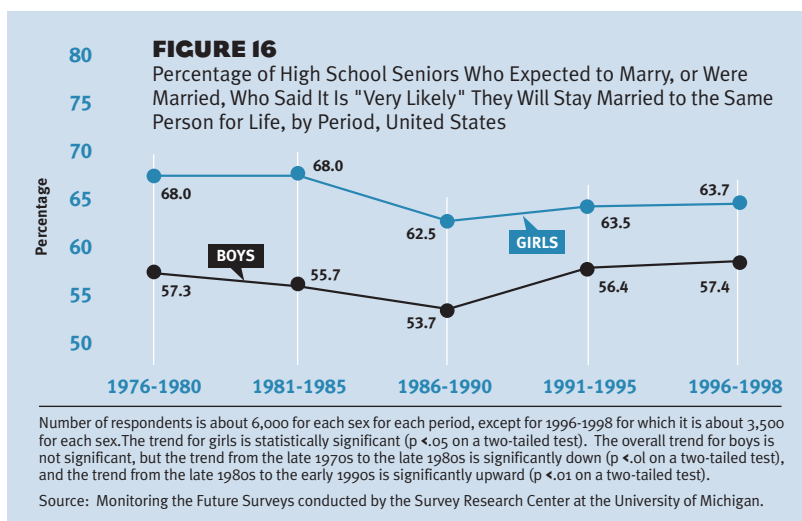
level of household income, and a much higher level of child abuse and domestic violence. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children is declining, to 44 percent in 1997 from 57 percent a decade earlier—a decline sadly predictive of increased abuse against children.⁸

Between 1996 and 1998 the percentage of children living in single-parent families did not increase, probably due mainly to the modest reduction in divorce. Whether this could be the beginning of a long-term reversal of the basic family trend of the past four decades, or is merely a temporary correction, can not at this time, of course, be known.

Teen Attitudes About Marriage And Family

KEY FINDING: Surveys of teen attitudes over the past few decades point up a growing disparity. The desire of teenagers for a long-term marriage has increased, especially for boys, but girls have become more pessimistic about ever being able to have such a marriage. Both boys and girls have become much more accepting of the alternatives to marriage.

To find out what the future may hold for marriage and family life it is important to de-



⁶ Larry Bumpass, J. A. Sweet and A. Cherlin, "The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage" *Demography* 53 (1991):913-27.

⁷ Larry Bumpass, R. K. Raley, and J. A. Sweet, "The Changing Character of Stepfamilies: Implications of Cohabitation and Nonmarital Childbearing" *Demography* 32 (1995):425-436

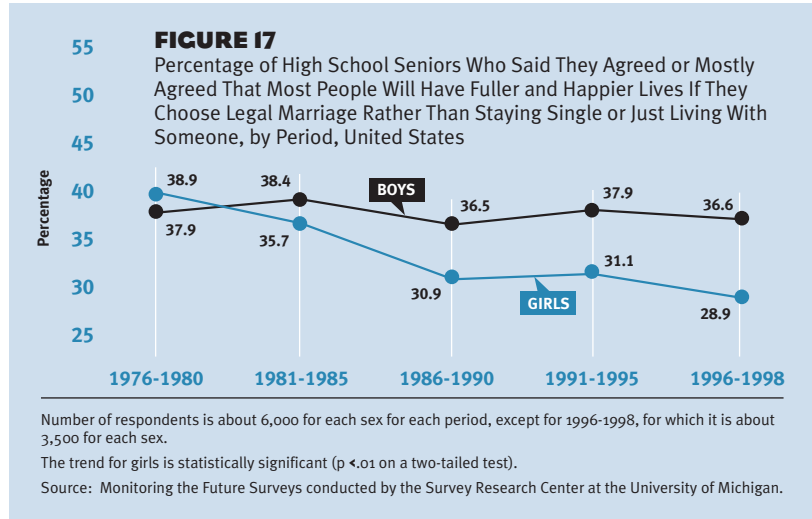
⁸ Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, 1998.

termine 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?

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.¹

Based on this survey, the percentage of teenagers who said that having a good marriage and family life was “extremely important” to them has increased slightly over the decades, especially for boys (Figure 15). Eighty-one percent of girls stated this belief in the 1996-1998 period, with boys lagging behind at 72 percent. Other data from the *Monitoring the Future* survey show a moderate increase in the percentage of teenage respondents who said that they will most likely choose to get married in the long run, recently about 80 percent. Only four percent say that they probably will not get married, with the remainder either already married or having “no idea.”²

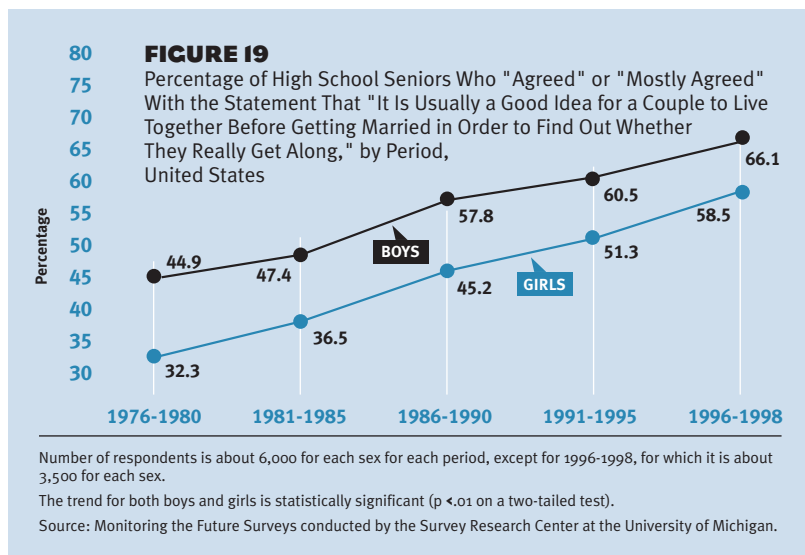
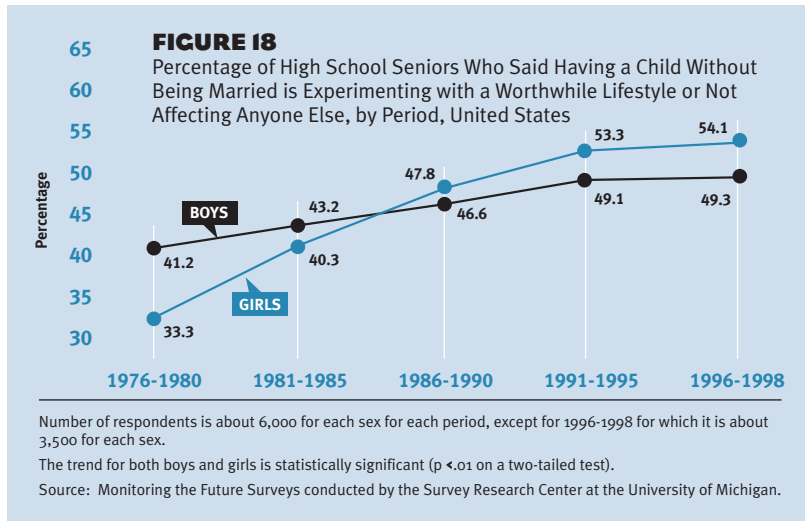
At the same time, answers to other questions by these teenagers indicate a growing pessimism among girls about the chances of actually fulfilling their desires and preferences, and a growing acceptance by both sexes of lifestyles that are alternatives to marriage. For girls who expect to marry (or who are already married), the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime has declined over the decades (Figure 16). So has agreement with the assump-



tion “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 answer to this question, that marriage is more beneficial to individuals than alternative lifestyles. Yet this belief is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the sub-

¹ The first survey was conducted in 1975, but because of changes in the ordering of the questions, the data from it are not comparable with the data from later surveys.

² In 1975, 77% answered that they most likely will choose to get married in the long run. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13-17 found an even larger percentage who thought they would marry someday—88% compared to 9% 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)



stantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.³

The acceptance of non-marital lifestyles by young people has increased enormously over the decades. Witness the remarkable increase, especially among girls, in the acceptance of

out-of-wedlock childbearing (Figure 18). And note that whereas in the 1970s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, today the tables have turned. 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 single parenthood.

Another remarkable increase is in the acceptance of living together before marriage, now by well over half of all teenagers (Figure 19). In this case girls remain more traditional than boys, but the gap is narrowing. Some of the growing acceptance is undoubtedly related to the belief that premarital cohabitation will actually strengthen marriage. Most teenagers apparently do not yet know that the available evidence fails to support this belief.

In summary, most teenagers still seem to prefer a rather traditional family life for themselves, and the importance they place on a good marriage has actually increased slightly in recent years. But girls are becoming more pessimistic about their marital futures and both boys and girls, in ever-growing numbers, do not seem to care if others choose less traditional lifestyles.

³ 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) 527-536; and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999).