

THE STATE *of* OUR UNIONS 2004



The Social Health of Marriage in America



THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT

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2004

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

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The National Marriage Project 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 resource 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* (January 2003) and *The Divorce Culture* and the widely acclaimed *Atlantic Monthly* article "Dan Quayle Was Right."

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IN OUR FIRST *THE STATE OF OUR UNIONS* REPORT, PUBLISHED in 1999, we stated: “we hear little about the state of marriage.” How things have changed in the past six years! Today, we hear a great deal about marriage.

Marriage has appeared on the public agenda at both the federal and state levels. As part of its proposal for the reauthorization of welfare reform, the Bush administration is seeking \$1.5 billion to provide access to marriage education, skills training and counseling resources for low-income couples who choose to marry. A handful of states, using flexible dollars from the 1996 welfare reform bill, are already experimenting with pilot programs to lower the divorce rate or to encourage “healthy marriages.”¹ On the legislative side, Congress has acted to eliminate the marriage penalty in federal income taxes. In recent months, Congressional committees have held hearings on marriage.

Marriage-strengthening initiatives are underway in local communities as well. Some communities are organizing coalitions to develop a common strategy for preparing couples for marriage and for mentoring them after marriage.² A grassroots marriage “movement,” dedicated to helping people acquire the knowledge and skills to form and sustain low-conflict, long-lasting marriages, is gaining adherents and momentum across the country.³ Professional educators, as well as community and faith leaders, are adopting new research-

based approaches to teaching relationship and marriage skills. Still other local groups are developing community-based assets and resources to support married couples.

Most recently and most controversially, the issue of gay marriage has commanded public attention and debate. On May 17, 2004, following a 4-to-3 decision by the Massachusetts State Supreme Court, Massachusetts became the first state in the union to grant same-sex couples the rights and responsibilities of legal marriage. In opposition to the Massachusetts decision, President Bush has called for a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. In addition, 40 states have adopted laws preventing same-sex couples from marrying.⁴

Marriage has also gained new prominence on the research agenda. After several decades of neglect of the subject, scholars are expressing renewed interest in studying marriage and marriage policy. In part, their interest is triggered by the Administration proposals to strengthen marriage. Several research initiatives have been launched to study or evaluate the impact of marriage programs on family formation among low-income couples.⁵ But in larger part, the renewed research interest in

marriage is inspired by the recognition that we are in the midst of a period of revolutionary change in the institution of marriage. As we have noted in previous *The State of Our Unions* reports, the pathway into marriage is changing. The meaning of marriage is changing. The institutional role of marriage is changing. Today, marriage is popular again but it is popular for reasons that are quite different from the reasons that prompted people to marry in the past.

As the first university-based initiative devoted exclusively to the study of contemporary marriage, the National Marriage Project is committed to providing research and analysis on the state of marriage and marital relationships in America. Our annual report, *The State of Our Unions*, provides a summary of key marriage-related trends. This year, as in previous years, the publication is divided into two sections. The first section, an essay on marriage attitudes and behavior among today’s young men, reports on the findings of a new nationally representative survey of young men commissioned by the National Marriage Project and conducted by Opinion Research Corporation in January and February 2004.

The second section includes what we consider the most important annually or biennially updated indicators related to marriage, divorce, unmarried cohabitation, child-centeredness, fragile families with children and teen attitudes about marriage and family. In addition, this section includes a brief discussion of three new topics: *What is Happening to Childrearing Families?; Your Chances of Divorce May be Much Lower Than You Think;* and *The Surprising Economic Benefits of Marriage*. For this section, 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 are collected by long established and scientifically reputable institutions.

1 These states are Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, Utah and Virginia. In addition, nearly three dozen states have launched educational programs to help couples better choose marriage partners and form healthier marriages. For a comprehensive view of these recent marriage policies and programs, see: Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet, and Mary Parke, *Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families*, Center for Law and Social Policy, April 2004. Available at: www.clasp.org.

2 Community-based initiatives have been launched in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Cleveland, Ohio; and, regionally, by Families Northwest based in Bellevue, Washington. Marriage Savers, a faith-based initiative, has established interdenominational marriage mentoring and education programs in roughly 150 communities in 35 states.

3 The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education was founded in 1996 to promote effective teaching of skills and knowledge to build healthy, satisfying marriages. The Coalition provides support, information, and resources through its website and sponsors the Smart Marriages Conference which drew close to two thousand attendees to its last annual meeting. Coalition website: cmfce@smartmarriages.com.

4 As reported by the Human Rights Campaign. <http://www.hrc.org>

5 The Fragile Families and Wellbeing Study at Columbia and Princeton Universities is a notable example. In addition, the Heritage Foundation, the Urban Institute, and the Center for Law and Social Policy have issued studies and reports on the impact of marriage policy on low-income families. Several federally-funded research or evaluation projects on marriage programs are currently underway, including a large-scale, comprehensive random-assignment evaluation of programs designed to support the marriage aspirations of low-income parents at the birth of their child by Mathematica Policy Research Inc. and an analysis of marriage incentives/disincentives for low-income people in state and federal tax policies by the Urban Institute.

David Popenoe
Barbara Dafoe Whitehead
June 2004



Executive Summary

“THE MARRYING KIND:” WHICH MEN MARRY AND WHY — *Challenging the popular stereotype of the marriagephobic male, findings from a new national survey of young heterosexual men, ages 25-34, indicate that while men are delaying marriage until older ages, most men are “the marrying kind.” Among all men surveyed, those from traditional, religiously observant family backgrounds are more likely to be married, to seek marriage and to have positive views of marriage, women, and children than young males from nontraditional and nonreligiously observant family backgrounds. Among the unmarried men surveyed, however, there is a small but significant subset of men who are personally averse to marriage. Slightly more than two out of ten expressed strongly negative views about their own personal desire to marry as well as more negative attitudes toward marriage, women, and children. Compared to other unmarried men in the survey sample, they are significantly more likely to come from nontraditional and nonreligiously observant families.*

SOCIAL INDICATORS OF MARITAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING — *Our social indicators are based on decadal measures which are more reliable than year-by-year changes. This year, the social indicators remain about the same as last year. Overall, these decadal trends continue to reflect declines in marital health and wellbeing. The most noteworthy changes this year are the continuing decline of the marriage rate accompanied by an increase in the number of cohabiting couples; a small increase in the percentage of children living in fragile families and born out of wedlock; and a sharp increase among teenage boys in their acceptance of unwed childbearing and a slight decrease in agreement among teenagers, especially girls, that “living together before getting married is a good idea.”*



The Marrying Kind

Which Men Marry and Why

by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead
and David Popenoe

TODAY'S BEST-SELLING NOVELS, MOVIES, TELEVISION shows and self-help books are obsessed with the thirty-something single man and his romantic pursuits. But today's bachelor hero is different from romantic heroes of the past. The old heroes were the courting and marrying kind. The new heroes are the fleeing and non-marrying kind. Instead of Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart, we now have Mr. Big and the Big Lebowski. Even in ABC's hit reality show *The Bachelor*, where the mission is marriage, four out of the five bachelors have broken up with the woman they picked as their future bride. As for the fifth and most recent bachelor, his marital match is already prompting tabloid speculation: Is It Over Between Jesse and Jessica?

Likewise, recent social science research into men's marrying behavior tends to focus on those men who are *least* likely to marry. Some researchers have been interested in

exploring the recent and steep decline in African-American men's marriage rates. Others have focused on identifying the obstacles to marriage among low-income men. Still others have turned their attention to the study of cohabiting men and unwed fathers.

What about the young men who are married? Neither the popular culture nor the research community has paid them much mind in recent decades. Indeed, the young husband has virtually disappeared as a cultural figure or a social type. Yet married men represent an important segment of the young male population. In 2002, there were 9.5 million married men between the ages of 25 and 34. And contrary to the popular stereotype, the typical thirty-something guy is a married guy.

Besides demography, there's still another reason to pay closer attention to young married men. The popular image of the young male as a rolling stone or a slacker drone is now widespread. Though there is some basis for this stereotype—a point we will return to later in this essay, it hardly describes the behavior of most young men. Knowing something about the characteristics and marrying behavior of young married men can help correct this skewed image.

Further, such knowledge can also shed light on which men are likely to marry and which are not. In the past, for most young

heterosexual adults, the marriage market and the partner market were virtually identical. Today, that is no longer the case. The marriage market is only part of a larger and more diverse partner market. Not every young male who is actively seeking a partner is searching for a wife. Some are looking for a sex partner. Others are looking for a “relationship” but not necessarily marriage. Nor do young males have identical fertility, marital or relationship histories. Some have children. Others do not. Some are divorced or separated. Others have not yet married for the first time. Some are cohabiting but still looking for their true “soul mate.” Others have never lived with a romantic partner. Such diversity in the goals and background of men in the partner market can make marital matching more difficult, prolonged, confusing and potentially less successful for both men and women, but especially for marriage-minded women. Consequently, it is helpful to know as much as possible about the characteristics of men who are likely to marry.

In this year’s report, therefore, we take a look at men who are the “marrying kind,” and some who aren’t. We identify the “marrying kind” as young men who are currently married and young unmarried men who say that they are ready to marry. Our portrait is based on the results of a nationally representative survey of more than 1,000 (1,010) heterosexual young men, ages 25 to 34, commissioned by the National Marriage Project and conducted by the Opinion

Research Corporation in January and February 2004. More than half of the sample is made up of married men (569), most in their first marriage. The rest of the sample (441) consists of unmarried men, most of whom have not yet married for the first time. Most of our sample is beyond the median age of first marriage for men, which is close to 27, so the singles represent a group that is delaying or in some cases avoiding marriage.

In this survey, we set out to ask two related sets of questions. First: What are the characteristics of the married men in the sample? Why do they get married when they do? How, in their opinion, has marriage changed their lives? Second: Among the unmarried men in the sample, how do single men gauge their personal readiness to marry? How, if at all, do the characteristics of the marriage-minded single men differ from those who are less likely, or ready, to marry?

In addition to seeking answers to these questions, we also explored men’s attitudes about marriage, divorce, children, family life and the role of government in marriage.

Before turning to the findings of the survey, however, it is important to understand the role of marriage in men’s lives.

Marriage in Men’s Lives

FOR MEN, EVEN MORE THAN FOR WOMEN, MARRIAGE is a transformative event. Getting married tends to change men’s behavior in notable and predictable ways. When men marry, they begin to lead healthier and more productive lives. They work harder and do better finan-



► About the Survey

In our 2002 State of Our Unions report, which featured the essay “Why Men Won’t Commit: Exploring Young Men’s Attitudes About Sex, Dating and Marriage,” we reported on the results of a series of focus groups of single men ages 25 to 33. For this year’s report, we commissioned a national survey to explore some of the recurring themes in those focus groups and expand on some of the issues raised by the participants. Our survey covers a range of topics, but focuses primarily on young men’s attitudes toward marriage, living together, dating, parenthood, and divorce. Conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, NJ, in January and February 2004, it is based on a statistically representative national sample of 1,010 English speaking heterosexual young men, ages 25 to 34, both

married and single.

A majority of the respondents (56%) were married, 36% were single and never married, and 8% were divorced, widowed or separated. Fifty-one percent of the sample had children (70% of the married respondents and 28% of the single respondents—including 17% of the never-married men).

The young men in this survey reported a variety of household living arrangements at the age of 15. Fifty-nine percent lived with their biological parents, 24% lived with their mothers, 5% lived with their fathers, 4% lived with one parent and a stepparent, and 4% lived with grandparents or other relatives.

Eighty-two percent of the respondents identified their race as white, 12% identified themselves as black (the same proportion as the entire US population in this age group) and 6% identified themselves as Asian or other race.



cially than men who are not married. They are less likely to hang out in bars, to abuse alcohol or drugs or to engage in illegal activities. They are more likely to spend time with relatives and to be involved in religious and community activities. Their sex lives are better. They are more responsible and involved fathers.¹

Scholars offer a number of explanations for the positive effects of marriage on men. One key reason is wives. Married women provide emotional support and physical care to their spouses. They monitor their husband's health habits, encourage them to seek medical treatment, when necessary, and often find a doctor or health professional to provide such treatment. In addition to TLC, wives commonly provide SDRs (stable domestic routines). Along with better health practices, stable routines help to reduce job absenteeism, quit rates and sick days and thus to strengthen men's workforce attachment. Moreover, since the majority of married women today work outside the home, includ-

ing over half of wives with young children, men gain financial advantages from their wives' workforce participation. Wage-earning wives reduce pressure on husbands to be the sole breadwinner while, at the same time, increasing family income and assets, the traditional measure of a husband's contribution to the family.

But the positive influence of wives does not explain why married men do better than, say, cohabiting men who also enjoy the benefits of having a female domestic partner. The reason for the difference probably has to do with the influence of marriage itself. Marriage includes a norm of male altruism. While it is acceptable for single men to be self-indulgent and carefree, it is not so for married men. Once married, men are supposed to work and care for others. They are expected to voluntarily donate their time and money to their wives and children and also, to a lesser degree, to kin who may need their help.

Marriage carries a norm and expectation of permanence. Even in our high-divorce society, people still believe that marriage should last a long time, if not always a lifetime. This norm encourages a change in outlook, from a short-term, high-risk, "live for the moment" orientation to one that is more oriented to

1 See summaries of the evidence in: Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case For Marriage* (NY: Doubleday, 2000) and David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

the future and to the future well-being of the family. Thus, married men tend to save more and work harder because they are thinking ahead to future responsibilities, such as educating their children or buying a house.

Finally, as sociologist Steven Nock argues, marriage establishes norms of adult heterosexual masculinity.² In their sexual behavior, single men are viewed as juveniles: they are still “playing,” as the words “playboy,” “player,” “boytoy,” and even “boyfriend” suggest. Of course, the cultural distinction between single “boys” and married men is not a measure of individual men’s maturity level. Rather, it reflects the influence of the institution of marriage on norms of male behavior. Marriage sets forth norms of masculinity that stand in sharp contrast to norms for teenage boys. For one thing, marital norms require men to be sexually faithful, to choose one woman above all others and to find in her the fulfillment of their sexual desires. For another, marital norms of masculinity call for accountability, sacrifice, and commitment rather than sensation-seeking, risk-taking, and unfettered freedom. Finally, marital norms require men to attach themselves to the mother of their children and to share in the long-term task of rearing their offspring. Married men have to commit to social, as well as biological, fatherhood. By instituting these norms of masculine behavior, marriage helps turn boys into men.

The Marrying Kind

Married Men: Background Characteristics

MEN WHO GREW UP WITH BOTH BIOLOGICAL PARENTS, whose father was involved in their lives, and whose parents attended religious services regularly are more likely to be represented among the population of men who are currently married. Sixty-three percent of all marrieds were living with both of their biological parents at age fifteen, for example, compared to 55 percent of the unmarrieds. Thus the married men tend to come from more traditional family backgrounds.

TIMING OF MARRIAGE A large majority (81 percent) of married men agree with the statement that “you decided to marry because it was the right time in your life to settle down.” Contrary to some popular opinion, the majority of married men surveyed do not believe that they decided to marry under pressure or duress from their future wives. Only 15 percent agree with the statement “you got married sooner than you wanted because your wife was pushing for it.” Of course, this finding does not tell us whether or not pressure was actually exerted. What it does suggest is that most married young men see their decision to wed as a choice and commitment they make freely and for their own reasons.

Among married men, readiness to have children does not figure prominently in their decision to marry. Only 35 percent agree that “you got married because you were ready to have children.” Nonetheless, when currently married men were looking for a spouse, the majority apparently figured on having children sometime in the future. Seventy-five percent agree that in choosing a wife, they specifically looked for someone who would be a good mother.

RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR Not surprisingly, the married men are more religiously active than the unmarrieds. Nearly half say that they go to religious services several times a month, versus less than a quarter of the unmarrieds. Compared to unmarried men, they are also significantly more likely to agree that “children should be raised in a religion” (75 percent v. 59 percent).

SATISFACTION WITH MARRIAGE The overwhelming majority of married men (94 percent) say that they are happier being married than being single. A large majority agree that marriage has improved their lives in two domains that are important to men: namely, sex and money. Seventy-three percent say that their sex life is better since getting married, and 68 percent say that marriage has helped them become more financially stable. Also, compared to unmarried men, married men are more optimistic about the institution itself. Less than half of married men (42 percent) agree with the statement “there are so many bad marriages today, it makes one

2 Steven L. Nock, *Marriage in Men’s Lives* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 56-57



question the value of marriage” compared to 58 percent of unmarried men.

CHILDREN Most married men do not see children as the central purpose of marriage. In this respect, their opinion is virtually identical to unmarried men. Slightly more than two-thirds of all men disagree with the statement that “the main purpose of marriage is to have children.”

However, 70 percent of married men surveyed live in households with children and, not surprisingly, they hold more child-centered attitudes than unmarried men. For example, married men are more likely to agree that “watching children grow up is life’s greatest joy” and they would feel as if they had “missed out on something important in life” if they did not have kids of their own. They are also more likely to want more than one child.

Married men are more disapproving of unwed childbearing. Less than half (47 percent) of married men agree with the view that “it’s okay for a woman to have a child on her own if she can afford it” compared to 63 percent of unmarried men. Also, they are more likely than unmarried men to say that “people should marry and not just live together if they have children” (64 percent v. 53 percent).

Single Men: Who’s “the marrying kind?”

AS DEMOGRAPHERS TELL US, MEN ARE DELAYING marriage until older ages. As recently as 1970, the median age of first marriage for men was 23; today it is approaching 27. For college educated men, the median age of first marriage is estimated to be a year or two older.

Scholars commonly point to two key factors in male delay of marriage: longer years of education and greater difficulties in gaining a secure foothold on the job ladder. But education and employment are not the only factors involved in this recent phenomenon.

One new factor is the changing place of marriage in the transition to adulthood. Marriage is becoming one of the later transitions in the early adult life course rather than

one of the earlier. According to a recent study of findings from the General Social Survey, people now place marriage after finishing schooling, obtaining full-time employment, and being financially independent in the sequence of events associated with the transition to adulthood. Overall, people believe that the “right” age to marry is around 25, with college-educated people favoring marriage at about 27.³ However, strict “age-of-marriage” norms are weakening. Young men encounter few social or familial pressures to marry by a certain age as a sign of their majority or maturity. Nor are they subject to the stern sanctions of shotgun marriage should they father a child outside of wedlock. And finally, young men face few, if any, negative consequences to delaying marriage. On the contrary, they have attractive alternatives to marriage. They have access to a singles culture that caters to young males. They can live with a young woman and gain some of the sexual and domestic benefits of marriage without the long-term commitment of marriage. Or they can simply enjoy the freedom of being unattached and uncommitted.

Unmarried But “Ready to Marry Tomorrow”

For unmarried men, as for married men, the experience of growing up with both biological parents is associated with the desire and propensity to marry. More than half—54 percent of singles from biofamilies—agree with the statement “you’d be ready to marry tomorrow if the right person came along” compared to 43 percent of those from other kinds of family backgrounds. Men who say that their fathers were very involved in their upbringing are also more “ready” than men who say their fathers were not very involved. (53 percent v. 38 percent). Further, unmarried guys from intact families have more positive attitudes toward women. Sixty percent of men from bioparent families disagree with the statement “you can’t trust women to tell the truth about their past relationships,”

3 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.

compared to just 47 percent of men from other family backgrounds.

Unmarried men who attend religious services several times per month or more are also likely to agree that they would be ready to get married tomorrow than nonobservant men (55 percent v. 43 percent). Religiously observant men also hold the most pro-family attitudes.

Cohabitation experiences play a growing role in the marriage attitudes of today's unmarried men. Men who have had only one living together relationship or are currently in their first living together relationship are more likely to agree that "your most important personal goal is getting married" compared to men with no living together experience or those with more than one cohabitation experience. This view probably reflects the normative role that cohabitation now plays as a stepping-stone into marriage. Half of marriages today are preceded by cohabiting unions.

Unmarried But Ready to Marry ... Someday?

Fifty-three percent of the unmarried men in our sample agree that they are "not interested in getting married anytime soon." As for their reasons for postponing marriage, nearly three-fourths (74 percent) agree with the statement "at this stage in my life I want

fun and freedom." In addition to "fun and freedom," men cite a number of other reasons for putting off marriage, including: the challenges of the marital search itself; the time constraints on dating imposed by work obligations; and the need to achieve financial viability, or the proxies of financial viability, such as a house or nice wedding. For example, 46 percent agree with the statement: "your work schedule makes it difficult for you to go out and date;" 47 percent agree that "you wouldn't want to marry until you could afford to own a home;" and 40 percent agree that "you wouldn't want to marry until you could afford a nice wedding." Interestingly, most single men are not putting off marriage in order to have more satisfying sex lives. Only 36 percent agree that "single men have better sex lives than married men."

Single Men: Who's The Nonmarrying Kind?

A SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT SUBSET OF OUR SAMPLE of unmarried men, some 98, or 22 percent of the total, agreed with the statement that "marriage is good for some people but personally it is not for you." We consider this group to be relatively hardcore marriage



avoiders, and it is useful to look at how they differ from the rest of the young unmarried male population.

Compared to the rest of unmarried men in this sample, those who say that marriage is “personally not for you” are strikingly more averse to marriage on a number of key questions. For example, they are substantially more likely to mistrust women to tell the truth about past relationships (60 percent v. 39 percent); more likely to worry about the risks of divorce (66 percent v. 53 percent); more likely to believe that it is okay for a woman to have a child on her own (70 percent v. 61 percent); more likely to say that they do not want children (29 percent v. 6 percent); more likely to say that single men have better sex lives than married men (52 percent v. 31 percent) and more likely to agree that “if you marry, your biggest concern would be losing your personal freedom” (62 percent v. 30 percent). They are also less likely than other unmarried men to have grown up in traditional families (41 percent v. 58 percent) and less likely to have had fathers who were involved in their lives (58 percent v. 75 percent).



Age is yet another important predictor of men’s propensity to marry. Most men will have married for the first time by age 30. Given that fact, one might expect that the men, ages 30 to 34, in this survey sample would be among those unmarried men most ready to commit to marriage. However, a relatively high percentage of these thirtysomething men are ambivalent or averse to marrying anytime soon. For example, 68 percent say that at this stage in life they want fun and freedom; 54 percent say they are not interested in getting married anytime soon; 64 percent agree “there are so many bad marriages today it makes one question the value of marriage;” and 41 percent agree that “you can’t trust women to tell the truth about their past relationships.” Only 24 percent agree that “your most important personal goal is to get married.”

Discussion

WHAT KIND OF MEN ARE THE MARRYING KIND?
The findings of this national survey suggest that young men from more traditional backgrounds are significantly more likely to marry and to have positive views of marriage and family life than men from nontraditional backgrounds. Men who grow up with both biological parents in the household are more likely to be married than men who grow up in other kinds of family households. Conversely, among unmarried men, experiencing a nontraditional family structure in childhood is associated with greater ambivalence about marriage and greater propensity to delay marriage.⁴

A strong religious upbringing is another factor influencing men’s greater propensity to marry. Men who are reared by religiously observant parents and who are religiously observant themselves are more likely to be married and to have positive views of mar-

4 Men from disrupted families are likely to experience economic strain during their childhood and thus may have heightened concerns about the economic risks that marriage poses in a high-divorce society. They may have gained more negative views of marriage from their divorced parents. Absent positive models of marriage, they may have less confidence about their own ability to sustain a long-lasting and satisfying marriage.



riage and family life than men who have not had have religious upbringings and do not regularly attend religious services themselves.

Still, among all young men today, there have been a number of important changes in marrying attitudes and behavior. One such change is the delay of entry into marriage. The prime time for men to search for and marry their “soul mate” now occurs at a later point in the early adult life course, roughly during the years between ages 25 and 30. In addition to the later timing of marriage, the meaning of marriage has changed. Compared to earlier generations of men, young men today are less likely to equate marriage with becoming an adult. Nor do they regard marriage as closely connected to “building a family.” Indeed, for the majority of male respondents in this survey, children are not an important reason for marriage. Thus, though marriage remains an important transitional event in men’s lives, it is increasingly disconnected from traditional notions of male adulthood or aspirations to fatherhood.

Another factor affecting men’s marrying behavior is the existence of attractive alternatives to marriage. Contemporary urban singles life provides many social outlets and sexual opportunities for unmarried males.

Young men face little social disapproval of prolonged bachelorhood from their peers, parents, or employers. And in the consumer culture, men are encouraged to indulge themselves in their bachelorhood. Cohabitation is another recent factor influencing men’s propensity to marry. For some men, especially those over 30, cohabitation offers an appealing alternative to marriage as well as to bachelorhood. This is especially true for older male urbanites.⁵

Also, and most notably, men face few penalties for postponing marriage until older ages. Unlike peer women over thirty, they do not have to worry about a ticking biological clock. Nor do they have to obey a sociological “clock.” Compared to earlier times, social pressures to marry are weak, even when young men father children out-of-wedlock. Men are more likely to time their entry into marriage according to a set of personal calculations rather than to a set of social expectations. As a huge majority of the married men in our sample stated, they decided to marry because it was “the right time in life to settle down.”

5 Sharon Sassler and Frances Goldscheider, “Revisiting Jane Austen’s Theory of Marriage Timing: Changes in Union Formation Among American Men in the Late 20th Century,” *Journal of Family Issues* 25: 2, March 2004 139-166.

Lastly, men are seeking a “soul-mate” relationship. According to a 2002 Gallup survey commissioned by the National Marriage Project, the vast majority of young men are looking for a soul mate who will fulfill their emotional, sexual, and spiritual desires and who will also share breadwinning responsibilities. More traditional aspirations—such as finding a wife who will stay home and care for children or who shares a similar religious faith or ethnic background—have receded in importance. However, as we have noted in earlier *The State of Our Unions* reports, the soul-mate ideal itself may contribute to the delay in marriage. Men who are searching for the perfect soul mate may be less satisfied with their real-life romantic partners. Even when they are satisfied with their current girlfriend, they may believe that they will find a “better one” out there if they just wait a bit longer. Further, a pornographic media culture may contribute to unrealistic expectations of what their future soul mate should look like. Influenced by the sexy images of young women on MTV, the Internet and on the runway in televised *Victoria’s Secret* specials,

men may be putting off marriage to their current girlfriend in the hopes that they will eventually find a combination “soul mate/babe.”

To conclude, the findings of this national survey support the view that, while there are many reasons why marriage today is being postponed, most young men are still “the marrying kind.” Moreover, the men who are the best “marriage bets” are those who are more traditional in their family and religious background characteristics and in their attitudes toward marriage. However, a small but significant percentage of men might be considered poor “marriage bets.” Slightly more than two out of ten unmarried men who responded to this survey hold substantially more negative attitudes about their own personal propensity to marry as well as more negative attitudes toward marriage, women and children. And they are far more likely to come from nontraditional and nonreligious backgrounds. No doubt, it is the presence of these men in the partner market that has led to the popular media stereotype of the commitmentphobic young male on the make but not on the path to marriage.

Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing

Trends of the Past Four Decades

THE STATE *of* OUR UNIONS

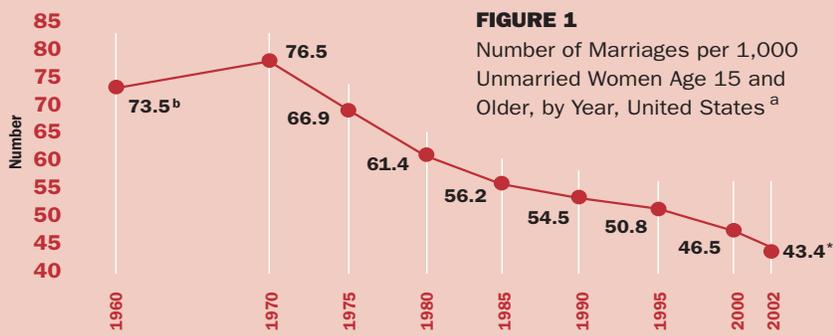
2004

- 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



THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT



^a We have used the number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried women age 15 and older, rather than the Crude Marriage Rate of marriages per 1,000 population to help avoid the problem of compositional changes in the population; that is, changes which stem merely from there being more or less people in the marriageable ages. Even this more refined measure is somewhat susceptible to compositional changes.

^b Per 1,000 unmarried women age 14 and older

Source: US Department of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001*, Page. 87, Table 117; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986*, Page 79, Table 124.

* Figure for 2002 was obtained using data from the Current Population Surveys, March 2002 Supplement, as well as Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for October–December 2002, National Vital Statistics Report 51:10, June 17, 2003, Table 3. (www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/pdf/51_10_12_t03.pdf) The CPS, March Supplement, is based on a sample of the US population, rather than an actual count such as those available from the decennial census. See sampling and weighting notes at <http://www.bls.census.gov:80/cps/ads/2002/ssampwgt.htm>.

A AMERICANS HAVE BECOME LESS LIKELY TO MARRY.

This is reflected in a decline of more than 40 percent, from 1970 to 2002, 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. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry.

The decline also reflects some increase in lifelong singlehood, though the actual amount can not be known 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. (For some economic implications of the decline of marriage, see the accompanying box: “The Surprising Economic Benefits of Marriage.”)

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 almost 19 percentage points for married men and over 16 points for married women. A slight increase in the percentage of married people in this age group occurred beginning in 1999, for unknown reasons, but this increase now appears to have ended.

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

FIGURE 2
Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Married, by Sex and Race, 1960-2003, United States^a

Year	Total	MALES		Total	FEMALES	
		Blacks	Whites		Blacks	Whites
1960	69.3	60.9	70.2	65.9	59.8	66.6
1970	66.7	56.9	68.0	61.9	54.1	62.8
1980	63.2	48.8	65.0	58.9	44.6	60.7
1990	60.7	45.1	62.8	56.9	40.2	59.1
2000	57.9	42.8	60.0	54.7	36.2	57.4
2003 ^b	57.1	42.5	59.3	54.0	36.4	56.6

^a Includes races other than Black and White.

^b In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2003 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years. Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-506; *America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000* and earlier reports; internet tables (www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabMS1-1.pdf); and data calculated from the Current Population Surveys, March 2003 Supplement.

Marriage

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

THE SURPRISING ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE

When thinking of the many benefits of marriage, the economic aspects are often overlooked. Yet the economic benefits of marriage are substantial, both for individuals and for society as a whole. Marriage is a wealth generating institution. Married couples create more economic assets on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples. A 1992 study of retirement data concluded that “individuals who are not continuously married have significantly lower wealth than those who remain married throughout their lives.” Compared to those continuously married, those who never married have a reduction in wealth of 75% and those who divorced and didn’t remarry have a reduction of 73%.^a

One might think that the explanation for why marriage generates economic assets is because those people who are more likely to be wealth creators are also more likely to marry and stay married. And this is certainly true, but only in part. The institution of marriage itself provides a wealth-generation bonus. It does this through providing economies of scale (two can live more cheaply than one), and as implicitly a long-term personal contract it encourages economic specialization. Working as a couple, individuals can develop those skills in which they excel, leaving others to their partner.

Also, married couples save and invest more for the future, and they can act as a small insurance pool against life uncertainties such as illness and job loss.^b Probably because of marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behavior, men tend to become more economically productive after marriage; they earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.^c All of these benefits are independent of the fact that married couples receive more work-related and government-provided support, and also more help and support from their extended families (two sets of in-laws) and friends.^d

Beyond the economic advantages of marriage for the married couples themselves, marriage has a tremendous economic impact on society. It is a major contributor to family income levels and inequality. After more than doubling between 1947 and 1977, the growth of median family income has slowed over the past 20 years, increasing by just 9.6%. A big reason is that married couples, who fare better economically than their single counterparts, have been a rapidly decreasing proportion of total families. In this same 20 year period, and largely because of changes in family structure, family income inequality has increased significantly.^e

Research has shown consistently that both divorce and unmarried childbearing increase child poverty. In recent years the majority of

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

Marriages that end in divorce also are very costly to the public. One researcher determined that a single divorce costs state and federal governments about \$30,000, based on such things as the higher use of food stamps and public housing as well as increased bankruptcies and juvenile delinquency. The nation’s 10.4 million divorces in 2002 are estimated to have cost the taxpayers more than \$30 billion.^h

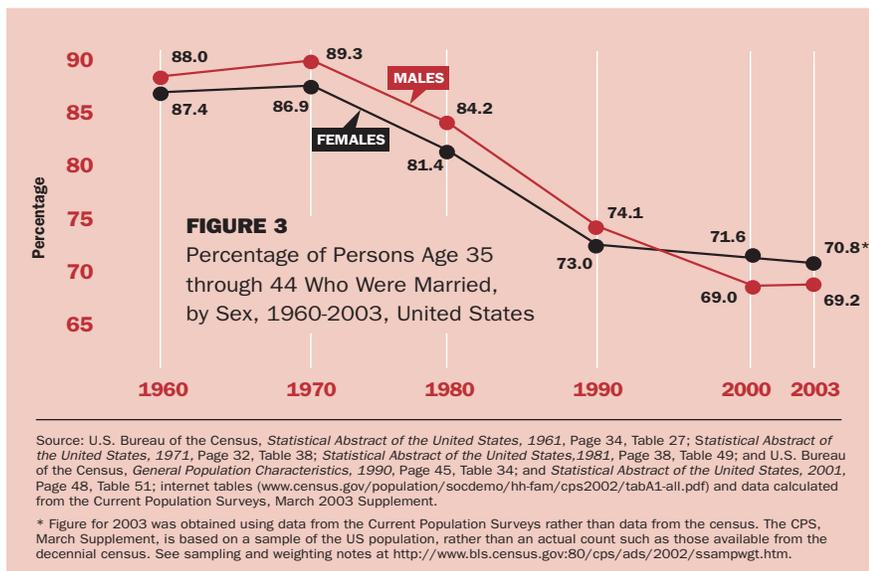
- ^a Janet Wilmoth and Gregor Koso, “Does Marital History Matter? Marital Status and Wealth Outcomes Among Preretirement Adults,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64:254-68, 2002.
- ^b Thomas A. Hirschl, Joyce Altobelli, and Mark R. Rank, “Does Marriage Increase the Odds of Affluence? Exploring the Life Course Probabilities,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65-4 (2003): 927-938; Joseph Lupton and James P. Smith, “Marriage, Assets and Savings,” in Shoshana A. Grossbard-Schechtman (ed.) *Marriage and the Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 129-152.
- ^c Jeffrey S. Gray and Michael J. Vanderhart, “The Determination of Wages: Does Marriage Matter?,” in Linda Waite, et. al. (eds.) *The Ties that Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000): 356-367; S. Korenman and D. Neumark, “Does Marriage Really Make Men More Productive?” *Journal of Human Resources* 26-2 (1991): 282-307; K. Daniel, “The Marriage Premium,” in M. Tomassi and K. Ierulli (eds.) *The New Economics of Human Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 113-125.
- ^d Lingxin Hao, “Family Structure, Private Transfers, and the Economic Well-Being of Families with Children,” *Social Forces* 75 (1996): 269-292.
- ^e U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P60-203, Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change Using the March Current Population Survey, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1998; John Iceland, “Why Poverty Remains High: The Role of Income Growth, Economic Inequality, and Changes in Family Structure, 1949-1999,” *Demography* 40-3:499-519, 2003.
- ^f Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, “The Economic Risk of Childhood in America: Estimating the Probability of Poverty Across the Formative Years,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:1058-1067, 1999.
- ^g Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill, “For Richer or For Poorer: Marriage as an Antipoverty Strategy,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21:4, 2002.
- ^h David Schramm, “The Costly Consequences of Divorce in Utah: The Impact on Couples, Community, and Government,” Logan, UT: Utah State University, 2003. Unpublished preliminary report.

historical high point.¹ For the generation of 1995, assuming a continuation of then cur-

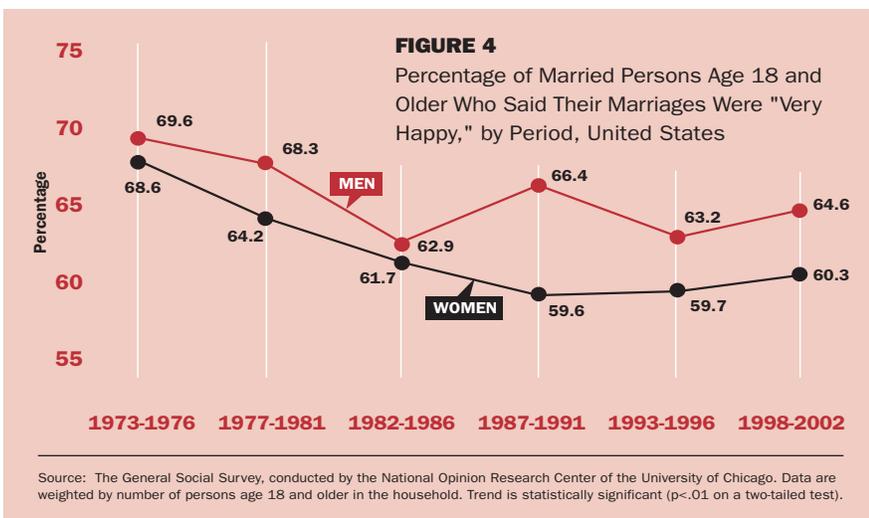
rent marriage rates, several demographers projected that 88 percent of women and 82 percent of men would ever marry.² If and

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

2 Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995.” *Population and Development Review* 27-3 (2001): 553-563.



There is a common belief that, although a smaller percentage of Americans are now marrying than was the case a few decades ago, those who marry have marriages of higher quality. It seems reasonable that if divorce removes poor marriages from the pool of married couples and cohabitation “trial marriages” deter some bad marriages from forming, the remaining marriages on average should be happier. The best available evidence on the topic, however, does not support these assumptions. Since 1973, the General Social Survey periodically has asked representative samples of married Americans to rate their marriages as either “very happy,” “pretty happy,” or “not too happy.”³ As Figure 4 indicates, the percentage of both men and women saying “very happy” has declined moderately over the past 25 years.⁴ This trend has shown a turnaround since reaching a low point in 1994, however, and is now heading in a positive direction.



Divorce

KEY FINDING: *The American divorce rate today is more than twice that of 1960, but has declined slightly since hitting the highest point in our history in the early 1980s. For the average couple marrying in recent years, the lifetime probability of divorce or separation remains close to 50 percent.*

THE INCREASE IN DIVORCE, SHOWN BY THE TREND reported in Figure 5, probably has elicited more concern and discussion than any other family-related trend in the United States. Although the long-term trend in divorce has been upward since colonial times, the divorce rate was level for about two decades after

when these figures are recalculated for the early years of the 21st century, the percentage of women and men ever marrying will almost certainly be lower.

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 growing number of persons, both young and old, are living together with no plans for eventual marriage.

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

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

YOUR CHANCES OF DIVORCE MAY BE MUCH LOWER THAN YOU THINK

By now almost everyone has heard that the national divorce rate is close to 50% of all marriages. This is true, but the rate must be interpreted with caution and several important caveats. For many people, the actual chances of divorce are far below 50/50. The background characteristics of people entering a marriage have major implications for their risk of divorce. Here are some percentage point decreases in the risk of divorce or separation during the first ten years of marriage, according to various personal and social factors^a:

Factors	Percent Decrease in Risk of Divorce
Annual income over \$50,000 (vs. under \$25,000)	-30
Having a baby seven months or more after marriage (vs. before marriage)	-24
Marrying over 25 years of age (vs. under 18)	-24
Own family of origin intact (vs. divorced parents)	-14
Religious affiliation (vs. none)	-14
Some college (vs. high-school dropout)	-13

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

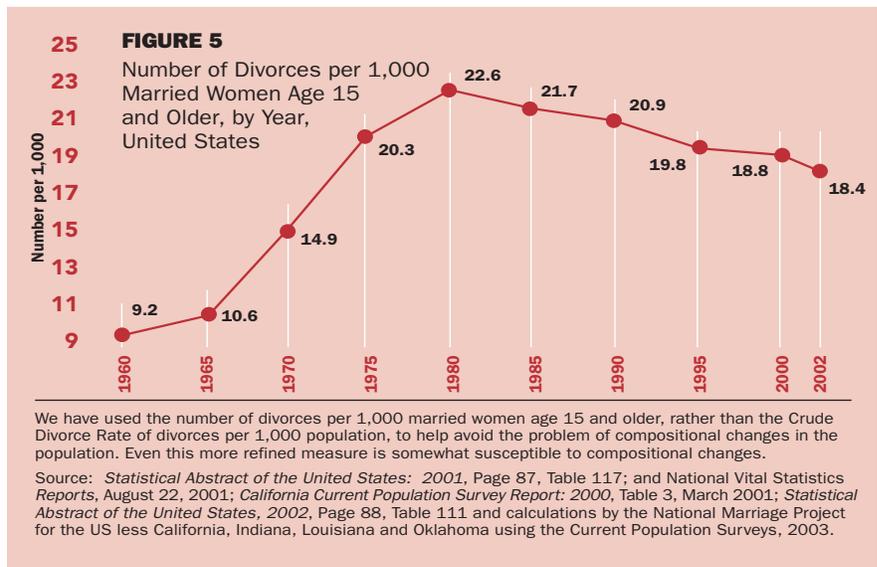
Also, it should be realized that the “close to 50%” divorce rate refers to the percentage of marriages entered into during a particular year that are projected to end in divorce or separation before one spouse dies. Such projections assume that the divorce and death rates occurring that year will continue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

^a Matthew D. Bramlett and William D. Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States*, National Center for Health Statistics, Vital and Health Statistics, 23 (22), 2002. The risks are calculated for women only.

^b 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.

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 apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.¹ Two probable reasons for this are an increase in the age at which people marry for the first time, and a higher educational level of those marrying, both of which are associated with greater marital stability.²

Although a majority of divorced persons eventually remarry, the growth of divorce has led to a steep increase in the percentage of all adults who are currently divorced (Figure 6). This percentage, which was only 1.8 percent for males and 2.6 percent for females



in 1960, quadrupled by the year 2000. The percentage of divorced is higher for females than for males primarily because divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women. Also, among those who do remarry, men generally do so sooner than women.

Overall, the chances remain very high—still close to 50 percent—that a marriage started in recent years will end in either

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

2 Tim B. Heaton, “Factors Contributing to Increased Marital Stability in the United States,” *Journal of Family Issues* 23 (2002): 392-409

FIGURE 6

Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Divorced, by Sex and Race, 1960-2003, 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
2003 ^a	8.3	8.7	8.4	10.9	12.8	10.9

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 2000 and earlier reports; and Current Population Survey, March 2003 supplement, raw data.

^a In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2003 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

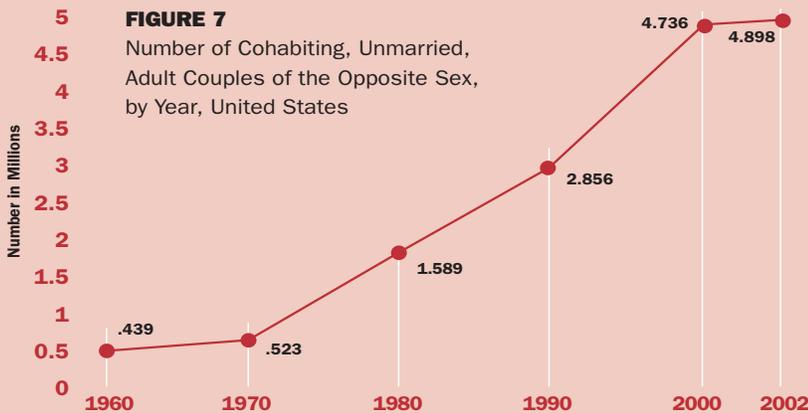
blacks than for whites, for instance, and higher in the West than in other parts of the country. But these variations have been diminishing. The trend toward a greater similarity of divorce rates between whites and blacks is largely attributable to the fact that fewer blacks are marrying.⁴ Divorce rates 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 after age 21, high-school drop outs versus college graduates, and the non-religious compared to the religiously committed. Teenagers, high-school drop outs, and the non-religious who marry have considerably higher divorce rates.⁵

Unmarried Cohabitation

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

BETWEEN 1960 AND 2002, AS INDICATED IN Figure 7, the number of unmarried couples in America increased by over 1100 percent. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household—is particularly common among the young. It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women age 25 to 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 pre-



Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000*; and *Unmarried-Couple Households, by Presence of Children: 1960 to Present*, Table UC-1, June 12, 2003 (www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabUC-1.pdf) and earlier reports.

divorce or separation before one partner dies.³ (But see the accompanying box: “Your Chances of Divorce May Be Much Lower Than You Think.”) The likelihood of divorce has varied considerably among different segments of the American population, being higher for

3 Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995,” *Population and Development Review* 27-3 (2001): 553-563; R. Kelly Raley and Larry Bumpass, “The Topography of the Divorce Plateau: Levels and Trends in Union Stability in the United States after 1980,” *Demographic Research* 8-8 (2003): 245-259

4 Jay D. Teachman, “Stability across Cohorts in Divorce Risk Factors,” *Demography* 39-2 (2002): 331-351

5 Raley and Bumpass, 2003

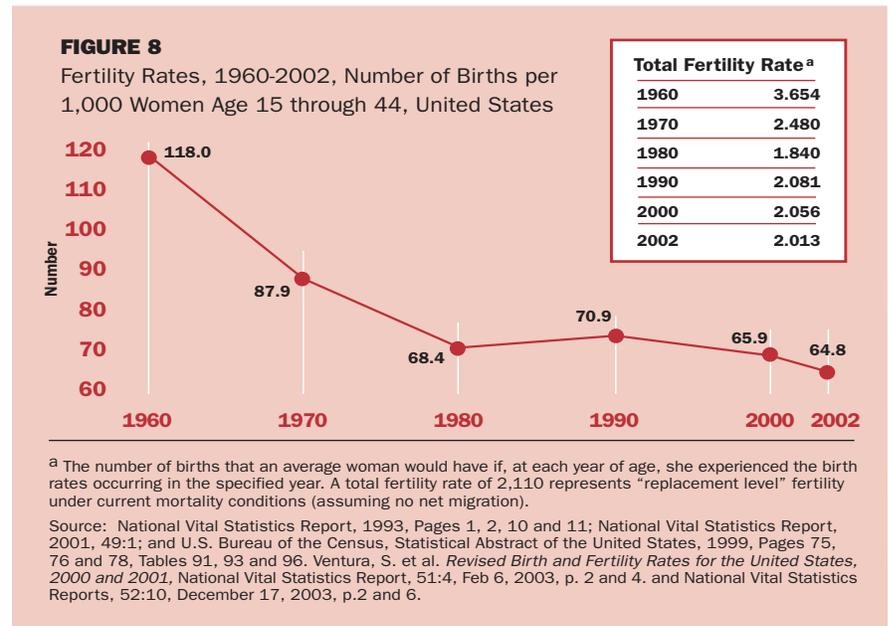
ceded by living together, compared to virtually none 50 years ago.¹

For many, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for others, simply an alternative to living alone, and for a small but growing number, it is considered an alternative to marriage. Cohabitation is more common among those of lower educational and income levels. Recent data show that among women in the 19 to 44 age range, 60 percent of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 37 percent of college graduates.² Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers, those who have been divorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now 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, however, because it is difficult to distinguish the “selection effect” from the “experience of cohabitation effect.” The selection effect refers to the fact that people who cohabit before marriage have different characteristics from those who do not, and it may be these characteristics, and not the experience of cohabitation, that leads to marital instability. There is some empirical support for both positions. Also, a recent study based on a nationally-representative sample of women concluded that premarital cohabitation (and premarital sex), when limited to a woman’s future husband, is not associated with an elevated risk of marital disruption.³ What can be said for certain is that no evi-

1 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.

2 Bumpass and Lu, 2000.



dence has yet been found that those who cohabit before marriage have stronger marriages than those who do not.⁴

Loss of Child Centeredness

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

THROUGHOUT HISTORY MARRIAGE HAS FIRST AND foremost been an institution for procreation and raising children. It has provided the

3 Jay Teachman, “Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Disruption among Women,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003): 444-455.

4 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).

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO CHILD-REARING FAMILIES?

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. Unfortunately, the percentage of childrearing families with these characteristics has dropped dramatically in recent decades. In the 1973-1976 period, 51% of children under the age of eighteen were living with married adults in a marriage the reporting spouse rated as "very happy." By the 1997-2002 period, that percentage had dropped to 37%.^a This negative change is the result of two trends: fewer children living in families headed by married couples, and a drop over time in the marital happiness of those couples (See Figures 11 and 4 in this report.)

Several reasons for this deterioration in children's family situation are especially worrisome. One is that Americans increasingly view marriage and child rearing as separate pursuits. Take, for example, agreement among never-married young people ages 18-34 with the statement "those who want children should get married." In national surveys, 64% of the males in this category agreed in 1988, but only 51% did so in 2002. For females the drop was slightly steeper, from 56% to 42%.^b Moreover, in our annual reporting of the family life opinions of American high school seniors, the greatest increase this year was in regard to the statement "having a child without being married is experimenting with a worthwhile lifestyle and not affecting anyone else." Fifty-six percent of senior boys now agree with this statement, up from 49% in the late 1990s and currently dead even with the percentage of senior girls who agree. (See Figure 17.)

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. (See accompanying box: "What's Happening to Child-Rearing Families?")

Americans on average have been having fewer children. Figure 8 indicates the decline in fertility since 1960. It is important to note that fertility had been gradually declining throughout American history, reaching a low point in the Great Depression of the 1930s before suddenly accelerating with the baby-boom generation starting in 1945. By 1960 the birth rate was back to where it had been in 1920, with the average woman having about three and one half children over the course of her life. Since 1960 the birth rate has mostly been down sharply, although it increased some in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s. Part of the recent upswing can be explained, in part, by a higher birth rate among new immigrants.

Since 2000 the birth rate has been continuing its downward trend. In 2002, the lat-

A second reason for children's deteriorating family situation is that children seem to be a growing impediment for the happiness of marriages. Many studies have shown that the arrival of the first baby commonly has the effect of pushing the mother and father apart, bringing stress to the marriage.^c One recent review of over 100 research studies found that parents report significantly lower marital satisfaction than nonparents. This is especially true for parents of infants: Only 38% of mothers of infants have high marital satisfaction, compared to 62% of childless women. Further, this review concluded that the effect of parenthood on marital happiness is more negative among younger birth cohorts and higher socioeconomic groups, signs that the negative effect may be on the increase.^d

^a Calculation by Professor Norval Glenn, University of Texas, using data from the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, 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).

^b General Social Surveys

^c Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Jay Belsky and John Kelly, *The Transition to Parenthood* (New York: Dell, 1994).

^d Jean M Twenge, W. Keith Campbell and Craig A. Foster, "Parenthood and Marital Satisfaction: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (August 2003): 574-583.

est year for which we have complete information, the American "total fertility rate" (TFR) stood at 2.013, below the 1990 level and slightly above two children per woman. This rate is below the "replacement level" of 2.1, the level at which the population would be replaced through births alone, but is still one of the highest rates found in modern, industrialized societies. In most European and several Asian nations the total fertility rate has decreased to a level well below that of the United States, in some countries to only slightly more than one child per woman.¹ Many observers believe that the United States birthrate will decline further in future decades to become more like that of Europe today.

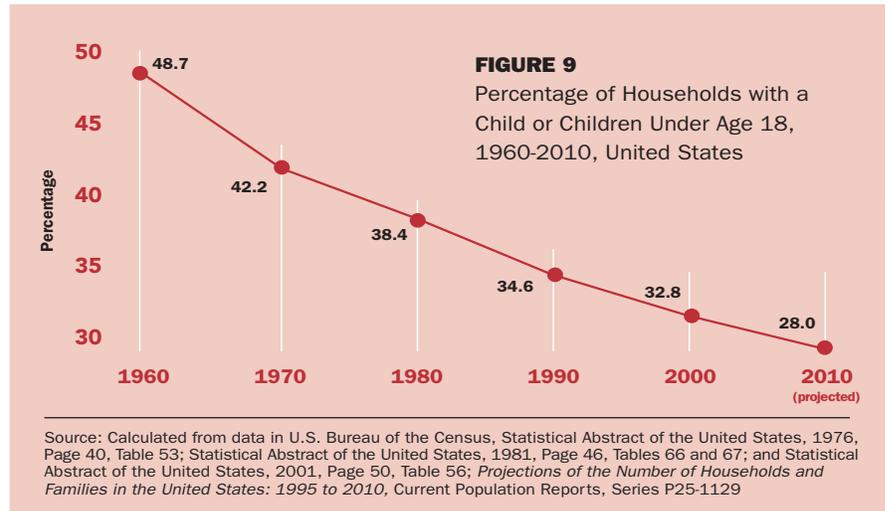
The long-term decline of births has had a marked effect on the household makeup of

1 The TFR in Spain, Italy and Greece is 1.2; in Germany, Japan and South Korea it is 1.3. World Population Data Sheet, (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2003).

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 18.² 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 percentage is projected to drop to 28 by 2010 (Figure 9). This obviously means that adults are less likely to be living with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and that children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. It suggests that the needs and concerns of children—especially young children—gradually may be receding from our national consciousness.

Several scholars determined that in 1960 the proportion of one's life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By that year the death rate had plummeted so that fewer marriages ended through death, and the divorce revolution of recent decades had not yet begun, so that a relatively small number of marriages ended in divorce. By 1985, however, just 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.³ 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."⁴ Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else compared, for example, to just 51 percent of



Norwegians or 45 percent of Italians. Consistent with this view is a dramatic change in our attitudes about holding marriages together for children. In a Detroit area sample of women, the proportion of women answering "no" to the question "Should a couple stay together for the sake of the children?" jumped from 51 percent to 82 percent between 1962 and 1985.⁵ 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."⁶

One effect of the weakening of child centeredness is clear. A careful analysis of divorce statistics shows that, beginning around 1975, the presence of children in a marriage has become only a very minor inhibitor of divorce (slightly more so when the child is male than female).⁷

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

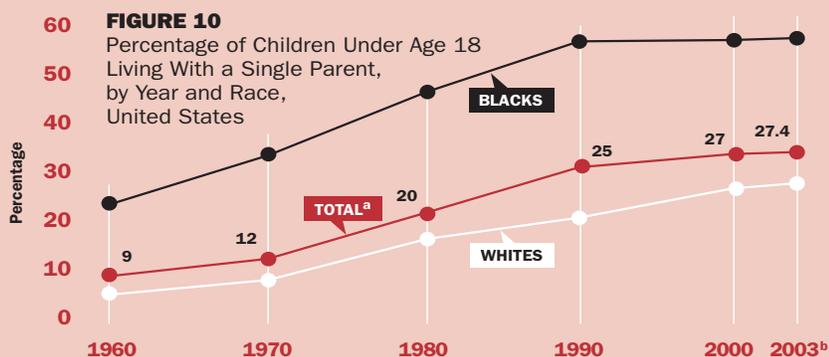
3 Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken and John Bongaarts, "Demographic Foundations of Family Change," *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 346-358.

4 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.

5 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.

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

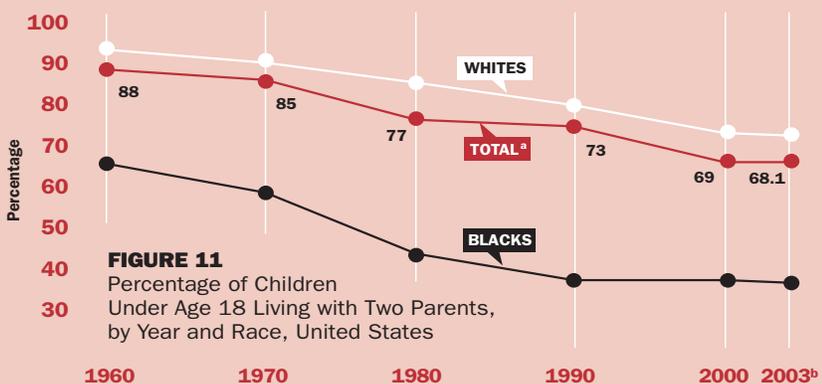
7 Tim B. Heaton, "Marital Stability Throughout the Child-Rearing Years," *Demography* 27 (1990): 55-63; Philip Morgan, Diane Lye, and Gretchen Condran, "Sons, Daughters, and the Risk of Marital Disruption" *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 110-129; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, "Children and Marital Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1991): 930-953.



^a Total includes Blacks, Whites and all other racial and ethnic groupings. Over these decades an additional 3 to 4 percent of children, not indicated in these figures, were classified as living with no parent.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002*, and earlier reports; and calculations from the Current Population Survey: March 2003 Supplement.

^b In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2003 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.



^a Total includes Blacks, Whites and all other racial and ethnic groupings.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000*; *Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002*, and earlier reports; and calculations from the Current Population Survey: March 2003 Supplement.

^b In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2003 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

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. The trend toward fragile families leveled off in the late 1990s, but the most recent data show a slight increase.*

THERE IS NOW AMPLE EVIDENCE THAT STABLE AND satisfactory marriages are crucial for the

wellbeing of adults. Yet such marriages are even more important for the proper socialization and overall wellbeing of children. A central purpose of the institution of marriage is to ensure the responsible and long-term involvement of both biological parents in the difficult and time-consuming task of raising the next generation.

The trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents (Figure 10). This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families.¹ 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 2003 the percentage had jumped to 27 percent. The overwhelming majority of single-parent families are mother-only, although the percentage of father-only families recently has grown to about 18 percent.

An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of persons under age 18 living with two parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by 20 percentage points (Figure 11). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while nine percent are stepfamilies.² 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.³ Data on stepfami-

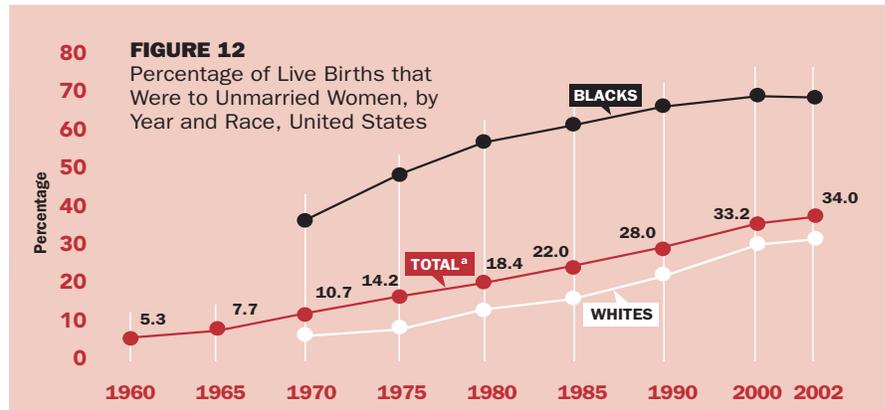
- 1 Mary Parke, *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?* (Washington, DC, Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2003); and William J. Doherty, et al., *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2002)
- 2 Jason Fields, *Living Arrangements of Children: Fall, 1996*, Current Population Reports, P70-74, Washington, DC: U. S. Census Bureau, 2001
- 3 Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66 (2004): 351-367; and more generally, David Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Step-families," in A. Booth and J. Dunn (eds.) *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994) 3-27.

lies, therefore, probably are more reasonably combined with single-parent than with biological two-parent families. An important indicator that helps to resolve this issue is the percentage of children who live apart from their biological fathers. That percentage has doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to 34 percent.⁴

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.

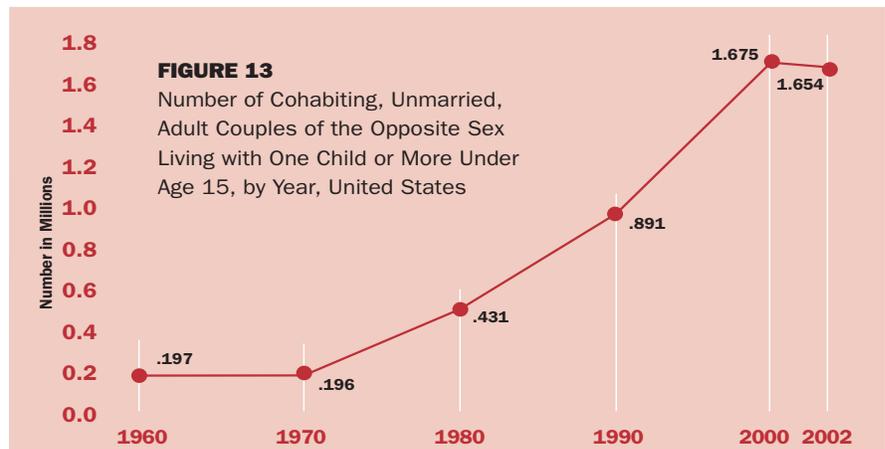
The second reason for the shift in family structure is an increase in the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers, which suddenly and unexpectedly began to increase rapidly in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than sixfold (Figure 12). More than a third of all births and more than two-thirds of black births in 2002, the latest year for which we have complete data, were out-of-wedlock. The percentage of black unwed births declined slightly in the late 1990s, but that decline now appears to have ended.

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 13). The small drop in that number between 2000 and 2002 is probably due merely to a slight decrease in the overall size of the cohabita-



^a Total includes Whites, Blacks and all other racial and ethnic groupings.

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995*, Page 77, Table 94; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999*, Page 79, Table 99; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000*, Page 69, Table 85; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001*, Page 63, Table 76; *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 50, 5. Martin, J., et. al. *Births: Final Data for 2002*, National Vital Statistics Report, 52:10, Dec. 17, 2003, p. 53.



Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P20-537; *America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000*, and *Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002*, Table UC-1, Series P20-547, (www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabUC-1.pdf) and earlier reports.

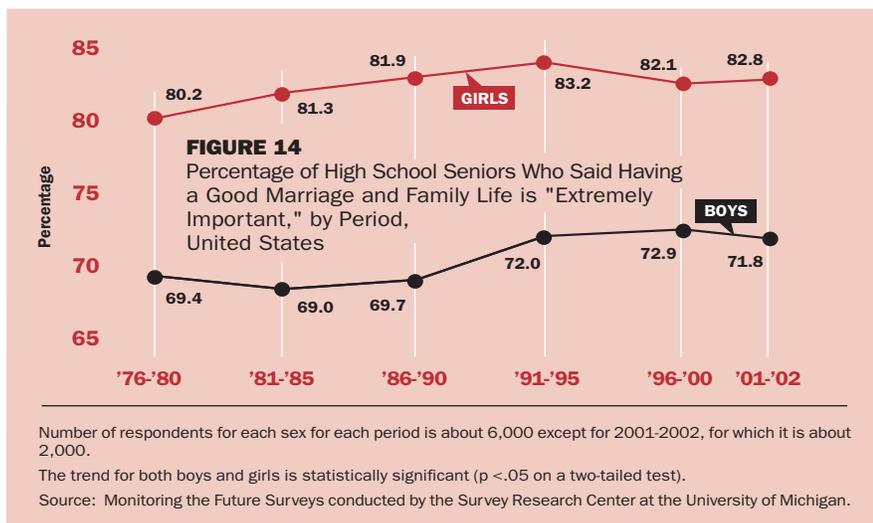
tion-prone age groups. An estimated 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their growing up years.⁵

In 2000 about 40 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18.⁶ For unmarried couples in the 25 to 34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all

5 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

6 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

4 Jason Fields, op.cit.



Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family

KEY FINDING: *The desire of teenagers of both sexes for "a good marriage and family life" has increased moderately over the past few decades. Boys are more than ten percentage points less desirous than girls, however, and they are also more pessimistic about the possibility of a long-term marriage. Both boys and girls have become more accepting of lifestyles that are alternatives to marriage, especially unwed childbearing, although the latest data show a slight drop in acceptance of premarital cohabitation.*

TO FIND OUT WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD FOR marriage and family life it is important to determine what our nation's youth are saying and thinking, and how their views have changed over time. Are these products of the divorce revolution going to continue the family ways of their parents? Or might there be a cultural counterrevolution among the young that could lead to a reversal of current family trends?

Fortunately, since 1976 a nationally representative survey of high school seniors aptly titled *Monitoring the Future*, conducted annually by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, has asked numerous questions about family-related topics.¹

Based on this survey, the percentage of teenagers of both sexes who said that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" to them has increased slightly over the decades. Eighty-three percent of girls stated this belief in the latest period, with boys lagging behind at 72 percent (Figure 14).

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 83 percent for girls and 78 percent for boys.² Among these teenagers,

such households.⁷ Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.⁸ Indeed, if one includes cohabitation in the definition of stepfamily, almost one half of stepfamilies today would consist of a biological parent and unrelated cohabiting partner.⁹

Children who grow up with cohabiting couples tend to have worse life outcomes compared to those growing up with married couples.¹⁰ Prominent reasons are that cohabiting couples have a much higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower level of household income, and a 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 problems for children.¹¹

7 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.

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

9 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.

10 Susan L. Brown, op. cit.; and Wendy Manning, "The Implications of Cohabitation for Children's Well-Being," pp. 121-152 in A. Booth and A. Crouter (eds.) *Just Living Together* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).

11 Bumpass and Lu, op. cit.

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

2 In the 1976-1980 period, 73% of boys and 82% of girls said they expected to marry (or were already

boys are somewhat more pessimistic than girls in the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime. Just 58 percent of boys and 66 percent of girls state that it is “very likely” they will stay married to the same person for life, although in the past decade the percentages for both sexes have been moving in a more optimistic direction (Figure 15).

At the same time, there is widespread acceptance by teenagers of non-marital lifestyles. Take, for example, agreement with the proposition “that most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone” (Figure 16). 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 the alternatives. Yet this belief is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.³

Witness the remarkable increase in recent decades in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing (Figure 17). And note that whereas in the 1970s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, the two sexes are now dead even following a sharp increase for boys in the most recent

married); by the latest period, 2001-2002, the boys’ percentage jumped to 78 and the girls’ to 84. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13 to 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)

3 For instance, see: Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); David G. Myers, *The American Paradox* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, “Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60 (1998) 527-536; and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage*, 2nd Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002).

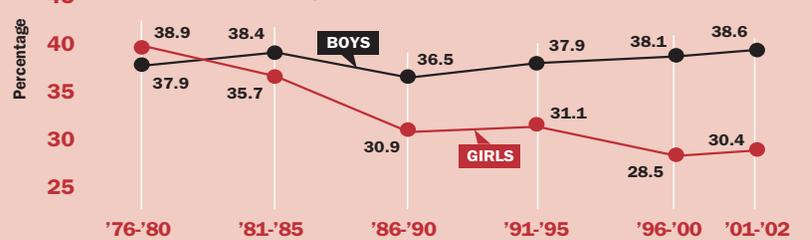
FIGURE 15
Percentage of High School Seniors Who Expected to Marry, or Were Married, Who Said It Is “Very Likely” They Will Stay Married to the Same Person for Life, by Period, United States



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2002, for which it is about 2,000. 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 2001-2002 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.

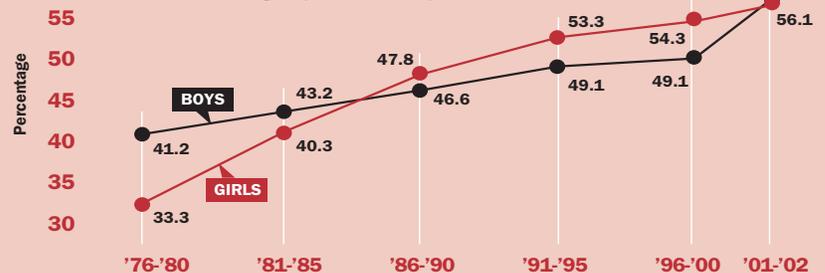
FIGURE 16
Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said They Agreed or Mostly Agreed That Most People Will Have Fuller and Happier Lives If They Choose Legal Marriage Rather Than Staying Single or Just Living With Someone, by Period, United States



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2002, for which it is about 2,000. The trend for girls is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

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

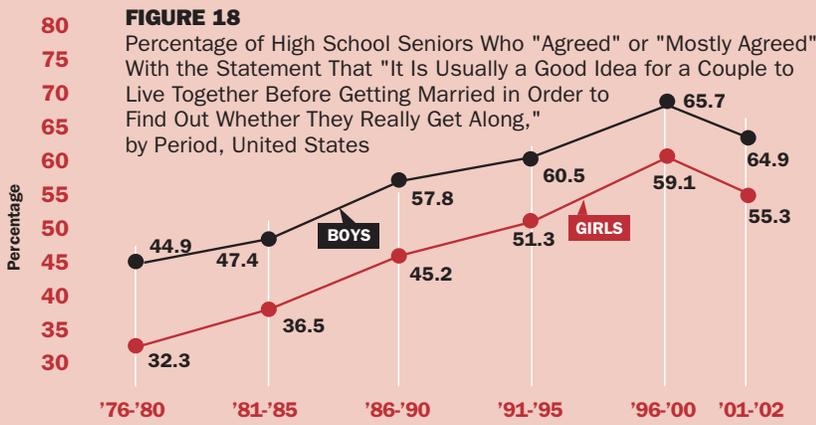
FIGURE 17
Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said Having a Child Without Being Married is Experimenting with a Worthwhile Lifestyle or Not Affecting Anyone Else, by Period, United States



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2002, for which it is about 2,000.

The trend for both boys and girls is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

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



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2002, for which it is about 2,000.

The trend for both boys and girls is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

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

period. With more than 50 percent of teenagers now accepting out-of-wedlock child-bearing as a "worthwhile lifestyle," at least

for others, they do not yet seem to grasp the enormous economic, social and personal costs of single parenthood.

Another remarkable increase is in the acceptance of living together before marriage, now by well over half of all teenagers (Figure 18). In this case girls remain more traditional than boys. Yet this trend appears to have slowed in the past five years, especially among girls. This may be an indication that teenagers are more aware of the evidence, widely publicized in recent years, linking pre-marital cohabitation to a higher divorce risk.

In summary, marriage and family life remain very important goals for today's teenagers at the same time that they widely accept a range of non-marital lifestyles. There are no strong signs yet of a generational shift that could lead to a reversal of recent family trends, but some data from the recent period suggest that the views of teenagers are, with the exception of unwed childbearing, moving in a more conservative direction.

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