

The State of Our Unions 2001



THE SOCIAL HEALTH OF MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

Social Indicators of Marital Health & Wellbeing

Marriage

Divorce

Unmarried Cohabitation

Loss of Child Centeredness

Fragile Families with Children

Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family



The National Marriage Project



The National Marriage Project

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

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

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

Leadership

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

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

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

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

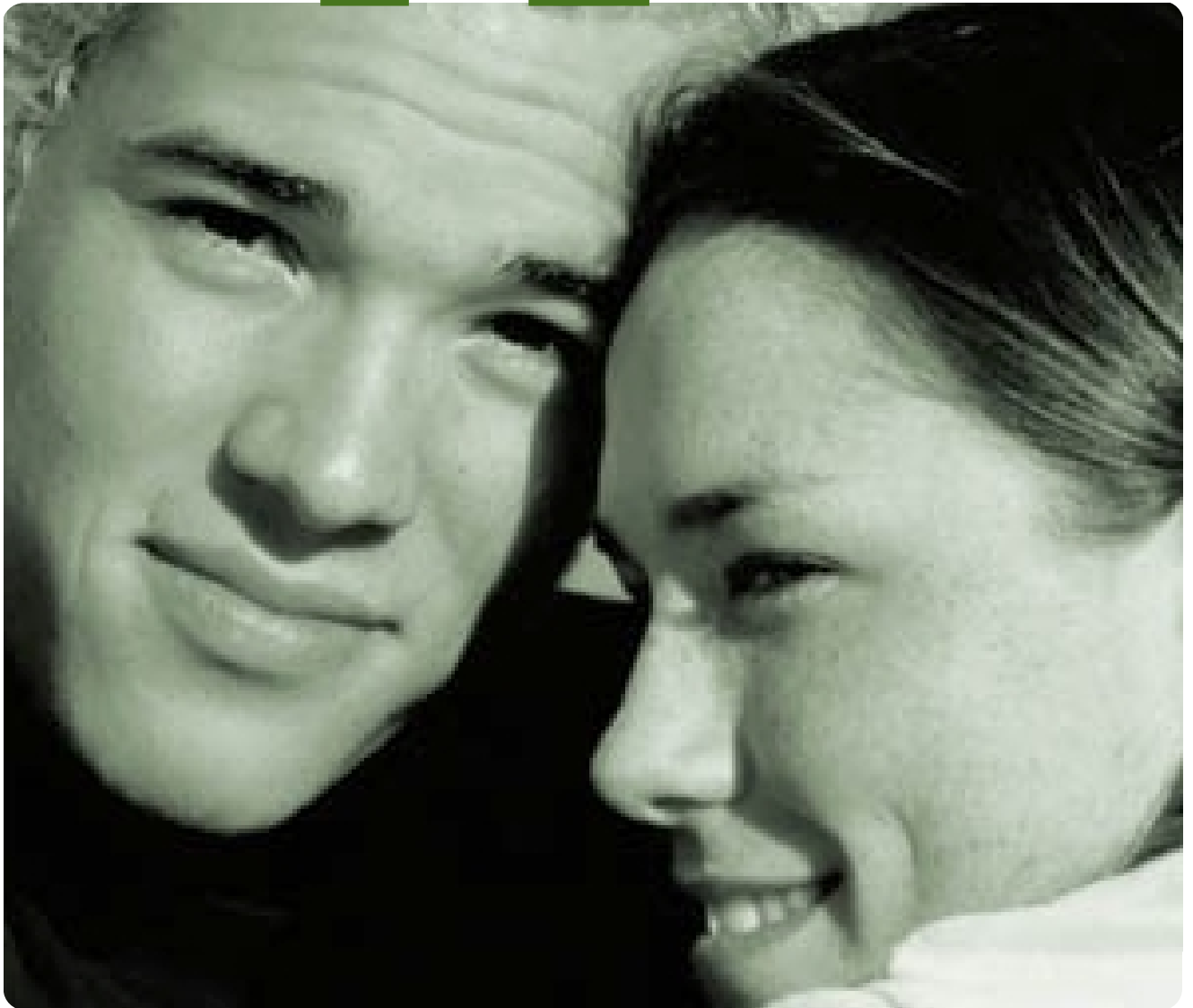
the nurture and raising of children. It is the "social glue" that reliably attaches fathers to children. It contributes to the physical, emotional and economic health of men, women and children, and thus to the nation as a whole. It is also one of the most highly prized of all human relationships and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

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

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

David Popenoe
Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

A vailable evidence
indicates that marriage
continues to decline



as a first living together experience for couples and as a status of parenthood. Most marriages today are preceded by a cohabiting union, and a growing percentage of these cohabiting unions include children. A special report on young adults in their twenties, based on a national survey conducted by the Gallup Organization, finds that young single adults today are looking for a spouse who will be their soul mate for life.

Who Wants To Marry A Soul Mate?

New Survey Findings on Young Adults' Attitudes about Love and Marriage

by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead
and David Popenoe

Key Findings

Young adults today are searching for a deep emotional and spiritual connection with one person for life. At the same time, the bases for marriage as a religious, economic or parental partnership are receding in importance for many men and women in their twenties. Taken together, the survey findings present a portrait of marriage as emotionally deep and socially shallow.

■ An overwhelming majority (94%) of never-married singles agree that “when you marry you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost.”

■ Less than half (42%) of single young adults believe that it is important to find a spouse who shares their own religion.

■ A large majority of young adults (82%) agree it is unwise for a woman to rely on marriage for financial security.

■ A clear majority of young men (62%) agree that while it may not be ideal, it's okay for an adult woman to have a child on her own if she has not found the right man to marry.

■ Over 80% of women agree it is more important to them to have a husband who can communicate about his deepest feelings than to have a husband who makes a good living.

■ A high percentage of young adults (86%) agree that marriage is hard work and a full-time job.

■ Close to nine out of ten (88%) agree that the divorce rate is too high and that the nation would be better off if we could have fewer divorces, with 47% agreeing that the laws should be changed so that divorces are more difficult to get.

■ Except for restricting divorce, the majority of young people see little role for government in marriage. Eight out of ten agree that marriage is nobody's business but the two people involved. A substantial proportion (45%) agree that the government should not be involved in licensing marriage.

Who wants to marry a soul mate?

Practically all young adults, according to a national survey of men and women conducted for the National Marriage Project by the Gallup Organization – the first large-scale study to look at attitudes about dating and marriage among married and single people, ages 20-29.

Young adults today are searching for a deep emotional and spiritual connection with one person for life. The overwhelming majority (94%) of never-married singles agree that “when you marry you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost.” There is no significant gender gap in this response; similarly high proportions of men and women agree that they want to marry a soul mate. In another measure of the strength of the soul-mate ideal, over 80% of all women, married and



Marriage is gaining popularity as a *Super-Relationship*, while other bases, such as economic partnership or parental partnership, have receded or disappeared.

single, agree it is more important to them to have a husband who can communicate about his deepest feelings than to have a husband who makes a good living.

Among single men and women, a large majority (88%) also agree that “there is a special person, a soul mate, waiting for you somewhere out there.” And never-married singles are highly confident that they will be success-

ful in locating that soul mate; a substantial majority (87%) agree that they will find that special someone when they are ready to get married.

Along with their ambitions for a spouse who meets their needs for emotional closeness and intimacy, these twentysomething singles also aspire to a marriage that lasts a lifetime. Seventy-eight percent agree that a couple should not get

About the Survey

This survey represents the second phase of an ongoing investigation into the attitudes and behaviors of young adults toward dating, cohabitation, marriage and parenthood.

In last year's *The State of Our Unions*, we reported on the results of a series of focus group discussions conducted around the country with single men and women in their twenties. Our investigation focused on young adults' attitudes toward sex and dating.

For this year's report, we commissioned a national survey to further explore and expand on the earlier qualitative study. The survey, conducted by the Gallup Organization from January to March 2001, is based on a statistically representative national sample of 1,003 young adults, ages 20-29. The sample population includes both married and single men and women and covers a broad range of topics, including dating, living together, marriage, divorce and parenthood.

A majority (61%) of the young adults in this sample were single and never married. Thirty-four percent were married and about 5% were divorced, sepa-

rated, or widowed. The sample included slightly more women than men (51% v 49%), which is also true of the American population as a whole. Of those who were single, 38% lived with their parents, 22% lived alone, 14% lived with a roommate, 14% cohabited with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 8% were living with relatives.

Forty-four percent of those surveyed had lived at some time with an opposite sex partner outside of marriage and of those who had done so (slightly more women than men), 46% of the men and 37% of the women had had more than one such living-together relationship.

Young adults in this sample reported a variety of household living arrangements at age 15. Sixty-two percent said they had lived with their married biological parents, 20% with their mother, 4% with their father, 7% with one parent and a stepparent, and 3% with grandparents or other relatives.

This report is the first of several based on the survey findings. Forthcoming reports will look at other key dimensions of young men and women's mating and marrying attitudes and behavior.



Less than half of young singles agree it is important to find a spouse who shares their own religious faith.

COHABITATION

Percent of all men and women, 20-29, who strongly or somewhat agree that...

Living together with
someone before marriage
is a good way to avoid
an eventual divorce

62%

The government should provide to
couples living together all of the
same benefits that they now
provide to married couples

43%

You would only marry someone if he
or she agreed to live together with
you first, so that you could find out
whether you really get along

43%

married unless they are prepared to stay together for life. In addition, they are reasonably confident that their own future marriages will be long lasting. Only 6% say it is unlikely that they will stay married to the same person for life.

Although young adults are confident that they will be successful in achieving a soul-mate marriage for themselves, they are less confident about the state of marriage in general. A substantial majority (68%) agree that it is more difficult to have a good marriage today than in their parents' generation, and slightly more than half (52%) agree that one sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way of life. Women, and those with a high-school education or less, are more likely than others to agree that there are very few people who have really good or happy marriages.

As one might expect, the generation that grew up in the midst of the divorce revolution also worries about the risks of divorce. Slightly more than half of all single adults (52%)—and an even higher percentage of those in their late twenties (60%)—agree that one of their biggest concerns about getting married is the possibility it will end in divorce.

The high aspirations for a soul mate may be

one reason why so many young adults are cohabiting before they take the plunge into marriage. Among the young adults surveyed, 44% had at some time lived with an opposite sex partner outside of marriage. As we reported in *The State of Our Unions, 2000*, single men and women in their twenties see cohabitation as a way to investigate a prospective partner's character, habits and capacity for fidelity before marriage. Many believe that living together yields more useful information about a partner than simply dating for a period of time. According to this reasoning, if one wants to marry a soul mate, then one has to live with a prospective spouse "24/7" in order to evaluate his or her emotional fitness for this special kind of relationship.

In addition, the widespread fear of divorce among young singles today contributes to the propensity to live together before marriage. Although there is no evidence to support the view that living together improves the chances of staying married, a majority (62%) agree that living together before marriage is a good way to avoid divorce. More than four in ten (43%) agree they would only marry someone who agreed to live together first.

Although most young adults believe that there is a "special someone waiting for them," they also indicate that some relationships are limited to "sex without strings." A large majority—78% overall and 84% of those with a college degree—agree that "it is common these days for people my age to have sex just for fun, and not expect any commitment beyond the sexual encounter itself." For example, more than half of the young singles (54%) agree there are people with whom they would have sex even though they have no interest in marrying them, though men (65%) are more likely to agree than women (41%). Half of young men (50%) agree with the statement that "if two

people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time," compared to 36% of women. Six out of ten young unmarried women agree that they wish guys would be more interested in them as a person and less as a sex object.

At the same time, young adults seem to distinguish casual sexual relationships from potential soul-mate relationships. About three in four (76%) agree if they meet a person with whom they think they could have a long-term relationship, they will try to postpone sex until they really know each other.

From Social Institution to Soul-Mate Relationship

Although young adults express high aspirations for the marital relationship, they see a diminished role for marriage in other domains. Many of the larger social, economic, religious and public purposes once associated with marriage are receding or missing altogether from their portrait of marriage.

Most noteworthy is the weakened link between marriage and child rearing. Only 16% of young adults agree that the main purpose of marriage these days is to have children. The idea that marriage is the principal pathway into parenthood is changing as well. A clear majority of young men (62%) agree that, while it may not be ideal, it's okay for an adult woman to have a child on her own if she has not found the right man to marry. More than four out of ten describe adults who choose to raise a child out of wedlock as "doing their own thing."

The survey also points to some evidence of the declining importance of marriage as an economic institution. Although two-thirds (65%) of singles say that they believe that marriage will improve their economic situation, an even

ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Percent of never-married men and women, 20-29, who strongly or somewhat agree that...

It is extremely important to you to be economically set before you get married

86%

You believe that if and when you marry, it will improve your economic situation

65%

Your educational pursuits or career development come before marriage at this time in your life

80%

higher percentage say it is extremely important to be economically "set" as individuals before they marry. It is especially noteworthy that young women are as likely as young men to agree that it is important for them to be economically "set" before marriage.

Indeed, this attitude represents a dramatic shift for women. In earlier generations, most women saw marriage as a stepping-stone to achieving economic independence from parents and to gaining economic security. Today, however, women are more likely to look to themselves and to their own educational and career achievements as a source of economic independence and security.

Partly this shift is due to changing patterns of education and work during the young adult years. More women are going on to higher education—now outranking men among college graduates—and also spending more years as working singles before marriage. During this expanded period of early adult singlehood, they acquire credit ratings, debts and assets on their own. For this reason, they tend to think about their economic lives and fortunes in individual terms.

Young men and women define their economic lives and future in individual terms rather than as part of a marriage partnership.



But the shift is also due to fears of the high risk of divorce. Because marriages break up at a high rate, young adults—and especially young women—no longer trust marriage as a reliable economic partnership. A large majority (82%) agree it is unwise for a woman to rely on marriage for financial security. For this reason, young women may prefer to invest in portable assets, like education and career development, rather than to place all their trust and self-investment in marriage. This pattern may also explain why young women say that they are less interested in having a spouse who makes a good living than in having a spouse who is a soul mate.

For young men, the shift away from marriage as an economic partnership is more subtle but nonetheless convergent with women's attitudes. Unlike young women in earlier times, young men have traditionally sought to be economically "set," before marriage. However, they used to pursue this goal as part of their expected role as primary breadwinner in a family household. Now they are likely to pursue the goal of economic independence for the same reasons young women do. They want to stand on their own two feet economically, not because they expect to be financially responsible for a family, but because they expect to be financially responsible for themselves. In other words, both young men and young women are likely to define their economic lives and future in individual terms rather than as part of a marriage partnership.

Along with the diminished importance assigned to marriage as a parental and economic partnership, the role of marriage as a religious institution seems to be fading. Although young adults seek a deep spiritual connection through marriage, they are not necessarily looking to marry someone who shares their own religion. Among singles, less than half (42%) agree that

it is important to find a spouse who shares their own religious faith. Indeed, the popular soul-mate ideal may be a substitute for more traditional religious understandings of marriage. In a secular society, where sex has lost its connection to marriage and also its sense of mystery, young people may be attracted to the soul-mate ideal because it endows intimate relationships with a higher spiritual, though not explicitly religious, significance.

Marriage is also losing its standing as a public institution among these young adults. According to the survey, young adults tend to see marriage as a private matter between two consenting adults. Eight out of ten agree that marriage is nobody's business but the two people involved. Further, a substantial proportion (45%) agree that the government should not be involved in licensing marriages. A high percentage also believe that the government should not give special privileges to married couples. Four in ten (43%) agree that government should provide cohabiting couples the same benefits provided to a married couple.

However, when it comes to divorce, young adults tend to see a more pro-marriage role for government. Close to nine out of ten (88%) agree that the divorce rate in this country is too high and the nation would be better off if we could have fewer divorces. A significant proportion (47%) agree that laws need to be changed so that divorces are more difficult to get. Women are more likely than men to hold this opinion.

Taken together, these findings paint a portrait of marriage as emotionally deep but socially shallow. While marriage is losing much of its broad public and institutional character, it is gaining popularity as a SuperRelationship, an intensely private spiritualized union, combining sexual fidelity, romantic love, emotional intimacy and togetherness. Indeed, this inti-

SOUL MATES

Percent of never-married men and women, 20-29, who strongly or somewhat agree that...

When you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost

94%

You think that there is a special person, a soul mate, waiting for you somewhere out there

88%

mate couple relationship pretty much defines the sum total of marriage. Other bases for the marital relationship, such as an economic partnership or parental partnership, have receded in importance or disappeared altogether.

Soul-Mate Marriage in a High-Divorce Society

There is nothing historically new in the desire for lasting friendship in marriage. Indeed, the notion of combining friendship, romantic love and sexual fidelity in marriage is one of the distinctive features, and perhaps most daring experiments, in the Western marriage tradition. (Most societies, past and present, still prefer marriages arranged by kin or parents, and many adhere to the sexual double standard—"she's faithful, he's not.") However, the findings in this survey suggest that today's young adults may be reaching even higher in their expectations for marriage. The centuries-old ideal of friendship in marriage, or what sociologists call companionate marriage, may be evolving into a more exalted and demanding standard of a spiritualized union of souls.

This development is understandable. Amid the dislocations of today's mobile society, dynamic economy, and frantic pace of life, it is difficult to sustain deep and lasting attachments. What's more, the desire for loving and lasting relationships may be especially strong

among members of a generation that has come of age during the divorce revolution. It is not surprising, therefore, that young adults look to a soul mate for the steady emotional support and comfort that may be missing in other parts of their life. And, indeed, this is not an unworthy aspiration. For those who achieve it, a soul-mate relationship can be personally rewarding and deeply satisfying.

However, as today's young adults seem to realize, a soul-mate marriage in a high divorce society is difficult to sustain. Perhaps that is why a high percentage (86%) indicate that marriage is hard work and a full-time job. Over eight in ten young adults (86%) agree that one reason for divorce is too much focus on expectations for happiness and not enough hard work needed for a successful marriage. Women and college-educated young adults are more likely than men and those with fewer years of formal education to agree that marriage is hard work.

The notion of "marriage as hard work" is also consistent with the idea of marriage as a private relationship. When marriage is defined as a private couples relationship, one cannot look to larger institutional forces, such as religion, law or social convention, to sustain marriage. Consequently, it is left to individuals to work hard on their own to maintain the quality of the marriage, often in the face of social and cultural trends that are adverse to marriage.

It is quite likely that women will take on primary responsibility for the emotional maintenance of the soul-mate relationship, as they typically have done with marriage in the past. However, given the exacting standards for successful soul-mate relationships, this kind of emotional maintenance will probably require high investments of time, attention and vigilance. This may be one reason why women are more likely than men to say that marriage takes work.



Young women may prefer to invest in portable assets, like education and career development, rather than put all their trust in marriage.

Implications for Children

The emphasis on marriage as an intimate couples relationship rather than as a child-rearing partnership has profound implications for children. For one thing, it means that marriages with children are likely to remain at high risk of breakdown and breakup.

The soul-mate ideal intensifies the natural tension between adult desires and children's needs. When children arrive, some couples may find it difficult to make the transition between couplehood and parenthood and may become disappointed and estranged from one another during the child-rearing years. This is not to say that couples should neglect each other while they are in the intensive child-rearing years, but it is to suggest that the soul-mate ideal of marriage may create unrealistic expectations that, if unfulfilled, may lead to marital discontent and perhaps a search for a new soul mate.

Moreover, the high expectations for marriage as a couples relationship may also cause parents to leave marriages at a lower threshold of unhappiness than in the past. Indeed, in 1994, a nationally representative survey found only 15% of the population agreeing that "when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along." And, according to one recent study, the meaning of "not getting along" is being defined down. It's been estimated that more than half of recent divorces occur, not because of high conflict, but because of "softer" forms of psychological distress and unhappiness. Unfortunately, these are the marriages that might improve over time and with help. As it turns out people do change their minds about the level of marital contentment. One recent large-scale study indicates that 86% of people who said they were unhappily married in the late 1980s but stayed mar-

ried, indicated that they were happier when interviewed five years later. Indeed, three-fifths of the formerly unhappily married couples rated their marriages as either "very happy" or "quite happy."

The central importance assigned to the soul-mate relationship also means that unwed parenthood is likely to remain at high levels. As the survey indicates, a high percentage of young adults, who are in the peak years of fertility, tend to separate sex and parenthood, on the one hand, from marriage, on the other. Put another way, people are pickier about the person they choose for a soul-mate relationship than they are about the people they choose as sexual partners, or as biological parents of their children. This is consistent with findings in other recent surveys. For example, a 1994 survey of University of California undergraduates found both men and women agreeing that a man is financially responsible for his child but not responsible to marry his pregnant girlfriend.

However, these speculations could be wrong. Perhaps today's young adults will be able to reconcile their aspirations for emotional closeness with the realities of parenthood and domestic life. Clearly, they are more strongly committed to avoiding parental divorce than the Baby Boom generation. Indeed, while only 15% of adults in the general population agree that parents should stay together for the sake of the children, 40% of young adults in the National Marriage Project survey agree. Moreover, our survey indicates that young adults are not cavalier about marriage or marital permanence. They are committed to lifelong marriage and to the idea that it takes constant effort to sustain a happy marriage. These attitudes may offer some glimmer of hope for their future marriages and for the future of marriage itself.

Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing

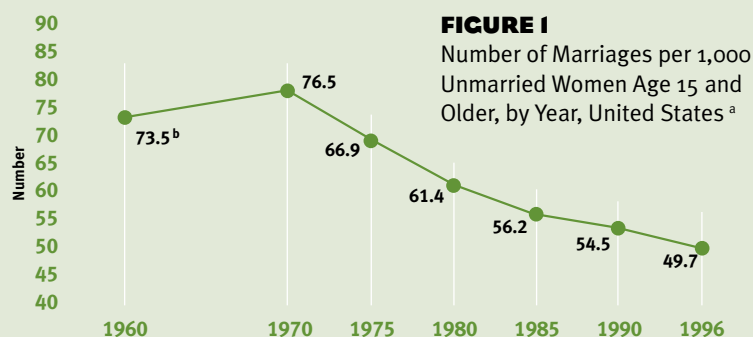


TRENDS OF THE PAST FOUR DECADES

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



T h e N a t i o n a l M a r r i a g e P r o j e c t



^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.

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

Source: US Department of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, Page. 111, Table 156; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986*, Page 79, Table 124.

FIGURE 2
Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Married, by Sex and Race, 1960-2000, United States

Year	Total ^a	MALES		Total ^a	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	42.6	60.0	54.2	35.7	57.0

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-506; *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1997* (Update) and earlier reports; calculated from Current Population Survey raw data.

^a Includes races other than Black and White.

Marriage

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

Americans have become less likely to marry. This is reflected in a decline of more than one third, from 1970 to 1996 (unfortunately, due to government cutbacks, the latest year for

which this key measure is available), in the annual number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women (Figure 1). Some of this decline—it is not clear just how much—results from the delaying of first marriages until older ages: the median age at first marriage went from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to about 25 and 27, respectively, in recent years. (See “Age at First Marriage: What’s Best?”) Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry.

The decline also probably reflects an actual increase in lifelong singlehood, though this will not be known for sure until current young and middle-aged adults pass through the life course.

The percentage of adults in the population who are married has also diminished. Since 1960, the decline of those married among all persons age 15 and older has been more than eleven percentage points—and more than 24 points among black females (Figure 2). It should be noted that these data include both people who have not ever married and those who have married and then divorced.

In order partially to control for a decline in married adults simply due to delayed first marriages, we have looked at changes in the percentage of persons age 35 through 44 who were married (Figure 3). Since 1960, there has been a drop of over 19 percentage points for married men and 16 points for married women. Although we typically think of the United States today as “the most marrying country,” we actually rank relatively low among the industrialized nations in this age group. In 1998, for example, we had a lower percentage of married women than Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands.¹

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

Age at First Marriage: What's Best?

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

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

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

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

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

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

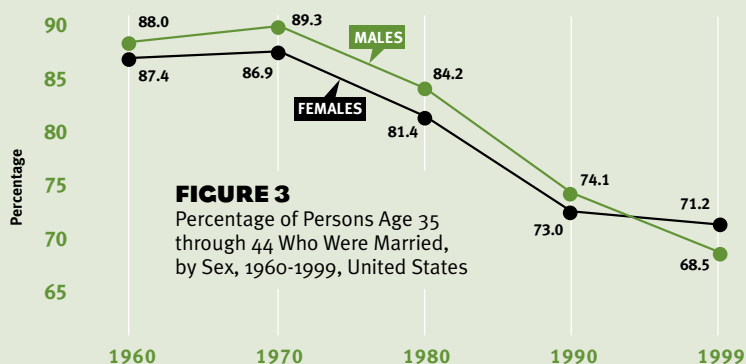
^b For instance, see John H. Laub, Daniel S. Nagin, and Robert J. Sampson, “Trajectories of Change in Criminal Offending: Good Marriages and the Desistance Process,” *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998): 225-238.

Marriage trends in the age range of 35 to 44 are suggestive of lifelong singlehood. In times past and still today, virtually all persons who were going to marry during their lifetimes had married by age 45. More than 90 percent of women have married eventually in every generation for which records exist, going back to the mid-1800s. By 1960, 94 percent of women then alive had been married at least once by age 45—probably an historical high point.² If the present marriage trend continues, some demographers are predicting that fewer than 85

percent of current young adults will ever marry.³

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

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



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1961, Page 34, Table 27; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1971, Page 32, Table 38; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, Page 38, Table 49; and calculated from data from U.S. Bureau of the Census, General Population Characteristics, 1990, Page 45, Table 34; and data from Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000, Page 52, Table 55.



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

² Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 10; Michael R. Haines, “Long-Term Marriage Patterns in the United States from Colonial Times to the Present,” *The History of the Family* 1-1 (1996): 15-39.

³ Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995.” Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

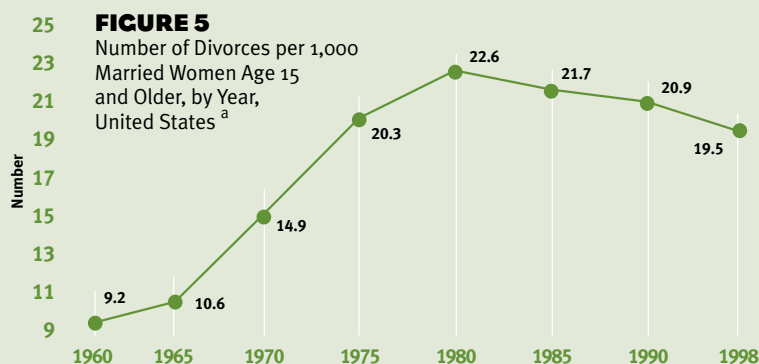
⁴ Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, this is a nationally representative study of the English-speaking non-institutionalized population of the United States age 18 and over.

saying “very happy” has declined moderately over the past 25 years.⁵ This trend has shown a turnaround since reaching a low point in 1994, but it is too soon to know whether this represents a longer-lasting change of direction.

Divorce

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

The increase in divorce, shown by the trend reported in Figure 5, probably has elicited more concern and discussion than any other family-related trend in the United States. Although the long-term trend in divorce has been upward since colonial times, the divorce rate was level for about two decades after World War II during the period of high fertility known as the baby boom. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the incidence of divorce started to increase and it more than doubled over the next fifteen years to reach an historical high point in the early 1980s. Since then the divorce rate has modestly declined, a trend described by many experts as “leveling off at a high level.” The decline in the 1980s may be attributable partly to compositional changes in the population, for example the aging of the baby boomers and a decrease in the number of people of marriageable age. The continuing decline in the 1990s, however, apparently rep-



^a We have used the number of divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, rather than the Crude Divorce Rate of divorces per 1,000 population, to help avoid the problem of compositional changes in the population.

Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998, Page 111, Table 156; Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1972, Page 63, Table 86; and National Vital Statistics Reports, August 19, 1998.

FIGURE 6

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

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

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-506; Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1997 (Update) and earlier reports; calculated from 2000 Current Population Survey raw data.

resents a slight increase in marital stability.¹

Although a majority of divorced persons eventually remarry, the growth of divorce has led to a steep increase in the percentage of all adults who are currently divorced (Figure 6). This percentage, which was only 1.8 percent for males and 2.6 percent for females in 1960, quadrupled by the year 2000. The percentage

⁵ Using a different data set that compared marriages in 1980 with marriages in 1992, equated in terms of marital duration, Stacy J. Rogers and Paul Amato found similarly that the 1992 marriages had less marital interaction, more marital conflict, and more marital problems. “Is Marital Quality Declining? The Evidence from Two Generations” *Social Forces* 75 (1997): 1089

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

of divorced is higher for females than for males primarily because divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women. Also, among those who do remarry, men generally do so sooner than women.

Overall, the chances remain very high—between 40 and 45 percent—that a marriage started today will end in divorce. (See “What Are Your Chances of Divorce?”) The likelihood of divorce has varied considerably among different segments of the American population, being higher for Blacks than for Whites, for instance, and higher in the West than in other parts of the country. But these and many other variations, such as in social class level, have been diminishing. The trend toward a greater similarity of divorce rates between Whites and Blacks is largely attributable to the fact that fewer blacks are marrying. Divorce rates in the South and Midwest have come to resemble those in the West, for reasons that are not well understood, leaving only the Eastern Seaboard and the Central Plains with significantly lower divorce.

At the same time, there has been little change in such traditionally large divorce rate differences as between those who marry when they are teenagers compared to those who marry later, and the non-religious compared to the religious. Both teenagers and the non-religious who marry have considerably higher divorce rates.

Unmarried Cohabitation

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

Between 1960 and 1998, as indicated in Figure 7, the number of unmarried couples in America increased by close to 1000 percent. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household—is particularly common among the young. It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women age 25-39 are currently living with a partner and an additional quarter have lived with a partner at some time in the past. Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none earlier in the century.¹

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

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.

What are Your Chances of Divorce?

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

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

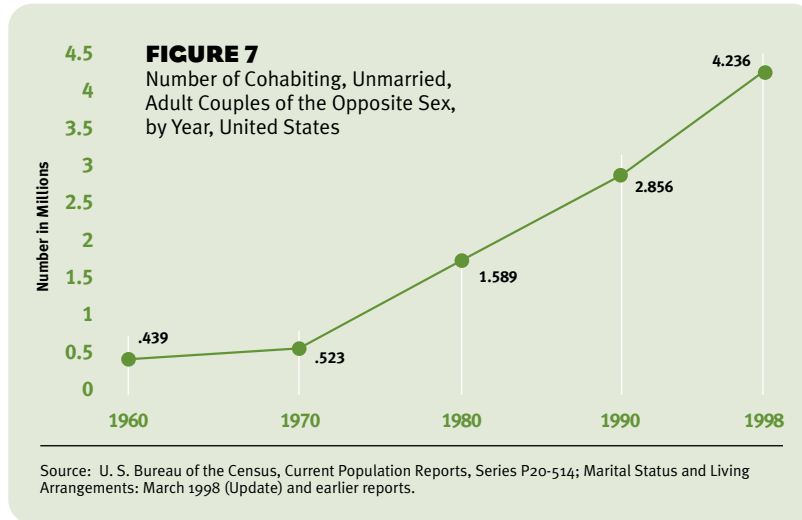
No one to our knowledge has calculated these projections over time using consistent methods, so trends in the chances of divorce using this measure cannot be given. However, some projections made using rates prevailing in the early 1980s yielded marital breakup chances of well over 50 percent, one as high as 60 percent, while in more recent years the

chances have been lowered to the 40 percent range. It should be noted that the projected chances of breakup for all marriages are somewhat higher than for first marriages, because second and subsequent marriages have a higher divorce rate. And, of course, the percentage of marriages projected to break up is higher if permanent separation as well as divorce are included in the measure of marital termination.

In summary, any statement about the percentage of marriages today projected to end in divorce is useful primarily as an indicator of the instability of marriages in the recent past. In view of the lowering of divorce rates in the last few decades, the statement “50 percent of all marriages will end in divorce” may no longer be accurate. If the divorce rate of 1995 was to persist into the future, according to one recent analysis, about 43% of today’s marriages would end in divorce.^b

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

^b Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995.” Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.



discord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now more than one third, contain children.³

The belief that living together before marriage is a useful way “to find out whether you really get along,” and thus avoid a bad marriage and an eventual divorce, is now widespread among young people. But the available data on the effects of cohabitation fail to confirm this belief. In fact, a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage. This evidence is controversial, because it is difficult to distinguish the “selection effect” from the “experience of cohabitation effect.” The selection effect refers to the fact that people who cohabit before marriage have different characteristics from those who do not, and it may be these characteristics, and not the experience of cohabitation, that leads to marital instability. There is some empirical support for both positions. What can be said for certain is that no evidence has yet been found that those who cohabit before marriage have stronger marriages than those who do not.⁴

Loss of Child Centeredness

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

Throughout history marriage has first and foremost been an institution for procreation and raising children. It has provided the cultural tie that seeks to hold the father to the mother-child bond. Yet in recent times, children increasingly have been pushed from center stage.

Americans have been having fewer children. Figure 8 indicates the decline in fertility since 1960. It is important to note that fertility had been gradually declining throughout American history, reaching a low point in the Great 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 up-

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

⁴ For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Smock, 2000; and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage—A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999).

swing can be explained by an increase in the number of women entering childbearing years. Because these women tend to be the children of the early baby-boomers, this phenomenon has been dubbed the “echo boom.”

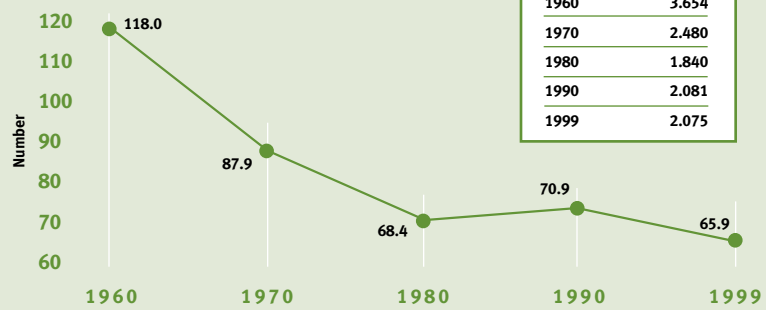
In 1999 the American “total fertility rate” stood at 2.075, or about two children per woman, and it has been at that level for several decades. In most European nations, on the other hand, the fertility rate has continued to drop, in some countries to only slightly more than one child per woman. Many observers believe that the United States birthrate will decline further in future decades to become more like that of Europe today.

The decline of births has had a marked effect on the household makeup of the American population. It is estimated that in the middle of the 1800s more than 75 percent of all households contained children under the age of 18. One hundred years later, in 1960, this number had dropped to slightly less than half of all households. Now, just four decades later, only 33 percent of households include children (Figure 9). This obviously means that adults are less likely to be living with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and that children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. It suggests that the needs and concerns of children—especially young children—gradually may be receding from our consciousness.

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

FIGURE 8

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

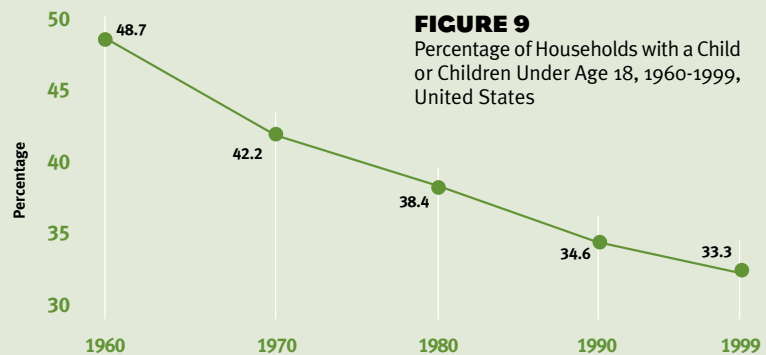


Source: National Vital Statistics Report, 1993, Pages 1, 2, 10 and 11; National Vital Statistics Report, 2001, 49:1; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Pages 75, 76 and 78, Tables 91, 93 and 96.

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

FIGURE 9

Percentage of Households with a Child or Children Under Age 18, 1960-1999, United States

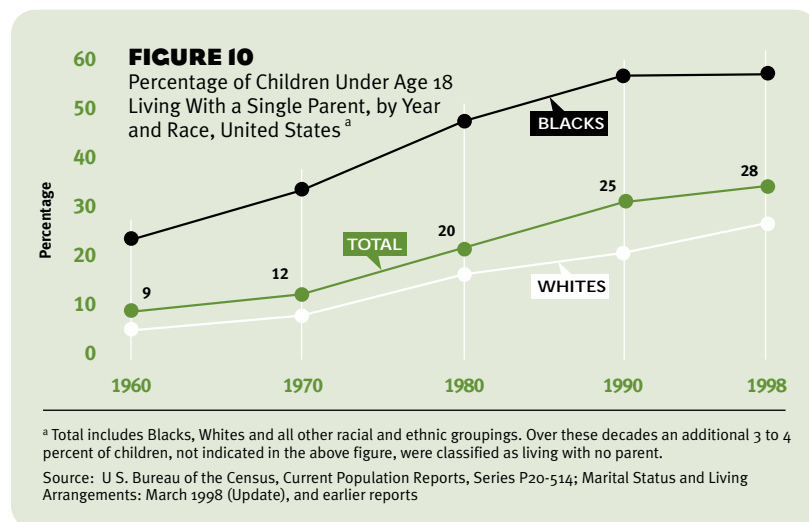


Source: Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1976, Page 40, Table 53; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, Page 46, Tables 66 and 67; and Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000, Page 54, Table 60.

and children dropped to 43 percent—which was the lowest in our history.¹ This remarkable reversal was caused mainly by the decline of fertility and the weakening of marriage through divorce and unwed births.

In a recent cross-national comparison of in-

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



dustrialized nations, the United States ranked virtually at the top in the percentage disagreeing with this statement: “the main purpose of marriage is having children.”² Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else compared, for example, to just 51 percent of Norwegians or 45 percent of Italians. Consistent with this view is a dramatic change in our attitudes about holding marriages together for children. In a Detroit area sample of women, the proportion

of women answering no to the question “Should a couple stay together for the sake of the children?” jumped from 51 percent to 82 percent between 1962 and 1985.³ A nationally-representative 1994 sample found only 15 percent of the population agreeing that “When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.”⁴

One effect of the weakening of child centeredness is clear. A careful analysis of divorce statistics shows that, beginning around 1975, the presence of children in a marriage has become only a very minor inhibitor of divorce (slightly more so when the child is male than female).⁵

Fragile Families With Children

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

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

The trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents (Figure 10). This is because the chil-

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

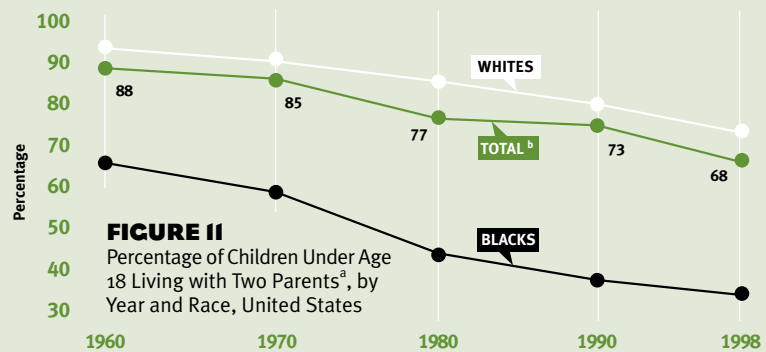
³ Arland Thornton, “Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1989): 873-893. This change occurred among women as they grew older, but it is very unlikely to be just an age effect.

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

⁵ Tim B. Heaton, “Marital Stability Throughout the Child-Rearing Years” *Demography* 27 (1990): 55-63; Philip Morgan, Diane Lye, and Gretchen Condron, “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

dren in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families. While in 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the 20th century, by 1998 the percentage had jumped to 28 percent (55 percent for Blacks). Although the number of father-only families recently has grown, the overwhelming majority of single-parent families are mother-only. (See “What is a Single-Parent Family Today?”)

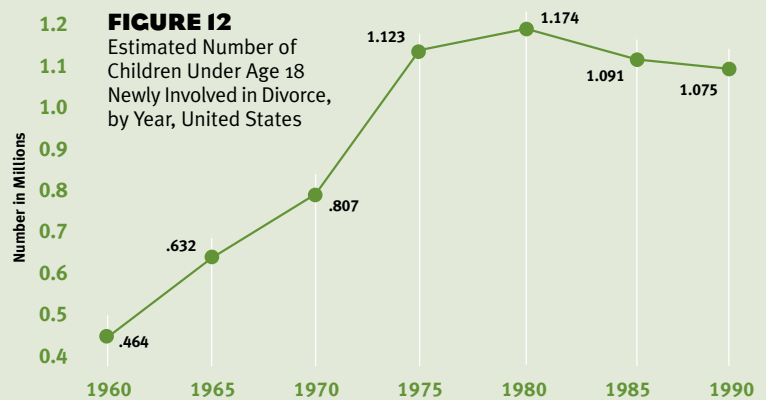
An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of persons under age 18 living with two parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by 20 percentage points (Figure 11). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and step-families; it is estimated that 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while nine percent are step families.¹ 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.² Data on stepfamilies, therefore, probably are more reasonably combined with single-parent than with biological two-parent families. An important indicator that helps to resolve this issue is the percentage of children who live apart from their biological fathers. That percentage has



^a Includes persons living with a natural parent and a stepparent.

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

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



Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998, Page 112, Table 160; and calculated using data from U. S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1972, Page 63, Table 86.

more than doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to about 35 percent.³

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

¹ Jason Fields, *Living Arrangements of Children: Fall 1996*. Current Population Reports, 70-74, U.S. Census Bureau, 2001.

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

³ This difficult to calculate measure is based on estimates from various U. S. Census Bureau documents. See: Wade F. Horn, *Father Facts*, Third Edition (Gaithersburg, MD: The National Fatherhood Initiative, 1998) 12.

What is a Single-Parent Family Today?

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

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

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

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

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

1960 to well over a million in 1975 (Figure 12). After peaking around 1980, the number leveled off and remains close to a million new children each year. Much of the reason for the leveling off is a drop in average family size; each divorce that occurs today typically affects a smaller number of children than in earlier times.

The second reason for the shift in family structure is an increase in the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers, which suddenly and unexpectedly began to increase rapidly in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of ba-

bies born to unwed mothers has increased more than six fold (Figure 13). The number of births to unmarried women in 1999 was the highest ever recorded. About a third of all births and more than two-thirds of black births that year (the latest for which data are available) were out-of-wedlock.

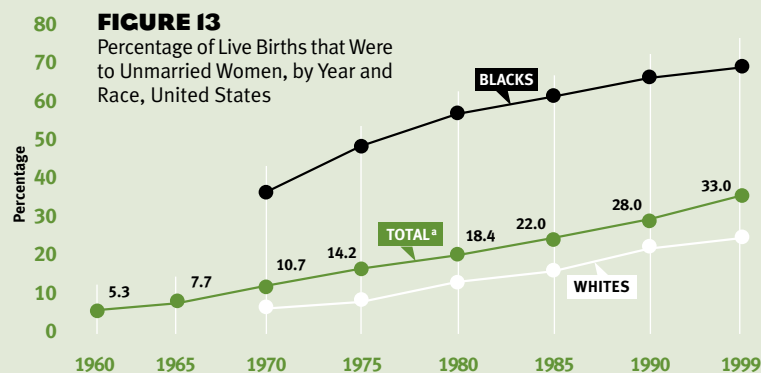
A third and still more recent family trend that has affected family structure is the rapid growth of unmarried cohabitation. Especially as cohabitation has become common among those previously married as well as the young and not-yet-married, there has been a nearly

800 percent increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children (Figure 14). An estimated 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their growing up years.⁴

In 1998 about 36 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18, a steep increase from around 20 percent a decade earlier.⁵ For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.⁶ Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.⁷ Indeed, if one includes cohabitation in the definition of stepfamily, almost one half of stepfamilies today would consist of a biological parent and an unrelated cohabiting partner.⁸

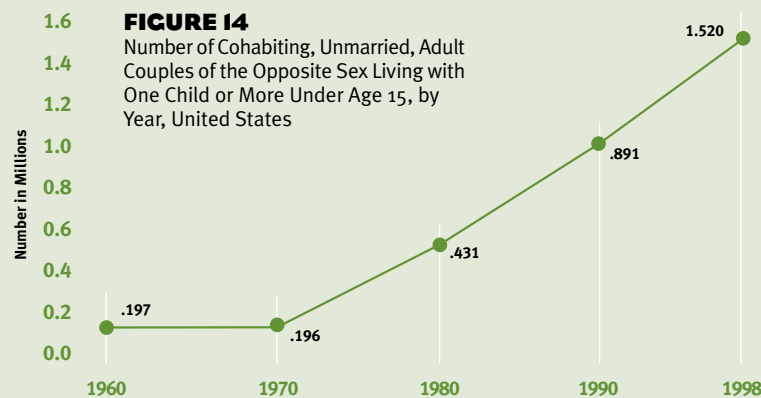
Children living with cohabiting couples tend to be disadvantaged compared to those living with married couples. Prominent reasons are that cohabiting couples have a much higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower level of household income, and a much higher level of child abuse and domestic violence. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children is declining, to 44 percent in 1997 from 57 percent a decade earlier—a decline sadly predictive of increased abuse against children.⁹

Between 1996 and 1998 the percentage of children living in single-parent families did not increase, probably due mainly to the modest reduction in divorce. Whether this could be



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

Source: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics Reports, annual, and Monthly Vital Statistics Reports; Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998, Page 81, Table 101.



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

the beginning of a long-term reversal of the basic family trend of the past four decades, or is merely a temporary correction, can not at this time, of course, be known.

⁴ 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.

⁵ US Bureau of the Census, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements*, March, 1998, Series P20-514

⁶ 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.

⁷ Larry Bumpass, J. A. Sweet and A. Cherlin, "The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage" *Demography* 53 (1991):913-27.

⁸ 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

⁹ Bumpass and Lu, 2000.

Teen Attitudes About Marriage And Family

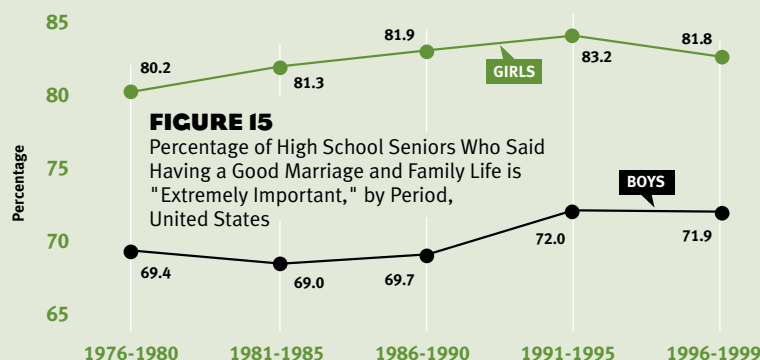
KEY FINDING: Surveys of teen attitudes over the past few decades point up a growing disparity. The desire of teenagers for a long-term marriage has increased, especially for boys, but girls have become more pessimistic about ever

being able to have such a marriage. Both boys and girls have become much more accepting of the alternatives to marriage.

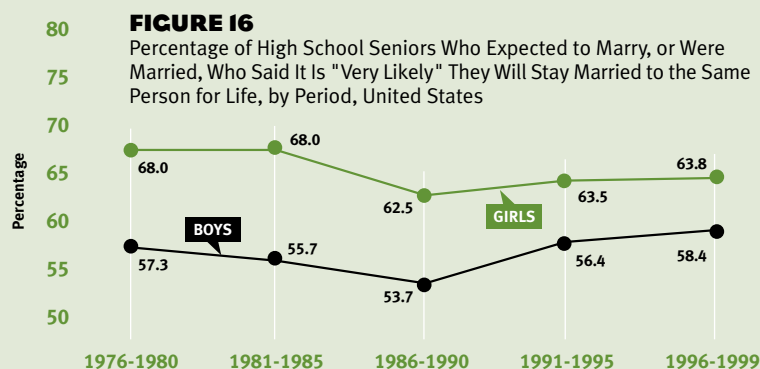
To find out what the future may hold for marriage and family life it is important to determine what our nation's youth are saying and thinking, and how their views have changed over time. Are these products of the divorce revolution going to continue the family ways of their parents? Or might there be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

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

Based on this survey, the percentage of teenagers who said that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" to them has increased slightly over the decades, especially for boys (Figure 15). Eighty-two percent of girls stated this belief in the 1996-1999 period, with boys lagging behind at 72 percent. Other data from the *Monitoring the Future* survey show a moderate increase in the percentage of teenage respondents who said that they will most likely choose to get married in the long run, recently about 80 percent. Only four percent say that they probably will not get married, with the remainder



Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1996-1999, for which it is about 4,500 for each sex.
The trend for both boys and girls is statistically significant ($p < .05$ on a two-tailed test).
Source: *Monitoring the Future* Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.



Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1996-1999 for which it is about 4,500 for each sex. The trend for girls is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test). The overall trend for boys is not significant, but the trend from the late 1970s to the late 1980s is significantly down ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test), and the trend from the late 1980s to the early 1990s is significantly upward ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).
Source: *Monitoring the Future* Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

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.

either already married or having “no idea.”²

At the same time, answers to other questions by these teenagers indicate a growing pessimism among girls about the chances of actually fulfilling their desires and preferences, and a growing acceptance by both sexes of lifestyles that are alternatives to marriage. For girls who expect to marry (or who are already married), the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime has declined over the decades (Figure 16). So has agreement with the assumption “that most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone” (Figure 17). Less than a third of the girls and only slightly more than a third of the boys seem to believe, based on their answer to this question, that marriage is more beneficial to individuals than alternative lifestyles. Yet this belief is 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

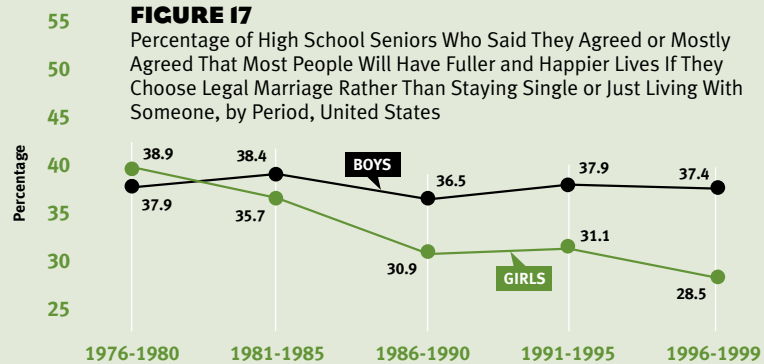
The acceptance of non-marital lifestyles by

² In 1975, 77% answered that they most likely will choose to get married in the long run. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13-17 found an even larger percentage who thought they would marry someday—88% compared to 9% who expected to stay single. Gallup has undertaken a youth poll several times since 1977 and the proportion of youth expecting to marry someday has not varied much through the years. See Robert Bezilla, ed, *America's Youth in the 1990s* (Princeton, NJ: The George H. Gallup International Institute, 1993).

³ For instance, see: Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); David G. Myers, *The American Paradox* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, “Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60 (1998) 527-536; and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999).

FIGURE 17

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



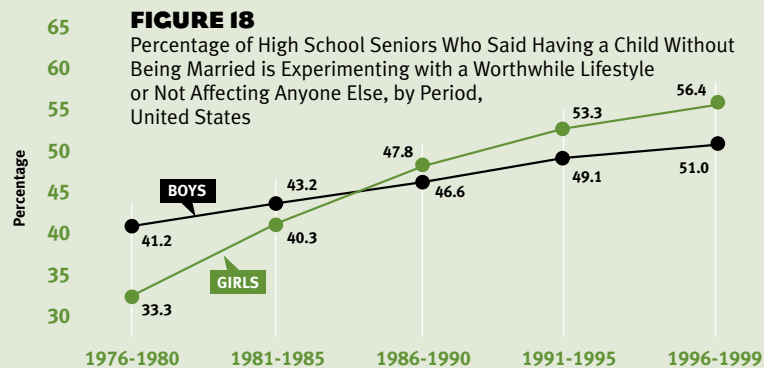
Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1996-1999, for which it is about 4,500 for each sex.

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 18

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

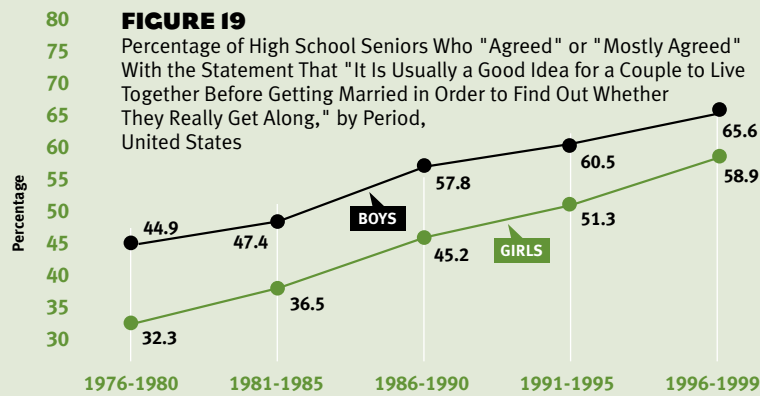


Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1996-1999 for which it is about 4,500 for each sex.

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.

young people has increased enormously over the decades. Witness the remarkable increase, especially among girls, in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing (Figure 18). And note that whereas in the 1970s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, today the tables have turned. With more than 50 percent of teenagers now accepting out-of-wedlock childbearing as a “worthwhile



Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1996-1999, for which it is about 4,500 for each sex.

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.

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

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

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

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