



THE STATE OF OUR  
UNIONS

2002

the social health of marriage in america

THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT

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trends of the past four decades

**Marriage • Divorce • Unmarried Cohabitation  
Loss of Child Centeredness • Fragile Families with Children  
Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family**



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## 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 Professor Norval D. 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  
54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Lucy Stone Hall A347  
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8045  
(732) 445-7922  
marriage@rci.rutgers.edu  
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu>

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**Alan Wolfe**, Professor of Political Science and Director Center for Religion and Public Life, Boston College, and Contributing Editor, *The New Republic*

**M**arriage has been much in the news lately, but we hear little about the actual 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, has 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 child-bearing, 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 central 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. Knowledge about marriage is especially important to the younger generation of men and women, who grew up in the midst of the divorce revolution in the 1970s and 1980s, and are now approaching their prime marrying years. 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*. The report is divided into two sections. The first section is an essay in a continuing series devoted to exploring the attitudes toward mating and marrying among today's not-yet-married young. The second section 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 are updated annually and 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*



## **Executive Summary**

**A special essay on young, not-yet married men's attitudes on the timing of marriage finds that men experience few social pressures to marry, gain many of the benefits of marriage by cohabiting with a romantic partner, and are ever more reluctant to commit to marriage in their early adult years.**

**Available evidence on marriage trends over the past four decades indicates that marriage has declined dramatically as a first living together experience for couples and as a status of parenthood. However, in recent years, there are signs that some marriage-weakening trends are slowing or in some cases leveling off.**

# Why Men Won't Commit

Exploring Young Men's Attitudes About Sex, Dating and Marriage

by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe

## Key Findings

*The mating and marrying behavior of today's young single men is a topic of growing interest in the popular culture and among young women. To a large degree, this popular interest reflects the delay in the age of first marriage. Both men and women are putting off marriage until older ages. The median age of first marriage for men has reached 27, the oldest age in the nation's history. (The median age for women stands at 25.) However, it is men more often than women who are accused of being "commitment phobic" and dragging their feet about marriage. Our investigation of male attitudes indicates that there is evidence to support this popular view.*

*The men in this study express a desire to marry and have children sometime in their lives, but they are in no hurry. They enjoy their single life and they experience few of the traditional pressures from church, employers or the society that once encouraged men to marry. Moreover, the sexual revolution and the trend toward cohabitation offer them some of the benefits of marriage without its obligations. If this trend continues, it will not be good news for the many young women who hope to marry and bear children before they begin to face problems associated with declining fertility.*

*The ten reasons why men won't commit are:*

1. **They can get sex without marriage more easily than in times past**
2. **They can enjoy the benefits of having a wife by cohabiting rather than marrying**
3. **They want to avoid divorce and its financial risks**
4. **They want to wait until they are older to have children**
5. **They fear that marriage will require too many changes and compromises**
6. **They are waiting for the perfect soul mate and she hasn't yet appeared**
7. **They face few social pressures to marry**
8. **They are reluctant to marry a woman who already has children**
9. **They want to own a house before they get a wife**
10. **They want to enjoy single life as long as they can**

## The Unsettled Life

For the young men in these groups, the early adult years are a time of insecure job and residential attachment.

More than half report having changed jobs in the past five years, and twelve said they had been laid off or unemployed during that same time period.

Living arrangements also tend to be fluid and unstable. The men report a variety of

## About This Study

For the past three years, as part of its Next Generation Program, The National Marriage Project has been conducting research into the attitudes toward dating, mate selection and marriage among young, unmarried adults. Last year, we reported on the results of a national survey of young men and women, ages 20 to 29. This year, we take a closer look at a select group of young, heterosexual, not-yet-married men.

As a first step toward understanding male attitudes about marriage and their timing of entry into first marriage, we conducted focus group discussions among not-yet-married heterosexual men in four major metropolitan areas:

northern New Jersey, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Houston. The participants, sixty men in all, came from a variety of religious, ethnic and family backgrounds.

These men range in age from 25-33. The majority are employed full-time, with reported annual incomes between \$21-\$35,000 and above. Most have had some college or hold a baccalaureate degree or better. No one reports ever being married. Three of the men have a child.

This report highlights key findings from this preliminary study. These findings are impressionistic and exploratory but they provide valuable leads for further research into changing male patterns in the timing and commitment to marriage.

living arrangements since leaving the parental home. It is common for a young man to shift from sharing an apartment with roommates to cohabiting with a girlfriend to moving back in with one or both parents and then, perhaps, leaving home and living on his own again. A couple of the men moved back home to help a parent who was sick or recently widowed, and at least one moved back into the parental home because his parents said they would “do everything” for him.

Compared to work or living situations, friendships tend to be a source of more secure and stable attachments. Many of the male participants say they hang out and socialize with friends they have known since their high school or college days. These friendship groups can be male-only or can


include women friends as well. These groups go out to clubs, bars, sports events, or spend time together in private apartments.

## Meeting Women

Men say that they meet women in a variety of ways: through friends; at bars, clubs and Happy Hours; at work; and through casual encounters at the gym or the grocery store. When and where men meet women influences their expectations for a relationship. They view the women they meet in bars and dance clubs as casual sex partners rather than as “marriage material.” According to the men, the common and mutual understanding between men and women is that bars are for sexual hookups. “When you

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meet a girl in a bar, they're the worst... twenty different guys have hit on them already." Clearly, the amount of alcohol consumed is a factor, as is the time of day. For example, when men get together with women during the "happy hour," after work, they may be meeting in a bar, but they engage in a different kind of socializing. They are likely to be in the company of friends and to drink less. Consequently, a woman they meet in a bar after work might be someone they would be interested in for more than casual sex.

In general, a time and place that is conducive to a conversation with a woman is more likely to lead to something more than casual sex, they say. However, several men said that they felt awkward striking up a conversation with a woman. "It's damn hard to get the courage to go up and talk to someone," one man admitted. Some say that it is easier to get to know a woman if they are introduced by friends. And they are also more likely to contemplate a serious romantic relationship with a woman they meet through mutual friends.

Men are generally opposed to having a romantic relationship with a woman who works in their place of employment. If you break up, they say, "she's on the other side of the cubicle."

The Internet is an increasingly accepted and popular way to find romantic partners. Some men say that it is good way to generate a high number of prospective candidates. However, no one reported achieving a long-term relationship as the result of an Internet contact, and several commented that deception and misrepresentation were commonplace.

The men say that they rarely ask women out on a date. "That's the old way," one

man commented. "I'll meet them and we'll just hang out," one man said. Some contend that women don't want to be asked out on a formal date because the women themselves are not ready to be in a serious relationship. Generally, men hold the view that you should become friends and get to know each other by hanging out before you go out on a date.

Men are divided over the question of who should pay for a date. Most believe that men should pay if they are the ones who ask for the date. However, others think that it is acceptable to split the costs of a night out or let her pick up the check occasionally. "Why shouldn't you both pay?" one man asked, "you both work." Another commented: "Sometimes a woman wants to pay, so she can feel a little independent."

### **The Big Turnoffs**

Men expect the women they date to be economically independent and able to "take care of themselves." This represents a major change from earlier times. Moreover, this expectation figures in one of the most common dating complaints among these men. They resent being evaluated on the size of their wallet, their possessions or their earning potential. Therefore, they say, they are turned off by "golddiggers." Likewise, they avoid "material girls," women who are into "the big house and car."

A woman who wants a baby is another dating turn-off for these men. They fear that she might use them to achieve her goal of having a child and even to "trick" them into fathering a child.

These men also say that they try to avoid going out with women who already have children. Some say they are uncomfortable

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in the presence of a woman's children and not eager to be thrust into the role of a play "daddy." Moreover, they feel bad if they establish a relationship with the children and then break up with their mother. Finally, they want to avoid competition and conflict with the children's biological father. One man says that it is easier to date a woman with children if the father is entirely "out of the picture."

### Sex for Fun and Fear of Paternity

Half of unmarried men, ages 20-29, agree that there are people with whom they would have sex even though they have no interest in marrying them, according to last year's Gallup survey commissioned by The National Marriage Project. More than half of unmarried men, 20-29, agree that if two people really like each other, it's all right to have sex even if they have known each other only for a short time. Although young men are more likely to hold these views than young women, there is widespread agreement about the prevalence of casual sex in today's youthful dating culture. Among all young adults, 20-29, eight in ten agree that it is common for people in their age group to have sex just for fun without any expectation of commitment. This view is more strongly held by those with higher levels of educational attainment.

However, once they have casual sex, men say, they are less respectful and interested in pursuing a relationship with a woman. "If a girl wants it on the first night we go out, I definitely lose respect for her, 'cause she's probably doing it with someone else." They are more likely to "take it slow" sexually when they are romantically interested in a

woman. Again, this is consistent with the Gallup survey. Seventy-four percent of single men agreed that if you meet someone with whom you think you could have a long-term relationship, you will try to postpone sex until you know each other. Apparently, "waiting" for sex typically means holding off until the fourth or fifth date, though one man said he waited seven months. At the same time, some men expressed the opinion that it was up to the woman to hold them in check. "We'll always push for more," one said.

Men realize that casual sex places them at risk for STDS, including HIV, and also at risk for unplanned fatherhood. Their concern about "diseases" and pregnancy is further heightened because a significant number admit that they don't use condoms every time they have sex.

For some, the risk of unwanted fatherhood arouses more worry than the risk of disease. With DNA testing, it is now possible to establish biological paternity beyond a reasonable doubt and thus to hold men legally responsible for the financial support of any child they father. These young men express concern of "spending my life connected to someone I'm not in love with." They worry that a woman who got pregnant after casual sex might deny them the opportunity to get to know and bond with a child whom they are nonetheless legally required to support. Moreover, they are concerned about the financial burden associated with unwed and unplanned fatherhood. "For eighteen years, it's like \$70,000 or \$100,000 dollars," one man remarked. Their anxiety is greatest when it concerns the risk of pregnancy that might occur as the result of a one-night stand. As one man put it: "If it's a girl I just met in a bar, I used to wake up in a

cold sweat worrying about pregnancy.”

Some men express resentment toward a legal system that grants women the unilateral right to decide to terminate a pregnancy or to have a child without any say-so from the biological father. There is also mistrust of women who may “trap” men into fathering a child by claiming to be sterilized, infertile or on the pill and then to exploit his resources in order to have and rear a child “of her own.”

At the same time, these men are generally accepting of the social trend of women having children “on their own.” “I could deal with a woman using a sperm donor a lot better than I could deal with a messed up marriage,” one man remarked.

### Living Together

Cohabitation is a common and popular form of romantic partnership for young adults today. Slightly more than 44 percent of single men, 20-29, agree with the statement that they would only marry someone if she agreed to live together first. Close to a third of the men in this study say that they have lived with someone in the past or are currently cohabiting with a girlfriend.

There are several reasons why men say that they choose to live with girlfriends. One is to test compatibility for marriage. They believe that living together is a good way to get to know a woman intimately, since “it’s the little things” that can wreck a marriage.

Another reason has to do with the convenience of having a regular sex partner. Living with a woman reduces the risks of sex with a stranger. Men believe that they can dispense with condoms if they are in a monogamous living together relationship. Moreover, they can avoid the time-consum-

ing effort of searching for a sex partner when they have one living at home.

Also, there are economies of scale associated with shared living. One man commented on how helpful it was to have a girlfriend who could look after the house, pay the bills and take care of the dogs when his work took him away from home for extended periods of time. Several others noted that they were better able to save for the purchase of a house if they lived together. For some, this economy was associated with shared plans for future marriage, or at least, future joint home ownership. For others, buying a house was part of the try-out for marital compatibility. “If the house works out, then maybe we’ll talk marriage,” one man said.

Moreover, for some men, cohabitation is desirable because they are less answerable to their partner. “We have an interesting relationship,” said one cohabiting man. “I come and go as I please ... as long as she understands, we’re together ... It’s the same as being married. We’re totally happy.”

Finally, these men see living together as a way of avoiding an unhappy marriage and eventual divorce. This view is widely shared among people their age. Sixty-two percent of young adults agree that living with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid eventual divorce, according to last year’s Gallup survey for the National Marriage Project. “Everyone I know who’s gotten married quickly — and failed to live together [first] — has gotten divorced,” one man said. Another commented: “It should be a law, you should move in together and have a one year trial period. Then you have to wait another year before you have kids.”

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Many men also fear the financial consequences of divorce. They say that their financial assets are better protected if they cohabit rather than marry. They fear that an ex-wife will "take you for all you've got" and that "men have more to lose financially than women" from a divorce.

Several men expressed the opinion that there was little difference between the commitment to live together and the commitment to marriage. According to them, marriage is "just a piece of paper," a "legal thing" that you do for family and friends. One observed that cohabitation was just like being married, so why go through the hassle of an expensive ceremony and legal contract? However, this was not the majority view. Most men put marriage on a higher plane of commitment than a living together partnership.

### **Marrying a Soul Mate**

Most of the men in these groups want to marry at some future time in their lives. They expect their marriages to last a life time. Like the majority of young adults today, they are seeking a "soul mate." They envision a soul mate as a woman with whom "you are completely compatible right now," "someone you're not putting on a show for," the one person you connect with. Notably, they emphasize a soul mate's willingness to take them as they are and not try to change them.

Until they find a soul mate, however, they are willing to wait. They don't want to "settle" for second best in their choice of a marriage partner, though they don't have the same standards for a choice of a live-in girlfriend. Indeed, in some cases, they see her as a second best partner while they continue to look for a soul mate.

### **The Timing of Marriage**

Men want to be financially "set" before they marry. For many men, this means owning a house before they marry. However, most of the men in these groups are not yet homeowners, and some are living with a parent, relatives, roommates, or girlfriends.

Most men had no ideal age or timetable for their own eventual marriage. They say: "I'll know when I'm ready" and "Whatever happens, happens." One man referred jokingly to the Larry King syndrome: you can get married and have kids at any age.

A number of the men stated that having children was the main reason to marry. However, these men are in no great hurry to have children. Unlike women, they have no biological clock to impose a strict time limit on fertility. Several men expressed a desire to have children at a young enough age to enjoy them. As one put it, "I don't want to be a grandfather to my kid." But for most of these men, having children was a remote life goal. At their age, they did not yet feel ready for the financial responsibilities or disruptions of a child. Some recognized that children would burden their relationship with their partner, and that the presence of children would require compromise and change. Notably, none of these men expressed a burning desire for children, a view that would likely have been different if the study participants had been childless unmarried women of similar age and background.

### **Few Social Pressures to Marry**

Today's young men encounter few, if any, traditional pressures from religion, employers or society to marry. Some men in the group reported mild, teasing pressures from

parents who wanted grandchildren, or from married buddies, but they shrugged this off. A few noted that they first began to think about marriage when their friends began to get married. However, since some of their friends' marriages seemed ill-advised or doomed, they were not unduly influenced by peer pressure to marry either.

### The New Work/ Family Bargain

Men support the idea of women working outside the home. Indeed, most say that they expect their future wives to work for pay outside the home. Underlying this expectation is the idea that women should be independent-minded and pursue their own career interests. As one man explained: "I like the idea of marrying someone with drive. I would expect her to want her career just as bad as I want mine." However, most of the men describe the advantages of having a working wife in affective rather than strictly financial terms. That is, they think that a wife who works is likely to be a more interesting companion than one who isn't employed. "She doesn't have to have a big income, but a career, a life of her own" said one man. "She definitely has to work . . . or in the evenings, it'll be a one-sided conversation," another observed.

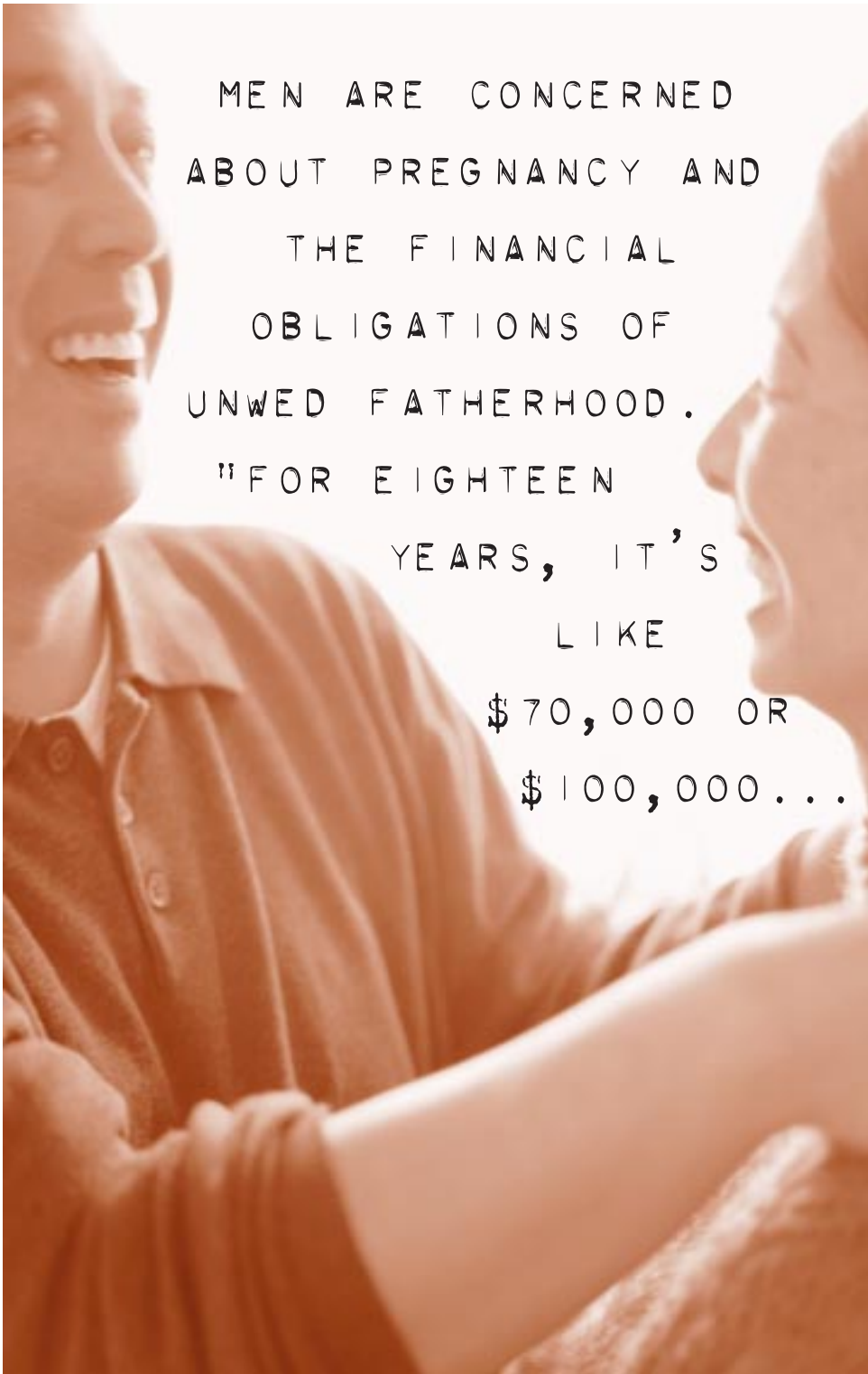
When children come along, however, men think it is preferable for one parent to stay at home or for relatives or grandparents to provide childcare. The overwhelming consensus is that you don't want to put your children in "stranger care." A number of men say that they will stay home with the children if their wife makes more money and prefers to be the primary breadwinner. However, the men who expressed interest in

becoming stay-at-home dads tended to be less well educated and less well employed than other men in the group, so it may be that their relatively poorer employment prospects make the idea of staying at home with children attractive in theory. (However, it remains to be seen whether they would continue to hold this view if they actually had the responsibility of full-time house and childcare, or whether they would prove themselves to be competent primary caregiving parents.)

### Divorce Is Too Easy

Like other young adults, these young men are highly critical of divorce. They think couples are too willing to call it quits without trying to work through difficulties in a marriage. As one observed: "One fight, and it's like 'I'm out of here.'" Some attribute the readiness to divorce as part of a societal trend toward narcissism, consumerism, and "too many choices." "You used to fall in love with the girl in your high school English class. Now you have more choices and you get married and then three years later, a better one comes along," commented one man. Others believe that both men and women are more independent and need each other less: "Now women are making as much as their husbands so they can say 'see ya,'" one said. Finally, these men cite the legacy of parental divorce as a factor contributing to a persistently high divorce rate: "We figure 'hey my parents got divorced, so we can get divorced.'" A couple of men expressed the opinion that living together before marriage lowers the level of commitment to marriage and thus contributes to a greater propensity to divorce, though this was a minority view.

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However, despite the strong and pervasive criticism of divorce, the men generally feel that children are better off if their parents divorce rather than stick it out in an unhappy marriage. They concur that this is the better choice even if the couple does not fight but simply has “fallen out of love.” They say that “children are smarter than you think and can pick up on parents’ unhappiness.” Apparently they believe that a child’s intuition that parents may be “out of love” is more harmful than the actual experience of parental divorce. Clearly, these men consider and evaluate marriage as an intimate couple relationship rather than as a child-rearing partnership. Thus, the perceived quality of couple satisfaction is more important in deciding whether to stay in a marriage than any perceived harms to children that might come from parental divorce.

### What’s the Future of Marriage?

Overall, men are not optimistic about the future of marriage as a lifelong commitment. They are acutely aware of the risks of divorce. Although they hold out the hope that their generation will work harder at marriage than baby boomers, they say that they are already seeing the first wave of divorces among their friends and this shakes their confidence in the future. Also, they believe that adults continue to change and “grow” and this makes it much harder to stay married to one person for a lifetime. One man said that he thought a contemporary marriage partnership of equals is more difficult to achieve than the traditional marriage with strict gender roles.

As with the respondents in our earlier focus groups and surveys, these men do not

believe that there is much that can be done to strengthen marriage on a society-wide basis. However, they do favor education on how to have and sustain successful relationships and marriages.

### Concluding Thoughts

Men see marriage as a final step in a prolonged process of growing up. This trend has a positive side. Men who marry at older ages are likely to be more financially stable than men in their late teens and early twenties. Further, men who marry at an older age may have gone through a “wild oats” period and may be more dependable and mature husbands and fathers.

At the same time, there is a potentially negative side. Financial stability, often equated with owning a home, comes before marriage in their personal priorities. However, pegging the timing of marriage to mortgage rates may substantially delay marriage, especially in more difficult economic times. Further, a prolonged period of single life may habituate men to the single life. Some of these men have spent a good part of their early adult years living with parents, roommates or alone. They have become accustomed to their own space and routines. They enjoy the freedom of not having to be responsible to anyone else. Like Henry Higgins, they fear losing their solitary pleasures by “letting a woman in their life.” More than a few men expressed resentment at women who try to change them. “Women look at men like computers; they always want to upgrade,” one said. Some of the men describe marital compatibility as a matter of finding a woman who will “fit into their life.” “If you are truly compatible, then you don’t have to change,” one man com-

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DOING IT  
WITH  
SOMEONE  
ELSE."

mented. Another man, who was a member of a band, said that he was grateful that his live-in girlfriend didn't give him a hard time about his late nights and the time he spent socializing with his bandmates after their gig.

In the past, of course, men might drag their feet about getting hitched, but there were pressures to wed. Marriage was associated with growing up and taking on male adult roles and responsibilities. Parents expected sons to leave and set up their own household. Now the pressures are mild to nonexistent. Boys can remain boys indefinitely.

In addition, some of the traditional community and family forces that might encourage single men to learn the habits of compromise, give-and-take, and fitting in with others are weakening as well. Young men today live in a peer world. Some have grown up with only one or no siblings. As young adults, they may have little experience or contact with children in a family household, something that was more common for unmarried young men in times past. Even meal times can be solitary.

Perhaps the most significant factor contributing to male delay of marriage is the rise of cohabitation. Men can get many of the benefits of marriage without the com-

mitment to marriage, or, as they often point out, without exposure to the financial risks of divorce. Cohabitation gives men regular access to the domestic and sexual ministrations of a girlfriend while allowing them greater legal, social and psychological freedom to lead a more independent life and to continue to look around for a better partner.

The men realize that women face time pressures to marry and bear children. At the same time, however, they express little sympathy for women's circumstances. Several men took the view that men had to be careful because women "want to get married just to have kids." Moreover, as noted above, there was strong sentiment that an unmarried woman who already had a child was less desirable as a date, and certainly less desirable as a prospective marriage partner.

The vast majority of young women today hope to marry and have a family. Men also share this aspiration for marriage and family. However, unlike women, they can postpone marriage for a longer time without losing the chance to have a biological child. Consequently, men's reluctance to marry makes it harder for peer women who are in their prime marrying years to achieve their desired life goal. As one man put it, "That's their issue."

# Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing

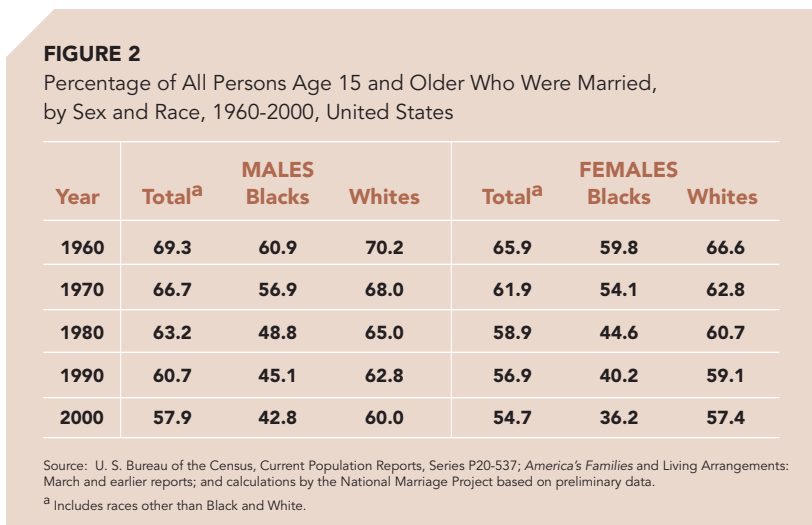
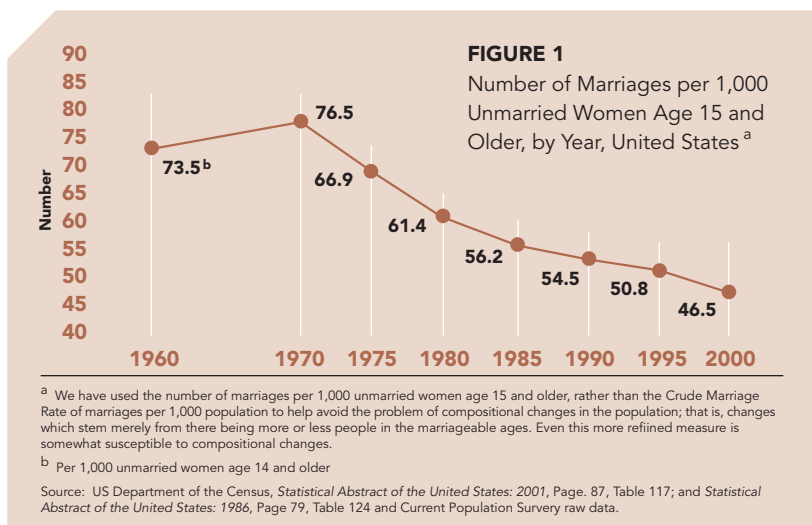
THE STATE OF OUR  
**UNIONS**  
2002

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 2000, in the annual number of marriages per 1000 unmarried adult 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 eleven percentage points—and nearly 24 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 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 16 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.<sup>1</sup>

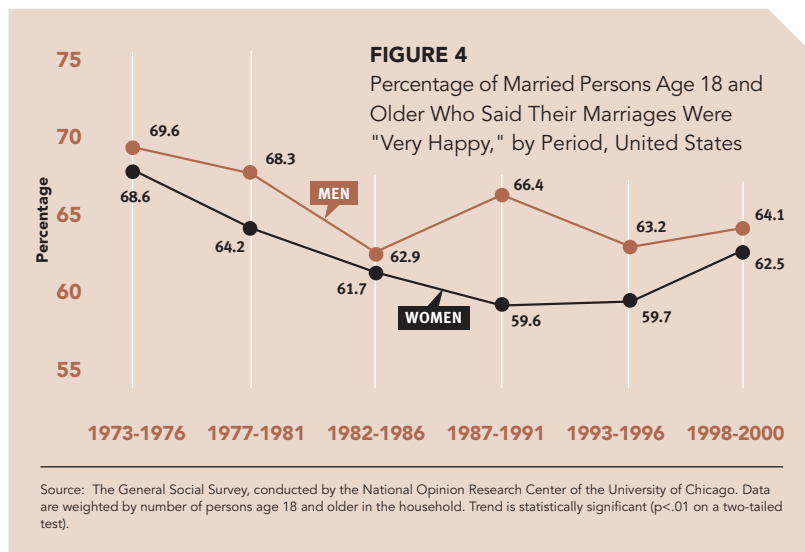
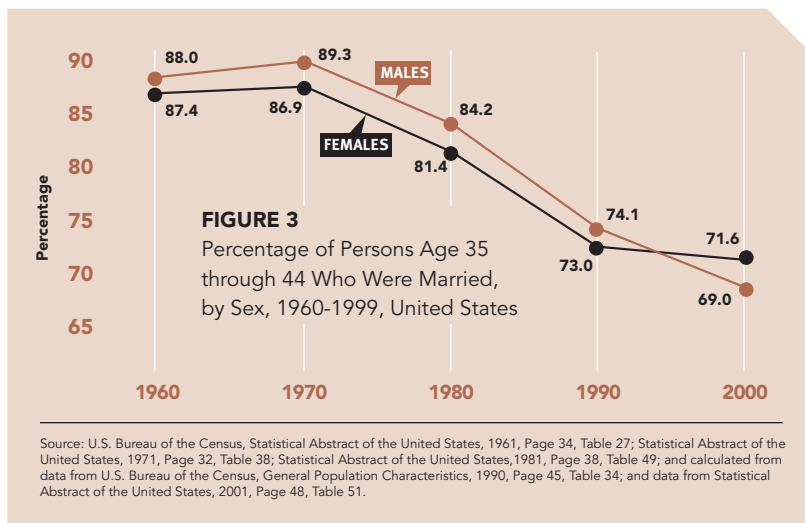
Marriage trends in the age range of 35 to 44 are suggestive of lifelong singlehood. In times past and still today, virtually all persons who were going to marry during their

<sup>1</sup> Comparative data from Rodger Doyle, "The Decline of Marriage," *Scientific American*, December 1999:36

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.<sup>2</sup> If the present marriage trend continues, some demographers are predicting that fewer than 85 percent of current young adults will ever marry.<sup>3</sup>

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



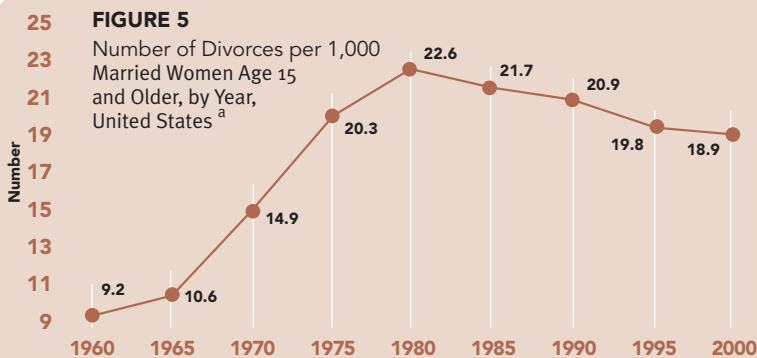
not support these assumptions. Since 1973, the General Social Survey periodically has asked representative samples of married Americans to rate their marriages as either "very happy," "pretty happy," or "not too happy."<sup>4</sup> As Figure 4 indicates, the percent-

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, "The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Table for the United States, 1995." Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

<sup>4</sup> 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.





<sup>a</sup> 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.

Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001, Page 87, Table 117; and National Vital Statistics Reports, August 22, 2001; California Current Population Survey Report: 2000, Table 3, March 2001; and calculations by the National Marriage Project based on preliminary data.

**FIGURE 6**  
Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Divorced, by Sex and Race, 1960-2000, United States

Year	Total	MALES		Total	FEMALES	
		Blacks	Whites		Blacks	Whites
1960	1.8	2.0	1.8	2.6	4.3	2.5
1970	2.2	3.1	2.1	3.5	4.4	3.4
1980	4.8	6.3	4.7	6.6	8.7	6.4
1990	6.8	8.1	6.8	8.9	11.2	8.6
2000	8.3	9.5	8.4	10.2	11.8	10.2

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 2000 and earlier reports.

age of both men and women saying "very happy" has declined moderately over the past 25 years.<sup>5</sup> This trend has shown a turn-

<sup>5</sup> 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

around since reaching a low point in 1994, however, and is now heading in a more positive 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Joshua R. Goldstein, "The Leveling of Divorce in the United States" *Demography* 36 (1999): 409-414

1.8 percent for males and 2.6 percent for females in 1960, quadrupled by the year 2000. 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—still around 50 percent—that a marriage started today will end in divorce. (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

### 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 recent study by a prominent demographer 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.<sup>a</sup>

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.<sup>b</sup> Crime rates, for

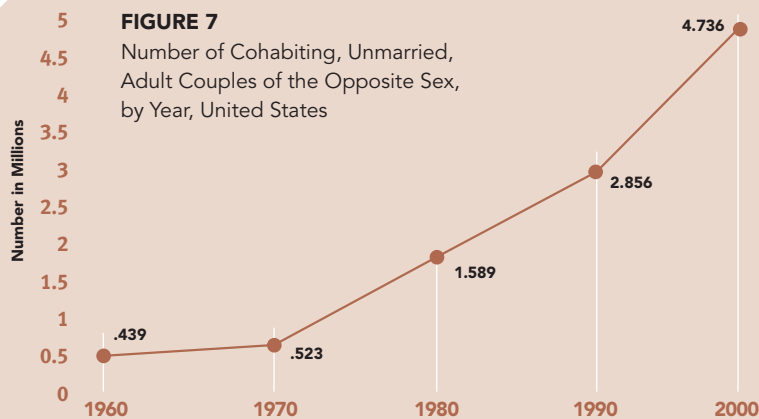
example, are highly correlated with a large percentage of unmarried young males in the population. And, in general, marital delay leaves young adults with an increased exposure to the hazards of nonmarital sex and childbearing, sexual exploitation, loneliness, and lack of social integration. Also, marital delay is relatively disadvantageous for women because their mating opportunities drop faster with age than is the case for men. Finally, one recent study, as yet unpublished, suggests that later marriages (i.e., over age 30) may be of lower quality than marriages begun when couples are in their mid-twenties.<sup>c</sup>

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 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" is probably different for women and men.

<sup>a</sup> Tim B. Heaton, "Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States," *Journal of Family Issues* 23 (2002): 392-409.

<sup>b</sup> 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.

<sup>c</sup> Norval D. Glenn, "Age at First Marriage and Marital Success." Unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, University of Texas, Austin, TX.



Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2000 and earlier reports.

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 2000, as indicated in Figure 7, the number of unmarried couples in America increased by over 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their 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 more than one third, contain children.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> Bumpass and Lu, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela J. Smock, "Cohabitation in the United States" *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000).

## 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.<sup>a</sup>

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, some projections made using rates pre-

vailing in the early 1980s yielded marital breakup chances of well over 50 percent, one as high as 60 percent, while in more recent years the chances have been lowered to the 50 percent range.<sup>b</sup> 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, not as a predictor of future events.

<sup>a</sup> 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.

<sup>b</sup> Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields, "Number, Timing and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996," US Census Bureau: Current Population Reports (P70-80) February, 2002.

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.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 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*, 2nd Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002).

## **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 on average 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 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. 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." The late 1990s increase is also due, in part, to a higher birth rate among recent immigrants.

In 2000 the American "total fertility rate" stood at 2.130, or two children per woman,

the highest level in several decades. In most European nations, on the other hand, the total 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 long-term 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, less than 33 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.

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 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.<sup>1</sup>

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



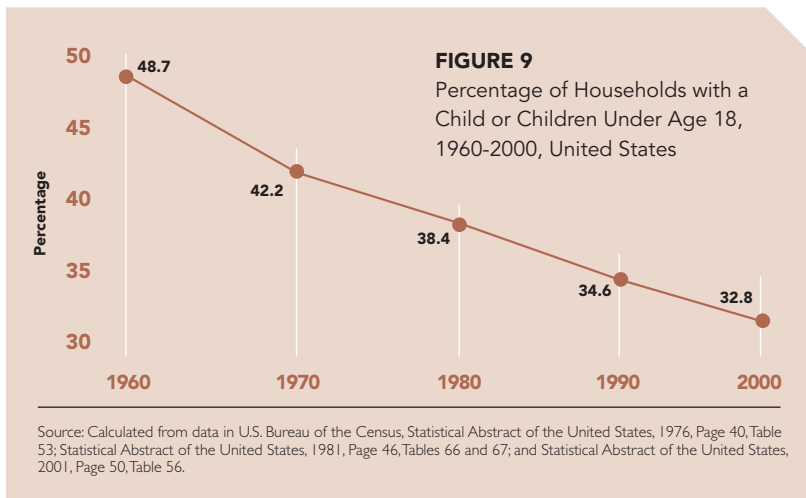
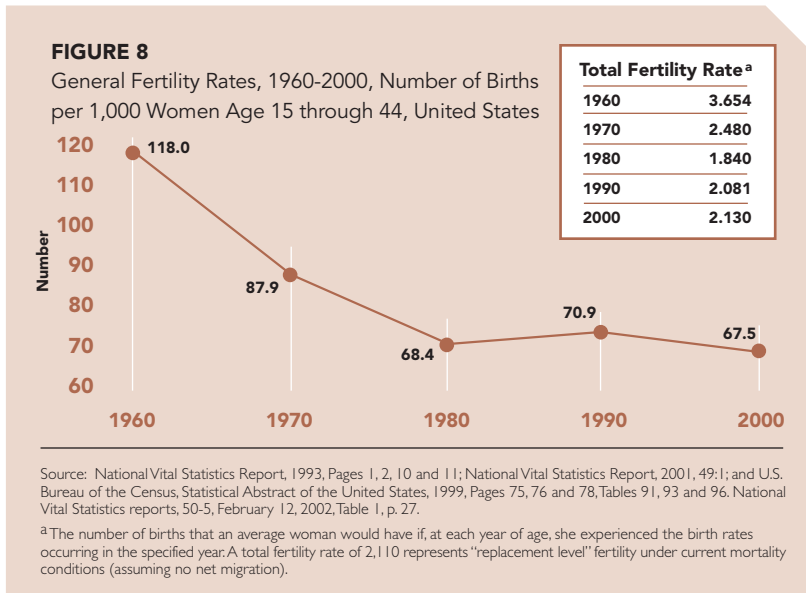
This remarkable reversal was caused mainly by the decline of fertility and the weakening of marriage through divorce and unwed births.

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."<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.



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

<sup>5</sup> 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

## Did a "Family Turnaround" Begin in the Late 1990s?

Much has been written about the possibility of a "family turnaround" beginning in the late 1990s—that is, about a reversal of the family weakening trends of recent decades of the kind highlighted in the annual State of Our Unions reports. If there were such a turnaround, the steady increases in out-of-wedlock births, single parent families, divorce, and nonmarital cohabitation would end. There would be a surge of interest in forming life-long unions and in having babies born to married couples. There would be fewer divorces and fewer parents with children cohabiting as a chosen way of life. Has such a turnaround actually begun? While the statistics discussed in this annual report deal mostly with long-term (i.e. decade by decade) trends, here we will review the short-term trends of the past few years. The data cited come mostly from official government sources.

Most prominent in the public discussion have been recent trends in the African American community, where evidence for a family turnaround has been the strongest. The proportion of out-of-wedlock births among black women, long the highest in the nation, declined from 70.4% in 1994 to 68.5% in 2000. Although modest, this change is the first improvement in this statistic for many decades. By the same token, the percentage of black children living in two-parent families increased from 36% to 38% between 1998 and 2000.

Are similar changes underway in the rest of America? A few statistics hint of this possibility. The percentage of children in two-parent families increased nationwide by about one point between 1998 and 2000, from 68% to 69%, and there was a slight increase between 1999 and 2000 in the percentage of persons age 35-44 who were

married. Also, an upturn occurred in the past few years in the percentage of married persons who said their marriages were "very happy," and the birth rate (total fertility) recently pushed up to its highest level in several decades.

The problem in positing a "family turnaround" based on these changes is that the changes have been recent, small, and in some cases based on samples, and thus subject to sampling error. Also, they may have been generated by the strong economy of the 1990s or even, in part, by the sudden impact of welfare reform. Therefore, we can not have full confidence that they will continue.

Other recent trends may presage a continuing weakening of the family. A Census Bureau report has found that childlessness among American women is on the rise over the long term: in 1998, 19% of women age 40-44 were childless, compared to just 10% in 1980. (The latest birthrate increase is accounted for in large part by recent immigrants.) The marriage rate still seems to be dropping, albeit at a slower pace. This is partly due to the sharp increase in the number of cohabiting couples, including couples with children, which was the most dramatic ten-year family change documented by the 2000 census. Nationwide, the proportion of out-of-wedlock births increased again last year following several years of leveling off, probably due in large part to the growth of nonmarital cohabitation. Finally, the divorce rate has remained at its high level for more than a decade.

It is too soon to speak of anything so significant as a "family turnaround." The only thing that can be said with confidence at this time is that many of the family trends toward a weakening family structure in the past few decades have slowed dramatically, and in some cases leveled off. What the future holds, of course, awaits the coming to maturity of the next generation.

## Fragile Families with Children

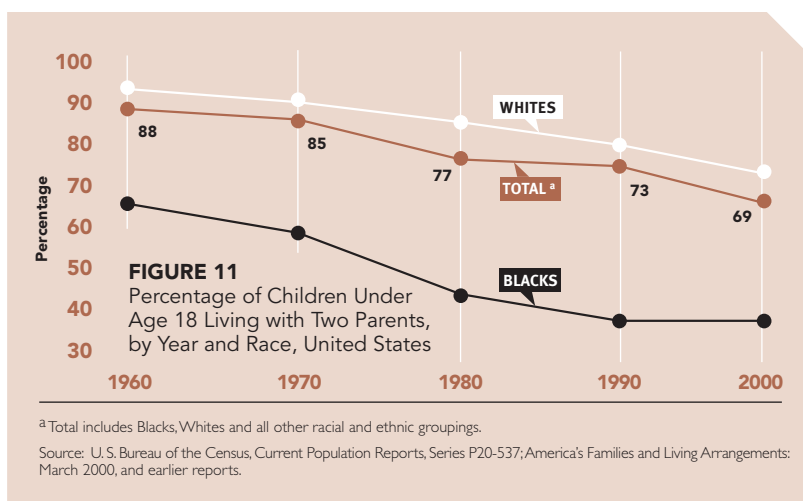
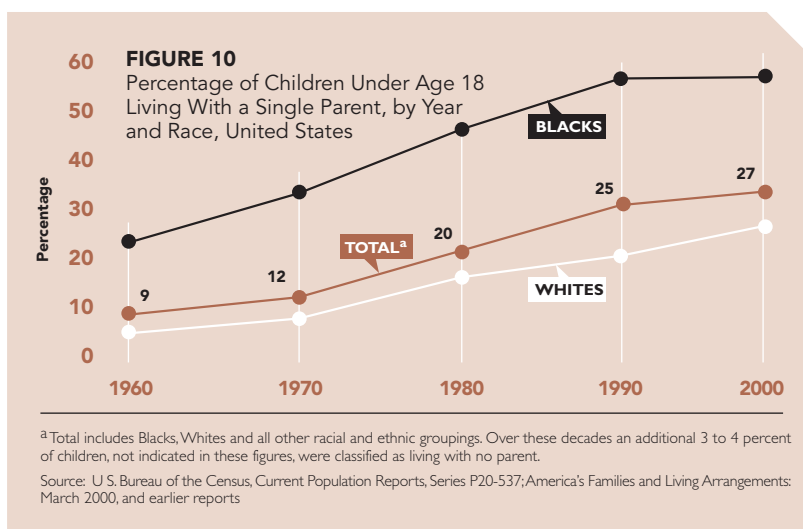
**KEY FINDING:** *The percentage of children who grow up in fragile--typically fatherless--families has grown enormously over the past four decades. This is mainly due to increases in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and unmarried cohabitation.*

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.

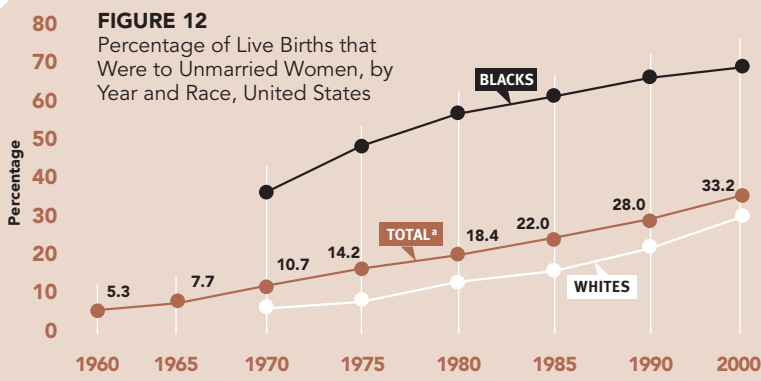
While in 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the 20th century, by 2000 the percentage had jumped to 27 percent. As part of a possible "family turnaround," however, the percentage of Black children living with a single parent dropped slightly in the past few years. (See "Did A 'Family Turnaround' Begin in the Late 1990s?"). The overwhelming majority of single-parent families are mother-only, although the number of father-only families recently has grown. (See "What is a Single-Parent Family Today?")

An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of persons under age 18 liv-

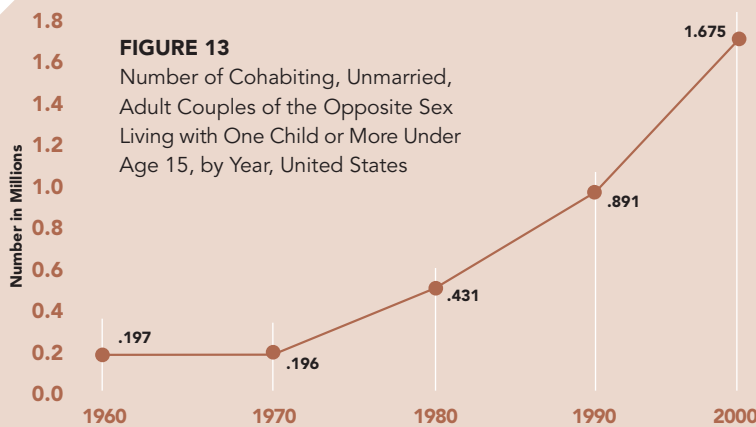


ing with two parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by almost 20 percentage points (Figure 11). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while nine percent are stepfamilies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jason Fields, "Living Arrangements of Children: Fall, 1996." Current Population Reports, P70-74, U. S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2001



<sup>a</sup>Total includes Whites, Blacks and all other racial and ethnic groupings.  
Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Page 77, Table 94; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Page 79, Table 99; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000, Page 69, Table 85; and Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001, Page 63, Table 76; National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 50, 5.



Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000, and earlier reports.

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.<sup>2</sup> Data on stepfamilies, therefore, probably are more reasonably combined with single-parent than with biological two-parent families.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 about 35 percent.<sup>3</sup>

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, went from under 500,000 in 1960 to well over a million in 1975. 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 12). The number of births to unmarried women in 2000 was the highest ever recorded.

About a third of all births and more than two-thirds of black births that year were out-of-wedlock, although the percentage of unwed black births declined slightly in the late 1990s.

A third and still more recent family trend that has affected family structure is the rapid

<sup>3</sup> 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.

## 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Saul D. Hoffman and E. Michael Forster, "Nonmarital Births and Single Mothers: Cohort Trends in the Dynamics of Non marital Childbearing" *The History of the Family* 2-3 (1997): 255-275.

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 an 850 percent increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children (Figure 13). An estimated 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their growing up years.<sup>4</sup>

In 2000 about 35 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18. For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.<sup>5</sup> Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

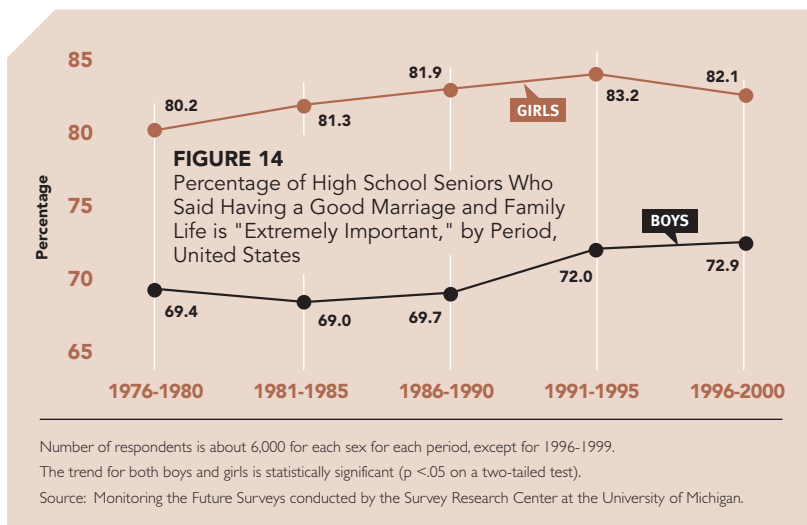
<sup>4</sup> Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S." *Population Studies* 54 (2000) 29-41

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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

<sup>7</sup> 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





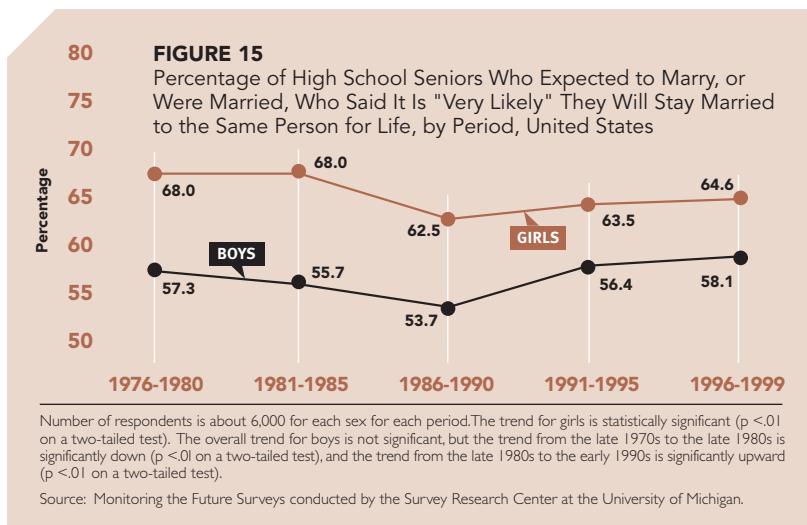
## Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family

**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 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?

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.<sup>1</sup>

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 14). Eighty-two percent of girls stated this belief in the 1996-2000 period, with boys lagging behind at 73 percent. Other data from the Monitoring the Future survey show a moder-



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.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bumpass and Lu, 2000.

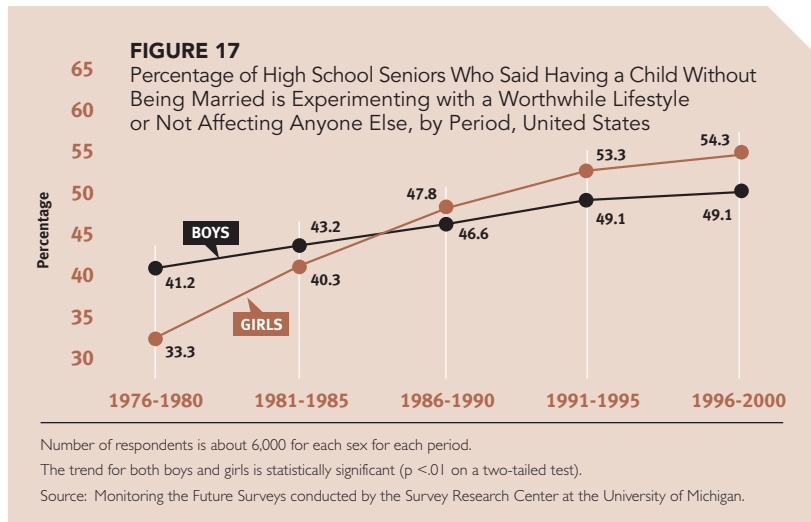
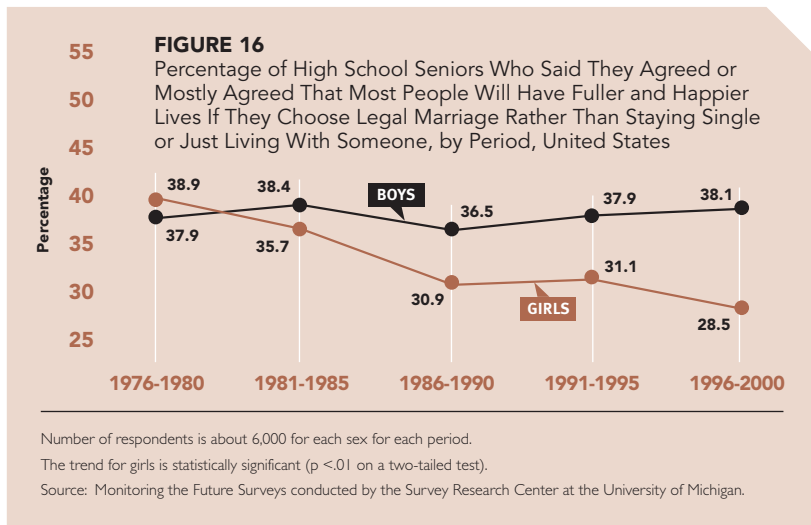
<sup>1</sup> The first survey was conducted in 1975, but because of changes in the ordering of the questions, the data from it are not comparable with the data from later surveys.

ate 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".<sup>2</sup>

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 15). So has agreement with the assumption "that most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone" (Figure 16). Less than a third of the girls and only slightly more than a third of

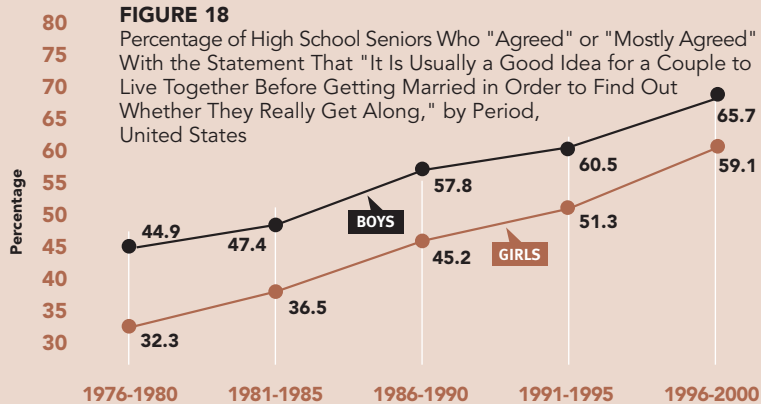
<sup>2</sup> In 1975, 77% answered that they most likely will choose to get married in the long run. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13-17 found an even larger percentage who thought they would marry someday—88% compared to 9% who expected to stay single. Gallup has undertaken a youth poll several times 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)

<sup>3</sup> 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*, 2nd Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002).



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 substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.<sup>3</sup>

The acceptance of non-marital lifestyles by young people has increased enormously



Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1996-1999, for which it is about 4,500. The trend for both boys and girls is statistically significant ( $p < .01$  on a two-tailed test). Source: Monitoring the Future Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

over the decades. Witness the remarkable increase, especially among girls, in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing (Figure 17). 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 18). 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.



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