

The State of Our Unions

The Social Health of Marriage in America

1999

David Popenoe

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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 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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The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2000

Key social indicators suggest a substantial weakening of the institution of marriage. Americans have become less likely to marry. When they do marry their marriages are less happy. And married couples face a high likelihood of divorce. Over the past four decades, marriage has declined as the first living together experience for couples and as a status of parenthood. Unmarried cohabitation and unwed births have grown enormously, and so has the percentage of children who grow up in fragile families.

Introduction

June, 1999

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, recently 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 in complete.

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, cohabitation, fragile families with children and youth 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, as of late spring 1999. 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

What's Happening To Marriage?

Americans haven't given up on marriage as a cherished ideal. Indeed, most Americans continue to prize and value marriage as an important life goal, and the vast majority of us will marry at least once in a lifetime. By the mid-thirties, a majority of Americans have married at least once.

Most couples enter marriage with a strong desire and determination for a lifelong, loving partnership. Moreover, this desire may be increasing among the young. Since the 1980s, the percentage of young Americans who say that having a good marriage is extremely important to them as a life goal has increased slightly.

But when men and women marry today, they are entering a union that looks very different from the one that their parents or grandparents entered.

- As a **couples relationship**, marriages are more likely to be broken by divorce than by death. And although one might expect that greater freedom to leave an unhappy marriage might increase the chances that intact marriages would be very happy, this does not seem to be the case. Marriages are less happy today than in past decades.
- As a **rite of passage**, marriage is losing much of its social importance and ritual significance. It is no longer the standard pathway from adolescence to adulthood for young adults today. It is far less likely to be closely associated with the timing of first sexual intercourse for young women and less likely to be the first living together union for young couples than in the past.
- As an adult **stage in the life course**, marriage is shrinking. Americans are living longer, marrying later, exiting marriage more quickly, and choosing to live together before marriage, after marriage, in-between marriages, and as an alternative to marriage. A small but growing percentage of American adults will never marry. As a consequence, marriage is surrounded by longer periods of partnered or unpartnered singlehood over the course of a lifetime.
- As an **institution**, marriage has lost much of its legal, religious and social meaning and authority. It has dwindled to a "couples relationship," mainly designed for the sexual and emotional gratification of each adult. Marriage is also quietly losing its place in the language. With the growing plurality of intimate relationships, people now tend to speak inclusively about "relationships" and "intimate partners," burying marriage within this general category. Moreover, some elites seem to believe that support for marriage is synonymous with far-right political or religious views, discrimination against single parents, and tolerance of domestic violence.
- Among **young women**, social confidence in marriage is wavering. Until very recently, young

women were highly optimistic about their chances for marital happiness and success. Now, according to youth surveys, their confidence in their ability to achieve successful marriage is declining. Moreover, they are notably more accepting of alternatives to marriage, such as unwed parenthood and cohabitation.

At the **national policy** level, marriage has received remarkably little bipartisan study or attention. During a four-decade period of dramatic historic change in marriage, no national studies, government commissions or task forces have been set up to examine the status of marriage or to propose measures to strengthen it. [1] Indeed the United States lags well behind England, Australia, and Canada in the level and seriousness of governmental response to the widespread evidence of the weakening of marriage.

The Marriage Relationship

One reason Americans prize marriage so highly is that it is the source of deeply desired benefits such as sexual faithfulness, emotional support, mutual trust and lasting commitment. These benefits cannot be found in the marketplace, the workplace or on the Internet.

Most people aspire to a happy and long-lasting marriage. And they will enter marriage with the strong desire and determination for a lifelong and loving partnership. While they are married, most couples will also be sexually faithful to each other as long as the marriage lasts. According to the most comprehensive study of American sexual behavior, married people are nearly all alike in their sexual behavior: "once married, the vast majority have no other sexual partner; their past is essentially erased." [2]

However, although Americans haven't stopped seeking or valuing happy and long-lasting marriage as an important life goal, they are increasingly likely to find that this goal eludes them. Americans may marry but they have a hard time achieving successful marriages. One measure of success is the intactness of the marriage. Although the divorce rate has leveled off, it remains at historically high levels. Roughly half of all marriages are likely to end in divorce or permanent separation, according to projections based on current divorce rates. Another measure of success is reported happiness in marriage. Over the past two decades, the percentage of people who say they are in "very happy" first marriages has declined substantially and continuously. Still another measure of success is social confidence in the likelihood of marital success. Young people, and especially young women, are growing more pessimistic about their chances for a happy and long-lasting marriage.

The popular culture strongly reinforces this sense of pessimism, even doom, about the chances for marital success. Divorce is an ever-present theme in the books, music and movies of the youth culture. And real life experience is hardly reassuring; today's young adults have grown up in the midst of the divorce revolution, and they've witnessed marital failure and breakdown first-hand in their own families and in the families of friends, relatives, and neighbors. For children whose parents divorced, the risk of divorce is two to three times greater than it is for children from married parent families. But the pervasive generational experience of divorce has made almost all young adults more cautious and even wary of marriage. The percent of young people who say they agree or mostly agree with the statement "one sees so few good marriages that one questions it as a way of life" increased between 1976 and 1992, while the percent of those who say it is very likely they will stay married to the same person for life decreased over the same time period for both males and females. [3]

Marriage as a Rite of Passage

For most of this century and certainly before, marriage was one of the most important rites of passage in life. It accomplished several goals associated with growing up: an economic transition from the

parental household into an independent household, a psychosexual transition merging two selves and lives into one, and a social and legal transition from status as a single person to a spouse. Across time and culture, betrothal and wedding rituals reflected these economic, social and sexual dimensions of young people's coming of age.

Today, marriage has lost much of its role and significance as a rite of passage. For earlier generations of women, first sexual intercourse and marriage were closely linked and timed. Ninety percent of women born between 1933-42 were either virgins when they married or had premarital intercourse with the man they wed. [4] For today's generation of young women, the timing of first sexual intercourse is increasingly distant from the timing of first marriage. Just over half of teenage girls have experienced first sexual intercourse by age 17. [5] Teenage girls are sexually active for seven or eight years on average before marriage. Indeed, premarital sex has become something of a misnomer. Sex is increasingly detached from the promise or expectation of marriage.

Secondly, because young adults are postponing marriage until their late twenties, they pass through much of their twenties as never-married singles. They are likely to live apart from the parental household, as singles, in a peer-group household, or in a cohabiting relationship. Many have "their own lives and their own jobs" long before they marry.

During the years before first marriage, many young adults make the economic transition from dependence to independence. The National Marriage Project's recent study of never-married, noncollege young men and women in northern New Jersey finds that these young adults are not inclined to see marriage as a way to get ahead by pooling paychecks. [6] Rather, they describe marriage as a relationship where each partner contributes to the maintenance of the household but keeps control of his or her own earnings. Moreover, these men and women believe that each partner has to demonstrate a capacity to take care of himself or herself economically before marrying. As one young woman in the group explained, "men learn to hate you if you try to live off them."

The pathway leading to marriage has changed as well. The pattern of mating used to follow a sequence: couple dating, going steady, sexual experimentation - sometimes including premarital sexual intercourse - and then marriage and children. Few people lived together before marriage, and most women were either virgins at the time of marriage or had premarital intercourse only with their future husband.

Today the pathway is more complex and varied, but it goes in roughly this order: In high school and college, young people socialize in coed groups with some pairing off for purposes of love and sex. First sexual intercourse occurs in the late teens but it is typically not premarital. In their twenties, young people are likely to enter a cohabiting partnership as a first living together union. Cohabiting unions are short-term. Either they break up or, more likely, lead to marriage. An estimated 60 percent of cohabiting unions end in marriage. [7] Pregnancy and childbearing might occur at almost any point in this mating sequence.

Cohabitation is emerging as a significant experience for young adults. It is now replacing marriage as the first living together union. It is estimated that a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner and about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner. [8] A growing percentage of cohabiting unions include children. For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group, the percentage with children approaches half of all such households. [9]

Recent studies point to significant differences between never-married, childless, engaged cohabiting couples and cohabiting couples who have not set a definite date to marry. Prenuptial cohabitators seem to look a lot like married couples in the level of commitment, happiness and frequency of conflict. Non-nuptial cohabitators, however, are significantly more likely than married or prenuptial cohabiting couples to experience domestic violence, to be sexually unfaithful, to have lower expectations and levels of commitment. [10]

University of Chicago sociologist Linda J. Waite finds that cohabitation involves a different "bargain" than marriage. Compared to married couples, cohabitators expect less mutuality and sharing of

resources, friends, leisure activities and goals. [11] They are less likely than married couples to "specialize" in their living together unions and thus to achieve higher levels of productivity. In many respects, cohabiting couples behave like roommates, sharing a residence and some household expenses, but remaining separate in many of their social and economic pursuits.

Marriage in the Life Course

Marriage occupies a significant proportion of the adult life span. Because of increasing longevity, one might expect the duration of marriage to increase in the future. But longer lives probably will not result in longer marriages, for several reasons. One is the later age of first marriage. Young people are postponing first marriage until they are well into their twenties. The second is the higher likelihood of divorce today. Still another is the decline in the rate of marriage and remarriage, especially for women. Finally, there is the rise in cohabiting unions after divorce or as an alternative to marriage. Older widowed or divorced individuals may choose to cohabit rather than remarry in order to avoid legal, economic and health-related entanglements. As a result of these forces, the lifetime proportion of marriage has declined slightly for women since mid-century, although the decline has been far steeper for Black women than others.

There are also some indications that lifelong singlehood may be increasing. The likelihood that adults will marry has declined dramatically since 1960. Much of this decline results from the postponement of first marriages until older ages, but it may also reflect a growing trend toward the single life. In 1960, 94 percent of women had been married at least once by age 45. If the present trend continues, fewer than 85 percent of current young adults will marry.

Another important trend toward singlehood is apparent in the status of single mothers. In the past, single mothers were likely to be widowed or divorced. For those who bore children out of wedlock, moreover, single motherhood tended to be a temporary status. They went on to marry and to have other children in wedlock. Today, single mothers are increasingly likely to have never married. And they are more likely to stay single, so unwed motherhood has become a permanent status for many women.

These convergent forces suggest that although marriage remains an important feature of adulthood, it no longer looms like Mount Everest in the landscape of the adult life course. It is more like a hill that people climb, up and down, once or twice, or bypass altogether.

Marriage as a Social Institution

Marriage is losing much of its status and authority as a social institution. According to legal scholar John Witte Jr., "the early Enlightenment ideals of marriage as a permanent contractual union designed for the sake of mutual love, procreation and protection is slowly giving way to a new reality of marriage as a 'terminal sexual contract' designed for the gratification of the individual parties." [12]

Marriage has lost broad support within the community and even among some of the religious faithful. In some denominations, clergy avoid preaching and teaching about marriage for fear of offending divorced parishioners. Marriage is also discredited or neglected in the popular culture. Consequently, young adults, who desperately want to avoid marital failure, find little advice, support and guidance on marriage from the peer or popular culture or from parents, clergy or others who have traditionally guided and supported the younger generation in matters of mating and marrying.

This loss of broad institutional support for marriage is evident in the marital relationship itself. Not so long ago, the marital relationship consisted of three elements: an economic bond of mutual dependency; a social bond supported by the extended family and larger community; and a spiritual

bond upheld by religious doctrine, observance and faith. Today many marriages have none of these elements.

The deinstitutionalization of marriage is one of the chief reasons why it is more fragile today. For most Americans, marriage is a "couple relationship" designed primarily to meet the sexual and emotional needs of the spouses. Increasingly, happiness in marriage is measured by each partner's sense of psychological wellbeing rather than the more traditional measures of getting ahead economically, boosting children up to a higher rung on the educational ladder than the parents, or following religious teachings on marriage. People tend to be puzzled or put off by the idea that marriage has purposes or benefits that extend beyond fulfilling individual adult needs for intimacy and satisfaction. In this respect, marriage is increasingly indistinguishable from other "intimate relationships" which are also evaluated on the basis of sexual and emotional satisfaction.

Women and Marriage

When we look at the state of marriage today, it is useful to consider the behavior and attitudes of young women. Historically, women are the normsetters in courtship and marital relationships as well as the bearers of the cultural traditions of marriage. (To test this proposition, simply compare the amount of space devoted to marriage in women's magazines to that in men's magazines.) So women's attitudes and expectations for marriage are an important measure of overall social confidence in the institution and a weathervane of which way the marital winds are blowing.

What do we know about the mating and marrying behavior of young women today? For one thing, women are older when they marry. The median age of first marriage for a woman is now 25, compared to 20 in 1960. For another, women who marry today are much less likely to be virgins than women in past decades. For yet another, most young women enter marriage after having lived with a partner, though not always their marriage partner. Finally, a significant percentage of young women have children outside of marriage. Women who become single mothers are less likely to ever marry.

Compared to men, young women are more disenchanted with marriage. This growing pessimism is particularly pronounced among teenage girls. For high school girls who expect to marry (or who are already married), the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime has declined over the past two decades while high school boys have become slightly more optimistic. Teenage girls are increasingly tolerant of unwed childbearing. Indeed, they outpace teenage boys in their acceptance of unwed childbearing today, a notable reversal from earlier decades when teenage girls were less tolerant of nonmarital births than teenage boys.

Women's disenchantment should not be taken as a lack of interest in having husbands. But their growing pessimism may reflect two convergent realities. One is women's higher expectations for emotional intimacy in marriage and more exacting standards for a husband's participation in childrearing and the overall work of the household. These expectations may not be shared or met by husbands, and thus the mismatch may lead to deep disappointment and dissatisfaction. The other is women's growing economic independence. Because women are better educated and more likely to be employed outside of the home today than in the past, they are not as dependent on marriage as an economic partnership. Consequently, they are less likely to "put up" with a bad marriage out of sheer economic necessity and more likely to leave when they experience unhappiness in their marriages. Moreover, because wives are breadwinners, they expect a more equitable division of household work – not always a fifty-fifty split but fairness in the sharing of the work of the home. Thus, the experience of working outside the home contributes simultaneously to greater economic independence and less tolerance for husbands who exempt themselves from involvement with children and the household. "I don't need a grown-up baby to take care of," is a complaint often voiced by working married mothers.

Some Good News about Marriage

Not all the marriage indicators are negative. Here and there, we find modest signs of positive change in attitudes or behavior.

- Married couples today are somewhat less likely to end up in divorce court than several years ago. After one and a half decades of sharp increase, the divorce rate has declined slightly and stabilized in recent years. Although projections based on the current rate suggest that close to half of all marriages are likely to end in divorce or permanent separation, that projection could change if the divorce rate declines in the future.
- The rate of unwed births has declined for the third year in a row, although the ratio of unwed and marital births remains the same. Mainly as a consequence of the modest reduction in both divorce and unwed births, the percentage of children living in single parent families has remained stable in the past two years (1996-98).
- The percentage of young Americans who say that having a good marriage is extremely important to them as a life goal has increased slightly since the 1980s.

Conclusion: Marriage is weakening but it is too soon to write its obituary . . .

Taken together, the marriage indicators do not argue for optimism about a quick or widespread comeback of marriage. Persistent long-term trends suggest a steady weakening of marriage as a lasting union, a major stage in the adult life course, and as the primary institution governing childbearing and parenthood. Young people's pessimism about their chances for marital success combined with their growing acceptance of unwed parenthood also do not bode well for marriage.

Nonetheless, there are some reasons for hope. For example, given the increased importance of marriage to teenagers, it is possible that this generation will work hard at staying happily married. The decline in the unwed birth rate is also a good sign. And there are stirrings of a larger grass-roots marriage movement. Churches in more than a hundred communities have joined together to establish a common set of premarital counseling standards and practices for engaged couples. A marriage education movement is emerging among marriage therapists, family life educators, schoolteachers and some clergy. In the states, legislators are considering or have passed bills creating incentives for engaged couples to receive premarital education. Florida now requires marriage education for high school students.

This is not the first time in the millennial-long history of western marriage that marriage has seemed headed for the dustbins and then recovered. Certainly it is possible that the nation is on the cusp of a turnaround in some of the negative marital trends. Perhaps the last four decades have merely been a "great disruption," in the words of social analyst Francis Fukuyama, and Americans will respond to the weakening of marriage with renewed dedication and success in achieving the goal of a long-lasting happy marriage. The positive trends bear watching and are encouraging, but it is still too soon to tell whether they will persist or result in a comeback of this important social institution.

Notes

1. For two "think-tank" reports that are notable exceptions to the general neglect of marriage in the policy world, see: Theodora Ooms, *Toward More Perfect Unions: Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda* (Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar, 1998); and *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation* (New York: Council on Families in America, 1995)
2. Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata, *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1994), 105.

3. Norval D. Glenn, "Values, Attitudes and the State of American Marriage," *Promises To Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, ed. David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshstain, and David Blankenhorn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 21.
4. Michael et. al, 97.
5. Kristin A. Moore, Anne K. Driscoll, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, *A Statistical Portrait of Adolescent Sex, Contraception and Childbearing* (Washington DC.: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, March 1998), 3. Figure is based on 1995 National Survey of Family Growth.
6. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, *Why Wed? Young Adults Talk About Sex, Love and First Unions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999)
7. Larry Bumpass and James Sweet, "National Estimates of Cohabitation," *Demography* 24-4 (1989): 615-625.
8. Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts." Unpublished manuscript, 1998. Center for Demography, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.
9. 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.
10. Linda J. Waite, "Cohabitation: A Communitarian Perspective," unpublished paper presented to the Communitarian Family Task Force, Washington, DC, January 1999, 13.
11. Waite, 8-13, *passim*.
12. John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 209.

The State of Our Unions

The Social Health of Marriage in America

Social Indicators of Marital Health & Wellbeing

Marriage

Key Finding: *Marriage trends in the United States over the past four 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, in the annual number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women ([Figure 1](#)). Some of this decline—it is not yet clear just how much—results from the postponement of first marriages until older ages; the median age at first marriage went from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to 25 and 27, respectively, in 1997. (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 for 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. More than 90 percent of women have married eventually in every generation for which records exist, going back to the mid-1800s. [1] In 1960, 94 percent of women had been married at least once by age 45. If the present marriage trend continues, some demographers are predicting that fewer than 85 percent of current young adults will ever marry.

The percentage of adults in the population at any one time who are married has also diminished

(Figure 2), due not only to the decline of marriages but to the high divorce rate. Since 1960, the decline among all persons age 15 and older has been more than 10 percentage points—and more than 20 points among Black females. Only the elderly age ranges have been relatively unaffected by this trend.

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 unmarried cohabitation increasing very rapidly, marriage is giving way to unwed unions. Most people now live together before they marry for the first time. An even higher percentage of divorced people who remarry live together first. And a still small but growing number of people 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 do marry have marriages of higher quality. It seems reasonable that if divorce removes poor marriages from the pool of married couples, the remaining marriages on average should be happier. The best available evidence on the topic, however, does not support this assumption. 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." [2] As Figure 3 indicates, the percentage saying "very happy" has declined moderately. [3] This change, in conjunction with the long-term increases in divorce and remarriage, has produced a substantial and continuous decline in the percentage of ever-married persons who are in "very happy" first marriages (Figure 4). [4] Indeed, it has been estimated that after ten years only about 25 percent of first marriages are successful, that is, both still intact and reportedly happy; this represents a substantial decline from earlier decades. [5]

Notes

1. Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 10.
2. 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 ages 18 and over.
3. 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 reported less marital interaction, more marital conflict, and more problems with their marriages. "Is Marital Quality Declining? The Evidence from Two Generations" *Social Forces* 75-3 (1997): 1089.
4. There has been a less steep decline in the percentage of ever-married persons who are in "very happy" marriages of any order (first, second, or subsequent unions), the change being from 62% in 1973-1976 to 49% in 1992-1996.
5. Norval D. Glenn, "Values, Attitudes and the State of American Marriage," *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, ed. D. Popenoe, et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996) 15-33; and Norval D. Glenn, "The Recent Trend in Marital Success in the United States" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991): 261-270.

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

Notes

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.

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.

Figure 1. Number of Marriages per 1,000 Unmarried Women Age 15 and Older, by Year, United States [a]

Year	Marriages
1960	73.5 [b]
1970	76.5
1975	66.9
1980	61.4
1985	56.2
1990	54.5
1996	49.7 [c]

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.

c Provisional data.

Source: U. S. 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, 1960-1998, United States

Year	Males			Females		
	Total	Blacks	Whites	Total	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
1998	58.0	41.4	60.2	54.8	36.3	57.5

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

Figure 3. Percentage of Married Persons Age 18 and Older Who Said Their Marriages Were "Very Happy," by Period, United States

Period	%	(n)
1973-1976	67.4	(4,708)
1977-1981	66.1	(3,177)
1982-1986	62.8	(4,842)
1987-1991	63.1	(4,358)
1992-1996	61.2	(4,160)
1996	61.9	(1,532)

The trend is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

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

Figure 4. Percentage of Ever-Married, Nonwidowed Persons in "Very Happy" First Marriages, by Period, United States

Period	%	(n)
1973-1976	53.5	(5,141)
1977-1981	50.4	(3,556)
1982-1986	44.7	(5,638)
1987-1991	42.6	(5,178)
1992-1996	38.3	(5,156)
1996	37.8	(1,943)

Trend is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).

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, 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 mostly to compositional changes in the population, for example the aging of the baby boomers and a decrease in the number of people of marriageable age. The continuing decline in the 1990s, however, apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.

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, more than quadrupled from 1960 to 1998. 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—close to 50 percent—that a marriage started today will end in either divorce or permanent separation. (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.

What Are Your Chances of Divorce?

One often hears it said that "if you marry, you have about a 50 percent chance of getting a 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, and is not intended to be, an accurate prediction. [a]

No one to our knowledge has periodically calculated these projections using consistent methods, so trends in the chances of divorce using this measure cannot be given. However, projections made using rates prevailing in the early 1980s consistently yielded marital breakup chances of well over 50 percent, some as high as 60 percent, while in more recent years the chances have been lowered to around 45 percent. 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, the statement that about half of marriages in the United States will end in divorce is still reasonably correct if one is thinking of it as a projection and not a prediction, and as including all marriages, not just first ones, and permanent separation as well as divorce. And most importantly, the statement is correct only if one assumes that present divorce rates will continue into the future. Given the current decline in divorce, this assumption may well prove to be incorrect.

a Computed with techniques similar to but more complicated than those used by demographers to calculate life expectancies, this measure would ideally 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 according to the estimates used and the necessary compromises made in the calculations.

Figure 5. Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Age 15 and Older, by Year, United States [a]

Year	Divorces
1960	9.2
1965	10.6
1970	14.9
1975	20.3
1980	22.6
1985	21.7
1990	20.9
1998	19.5 [b]

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.

b Provisional data.

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, 1960-1998, United States

Year	Males			Females		
	Total	Blacks	Whites	Total	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
1998	8.2	9.2	8.3	10.3	12.2	10.2

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

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 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 about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner. 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 in America—especially cohabitation as an alternative to marriage—is more common among Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and disadvantaged white women. It 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.

The belief that living together before marriage is a useful way "to find out whether you really get along," and thus a way to avoid a bad marriage and an eventual divorce, is now widespread among young people. But the available data on the effects of cohabitation contradict this belief. There is no evidence that those who decide to cohabit before marriage will have a stronger marriage than those who don't live together, and some evidence to suggest that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage. [\[2\]](#)

Notes

1. Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts." Unpublished manuscript, 1998. Center for Demography, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.
2. See: 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: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999)

Figure 7. Number of Cohabiting, Unmarried, Adult Couples of the Opposite Sex, by Year, United States

Year	Number (in Millions)
1960	.439
1970	.523
1980	1.589
1990	2.856
1998	4.236

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

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 8](#)). This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families. While in 1960 only 9 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 has recently grown, the overwhelming majority of single-parent families are mother-only. (See "[What Is a Single-Parent Family Today?](#)")

Another useful indicator of fragile families is the percentage of persons under age 18 living with two parents. This percentage has declined substantially since 1960 ([Figure 9](#)), but remains slightly more than two-thirds. Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some twelve or thirteen percent of American children live with a stepparent. 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. [1] 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 more than doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to more than 35 percent. [2]

The dramatic shift in family structure indicated by these measures has, in turn, been generated mainly by three other trends: divorce, unmarried births, and unmarried cohabitation. 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 ([Figure 10](#)). 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. The percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than sixfold since 1960 ([Figure 11](#)). By the mid-1990s about a third of all births and more than two-thirds of Black births were out-of-wedlock. There has recently been a drop in the number of out-of-wedlock births, but also a continuing drop in the total number of births per thousand Americans to the lowest point since the government began keeping records in 1909. This has kept the ratio of out-of-wedlock births at a high level.

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 12](#)). 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. [3] For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households. [4]

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 domestic violence and child abuse. It is especially unfortunate, then, that 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. [5]

In the past two years, between 1996 and 1998, the percentage of children living in single-parent families has not increased. This is due mainly to the modest reductions of both divorce and unwed births. Whether this could be 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.

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.

Notes

1. See: David Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Stepfamilies" *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* Eds. A. Booth and J. Dunn (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994) 3-27.
2. This difficult to calculate measure is based on estimates from various U. S. Census Bureau documents. See: Wade F. Horn, *Father Facts*, 3rd ed. (Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative, 1998) 12.
3. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements, March, 1998.*, Series P20-514
4. 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.
5. Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts." Unpublished manuscript, 1998. Center for Demography, University of

Figure 8. Percentage of Children Under Age 18 Living With a Single Parent, by Year and Race, United States

Year	Total [a]	Blacks	Whites
1960	9	22	7
1970	12	32	9
1980	20	44	16
1990	25	55	19
1998	28	55	23

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 the above Figure, were classified as living with no parent.

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

Figure 9. Percentage of Children Under Age 18 Living with Two Parents, [a] by Year and Race, United States

Year	Total [b]	Blacks	Whites
1960	88	67	91
1970	85	59	90
1980	77	42	83
1990	73	38	79
1998	68	36	74

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.

Figure 10. Estimated Number of Children Under Age 18 Newly Involved in Divorce, by Year, United States

Year	Number (in Millions)
1960	.464
1965	.632
1970	.807
1975	1.123
1980	1.174
1985	1.091
1990	1.075

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*

Figure 11. Percentage of Live Births that Were to Unmarried Women, by Year and Race, United States

Year	Total [a]	Whites	Blacks
1960	5.3	—	—
1965	7.7	—	—
1975	14.2	7.3	48.8
1980	18.4	11.1	55.2
1985	22.0	14.5	60.1
1990	28.0	20.1	65.2
1997	32.4	21.5	69.4

a 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, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, annual, and *Monthly Vital Statistics Reports*; U. S. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, Page 81, Table 101.

Figure 12. Number of Cohabiting, Unmarried, Adult Couples of the Opposite Sex Living with One Child or More Under Age 15, by Year, United States

Year	Number (in Millions)
1960	.197
1970	.196
1980	.431
1990	.891
1998	1.520

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

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 is greater than ever, but girls have become more pessimistic about ever being able to have such a marriage and 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 both boys and girls who said that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" to them has increased over the decades by a modest but

statistically significant amount (Figure 13). Eighty-three percent of girls stated this belief in 1995, with boys lagging behind at 73 percent. Other data from the *Monitoring the Future* survey show a moderate increase in the proportion of teenage respondents who said that they will most likely choose to get married in the long run, now about 80 percent. Only four percent say that they probably will not get married, with the remainder 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 14). 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 15). 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 young people has increased enormously over the decades. Witness the remarkable increase, especially among girls, in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing (Figure 16). And note that whereas in the 1970s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, today the tables have turned. With more than 50 percent of teenagers now accepting out-of-wedlock childbearing as a "worthwhile lifestyle," at least for others, they do not yet seem to grasp the enormous economic, social and personal costs of single parenthood.

Another remarkable increase is in the acceptance of living together before marriage, now by well over half of all teenagers (Figure 17). 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. Obviously they do not yet know that there is no evidence to support this belief, and some evidence suggesting that cohabitation is detrimental to later marriage.

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.

Notes

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 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: George H. Gallup International Institute, 1993)
3. For instance, see 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: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999).

Figure 13. Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said Having a Good Marriage and Family Life is "Extremely Important," by Period, United States

Period	Boys	Girls
1976-1980	69.4	80.2
1981-1985	69.0	81.3
1986-1990	69.7	81.9
1991-1995	72.0	83.2
1995	72.9	83.1

Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1995, for which it is about 1,200 for each sex.

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

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

Figure 14. 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

Period	Boys	Girls
1976-1980	57.3	68.0
1981-1985	55.7	68.0
1986-1990	53.7	62.5
1991-1995	56.4	63.5
1995	59.3	64.2

Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1995, for which it is about 1,200 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: *The Monitoring the Future Surveys* conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

Figure 15. 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

Period	Boys	Girls
1976-1980	37.9	38.9
1981-1985	38.4	35.7
1986-1990	36.5	30.9
1991-1995	37.9	31.1
1995	40.1	30.1

Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1995, for which it is about 1,200 for each sex.

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

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

Figure 16. 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

Period	Boys	Girls
1976-1980	41.2	33.3
1981-1985	43.2	40.3
1986-1990	46.6	47.8
1991-1995	49.1	53.3
1995	49.4	53.3

Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1995, for which it is about 1,200 for each sex.

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

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

Figure 17. Percentage of High School Seniors Who "Agreed" or "Mostly Agreed" With the Statement That "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

Period	Boys	Girls
1976-1980	44.9	32.3
1981-1985	47.4	36.5
1986-1990	57.8	45.2
1991-1995	60.5	51.3
1995	62.0	54.6

Number of respondents is about 6,000 for each sex for each period, except for 1995, for which it is about 1,200 for each sex.

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

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