

5th  
Annual  
Edition

T H E S T A T E O F O U R

# UNIONS

2003



The Social Health of Marriage in America

T H E N A T I O N A L M A R R I A G E P R O J E C T



5th  
Annual  
Edition

T H E S T A T E O F O U R

# UNIONS 2003

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



The Social Health of Marriage in America



T H E N A T I O N A L M A R R I A G E P R O J E C T



## 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 *Why There Are No Good Men Left*, *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.

Design: Bruce Hanson, EGADS, Hightstown, NJ.

© Copyright 2003 by the National Marriage Project  
All rights reserved.

For more information:



The National Marriage Project  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Lucy Stone Hall B217  
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8045  
(732) 445-7922  
marriage@rci.rutgers.edu  
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu>

June 2003

## Table of Contents

<b>Marriage and Children: Coming Together Again?</b> .....	6
<b>Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing: Trends of the Past Four Decades</b> ....	19
Marriage .....	20
Divorce .....	23
Unmarried Cohabitation .....	24
Loss of Child Centeredness .....	26
Fragile Families with Children .....	28
Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family .....	30

## Research Advisory Board

A Research Advisory Board made up of the following distinguished academic and social science experts guides the work of the National Marriage Project.

**Don S. Browning**, Alexander Campbell Professor Emeritus of Religious Ethics and the Social Sciences, and Director, the Religion, Culture and Family Project, University of Chicago

**William J. Doherty**, Professor of Family Social Science and Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program, University of Minnesota, and former President of the National Council on Family Relations

**Amitai Etzioni**, University Professor, George Washington University, founder and head of the Communitarian Network, and former President of the American Sociological Association

**William A. Galston**, Professor and Director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland, and former domestic advisor to President Clinton

**Neil Gilbert**, Milton and Gertrude Chernin Professor of Social Welfare and Social Services, University of California at Berkeley

**Mary Ann Glendon**, Learned Hand Professor of Law, Harvard University

**Norval D. Glenn**, Ashbel Smith Professor of Sociology and Stiles Professor of American Studies, University of Texas at Austin

**James Davison Hunter**, William R. Kenan Professor, and Executive Director, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia

**David G. Myers**, John Dirk Werkman Professor of Psychology, Hope College

**Alice S. Rossi**, Professor Emerita of Sociology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and former President of the American Sociological Association

**Isabel Sawhill**, Arjay Miller Chair in Public Policy, the Urban Institute, and Senior Fellow, Johnson Chair, the Brookings Institution, and President of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

**Linda J. Waite**, Lucy Flower Professor of Sociology, University of Chicago, and former President of the Population Association of America

**Judith S. Wallerstein**, Founder, Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition, Corte Madera, CA, and Senior Lecturer Emerita, University of California, Berkeley

**James Q. Wilson**, Professor Emeritus of Management, University of California at Los Angeles, and Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; former Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government, Harvard University, and President of the American Political Science Association

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

Marriage 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 marriage and marriage-related issues. 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

*This report on marriage as a child-rearing institution offers some good news and some bad news for children. On the upside, there has been a slight and recent increase in the percentage of children in two-married-parent families, the first reversal of a four-decade-long trend. Some government indicators point to improvement in key areas of child wellbeing. A growing number of private and public initiatives are aimed at strengthening married parent families.*

*On the downside, marriage has continued to decline as a status of parenthood over four decades. There has been a sharp increase in cohabiting couples with children. The percentage of households with children has dropped from nearly half of all households in 1960 to less than one-third today, a demographic shift with major implications for children's centrality in the society. Further, amid a society of material abundance, there are signs that the psychosocial wellbeing of children is declining.*

# Marriage and Children: Coming Together Again?

by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe

**I**n this year's essay, we look at the state of marriage as a child-rearing institution. This is not a new topic for us. Since the National Marriage Project began, our principal goal has been to report on marriage trends that affect the lives and future prospects of the nation's children. But the topic is especially compelling today because there are signs that the four-decade-long decline in two-married-parent families may be coming to an end.

In last few years, for example, the percentage of children in two-married-parent families inched up nationwide by about one point, from 68 to 69 percent, the first reversal in decades. The percentage of black children living in two married-parent families increased from 34 to 39 percent between 1996-2002. In addition, there has been a decline in the proportion of unwed births among black women, from 70.4 percent in 1994 to 68.5 percent in 2001. (See "Did a Family Turnaround Begin in the Late 1990s?" p 20.)

These are small and very recent changes, but they represent good news for children. A robust body of social science evidence indicates that children do best when they grow up with both married biological parents who are in a low-conflict relationship.<sup>1</sup> According to the research, children who grow up in other kinds of family arrangements are at higher risk for poverty, economic insecurity, emotional and school problems and unwed teen pregnancy, even after researchers control for race, income and family background.

The recent uptick in two-married-parent families is hopeful in another sense. It suggests that there is nothing inevitable about the marriage trends of the past four decades. They can change in a more positive direction. At the same time, however, it is too early to say whether this turnaround is here to stay. Strong countervailing social and cultural trends continue to threaten marriage as a child-rearing and child-centered institution.

This essay looks at some of the longer-term trends that contribute to a decline in marriage as the primary institution for bearing and rearing children. It also reports on evidence of a new kind of poverty that threatens youthful wellbeing. In doing so, our larger goal is not to minimize the good news of a possible turnaround in children's family lives but to ground it in an appraisal of the obstacles that may stand in the way of sustained progress.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Parke, "Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says about the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being," Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2003. Available at [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).



In recent years, marriage has enjoyed something of a comeback in the popular culture. From hit movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* to top-rated dating reality shows like *The Bachelor* to best-sellers on sexier marriage, popular attention has turned to the pursuit and pleasures of matrimony.<sup>2</sup> But the revived enthusiasm for marriage is mostly about romantic relationships and lavish weddings. It has little to do with the importance of marriage for children, or the connection between marriage and parenthood. Indeed, though Americans aspire to marriage, they are ever more inclined to see it as an intimate relationship between adults rather than as a necessary social arrangement for rearing children.

To be sure, marriage is not only about children, nor are children essential to marriage. A couple does not have to have children in order to participate in the privileges and obligations of marriage. Yet, throughout the nation's history and through much of the world today, marriage is first and foremost an institution designed to unite men and women in the shared tasks of child rearing. The possibility or presence of children is the key reason why the state and society treat marriage differently from other intimate partnerships. But in American society today, this institutional role is eroding.

Marriage is undergoing legal, social and cultural changes, and many of these changes are shifting its meaning and purpose away from children and toward adults.

Chief among these changes is the weakening connection between marriage as a couple relationship and marriage as a parental partnership. The two used to be joined together. Today, however, the couple relationship is increasingly independent of the procreative and parental partnership. As a

consequence, there is a growing split between adults' and children's experience of marriage. Though most adults continue to prize marriage and to seek it for themselves, children are less able to count on their parents' marriage as the secure foundation of their family lives. Indeed, if there is a story to be told about marriage over recent decades, it is not that it is withering away for adults but that it is withering away for children.

### *The Separation of Parenthood From Marriage*

Marriage used to be the principal pathway into parenthood, but that is changing. About a third of all children and more than two-thirds of African-American children are born out of wedlock. In addition, since 1960, there has also been an 85 percent increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children. An estimated 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting couple household during their growing up years. The persistently high rate of divorce is still another factor separating marriage and parenthood. Roughly a million children each year experience parental divorce and its aftermath. As a consequence of these combined forces, 69 percent of all children are living with two married parents compared to 85 percent as recently as 1970. Only 38 percent of black children live with two married parents compared to 58 percent in 1970.<sup>3</sup>

Recent signs of a shift toward two married-parent families offer hope that this trend can be reversed. At the same time, it will be hard to sustain a turnaround in the face of grow-

If there is a story to be told about marriage over recent decades, it is not that it is withering away for adults but that it is withering away for children.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of popular books on perking up marital sex include: Michele Weiner Davis, *The Sex Starved Marriage* (2003), Barry McCarthy, *Rekindling Desire* (2003), and Valerie Raskin, *Great Sex for Moms* (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2002.*, (Washington, DC: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2002), 73; Table POP5 <http://childstats.gov/ac2002/pdf/ac2002.pdf>



ing acceptance of parenthood outside of marriage, especially among the young. In a Gallup survey of twentysomething young adults, commissioned by the National Marriage Project in 2001, less than half (44 percent) of the young men and women agree that "it is wrong to have a child outside of marriage." For young adults, unwed parenthood is often viewed as a "choice" rather than the result of an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy. In the same survey, 40 percent of single women agreed with the statement that "although it might not be the ideal option, you would consider having a child on your own if you reached your mid-thirties and had

not found the right man to marry." Notably, the proportion of unwed births among women, 20-24, has gone up, from 48.2 percent in 1990 to 61.7 in 2001.

Indeed, in the minds of many single young adults, the connection between marriage and parenthood is fading. Getting married and becoming a parent seem to be entirely separate life pursuits, with different requirements for each. Likewise, single young adults are changing their views of the timing of marriage and parenthood. Marriage used to come before parenthood in the sequence of life events. Today, however, the sequence is reversed, according to a recent analysis of

findings from the General Social Survey. The survey asked people to identify the “normal” age for selected events traditionally associated with the transition to adulthood, like marrying, buying a home, and having children. Survey respondents who were divorced, married, and widowed put the “normal” age of marrying as slightly younger than the age of having a child (by 0.5-1.1 years), while never-married people put having a child 0.5 years before getting married.<sup>4</sup>

## The Retreat of Fathers From Children

Though most women think it would be a good thing if men shared more fully in the rearing and nurturing of children, trends are moving in the opposite direction. Men are increasingly disengaged from daily tasks of nurturing and providing for their children. They are staying single longer before they marry, having more children out of wedlock, cohabiting rather than marrying, and divorcing in large numbers. A small but growing percentage may be foregoing marriage altogether. Eighteen percent of men, ages 35 to 44, today have never married compared to seven percent in 1970. The result is that, compared to children in mid-twentieth-century America, the proportion of children living apart from their biological fathers has increased sharply, from 17 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2000.

Of course, these figures don't tell the whole story. Perhaps more than at any time in the past, many fathers are actively participating in child rearing from the moment their offspring are born. They change diapers, comfort cranky babies at two AM, and take the kids to the pediatrician. Indeed, the pattern

in American fatherhood today is confounding: while a growing number of fathers are highly engaged in their children's lives, there are also more fathers who are disengaged or entirely absent. The key factor contributing to this divergent pattern is marriage.

Ideally, fathers would provide lifelong nurture and support for their offspring, whether they were married or not. But in reality, marriage is the social glue that holds fathers to their offspring. Marriage encourages regular and routine father involvement. When marriage and fatherhood come unglued, father involvement often weakens. Some fathers become entirely disconnected from their children. According to one recent study, 28 percent of children with nonresident fathers had no contact with them in the past year.<sup>5</sup> Compared to married fathers, men who are not married to their children's mothers are significantly less likely to be consistently and positively involved with their children during their growing up years. Unmarried cohabiting fathers fail to show as much warmth or put in as much time or money in the care of their biological children as do married fathers.<sup>6</sup> And cohabiting men who are living with nonbiological children pose a risk of physical or sexual abuse to such children.<sup>7</sup>

Recent changes in the early adult life course also affect men's attitudes toward marriage and fatherhood. Today's young adults are putting off marriage until older ages. The delay of marriage is due to several well-recognized factors: more years of schooling, an effort to achieve economic independence

[For many single young adults], getting married and becoming a parent seem to be entirely separate life pursuits, with different requirements for each.

<sup>4</sup> Tom W. Smith, “Coming of Age in 21st Century America: Public Attitudes towards the Importance and Timing of Transitions to Adulthood,” National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, GSS Topical Report 35, 2003, 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Sorensen and Chava Zibman, “To What Extent Do Children Benefit from Child Support?” Discussion Paper 99-11, The Urban Institute (2000), 8

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Hofferth and Kermyt G. Anderson, “Are All Dads Equal? Biology Versus Marriage as a Basis for Paternal Investment,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003), 213-232

<sup>7</sup> Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, “Child Abuse and Other Risks of Not Living with Both Parents” *Ethology and Sociobiology* 6 (1985), 197-210; and Leslie Margolin “Child Abuse by Mothers' Boyfriends: Why the Overrepresentation?” *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16 (1992), 541-551.

The proportion of children living apart from their biological fathers has increased sharply, from 17 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2000.

after the end of formal schooling, and a more prolonged and often ragged transition from the parental home to living on one's own continuously. Young men today take longer than young women to leave home and are more likely to return home after they have left for the first time.<sup>8</sup>

Men's delay of marriage pushes plans for fatherhood into the distant future. Though most single young men want children once they get married, they aren't ready to think about having them anytime soon. In the meantime, however, they are leading sexually active lives that put them at increased risk of unmarried fatherhood. Perhaps for that reason, they express ambivalence and wariness about children. In a recent National Marriage Project study of young never-married men, a significant number viewed children negatively, as a source of burdensome financial obligation, conflict and even "trickery" by women.<sup>9</sup> Most said they avoided dating women with children, for fear of conflict with the child's biological father or fear that their girlfriend was chiefly interested in finding a father for her child. They also worried that a "one-night" stand would lead to unplanned fatherhood and a long-lasting parental relationship with a woman they did not care about and would not want to marry. (This fear did not make them renounce one-night stands, however.) And they are concerned that their sexual partners might deliberately deceive them about "being on the pill" or "being infertile" and get pregnant "on purpose." Some expressed the view that the legal deck is stacked against men in divorce, so why risk marriage at all?

<sup>8</sup> Frances Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider, *The Changing Transition to Adulthood: Leaving and Returning Home* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 136-39.

<sup>9</sup> See discussion in David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2002*, (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2002), 6-16.

## A Shift From Child-Centered Marriage to Soul-Mate Marriage

Americans today tend to see marriage as a couples relationship, designed to fulfill the emotional needs of adults, rather than as an institution dedicated to bringing up children. In a recent cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, nearly 70 percent of Americans *disagreed* with the statement that "the main purpose of marriage is having children," compared with just 51 percent of Norwegians and 45 percent of Italians.<sup>10</sup> An even higher percentage of younger Americans—more than 79 percent of men and women, ages twenty to twenty-nine—disagree with the same statement, according to the National Marriage Project's 2001 Gallup survey.

Of course, the focus on the couple relationship is not new. The ideal of romantic friendship in marriage is a distinctive part of a long-standing marriage tradition in western societies. In many ways, this vision of marriage has been positive. It has inspired past and present efforts to enhance and improve the quality of the couple relationship. Today, however, the ideal of friendship in marriage, or what sociologists call companionate marriage, has been notched up to a more demanding ideal. People now expect their marriages to be a spiritualized union of souls.

The soul-mate view of marriage is particularly strong among young adults. An astonishing 94 percent of single men and women, ages twenty to twenty-nine agree with the statement that "when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost." Eighty-eight percent believe that

<sup>10</sup> Tom W. Smith, "The Emerging 21st Century Family," General Social Surveys Social Change Report 42, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1999

there is one person “out there” who is specially destined to be their soul mate.<sup>11</sup>

It is understandable that people are seeking at least one enduring, intimate attachment in their lives. Amid the frazzling pace and fragmented relationships in a mobile society and dynamic economy, marriage holds out the promise of the kind of emotional closeness and solicitude that is missing in other domains of adult life. Unfortunately, the very time-pressured and work-stressed conditions that fuel the hunger for emotional intimacy also may undermine the chances for achieving it. Building a soul-mate relationship takes a commitment to permanence, and permanence is going out of style in contemporary American relationships.

Moreover, in unexpected ways, the pursuit of a soul-mate relationship may weaken marriage as an institution for rearing children. For one thing, it changes the characteristics one is likely to seek in a future spouse. In times past, people who were thinking about marriage tended to think about their future spouse’s capacity to be a good mother or a good father. Today, however, fitness for future parenthood is less important in evaluating a mate. In general, people tend to be far pickier about the person they marry than the person they conceive a child with.

Also, the exacting emotional requirements of a soul-mate relationship are likely to make marriages unhappier and potentially more fragile. There is a natural tension between adult desires for intimacy and privacy and children’s needs for security and attention. Heightened expectations for couple intimacy during the prime child-rearing years may intensify this tension and lead to higher levels of marital discontent and discord. This is not to say that parents should neglect each other’s sexual or emotional needs during the

child-rearing years, but it is to suggest that the new soul-mate ideal may create unrealistic expectations for intimacy that, if unfulfilled, may lead to disappointment, estrangement and even a search for a new soul mate. Indeed, this may help explain why marital satisfaction has declined in recent decades, despite the fact that the easy availability of divorce might be expected to reduce the number of unhappy marriages.

The emphasis on more adult-centered measures of marital happiness also figures in the persistently high rate of parental divorce. In the past, when marriage was more closely linked to the tasks of rearing children, most Americans believed that parents had an obligation to stay together “for the sake of the children.” Today, only 15 percent of the population agree that “when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.” (See “Loss of Child Centeredness,” p. 26) Moreover, the definition of “getting along” has been liberalized to include more subjective individual measures of marital satisfaction. As many as two-thirds of the divorces in recent years occur not because of high conflict or physical violence but because of “softer” forms of psychological distress and unhappiness.<sup>12</sup>

The demands of work also take their toll. Many married parents with young children, especially those who also have full-time jobs outside the home, are often chronically stressed, time-starved and sleep-deprived, and their harried state probably contributes to the decline in marital satisfaction during the most demanding child-rearing years. At the same time, the popular culture pushes images of sexy singles and hot romance, a portrait that hardly fits the reality of many working parents’ lives or confers social value on their commitment to marriage and children.

[Young single men] are leading sexually active lives that put them at increased risk of unmarried fatherhood.

<sup>11</sup> David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2001*, (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2001)

<sup>12</sup> Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation At Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 220.



The popular culture pushes images of sexy singles and hot romance, a portrait that hardly fits the reality of many working parents' lives today

## *A Population Shift Away from Married-Parent Households*

Demographic trends play a role in the social shift away from children. Compared to earlier generations, Americans today live longer, have fewer children, and spend a longer proportion of the life span as single adults than they do in continuous marriage. In 1960 the proportion of one's life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By 1985, this proportion had dropped to 43 percent, the lowest in our history.<sup>13</sup> The percentage of households with children has also dropped dramatically in recent decades, from nearly half of all households in 1960 to less than one-third today. Census Bureau projections suggest that by 2010, married couples with children will account for only 20 percent of total households, and households with children will account for little more than one-quarter of all households—the lowest share in at least a century. By contrast, the percentage of one-person households is projected to reach close to 27 percent of total American households by 2010.<sup>14</sup>

The number of children in a family household is projected to decline slightly as well. Among family households with children, one-child families are growing rapidly. Childlessness among American women is also on the rise. In 1998, 19 percent of women ages 40-44 were childless compared to just 10 percent in 1980.

The combined effects of these demographic changes are profound: within families and communities today, and into the future,

adults are less likely to be living with children, neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and children are less likely to be a presence in daily life. Children are pushed to the margins of the society and—except when they cause mayhem—to the sidelines of our social consciousness.

## *Faltering Public Focus on Children*

In the public realm, there has been another kind of shift from the needs and interests of children. Children don't vote or join unions or run for public office. They depend on adults to represent their political interests, and their parents are the most likely voters to do so. However, the proportion of parents with dependent children has declined while other voting groups such as single adults and empty-nest couples are on the rise. Also, the society is aging. And aging Americans have pressing political priorities of their own, such as expanded health care, prescription drug benefits, and low real estate taxes. Since seniors vote in high numbers, these priorities tend to dominate the domestic political agenda.

A strong libertarian strain in American politics plays a part in this trend as well. In the libertarian view, society is made up of free, rights-bearing adults. This political philosophy leaves little room for children who, by virtue of their age, legal status, and developmental immaturity, depend on others to represent their political interests and to fulfill their basic needs. Moreover, in the libertarian perspective, the conduct of intimate relationships is a private matter. A couple's intimate relationship is nobody's business but the two people involved, unless, of course, their relationship hurts, taxes, or impinges on another's liberties. According to this view, marriage is just one kind of intimate relationship between freely consenting adults and thus does not warrant special privileges by the

<sup>13</sup> Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken and John Bongaards, "Demographic Foundations of Family Changes," *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987), 346-358

<sup>14</sup> US Census Bureau, *Projections of the Number of Households and Families in the United States: 1995 to 2010*, Current Population Reports, P25-1129 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 1996)

state. The special status of children, as dependents who do not freely choose their parents but who have a stake in their parents' marriage, is little acknowledged, much less considered as a reason for the state to treat marriage differently from other kinds of intimate partnerships.

Apparently, the libertarian perspective on marriage is gaining ground among young adults. According to the 2001 Gallup survey, eight out of ten men and women, ages 20-29, agree that marriage is nobody's business but the two people involved; forty-five percent agree that the government should not be involved in licensing marriages; and four out of ten agree that government should provide cohabiting couples the same benefits provided to a married couple.<sup>15</sup>

## Legal Trends in Marriage and Parenthood

**I**n law, as in the society, the connection between marriage and parenthood has weakened in recent decades. Family law has increasingly moved in the direction of treating parenthood as a status independent of marriage.

For centuries, marriage has been the legal institution governing parenthood. It has been the means of establishing paternity, legitimacy, and the rights and responsibilities of parents for their children. However, as marriage has weakened as the primary institution for bearing and rearing children, the law has sought to establish new rules governing parent-child relationships independent of marriage. In this overall trend, two developments have major implications for children's family lives. The first is a shift toward greater legal oversight over parent-child relationships. In response to the growing number of unwed, divorced, and cohabiting parents, laws governing parent-child relationships

have proliferated in recent decades. Though there is strong public resistance to the law's presence in the bedroom, there is growing acceptance of the law's presence in the family room. As the late sociologist William J. Goode has observed: "People have come to expect that the government and thus new laws must try to solve an expanding array of problems that are related to the family, from welfare to gender equality."<sup>16</sup> This trend has occurred simultaneously, and probably not accidentally, with the public's rejection of extralegal measures, such as social pressure and stigma, to enforce norms of married parenthood.

The second trend affecting children's family lives is the legal recognition of the "social parent." This refers to an adult whose parentage is based on the nature and duration of the adult's relationship to the child rather than on the bonds of blood, marriage or legal adoption. Though the law still takes biological parenthood seriously, it is clearly moving toward greater recognition of parenthood as a matter of affectionate rather than genetic bonds.

This legal innovation reflects the challenge of assigning children to parents in a society where marriage no longer reliably serves as the legal basis for parenthood. Yet the law is a blunt instrument. It is poorly designed as the means of regulating the intricate complexities of parent-child relationships. And its limitations are manifest. Despite stepped-up efforts to establish paternity, enforce child support obligations, and develop workable child custody arrangements, the law has been unable to coerce from unmarried or unrelated "parents" the same level of financial commitment, cooperation and sustained dedication that is typically volunteered by married parents. What's more, in its attempt to do so, it has institutionalized family arrangements that have been empirically demonstrated to be less advantageous to children.

The weakening of marriage has contributed to a poverty of connectedness among the young.

<sup>15</sup> *State of Our Unions 2001*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> William J. Goode, "Family Changes Over the Long Term: A Sociological Commentary," *Journal of Family History* 28 (2003), 15-30



### *A Poverty of Connectedness*

The weakening of marriage has contributed to a new kind of poverty among the young. It is a poverty of connectedness. Four decades of persistently high levels of marital disruption and nonmarriage have taken a toll on children's primary sources of emotional nurturance and security. Parent-child, and especially father-child ties, have become more fragile, inconsistent and distant. Children's emotional lives have become more turbulent, insecure, and anxiety-filled as a result.

Amid a society of material abundance, there are growing signs of emotional want and deprivation even among some of the most economically privileged young. There has been a notable increase in emotional and psychiatric distress. Problems such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and other psychosocial difficulties are on the rise. For example, one recent study found that levels of anxiety among a nonclinical

population of children and college students have appreciated substantially in recent decades. In fact, the average American child in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.<sup>17</sup> Another study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, found a substantial increase between 1979 and 1996 in clinician-identified psychosocial problems among 4-15 year olds who came in to primary care offices, such as depression and suicidal ideation.<sup>18</sup> A third study, of college students seeking counseling, found that those treated for depression doubled between 1989 and 2000.<sup>19</sup> Finally, a systematic review of social indicators between 1975 and 1998 found that the indices for social relationships and emotion-

<sup>17</sup> Jean Twenge, "Age of Anxiety? Birth Cohort Change in Anxiety and Neuroticism, 1952-1993," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000)

<sup>18</sup> Kelly J. Kelleher, et al., "Increasing Identification of Psychosocial Problems: 1979-1996" *Pediatrics* 105 (2000), 1313-1321

<sup>19</sup> Sherry A. Benton, et al., "Changes in Counseling Center Client Problems Across Thirteen Years," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 34 (2003), 66-72



al/spiritual well-being “show long-term declines across the three decades studied,” concluding that improvements in other areas of children’s lives have been offset by declining levels of emotional wellbeing. Thus, according to the researchers, the overall quality of life of children/youth in the United States was, on balance, not better in 1998 than in 1975.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, not all these problems can be directly attributed to family disruption. A number of social and cultural forces contribute to these problems, including the stresses of an achievement-oriented culture, the pressures of peer culture, the pervasive influence of violent and sexually graphic popular entertainment, the “hurried child” syndrome, the isolation of children from the larger community, and the persistent threat of gang, school and street violence, especially for children in some inner city neighborhoods. The rise in the incidence of psychological problems may also reflect increased reporting, a greater readiness to medicalize behavior that might once have been dismissed as “growing pains” or “adolescent angst,” and the growing availability of psychotropic drugs to treat these problems.

However, in searching for proximate sources of this trend, it is impossible to ignore what has happened in children’s family lives over the past four decades. Children reared in nonintact families have more than twice the risk of social and behavioral problems as children reared in married parent families. It defies common sense to think that the rise in nonintact families would not have an impact on children’s emotional wellbeing.

Indeed, recent reports and studies point toward family structure changes as a source of children’s psychosocial distress. Most children who experience parental divorce do not

suffer severe emotional problems.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that divorce is an emotionally distressing experience for children. For example, in its official 2002 policy statement on divorce, the American Academy of Pediatrics identifies a number of age-related psychosocial symptoms associated with divorce, including distress among the very young: for infants, crying, sleep disturbance, and gastrointestinal problems; for four-to-five year olds, nightmares, aggression and clinginess; for school-aged children, discomfort with gender identity, aggression, and moodiness; for adolescents, substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behavior, and depression.<sup>21</sup> Other studies link higher rates of emotional distress and mental illness among children who experience parental divorce.<sup>22</sup> One recent study of youth suicide observes that the “increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent” explains as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides over time.<sup>23</sup>

Recent studies also point to the persistence of emotional distress among some children of divorce, a shift from earlier thinking. In the 1970s and ‘80s, the emotional impact of family breakup on children was thought to be short-term, like a bout of the flu. This view was based on studies of children’s

Children have borne more than a fair share of the burdens associated with the weakening of marriage in recent times.

<sup>21</sup> George Cohen, MD, et al, “Helping Children and Families Deal with Divorce and Separation,” *Pediatrics* 110 (2002), 1019-1023. Also at <http://www.aap.org/policy/010111.html>.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example Ronald L. Simons, et.al., “Explaining the Higher Incidence of Adjustment Problems Among Children of Divorce Compared With Those in Two parent Families,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999), 1020-1033; P.L. Chase-Landsdale et. al., “The Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce on the Mental Health of Young Adults: A Developmental Perspective,” *Child Development* 66 (1995), 1614-1634; Catherine E. Ross and John Mirowsky, “Parental Divorce, Life-Course Disruptions and Adult Depression,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999), 1034-1045; Paul R. Amato, “Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996), 628-640

<sup>23</sup> David M. Cutler, et.al, “Explaining the Rise in Youth Suicide,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, w7713: 2000. Available at <http://papers.nber.org/papers/w7713.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth C. Land, et al., “Child and Youth Well-Being in the United States, 1975-1998: Some Findings from a New Index,” *Social Indicators Research* 56 (2001), 241-320

Experts have reached a working consensus, based on a robust body of research, that marriage benefits children.

divorce experience that relied heavily on mothers' reports and on small, unrepresentative samples of divorced families. Today, however, clinical and social science research, based on large representative samples and longitudinal clinical studies, point to long-lasting emotional damage associated with broken or disrupted family bonds.

Apparently, the emotional effects of family breakup on some children more closely resemble a debilitating chronic ailment than a brief bout of the flu. As the American Academy of Pediatrics notes, the experience of divorce is more than a set of discrete symptoms. It is "a long searing experience" for children.<sup>24</sup> A study following more than 11,000 British children from birth through age thirty-three concluded that "a parental divorce during childhood or adolescence continues to have a negative effect [on mental health] when a person is in his or her twenties or thirties."<sup>25</sup> In her twenty-five year clinical study of middle-class children of divorce, Judith Wallerstein found that the experience of divorce has long-term effects on the young adults' pursuit of happy, lasting relationships. Compared to young adults from intact families, adult children of divorce have a harder time dealing with even moderate conflict, are more fearful of failure, are more insecure about relationships, and more likely to experience a divorce themselves.<sup>26</sup>

The increase in youthful psychosocial and mental health problems could not have come at a worse time. American society today requires ever-higher levels of individual competence and educational achievement for a successful adult life. To meet these demands, children need strong characters as well as

healthy bodies and able minds. Warm, consistent, and firm attachments to parents help children defer gratification, set and stick to goals, and resist harmful peer pressures. Close parent-child bonds protect teens from emotional distress as well as risky behaviors such as early sexual activity, smoking, drinking and drug use.<sup>27</sup> Young adults' ability to form strong, lasting marriages enhances their own emotional wellbeing and confers psychological benefits on their children as well.

Solving the problem of children's declining emotional and mental health poses special challenges to the society. Some effects of family breakup, such as child poverty, loss of family income, poor quality housing, and lack of health insurance, can be addressed through law, public policy or increased public spending on child health, daycare, family tax credits, better housing, more effective policing, and innovative youth programs. By contrast, emotional impoverishment associated with the loss or lack of stable family connections is harder to remediate through laws, programs or public spending alone. In Sweden, where there is a strong social safety net for children and where the poverty rate among single mothers is low, the emotional problems found among children living with a single parent are similar to those found among American children in single parent families, according to a 2003 study in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*. After examining such problems as psychiatric disease, suicide or attempted suicide, injury and addiction the study concluded that "even when a wide range of demographic and

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, et. al, 1019

<sup>25</sup> Andrew J. Cherlin, P. L. Chase-Lansdale, C. McRae, "Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course," *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998), 239-249

<sup>26</sup> Judith Wallerstein et.al., *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 299-300

<sup>27</sup> The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, which includes data on 90,118 American adolescents, found that when adolescents feel connected to their parents (i.e., have feelings of warmth, love, and caring from their parents), they are less likely than other adolescents to suffer from emotional distress, have suicidal thoughts and behaviors, use violence, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or smoke marijuana. They also have their first sexual experience later than adolescents who are not connected to their parents. Michael D. Resnick, et.al., "Protecting Adolescents from Harm," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 278, (1997), 823-832.

socioeconomic circumstances are included in multivariate models, children of single parents still have increased risks of mortality, severe morbidity, and injury.”<sup>28</sup>

Given this evidence and given the shortcomings of other possible interventions, such as putting more and more children on Prozac, Paxil or Ritalin or sending them off to treatment centers and boot camps, it seems clear that the most effective way to foster children’s emotional wellbeing is to increase their chances of growing up in a household with both married parents who get along with each other.

## Conclusion

Someone once observed that the brunt of rapid social change falls disproportionately on the young. This is surely the case when it comes to marriage. Children have borne more than a fair share of the burdens associated with the weakening of marriage in recent times.

It is easy to ignore children’s interests in marriage, when marriage is defined primarily as a couple relationship. Yet, children have a compelling stake in their parents’ marriage. It is a source of social and economic advantage for them. It provides a reliable means of attaching their fathers to the family household over the long term. It brings together under one roof the two people who have brought them into the world and who have a mutual interest in their wellbeing.

At the same time, children are powerless to preserve or defend their stake in their parents’ marriage. In the past, social strictures and sanctions against divorce and illegitimacy helped protect children’s stake in marriage. But today, these strictures have van-

ished. Nor has the law been any more successful in representing children’s interests. Indeed, no-fault divorce has contributed to the easy and unilateral dissolution of marriages with children. More surprisingly, the revolution in no-fault divorce law occurred with almost no consideration of its impact on children. And finally, the revived enthusiasm for marriage in popular media has ignored children, focusing on the cult of the wedding rather than on building a marriage culture in which children can flourish.

One of the best things that the society can do for children is to create the conditions for healthy marriages. Achieving this goal does not mean pushing marriage at any cost on everyone. But it does mean increasing the proportion of parental marriages that are low in conflict and high in mutual respect, cooperation and duration. It also means reducing the economic and social obstacles that stand in the way of successful and long-lasting marriage. Finally, it means creating a culture where marriage is reconnected to parenthood and where married parents are encouraged, supported and valued for their long-term commitment to marriage.

The difficulty of achieving this goal cannot be underestimated. Long-term trends militate against easy success. However, there are signs of hope. In some key areas, child wellbeing has improved in the past few years. Child poverty has dropped from 23 percent in 1993 to about 16 percent in 2000, the lowest level in more than 20 years.<sup>29</sup> Teen pregnancy and birth rates have steadily declined for the past 12 years. The percentage of teens who have ever had sexual intercourse dropped from 54.1 percent in 1991 to 49.9 percent in 1999.<sup>30</sup> Youth violent

<sup>28</sup> G. Weitoft, A Hjern, B Haglund, and M. Rosen, “Mortality, Severe Morbidity, and Injury in Children Living with Single Parents in Sweden: A Population-Based Study,” *The Lancet*, 361 (2003), 289-95.

<sup>29</sup> Kristin Anderson Moore and Zakia Redd, “Children in Poverty: Trends, Consequences, and Policy Options,” *Child Trends Research Brief*, 2002-54, November 2002

<sup>30</sup> Child Trends, “Facts at a Glance,” September 2002

crime peaked in 1993 and has since been followed by a sustained decline.<sup>31</sup> Other clustered risk behaviors associated with young people, such as cigarette smoking, drinking alcohol, and illicit drug use, have dropped or remained relatively stable in recent years.<sup>32</sup>

The climate of opinion about children's family lives has changed as well. The polarizing debate about the impact of family disruption on children is over. Experts have reached a working consensus, based on a robust body of research, that marriage benefits children. Along with policy consensus, there is social activism on behalf of marriage. A grass-roots marriage movement, dedicated to providing people with the resources and skills to prepare for and achieve long-lasting healthy marriages is gaining momentum and adherents.<sup>33</sup> A handful of states are experimenting with projects designed to lower the divorce rate or strengthen marriage.<sup>34</sup> Some communities are organizing coalitions of faith, business and public groups to develop a common strategy for supporting healthy marriages.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Philip J. Cook and John H. Laub, "After the Epidemic: Recent Trends in Youth Violence in the United States," Working Paper Series SAN01-22, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University, (2001). Also available at [www.pubpol.duke.edu/workingpaper\\_author.html](http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/workingpaper_author.html)

<sup>32</sup> Child Trends, "A Century of Children's Health and Well-Being," Research Brief, December 1999

<sup>33</sup> Diane Sollee formed the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education in 1996 to promote the effective teaching of skills and knowledge about marriage. Her first "Smart Marriages" conference drew 400 participants. The 2002 Smart Marriages conference drew about 1700 participants.

<sup>34</sup> States initiating programs to lower divorce and/or strengthen marriage include Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, Tennessee and Utah.

<sup>35</sup> Community-based initiatives have been launched in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Cleveland, Ohio; and, regionally, by Families Northwest based in Seattle, Washington. Marriage Savers, a faith-based initiative, has established inter-denominational marriage strengthening policies in roughly 150 communities in 35 states

As part of welfare reform, the Bush administration is seeking funding for pilot projects designed to help low-income couples who choose to be married to gain access to marriage education, skills training and counseling resources. Think tanks and research centers across the political spectrum are studying and reporting on people's attitudes, behavior and readiness to marry.<sup>36</sup> Other experts are involved in evaluating the effectiveness of current marriage preparation and education programs.

Altogether, these efforts mark a new chapter in the society's response to marriage decline. Where there was once a sense of inevitability about the decline of marriage, there is now a sense of possibility about reversing that decline. Where once there was a sense of despair about the chances of improving marital relationships, there is now a growing sense of optimism that relationships can be repaired, that steps can be taken to improve children's chances of growing up in married parent families, that skills can be taught to help parents form and sustain good marriages, and that the institution of marriage can be revitalized through public as well as private action. Whether recent initiatives will lead to a sustained trend toward two-married-parent families remains to be seen. But they represent the most promising development to come along in four decades.

<sup>36</sup> For example, think tanks and university-based initiatives conducting research into marriage, marriage readiness and/or marriage policy include the Family, Religion and Culture Project at the University of Chicago, the Heritage Foundation, the Urban Institute, the Center for Law and Social Policy, the Institute for American Values, the Fragile Families and Wellbeing Study at Columbia and Princeton Universities, Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, and the National Marriage Project at Rutgers

# Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing

## TRENDS OF THE PAST FOUR DECADES

T H E S T A T E O F O U R

# UNIONS

## 2003

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



The Social Health of Marriage in America



T H E N A T I O N A L M A R R I A G E P R O J E C T



## ► 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 2001, 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.

### 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 lifelong 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. In short, marriage and children would be reconnected. 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.

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 68.6% in 2001. 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-married-parent families increased from 34% to 39% between 1996 and 2002

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 2002, from 68% to 69%, and there was a slight increase between 1999 and 2002 in the percentage of persons age 35-44 who were married. Also, the divorce rate

has continued its slow but steady decline since reaching a peak in the early 1980s, and an upturn occurred in the past few years in the percentage of married persons who said their marriages were “very happy.”

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 cannot have full confidence that they will continue.

Other recent trends may presage a continuing weakening of the family. The marriage rate continues its long-term drop, which began around 1970. This drop 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 and has continued in the past few years. Nationwide, the proportion of out-of-wedlock births increased again in 2000 and 2002 following several years of leveling off, probably due in large part to the growth of nonmarital cohabitation. A Census Bureau report has found that childlessness among American women is on the rise over the long term: in 2000, 19% of women age 40-44 were childless, compared to just 10% in 1980. And the birth rate (total fertility), after rising during the 1990s, fell back in 2001 below its 1990 level.

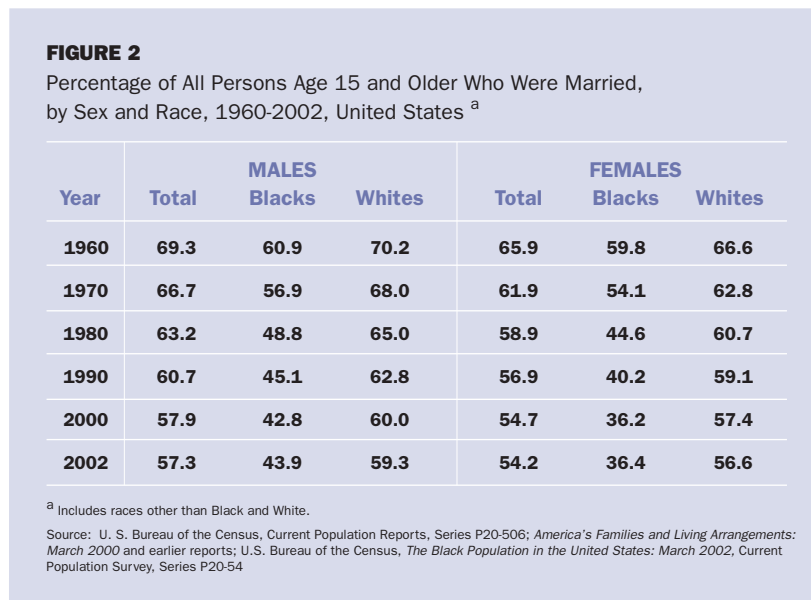
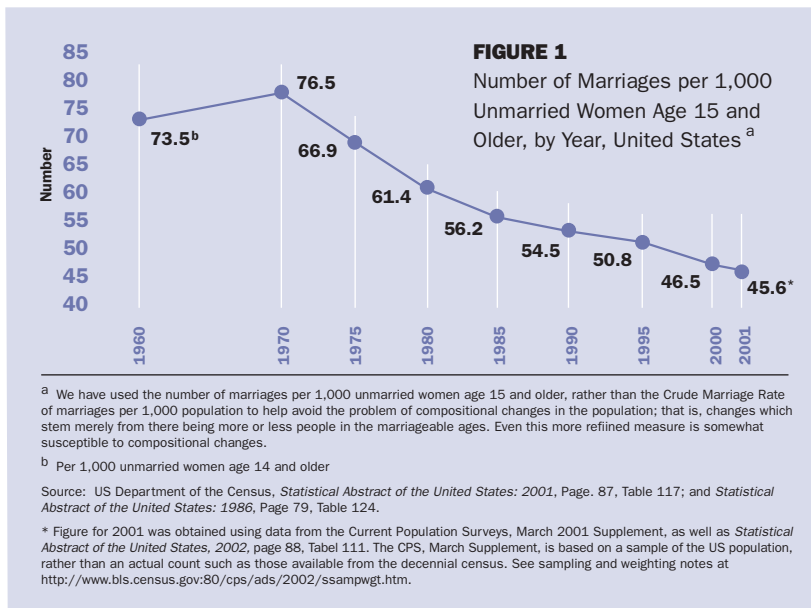
It is too soon to speak of anything so significant as a “family turnaround.” The only thing that can be said with confidence at this time is that many of the family trends toward a weakening family structure in the past few decades have slowed dramatically, and in some cases leveled off. What the future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

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 twelve percentage points—and over 23 points among black females (Figure 2). It should be noted that these data include both people who have never 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 18 percentage points for married men and 16 points for married women. A slight increase in the percentage of married people in this age group occurred beginning in 1999, but the reasons for this are not yet known.

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.<sup>1</sup> If the present marriage trend continues, some demographers are predicting that fewer than 85 percent of current



young adults will ever marry.<sup>2</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

<sup>1</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>2</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

## 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.

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>3</sup> As Figure 4 indicates, the percentage of both men and women saying "very happy" has declined moderately over the past 25 years.<sup>4</sup> This trend has shown a turnaround since reaching

<sup>3</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>4</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



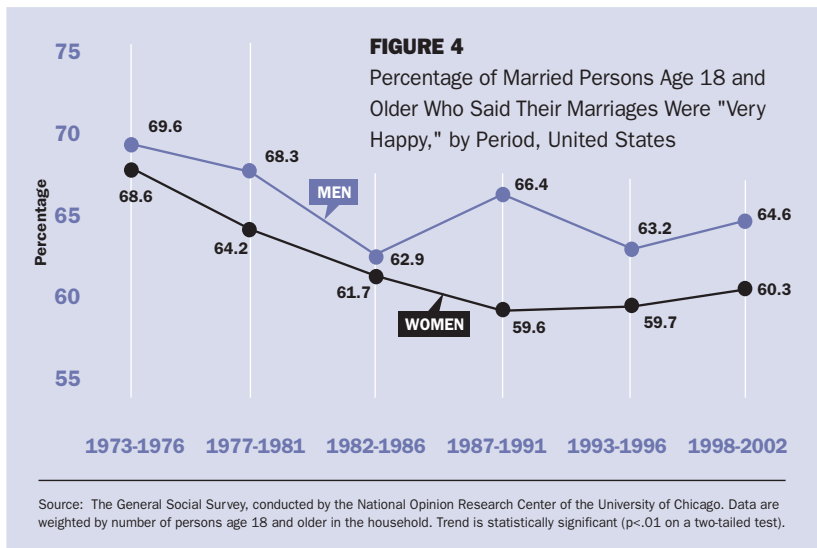
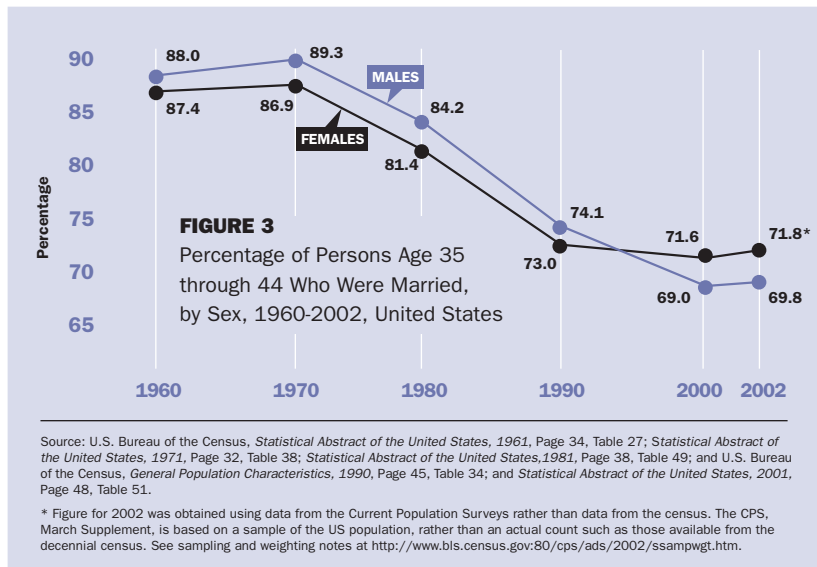
a low point in 1994, however, and is now heading in a more positive direction.

Scholars are now widely in agreement that the best family situation for children and adolescents is to live with married parents who have a good marriage. A rough indicator of changes over time in this ideal family arrangement is shown in Figure 5, which we are introducing this year for the first time. As can be seen, the percentage of young people (persons under 18) living with married adults in a marriage that the reporting spouse said was “very happy” has declined sharply over a thirty-year period. Part of the decline is because many more young people are living with an unmarried adult, also shown in Figure 5. The percentage of young people (data not shown) living with married parents who report less than “very happy” marriages, however, has remained relatively stable over the thirty years.

## ► 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.*

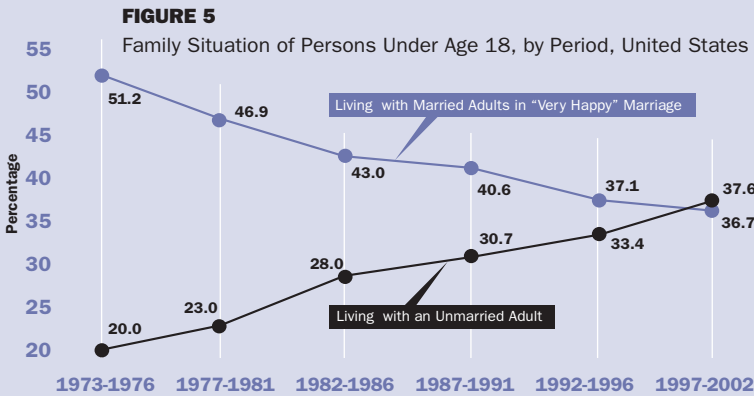
The increase in divorce, shown by the trend reported in Figure 6, probably has elicited more concern and discussion than any other family-related trend in the United States. Although the long-term trend in divorce has been upward since colonial times, the divorce rate was level for about two decades 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



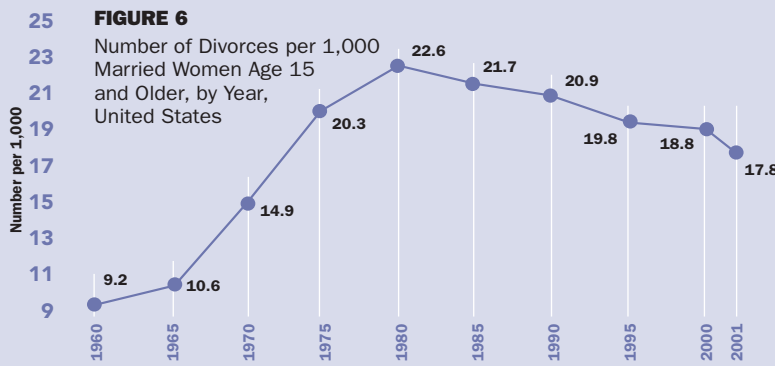
boomers and a decrease in the number of people of marriageable age. The continuing decline in the 1990s, however, apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.<sup>1</sup>

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 7). This percentage, which was only 1.8 percent for males and 2.6 percent for females in 1960, quadrupled by the year 2000. The per-

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



Source: The General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago. Data are weighted by number of persons under age 18 in the household. The trends in pre-adults living with an unmarried person and in those living with married persons in a "very happy" marriage are statistically significant ( $p < .01$  on a one-tailed test).



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; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2002*, Page 88, Table 111 and calculations by the National Marriage Project for the US less Colorado, California, Indiana and Louisiana using the US Census Bureau tables from the American Community Surveys, 2002.

**FIGURE 7**  
Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Divorced, by Sex and Race, 1960-2002, 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
2002	8.1	8.3	8.3	10.7	12.2	10.7

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P20-537; *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 2000 and earlier reports*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Black Population in the United States: March 2002*, *Current Population Survey*, Series P20-541, and *Women and Men in the US: March 2002*, Series P20-544

centage 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 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 8, the number of unmarried couples in America increased by over 1000 percent. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married

## 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 prevailing 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*, Current Population Reports, P70-80, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2002.

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>

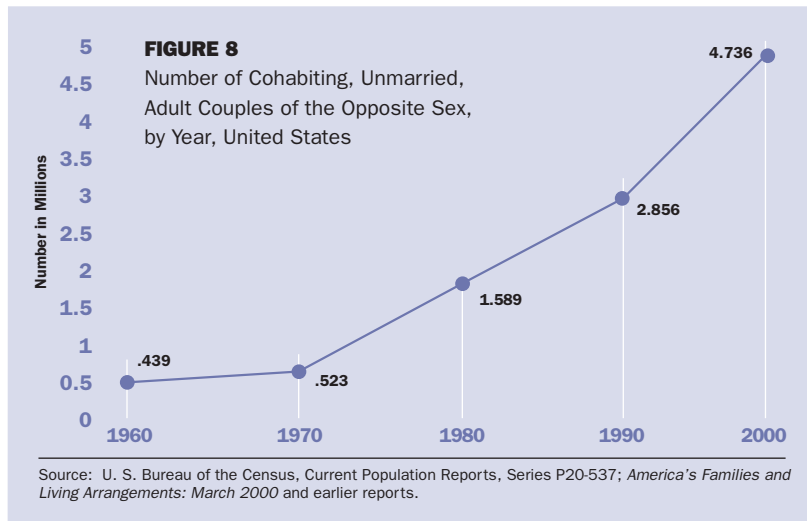
For some, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for others, an alternative to marriage, and for still others, simply an alternative to living alone. Cohabitation is more common among those of lower educational and income levels. Recent data show that among women in the 19 to 44 age range, 60% of high 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 dis-

cord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now almost 40 percent, contain children.

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

<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.



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>3</sup>

## ► 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 9 indicates the decline in fertility since 1960. It is important to note that fertility had been gradually declining throughout American history, reaching a low point in the Great Depression of the 1930s, before suddenly accelerating with the baby-boom generation starting in 1945. By 1960 the birth rate was back to where it had been in 1920, with the average woman having about three and one half children over the course of her life. 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. But in 2001 the rate dropped back to below its 1990 level. In most European nations the total fertility rate has decreased to a level well below that of the United States, 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. In 2000, just four decades later, less than 33 percent of households included children, and the per-

<sup>3</sup> For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (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).

centage is projected to drop to 28 by 2010 (Figure 10). This obviously means that adults are less likely to be living with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and that children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. It suggests that the needs and concerns of children—especially young children—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> 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.

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

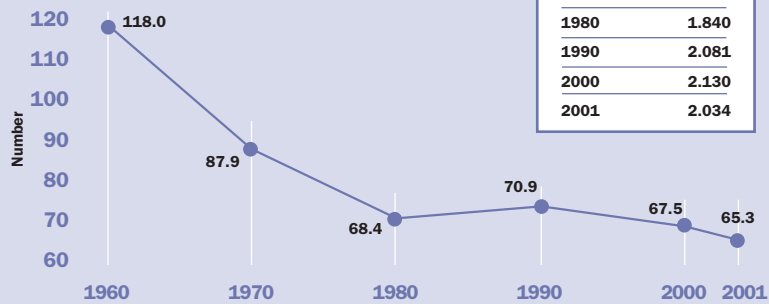
<sup>2</sup> Tom W. Smith, "The Emerging 21st Century American Family," GSS Social Change Report 42, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1999: Table 20, 48.

<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.

**FIGURE 9**

General Fertility Rates, 1960-2001, Number of Births per 1,000 Women Age 15 through 44, United States



**Total Fertility Rate<sup>a</sup>**

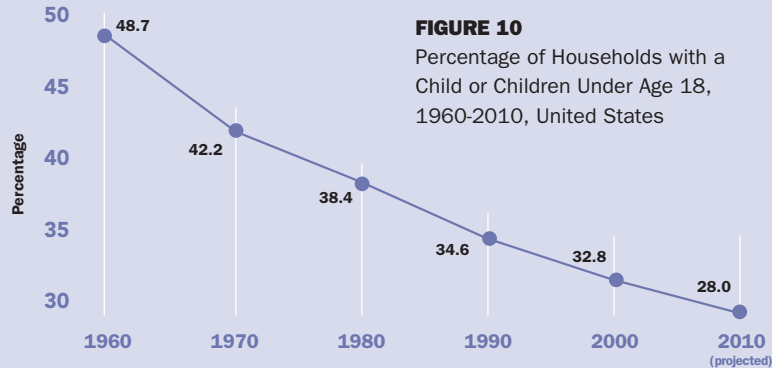
1960	3.654
1970	2.480
1980	1.840
1990	2.081
2000	2.130
2001	2.034

<sup>a</sup> The number of births that an average woman would have if, at each year of age, she experienced the birth rates occurring in the specified year. A total fertility rate of 2,110 represents "replacement level" fertility under current mortality conditions (assuming no net migration).

Source: National Vital Statistics Report, 1993, Pages 1, 2, 10 and 11; National Vital Statistics Report, 2001, 49:1; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Pages 75, 76 and 78, Tables 91, 93 and 96. National Vital Statistics reports, 50:5, February 12, 2002, Table 1, p. 27; and Ventura, S., et al. *Revised Birth and Fertility Rates for the United States, 2000 and 2001*, National Vital Statistics Report, 51:4, Feb 6, 2003, p. 2 and 4

**FIGURE 10**

Percentage of Households with a Child or Children Under Age 18, 1960-2010, United States

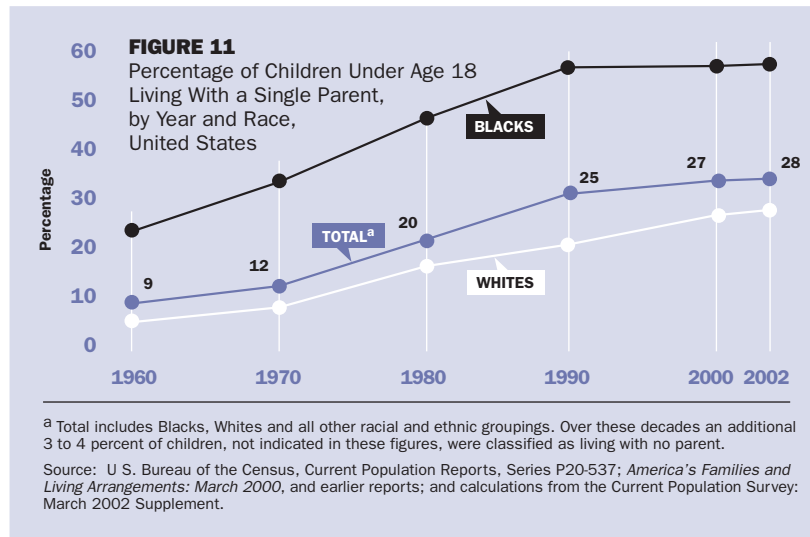


Source: Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1976, Page 40, Table 53; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, Page 46, Tables 66 and 67; and Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001, Page 50, Table 56; *Projections of the Number of Households and Families in the United States: 1995 to 2010*, Current Population Reports, Series P25-1129

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 cen-





teredness 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>

## ► 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. In the past few years, however, several of these trends have leveled off.*

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 chil-

dren. A central purpose of the institution of marriage is to ensure the responsible and long-term involvement of both biological parents in the difficult and time-consuming task of raising the next generation.

The trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents (Figure 11). This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families. 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 2002 the percentage had jumped to 28 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 living with two parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by almost 20 percentage points (Figure 12). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while nine percent are stepfamilies.<sup>1</sup> 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

<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

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

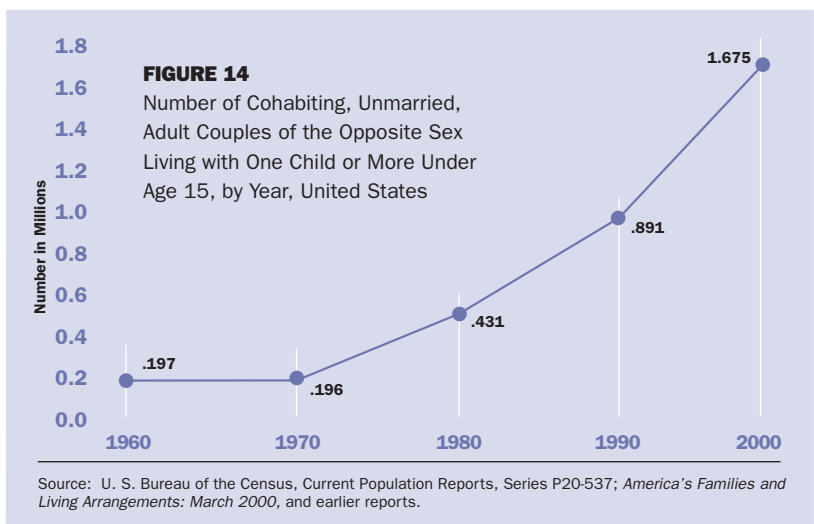
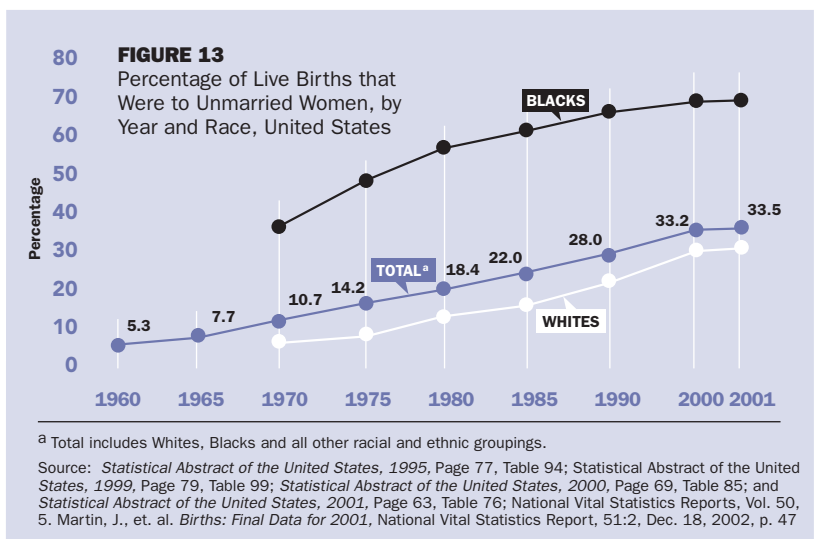
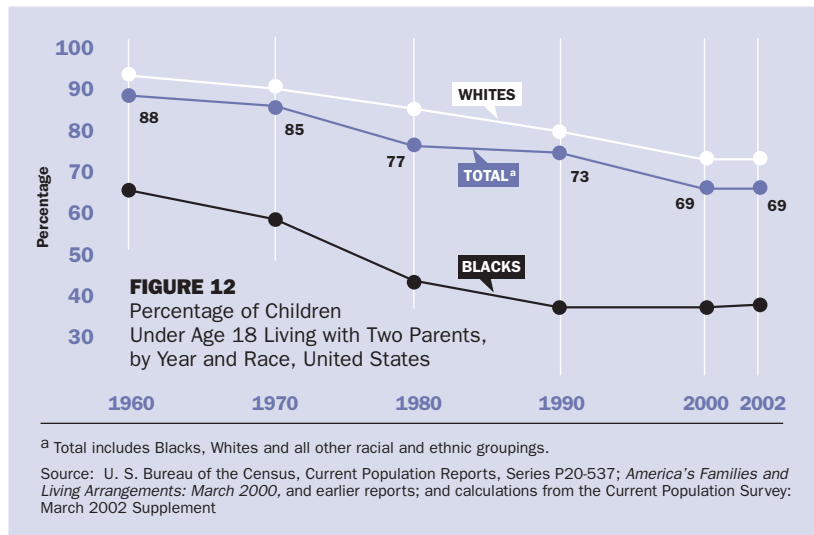
<sup>2</sup> See: David Popenoe, “The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Stepfamilies” in A. Booth and J. Dunn (eds.) *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994) 3-27.

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 doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to 34 percent.<sup>3</sup>

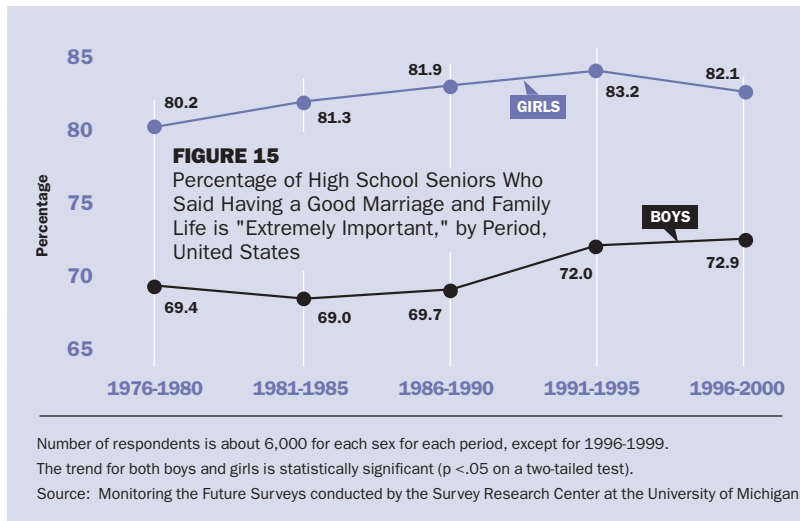
The dramatic shift in family structure indicated by these measures has been generated mainly by three burgeoning trends: divorce, unmarried births, and unmarried cohabitation. The incidence of divorce began to increase rapidly during the 1960s. The number of children under age 18 newly affected by parental 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 sixfold (Figure 13). The number of births to unmarried women in 2001 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 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 14). An estimated 40 percent of all children today



<sup>3</sup> Jason Fields, op.cit.



are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their growing up years.<sup>4</sup>

In 2000 about 40 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18.<sup>5</sup> For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.<sup>6</sup> Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.<sup>7</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>8</sup>

Children living with cohabiting couples

- <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> Tavia Simmons and Martin O'Connell, *Married-Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000*. Census 2000 Special Reports, CENSR-5, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2003
- <sup>6</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>7</sup> Larry Bumpass, J. A. Sweet and A. Cherlin, "The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage" *Demography* 53 (1991):913-27.
- <sup>8</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
- <sup>9</sup> Bumpass and Lu, 2000.

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.<sup>9</sup>

## ► 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

<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.



## What is a Single-Parent Family Today?

Of the 19.8 million children under 18 living in single-parent families in 2002, 83 percent lived with their mother and 17 percent lived with their father.<sup>a</sup> 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 more than 40 percent today. In earlier times, most single mothers were divorced or widowed. But the number of never-married single mothers is now 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>b</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>a</sup> A portion of families classified as single-parent are actually unmarried cohabiting couples; another portion involves shared physical custody arrangements, a rapidly growing family form.

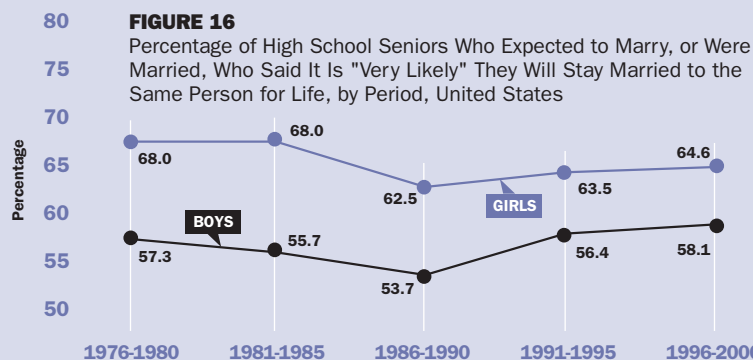
<sup>b</sup> Saul D. Hoffman and E. Michael Forster, "Nonmarital Births and Single Mothers: Cohort Trends in the Dynamics of Nonmarital Childbearing" *The History of the Family* 2-3 (1997): 255-275.

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-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 moderate increase in the percentage of teenage respondents who said that they expect to marry (or who are already married), recently 78 percent for boys and 83 percent for girls.<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 mar-

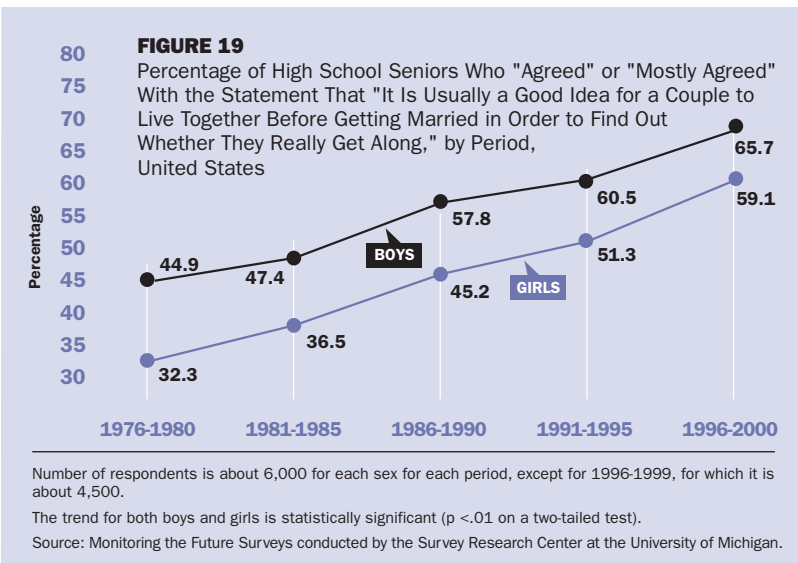
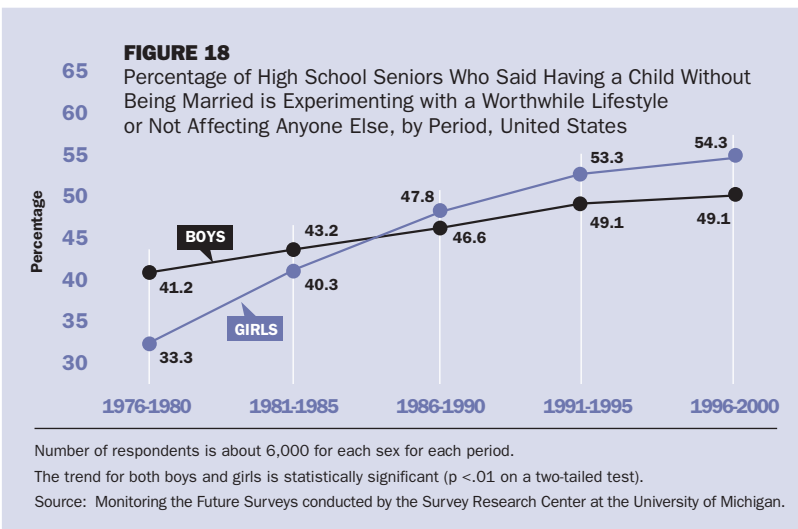
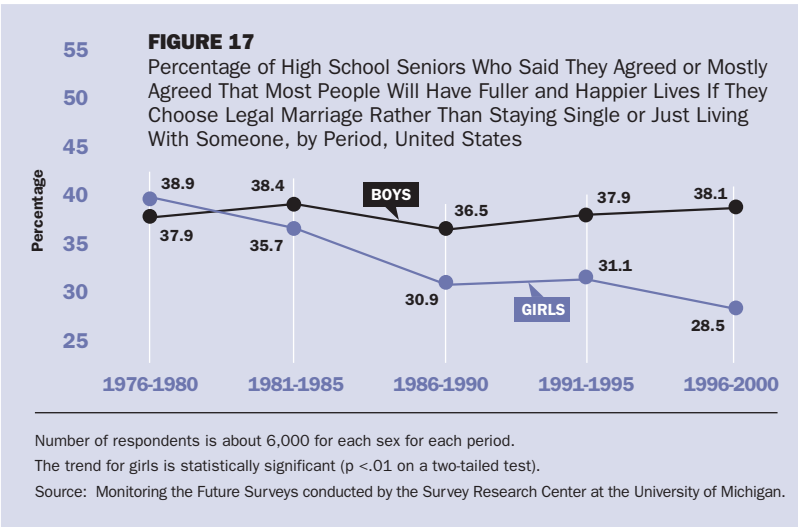
riage. For girls who expect to marry (or who are already married), the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime has declined over the decades (Figure 16). So has agreement with the assumption "that most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone" (Figure 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

<sup>2</sup> In the 1976-1980 period, 73% of boys and 82% of girls said they expected to marry (or were already married); by 1996-2000, the boys' percentage jumped to 78 and the girls' to 83. 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)



Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period. The trend for girls is statistically significant ( $p < .01$  on a two-tailed test). The overall trend for boys is not significant, but the trend from the late 1970s to the late 1980s is significantly down ( $p < .01$  on a two-tailed test), and the trend from the late 1980s to the early 1990s is significantly upward ( $p < .01$  on a two-tailed test).

Source: Monitoring the Future Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.



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 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.

<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, 1999).



Non-Profit Organization

U.S. Postage

PAID

Permit No. 157

New Brunswick, NJ