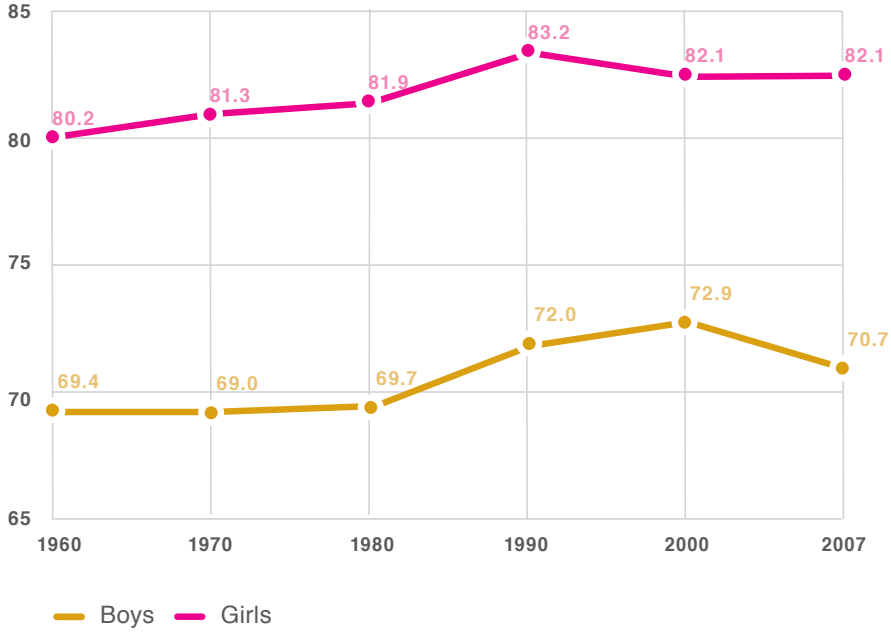


TEEN ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

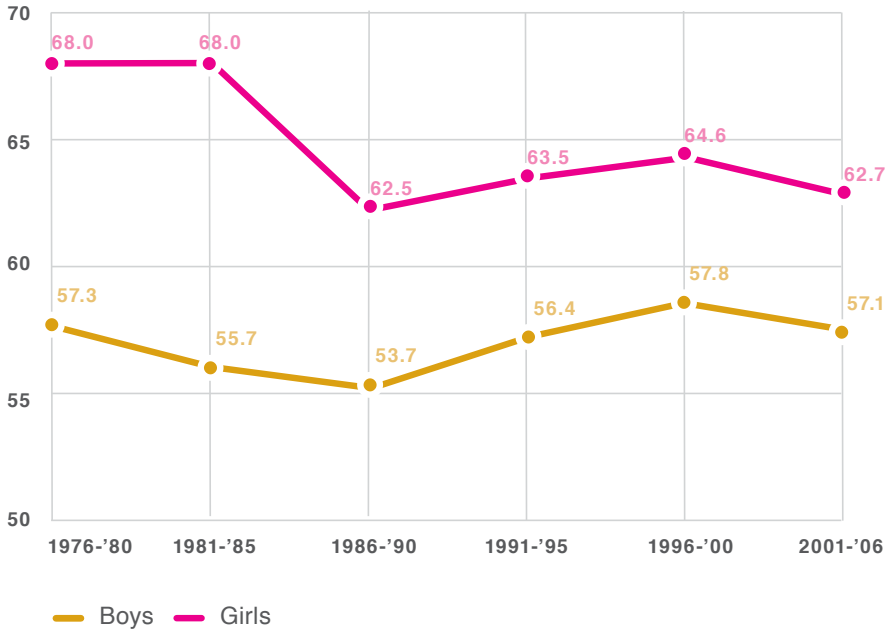
FIGURE 14. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A GOOD MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IS “EXTREMELY IMPORTANT,” BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: *Monitoring the Future* surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan

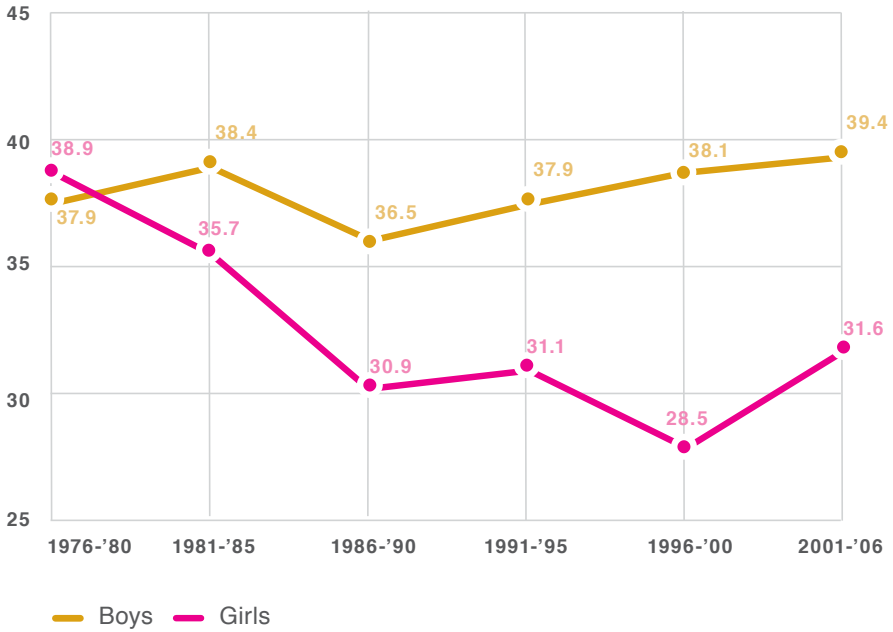
FIGURE 15. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL STAY MARRIED TO THE SAME PERSON FOR LIFE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000. From 1976-1980 to 1986-1990, the trend is significantly downward for both girls and boys ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test), but after 1986-1990, the trend is significantly upward for boys ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

SOURCE: *Monitoring the Future* surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

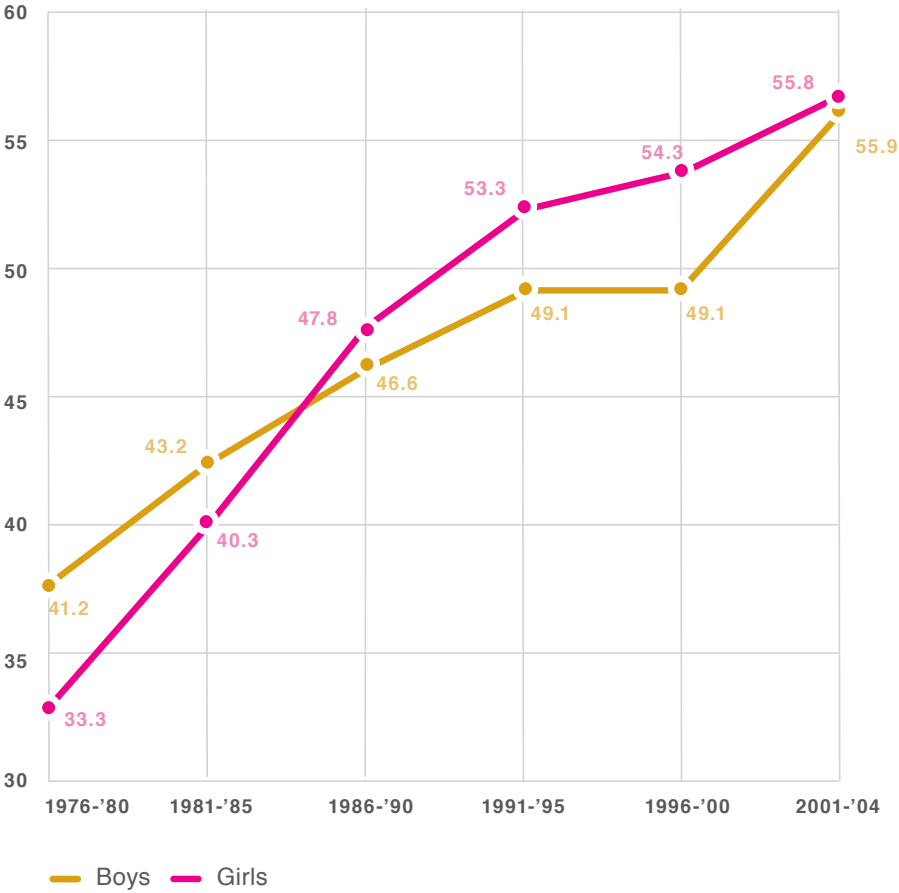
FIGURE 16. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID THEY AGREED OR MOSTLY AGREED THAT MOST PEOPLE WILL HAVE FULLER AND HAPPIER LIVES IF THEY CHOOSE LEGAL MARRIAGE RATHER THAN STAYING SINGLE OR JUST LIVING WITH SOMEONE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: *Monitoring the Future* surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

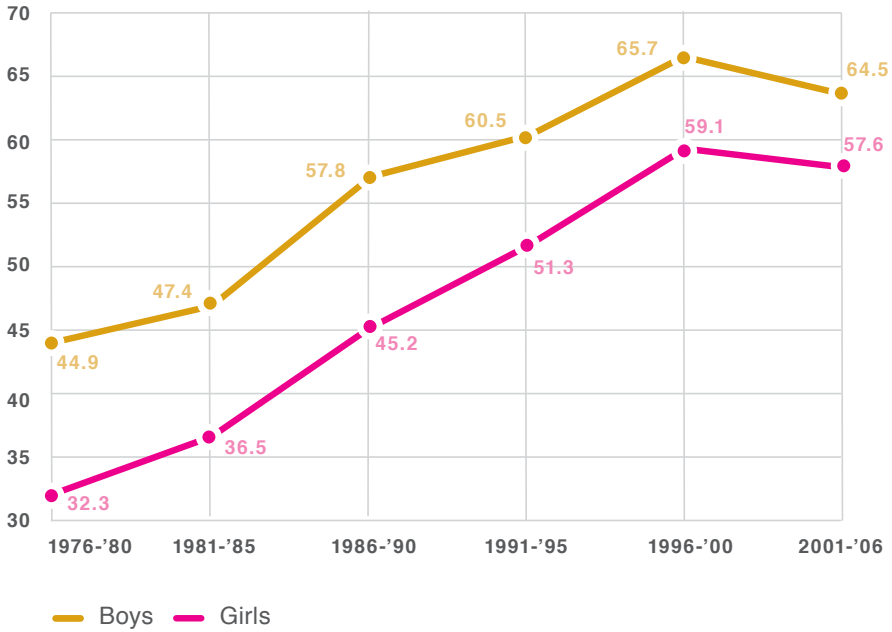
FIGURE 17. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A CHILD WITHOUT BEING MARRIED IS EXPERIMENTING WITH A WORTHWHILE LIFESTYLE OR NOT AFFECTING ANYONE ELSE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2004, for which it is about 4,500.

SOURCE: *Monitoring the Future* surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

FIGURE 18. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO AGREED OR MOSTLY AGREED WITH THE STATEMENT: “IT IS USUALLY A GOOD IDEA FOR A COUPLE TO LIVE TOGETHER BEFORE GETTING MARRIED IN ORDER TO FIND OUT WHETHER THEY REALLY GET ALONG,” BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000.

SOURCE: *Monitoring the Future* surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

KEY FINDING: The desire of teenagers of both sexes for “a good marriage and family life” has increased slightly over the past few decades. Boys are more than ten percentage points less desirous than girls, however, and they are also a little 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 surprising 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-two percent of girls stated this belief in the latest period, with boys lagging behind at 71 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

84.5 percent for girls and 77 percent for boys.² Among teenagers, boys are a little more pessimistic than girls in the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime. But this difference has recently diminished and, since 1986-90, the trend has been slightly more optimistic overall (Figure 15).

At the same time, there is widespread acceptance by teenagers of nonmarital 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 among teens (Figure 17). And note that whereas in the 1970’s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, now they are about the same. With more than 50 percent of teenagers now accepting out-of-wedlock childbearing as a “worthwhile lifestyle,” at least for others, they do not yet seem to grasp the enormous economic, social and personal costs of single parenthood.

Another remarkable increase is in the acceptance of living together before marriage, now by well over half of all teenagers (Figure 18). In this case girls remain more traditional than boys. However, this trend recently has taken an unexpected reversal

for both boys and girls. This may be an indication that teenagers are more aware of the evidence, widely publicized in recent years, linking premarital 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 nonmarital 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.

- 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 percent of boys and 82 percent of girls said they expected to marry (or were already married); by the latest period, 2001-2004, the boys' percentage jumped to 77 and the girls' to 84.5. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13 to 17 found an even larger percentage who thought they would marry someday—88 percent compared to 9 percent 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).