



THE SOCIAL HEALTH OF MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

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



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Marriage

Divorce

Unmarried Cohabitation

Loss of Child Centeredness

Fragile Families with Children

Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family

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The National Marriage Project

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

The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing. The National Marriage Project has five goals: (1) annually publish *The State of Our Unions*, an index of the health of marriage and marital relationships in America; (2) investigate and report on younger adults' attitudes toward marriage; (3) examine the popular media's portrait of marriage; (4) serve as a clearinghouse resource of research and expertise on marriage; and (5) bring together marriage and family experts to develop strategies for revitalizing marriage.

Leadership

The project is co-directed by two nationally prominent family experts. David Popenoe, Ph.D., a professor of sociology emeritus and former social and behavioral sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of *Life Without Father*, *Disturbing the Nest*, *War Over the Family* and many other scholarly and popular publications on marriage and family. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D., an author and social critic, writes extensively on issues of marriage, family and child wellbeing. She is the author of *Why There Are No Good Men Left*, *The Divorce Culture*, and the widely acclaimed *Atlantic Monthly* article "Dan Quayle Was Right."

We extend special thanks to Professor Norval D. Glenn for his assistance in preparing the social indicators portion of this report.

Design: Bruce Hanson / EGADS, Hightstown, NJ

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July 2007

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In this year's essay, David Popenoe argues that long-term trends point to the gradual weakening of marriage as the primary social institution of family life. More Americans today are living together, marrying at older ages or not at all, and rearing children in cohabiting or solo parent households. Overall, the U.S. trends are following the far-advanced trends toward nonmarriage in Northwestern European nations, albeit at a slower and more uneven pace.



Popenoe attributes the weakening of marriage to a broad cultural shift away from religion and social traditionalism and toward faith in personal independence and tolerance for diverse life styles — otherwise known as “secular individualism.” This cultural shift is a central feature of modern societies and therefore unlikely to be reversed.

Compared to Europeans, moreover, Americans are more libertarian and thus may be more susceptible to harshly negative consequences of secular individualism on family life. As Popenoe concludes, it will probably require a cultural awakening, perhaps prompted by rational self-interest, to avoid such an outcome. We will have to adopt the view that personal happiness depends on high-trust and lasting relationships and that such relationships require constraints on short-term adult interests in order to foster long-term commitments to children, and thus to the future.

BARBARA DAFOE WHITEHEAD



THE FUTURE_{OF} MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

BY DAVID POPENOE

Almost a decade ago, in our first annual State of Our Unions Report in 1999, the lead essay was “What’s Happening to Marriage.” The picture we painted was hopeful, if not especially optimistic. Marriage, we reported, “is weakening but it is too soon to write its obituary.” In this, our ninth annual report to the nation, I want to summarize what has been happening to marriage in recent years and peer into the future. One question in particular is compelling: Is marriage in America headed in the direction of the European nations, where it is an even weaker social institution than in the United States? Or are we, as in other areas of our national life—such as our higher level of religious participation and belief—the great exception to the seemingly entrenched trends of the developed, Western societies? This raises, in turn, another intriguing question: Is America still a single nation in family terms, or are we becoming more divided by region and class?

Marriage and Family Trends of the Past Decade

There can be no doubt that the institution of marriage has continued to weaken in recent years. Whereas marriage was once the dominant and single acceptable form of living arrangement for couples and children, it is no longer. Today, there is more “family diversity.” Fewer adults are married, more are divorced or remaining single, and more are living together outside of marriage or living alone. [The most recent data are available in the second half of this report.] Today, more children are born out-of-wedlock (now almost four out of ten), and more are living in stepfamilies, with cohabiting but unmarried adults, or with a single parent. This means that more children each year are not living in families that include their own married, biological parents, which by all available empirical evidence is the gold standard for insuring optimal outcomes in a child’s development.

In the late 1990s quite a bit was written about a “marriage and family turnaround,” or a reversal of the many family weakening trends. Most negative family trends have slowed appreciably in recent years; they have not continued in the dramatically swift trajectory upward that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s. Much of this may be due simply to the slowing of social trends as they “mature.” The only major family trend that has actually reversed direction is divorce. After rising steeply, beginning around 1965, the divorce rate has dropped gradually since the early 1980s, apparently mainly the result of adults becoming

better educated and marrying at a later age. Other possible reasons for the decreasing divorce rate are the rise of non-marital cohabitation and a decline in second and subsequent marriages. Divorcees, for example, have become more likely to cohabit rather than remarry, thus avoiding remarriages that have always had a disproportionately high risk of divorce.

The Marriage Gap

One surprising development of recent years is the growth of a marriage and divorce “gap” between differently educated segments of the population. People who have completed college (around a quarter of the population) tend to have significantly higher marriage and lower divorce rates compared to those with less education. Among those married in the early 1990s, for example, only 16.5 percent of college educated women were divorced within ten years, compared to 46 percent for high school dropouts. Indeed, most of the recent divorce rate decline has been among the college educated; for those with less than a high school education, the divorce rate actually has been rising.¹

The weakening of marriage and the resultant growth of family diversity thus is found much more prominently among those with less education and associated lower incomes. The underlying reason for this may be as simple as the fact that the personality and social characteristics

1. Steven P. Martin, “Trends in Marital Dissolution by Women’s Education in the United States,” *Demographic Research* 15-20 (December 2006), 537-560.

enabling one to complete college are similar to those that foster today's long-term marriages. Or, that delayed entry into the adult world of work and childbearing, and the increase in income and knowledge that college typically fosters, better allows mature values and financial security to undergird choice of partner and family life. Whatever the reasons, this marriage and divorce gap has been a major contributor to the growing economic inequality in America.

Some expect the marriage gap to grow larger in the future because children tend to follow the family behavior of their parents. Children of the educated and financially comfortable are better socialized to marry successfully and to contain childbearing within marriage, whereas children of the lower classes often do not have this advantage. But it is doubtful that this gap will have much effect on the over-all drift of marriage in America. The increase in the college-educated portion of the population has been slowing appreciably. And the fertility of college-educated women has dropped. Twenty-four percent of college-educated women aged 40-44 were childless in 2004, compared to only 15 percent of women that age who didn't finish high school.² On a national scale, the continuation of this fertility discrepancy could seriously counteract any beneficial family effects of higher education.

The European Direction

No matter how weak it has become, however, compared to other modern nations marriage remains at the center of American life. About 85 percent of Americans are expected to marry sometime in their lives, compared to less than 70 percent in a number of European nations. Only ten percent of Americans in an international survey agreed that "marriage is an out-dated institution," compared to 26 percent in the UK and 36 percent in France.³ Only about ten percent of American couples are cohabiting outside of marriage, compared to almost one third in Sweden. And our commercial wedding industry certainly has become huge. Yet an overriding question is whether marriage and family trends in every mod-



ern society are headed in a common direction. In other words, is there a set of family trends endemic to modern (urban, industrial, democratic, and still mostly Western) societies that supercedes economic, cultural, and even religious differences among regions and nations? If so, the current family system in the United States is not an exception but merely a laggard; we will gradually be swept up in the tide.

Up to now, the pacesetters in most contemporary marriage and family trends—all moving in the direction of a non-marriage culture—have been the nations of Northwestern Europe, especially the Nordic countries. They have the latest age at first marriage, the lowest marriage and highest non-marital cohabitation rates, and the largest number of out-of-wedlock births. The nations in Southern Europe such as Spain, Italy and Greece, with less cohabitation and fewer out-of-wedlock births, tend to look more like the United States. Family traditionalism remains stronger in these southern nations, and young people live longer in their childhood homes, often until they marry, rather than living independently or in cohabiting unions. The United Kingdom and the Anglo-settler nations, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, typically stand somewhere in between the two extremes.

But with respect to each of the dominant family trends of recent decades the other modern nations have been moving, albeit at varying speeds and not without some temporary lapses, in the Northwest European direction. The percentage of people getting married has been going down, the

2. Jane Lawler Dye, "Fertility of American Women: June 2004," *Current Population Report*, P20-555, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau (2005), Table 7.

3. Reported in Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "Marriage and Divorce: Changes and their Driving Forces," unpublished manuscript, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania (2007).

“The recent family trends in the Western nations have been largely generated by a distinctive set of cultural values that scholars have come to label ‘secular individualism’”

number of people cohabiting outside of marriage has been increasing, and the out-of-wedlock birth percentage has been skyrocketing. Between the early to mid 1990s and the early 2000s, for example, the marriage rate dropped twelve percent in Italy, 14 percent in Spain, 22 percent in Canada, 28 percent in New Zealand and 24 percent in the United States. At the same time, the nonmarital cohabitation percentage (of all couples) climbed 23 percent in Italy and Australia, 53 percent in the United Kingdom, and 49 percent in the United States. The nonmarital birthrate jumped 24 percent in the United States, 48 percent in the United Kingdom, 96 percent in Italy, and a whopping 144 percent in Spain.⁴

In one major respect the United States has long been the pacesetter and not the laggard. For generations, we have had the highest divorce rate. Yet even this is now changing. The U.S. rate has been dropping for several decades, while the divorce rate in many European nations has stayed the same or been climbing. The number of divorces per one thousand married women in the United Kingdom in 2002 was 14.4, not too far from the United States rate of 18.4. In the past, the incidence of family breakup was closely aligned with the incidence of divorce, but this is no longer the case. Because more people now cohabit in place of marrying, when a cohabiting couple breaks up it is not registered as a divorce would be. Unfortunately, we have no standard reporting system for the breakup of cohabiting couples, but all empirical studies show that cohabiting couples breakup at a much higher rate than married couples. While only ten percent of American couples cohabit, some 20 percent of British couples do. So if we are considering total family breakup, it is likely the case that Britain plus a number of other European nations now surpass us.

There is one other important respect in which America has been in the vanguard of family trends—we have the highest percentage of mother-only families. Many European nations have a much higher percentage of out-of-wedlock births than we do, but the great majority of these births are to unmarried but cohabiting couples. In America, much more often, children are born to a lone mother with the father not in residence and often out of the child's life. Nearly half of all extra-marital births in America were of this nature in

2001, according to the latest available data.⁵ One reason is our relatively high percentage of births to teenagers, 80 percent of which are non-marital and more than half of those to lone mothers; another is that 70 percent of all unwed births to African Americans are to lone mothers.

However, the gap in mother-only families between the United States and other nations of the West is also in the process of diminishing. Being born to a lone mother is only one route to living in a mother-only family. Another route is through the break-up of parents after the child is born, which is far more common among parents who cohabit compared to those who marry. With parental break-up rates in other nations climbing rapidly, thanks largely to increased non-marital cohabitation, many of these nations are catching up with us in the alarming statistic of mother-only families. Even by the early 1990s, according to the calculations of several scholars, New Zealand had caught up with the United States with nearly 50 percent of children expected to experience single parenting by age 15, and the figure for Canada and five European countries exceeded 33 percent.⁶ These percentages would probably be much higher if they were recalculated today using more recent data.

So if we are moving in the direction of the more negative family trends of other modern nations, and they are moving in the direction of our negative trends, where does this leave us? Aren't we all in a common basket, destined to witness an institution of marriage that is ever weakening? Before considering this, let us first have a look at the possibility that America is becoming increasingly bifurcated into two distinct cultures. Could it be that only one part of America is moving in a European family direction?

The American Red-Blue Divide

The recent family trends in the Western nations have been largely generated by a distinctive set of cultural values that scholars have come to label

4. Unless otherwise indicated, all calculations are by the National Marriage Project from published international data sources.

5. Lisa Mincieli and Kristin Moore, “The Relationship Context of Births Outside of Marriage: The Rise of Cohabitation,” *Child Trends Research Brief 2007-13* (May 2007).

6. Patrick Heuveline, J. M. Timberlake, and F.F. Furstenberg, Jr., “Shifting Childrearing to Single Mothers: Results from 17 Western Countries,” *Population and Development Review 29-1* (March 2003), 47-71.

“secular individualism.” It features the gradual abandonment of religious attendance and beliefs, a strong leaning toward “expressive” values that are preoccupied with personal autonomy and self-fulfillment, and a political emphasis on egalitarianism and the tolerance of diverse lifestyles. An established empirical generalization is that the greater the dominance of secular individualism in a culture, the more fragmented the families. The fundamental reason is that the traditional nuclear family is a somewhat inegalitarian group (not only between husbands and wives but also parents and children) that requires the suppression of some individuality and also has been strongly supported by, and governed by the rules of, orthodox religions. As a seeming impediment to personal autonomy and social equality, therefore, the traditional family is an especially attractive unit for attacks from a secular individualistic perspective.

On average, America has been moving in the direction of secular individualism, as can be seen in the general drift of our family trends. But the “on average” covers up some very substantial variations, some of which account for why, looked at internationally, we are a nation with relatively conservative family values. A recent National Cultural Values Survey⁷ found that American adults usefully can be split into three groups, based on the degree to which they have embraced secular individualism, ranging from the Orthodox to the Progressives, with Independents in the middle. The survey found 31 percent of the population in the religiously Orthodox category, 17 percent in the secular Progressive category, and 46 percent as Independents. The Orthodox category is far larger than one finds in Western Europe and the other Anglo nations, and the Progressive category (i.e., secular individualist) is considerably smaller, and therein lies the major basis for American family exceptionalism.

One thing that makes these categories so prominent in American culture is that they are strongly expressed geographically. As analyzed by demographers at the University of Michigan, the two extremes are reflected in the so-called Red (Republican) and Blue (Democratic) state distinction frequently made in recent national political analysis.⁸ The more Progressive Blue states are principally those of the Northeast, the Upper

Midwest, and the West Coast, while the more Orthodox Red states are found in the South, the lower Midwest, and the Mountain region of the West. Reflecting their different ideologies, the Blue states tend to have lower marriage and higher cohabitation rates, along with lower fertility, while the Red states are more traditional in their family structure. [See box in the second half of this report.]

The ideology and family behavior found in the Blue states resembles that of the other Western nations, although not quite as far down the path of Progressivism. If one were referring only to this part of America, one would not be talking about American exceptionalism. The large Orthodox population of the Red states, however, does give the United States a unique configuration in the modern world. If it were not for this population, we would not be having a “culture war” and we probably would not even be having a national conversation about the weakening of marriage. There is no such conversation about marriage in the Northwestern European nations, despite the fact that the institution of marriage is considerably weaker there than it is here.

It is clear that the family structure of America is exceptional in some respects. The question is, are we so exceptional that we can resist the modern trend of marriage and family decline? So far the answer is no—we have been headed down the same path as every other modern, Western society toward ever-increasing secular individualism with its associated family structures. If this trend continues, the family structure of the Red states will come to look more and more like today’s Blue states, and the Blue states will look ever more like Europe.

The Prospect for Cultural Change

To reverse this trend of marriage and family decline would take a cultural transformation of some kind, and it is interesting to consider and evaluate what this might look like, and what could bring it about. One potential source of change would be a significant expansion in influence and authority of today’s orthodox, anti-individualist religions. Much has been written in recent years about the weakening of secularization, pointing out that modernization no longer necessarily means the demise of religion. The evidence for this comes from the newly modernizing countries

“The ideology and family behavior found in the Blue states resembles that of the other Western nations, although not quite as far down the path of Progressivism.”

7. Culture and Media Institute, Alexandria, Virginia (2007).

8. Ron J. Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert, “The Second Demographic Transition in the U.S.: Exception or Textbook Example,” *Population and Development Review* (December 2006), 32-4.

“The immigration situation in the United States, however, is different, and it does not seem as likely that in the foreseeable future immigrant groups will be able to seriously shift our culture in a more traditional direction. “

of the world, however, where orthodox religions have actually been gaining, rather than losing, strength. There is no evidence that anything like this has been happening to date in the Western European and Anglo nations. Quite the opposite; with each passing year these nations—including the United States—are more secular than ever before. The National Cultural Values Survey noted above found that regular churchgoing has dipped below 50 percent and only 36 percent believe “people should live by God’s principles,” concluding that “America no longer enjoys cultural consensus on God, religion, and what constitutes right and wrong.”⁹

A powerful indicator of future trends are the beliefs and attitudes of today’s young people, which are unmistakably more secular and individualist than those of their elders. A recent study concluded that emerging adults (ages 18-24) in America, compared to their earlier counterparts and their older contemporaries, are more disaffected and disconnected from society, more cynical or negative about people, and have moved in a liberal direction.¹⁰ A Pew Foundation national survey found that 20 percent of today’s young people (18-24) say they have no religious affiliation or are atheist or agnostic, nearly double the percentage of the non-religious found in that age group less than 20 years ago. In the same time period the percentage of young people who did not agree that they had “old fashioned values about family and marriage” jumped from 17 percent to 31 percent.¹¹ A study in Britain, starkly pointing up the entrenched nature of this generational shift, found that a child with two religious parents has only a 50 percent chance of being religious, while a child with one religious parent has 25 percent chance of being religious.¹²

Another cultural transformation that could move the family in a more traditional direction is widespread immigration. In combination with low birthrates, massive immigration is capable of changing the culture, social experiences, and self-

identity of a population—including the ideologies of secularism and individualism. This possibility is beginning to be discussed in Europe, where birthrates in many nations remain well below replacement level and immigration, mostly from orthodox Muslim countries with high birthrates, is high and growing. The percentage of foreign born in many Western European nations is now similar to that in America, around twelve percent, but the birthrates of these groups are typically far higher than the indigenous populations. Projections are that the percentage of people of “foreign origin” may reach as high as one third in some European nations by 2050, and far higher than that in the major cities.¹³ What is not known is how these new immigrants ultimately will react to secular individualism and the other cultural beliefs and practices of modern, Western democracies. As many have noted, because of long-standing antipathies between peoples of the Muslim faith and those of Christianity, often violent and going back well more than a millennium, it does seem possible that Europe faces the prospect of a major cultural transformation sometime in the future through immigrants who, rather than assimilate, will pull the culture in a new direction.

The immigration situation in the United States, however, is different, and it does not seem as likely that in the foreseeable future immigrant groups will be able to seriously shift our culture in a more traditional direction. The most likely candidate for cultural change, of course, is the growing Hispanic population. The percentage of Hispanics is projected to reach 25 percent of the total population by 2050, when non-Hispanic Whites will make up only a slim majority.¹⁴ But unlike Europe we are already a nation made up of many different immigrant groups; many Hispanics have been here for years, and they share a common religious heritage in Christianity. Thus Hispanics don’t pose the same threat of not assimilating to Western culture as do the Muslims. Indeed, to date, Hispanics seem to have assimilated into the American culture of secular individualism more than the reverse. For example, the unwed birth percentage among Hispanics has jumped from 19 percent in 1980 to 48 percent in 2005 and stands well above the per-

9. Executive Summary, op.cit.

10. Tom Smith, “Generation Gaps in Attitudes and Values from the 1970s to the 1990s,” in R. A. Settersten, Jr., F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., and R. C. Rumbaut (eds.), *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).

11. The Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Generation Next,” Washington, DC, 2007.

12. Alasdair Crockett and David Voas, “Generations of Decline: Religious Change in the 20th Century,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (December 2006), 45-4.

13. David Coleman, “Immigration and Ethnic Change in Low-Fertility Countries: A Third Demographic Transition,” *Population and Development Review* 32-3 (September 2006), 401-446.

14. Philip Martin and Elizabeth Midgely, “Immigration: Shaping and Reshaping America,” *Population Bulletin* 58-2 (June 2003), p. 22.

centage for the non-Hispanic White population (25 percent). Hispanics have the same divorce rate as non-Hispanic Whites, and in recent years their rate of non-marital cohabitation has grown faster than that of any other immigrant group. These trends contradict earlier expectations that Hispanics might bring this nation a new wave of family traditionalism.

The prediction of the continued growth of secular individualism within modern cultures rests on some powerful facts. So far in the Western experience, at least, the dominant sociological factors associated with secular individualism are that the higher the educational and income levels of a population, and the more urbanized it is, the greater the degree of secular individualism. Is it likely that any time in the near future educational, income, and urbanization levels in America will drop? They have been increasing inexorably for three centuries, so a turnaround would most likely occur only in the event of some catastrophe, either natural or man-made. Absent such a catastrophe (which certainly can not be ruled out in today's world), the most likely future scenario is that secular individualism will increasingly dominate the cultures of the West.

The best prospects for cultural change, therefore, rest on the possibility that, at some time in the future, new generations of secular individualists themselves will undergo a change of heart. One way this might occur is through the growth of new, non-orthodox religious ideologies that remained compatible with secular individualism but take it in new directions. Unfortunately, the new religious strains that have emerged in recent decades, so-called New Age religions, have been profoundly individualistic. None has shown any interest in preserving marriage and family solidarity. Indeed, they seem part and parcel of the secular individualist movement, albeit with a more "spiritual" bent. The same seems to hold true for today's rapidly growing "green" movement, which itself shows signs of becoming a new quasi-religion in which the environment has replaced God as a focus of almost divine adoration. So far there is little evidence that "pro-green" translates into "pro-marriage" or "pro-family," although it is conceivable that somehow the conservation of nature could become translated into the conservation of the family.

Any widely accepted "new morality" that might change family behavior would probably have to be compatible with secular individualism's motivating force—rational self-interest. The self-interest of today's young people still includes the desire to have strong intimate relationships and to want to

do best by their children. And there is every reason to believe that these interests will continue into the future because they are, in fact, an intrinsic part of being human. The task that lies ahead, then, is to help young people to see the importance of marriage and strong families as the best way to achieve these interests; to help them realize that a better and more meaningful way of life, both for themselves and for their children, involves a commitment to long-term marriage.

What Can be Done?

As a first step, the institution of marriage needs to be promoted by all levels of society, particularly the families, the schools, the churches, the non-profit sector, and the government. The great majority of American high school seniors still want to get married, with 82 percent of girls and 70 percent of boys recently saying that "having a good marriage and family life" is "extremely important" to them. These percentages, in fact, represent a slight increase from the late 1970s.¹⁵ But as high schoolers reach young adulthood, when the attraction of cohabitation and careers gains strong currency, making the actual commitment to marriage is not easy. Young people need, therefore, to be made continually aware of the many benefits married life brings, both for themselves and for their children. The empirical evidence is now strong and persuasive that a good marriage enhances personal happiness, economic success, health and longevity. This evidence should become a regular part of our educational programs and our public discourse.

Yet successful marriage promotion requires more than empirical evidence. Marriage has fallen by the wayside, in part, because it receives less and less social recognition and approval. Any norm of behavior requires for its maintenance the continuing support of the community, including active social pressures to uphold it. When social approval and pressures wither, the norm weakens. Today's young people have been taught through the schools and in their communities a strong message of tolerance for "alternative lifestyles." "Thou shalt not make moral judgments about other people's family behavior" seems to have become a dominant message in our times. The reason for this is completely understandable; children and young people come from ever more diverse family situations which are not of their own doing, and they should be fully accepted and not be penal-

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15. Data from Monitoring the Future surveys, reported in this second half of this report.

“America is still the most marrying of Western nations, but nevertheless we are caught up in the prevailing trends of modernity that lead toward an ever-weakening institution of marriage.”

ized. The problem is that this moral message is carried on into adult life, where it is applied not to children and young people but to adults who do have choices about how they shape their lives. In an effort not to judge much less stigmatize any adult life style, we have all too often become virtually silent about the value and importance of marriage. This silence is extremely damaging to the promotion of a pro-marriage culture.

The widespread promotion of marriage is directed at only half of the problem, however. Getting people to marry is one thing, helping them to stay married is something else entirely. Helping people to stay married is the main focus of an important set of programs known as marriage education. Typically conducted in group settings rather than counseling situations, marriage education programs focus on developing the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed for making a wise marital choice and having a successful marriage. Although marriage education has been around for many decades, it recently has been thrust into the limelight thanks to widespread publicity and government financial assistance.

The importance of marriage education is magnified by the fact that the marital relationship today is so different from what it was in the past. Marriage is now based almost entirely on close friendship and romantic love, mostly stripped of the economic dependencies, legal and religious restrictions, and extended family pressures that have held marriages together for most of human history. Until fairly recent times marriages had little to do with romantic love, sexual passion, or even close friendship; they were functional partnerships in the intense struggle of life. Today, a successful marriage rests almost entirely on how well one gets along, intimately and for the long term, with someone of the opposite sex. The “relationship knowledge” this requires has never been part of formal education, but there is no reason to believe that it can not effectively be taught to married couples and those about to be married, as well as to younger people as part of the high school curriculum. Indeed, the initial empirical evaluations of marriage education programs conclude that they are both well-received and have generally positive outcomes.

Marriage promotion and marriage education are essential steps, but in order fully to rebuild the institution of marriage there would probably have to be a cultural shift of a more fundamental nature. Modern cultures would need to pull back from the now dominant thrust of secular individualism—the excessive pursuit of personal auton-

omy, immediate gratification, and short-term personal gain—and give greater emphasis to issues of community and social solidarity. This could come about through a growing realization, based on rational self-interest, that our personal happiness and sense of well-being over the long course of life are less affected by the amount of independence, choice, bodily pleasure and wealth we are able to obtain than by the number of stable, long-term and meaningful relationships we have with others.¹⁶ And through a greater recognition of the fact that short-term adult interests can be in conflict with the long-term health and wellbeing of children, and that our children's welfare has everything to do with the future of our nation.

Conclusion

America is still the most marrying of Western Nations, but nevertheless we are caught up in the prevailing trends of modernity that lead toward an ever-weakening institution of marriage. Marriage rates have been dropping and cohabitation and out-of-wedlock birth rates have been rising, thanks in large part to the growing influence of secular individualism in all modern cultures. The negative effects of this are felt most profoundly by our children, who are growing up in family situations that are less and less optimal from a child-development perspective. As we move in the direction of the weaker family structures of Europe it is important to remember that we lack many of the welfare “safety-nets” found there, and therefore the negative effects of marital decline on children are likely to be heightened in this country.

We are not a unified nation in family terms. We have a marriage gap, whereby the college-educated have a stronger marriage culture than the less well-educated. And we have a Red state/Blue state divide, whereby the nation is geographically split up into areas of family traditionalism and non-traditionalism. Yet these divisions remain peripheral to the overall waning of marriage in America.

The rebuilding of a stronger marriage culture is possible. In addition to the heavy promotion of marriage built around the self-interest of today's young people, it will probably require a cultural shift of some magnitude, one in which stable, predictable, and long-term relationships with others come to be viewed as the best foundation for adult personalities, childrearing, and family life.

16. For an important statement about this, see John Ashcroft and Phil Caroe, “Thriving Lives: Which Way for Well-Being?” Relationships Foundation, Cambridge, England (2007).

Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing

TRENDS OF THE PAST FOUR DECADES



THE SOCIAL HEALTH OF MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

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

The Red/Blue American Family Divide

The Red State/Blue State divide has become a familiar theme in national politics. In a series of recent presidential elections, the so-called Red states have tended to vote Republican and the Blue states have voted Democratic. The Red states consist of the South (e.g. Alabama), the lower Midwest (e.g. Oklahoma), and the Mountain Region of the West (e.g. Montana). The Blue states are those of the Northeast (e.g. Massachusetts), the upper Midwest (e.g. Minnesota), and the West Coast (e.g. California).

Less well known is the fact that the Red and Blue states also differ significantly in family terms, and this may help to explain their politics. The Red states typically have a more traditional family structure than the Blue States; people in the Red states marry younger and in larger numbers, cohabit outside of marriage less, and have more children. This is in large part because Red Staters are likely to be more religiously observant and to belong to denominations that profess allegiance to more conservative social values. However, the Red states also have higher divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates than the Blue states, and these rates can hardly be considered indicators of traditionalism, much less religiosity. A closer look at the actual demographic differences among the states can help us to better understand the nature and causes of the Red/Blue American family divide.

Red states have significantly higher marriage rates. The national marriage rate was 41 marriages per 1000 single women in 2005. Some of the highest marriage rates are found in the South, with Arkansas (77) and Alabama (54) leading the pack, and in the Mountain states of Idaho (66), Wyoming (60) and Utah (58). The lowest marriage rates, in contrast, are found in the Northeast with Pennsylvania (24), New Jersey (27), Delaware (28) and Connecticut (28) at the bottom.^a

Higher marriage rates are associated with less non-marital cohabitation, and this also clusters geographically along Red/Blue lines.

The national rate of unmarried partner households (as percent of all couple households) was 10% in 2005. States in the South and Midwest have the lowest percentages: Alabama (6%), Mississippi (8%), Kansas (8%), and Arkansas (8%). At the opposite pole are the states in the Northeast and Northwest: Vermont (14%), Maine (13%), Oregon (12%) and Washington (12%).^b

Statewide fertility rates follow a similar Red/Blue geographic distribution. The national fertility rate was 67 births per 1000 women ages 15-44 in 2005, but it was in the 70s in a number of Red states, Idaho (77), Kansas (70), and Georgia (70), and only in the 50s for Vermont (51), Maine (54) and Massachusetts (56). In addition to family traditionalism, the fertility rate in a number of southwestern States is greatly affected by the higher-fertility Hispanic population.^c

Put all together, these demographic characteristics add up to more married couples with children in the Red states and fewer in the Blue states, and this is one of the biggest reasons for the Red/Blue political divide. Married people with children have tended disproportionately in recent presidential elections to favor the Republican Party. Indeed, for recent elections the correlation between married-with-children and voting Republican is one of the highest ever found between demographic factors and voting behavior.^d

Yet the Red states also, interestingly, have the highest out-of-wedlock birth percentages and divorce rates. While 37% of all births in the U.S. were out-of-wedlock in 2005, the unwed birth percentages for the Red states of Mississippi (49%) and Louisiana (48%) are far ahead of the Blue states of New Hampshire (27%) and Minnesota (30%).

A closer examination, however, shows that this Red/Blue geographic pattern of unwed births is heavily dictated by the racial and ethnic make up of each state, as well as by educational and income levels. States such as Mississippi and Louisiana are at the top partly due to the extremely high unwed birth percentages for Blacks (77%) and Hispanics (50%). The state with the highest overall unwed birth percentage is New Mexico (51%), owing mainly to the contribution of its large Hispanic population.

If one removes Blacks and Hispanics from the equation and looks just at unwed births among Whites, a geographic pattern more influenced by family traditionalism emerges. For the White population only, the unwed birth percentage in Mississippi (26%) is *lower* than for the White population in New Hampshire (27%). Unwed birth percentages below the national average of 25% for Whites are also found in the Red states of Alabama (21%), North Carolina (23%), and Georgia (23%). In contrast, above average unwed birth percentages for Whites are found in the secular and cohabitation-high Blue states of Vermont (32%) and Maine (35%) and Oregon (29%).^e



The picture is further complicated, however, by the fact that marriage, cohabitation, and unwed birth rates are so strongly affected by income and educational levels. In general, people with lower incomes and less education tend to marry less, cohabit more, and have more births out-of-wedlock.

While professed traditional family values may help to generate fewer unwed births, they do not seem to provide much protection against divorce. The highest divorce rates are found in the more religiously-based Red states such as Arkansas (25), Oklahoma (25), and West Virginia (23), in striking contrast to more secular Blue states such as Pennsylvania (11), and Massachusetts (11). The national divorce rate was 16 divorces per 1000 married women in 2005.^f Level of educational achievement is the single factor that probably best explains the geographic distribution of divorce. The lower the educational (and associated income) level, the higher the divorce rate, and educational levels are substantially lower in the Red states than in the Blue states.

The Blue states of the West Coast stand as an exception to this education-based pattern, however, with the divorce rates for highly-educated Oregon and Washington being above the national average (probably California, too, but unfortunately divorce rates for that state are not available). In addition to education, therefore, another important causal factor in divorce may be the level of geographic

mobility in a state, making the more recently settled and more transient populations of the West Coast and Mountain states more vulnerable to divorce. Mobility levels may also help to account for another geographic exception: the long-settled Red states of the Central Plains (e.g. Iowa and North Dakota) have very low divorce rates, comparable to those of the East Coast states.

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- a. Calculations by the National Marriage Project obtained using data from the *Current Population Surveys*, March 2005 Supplement, as well as *Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2005*, National Vital Statistics Report 54:20, July 21, 2006, Table 3. The exceptionally high marriages rates in Nevada and Hawaii are not considered here because so many out-of-staters go to these states to get married.
 - b. Calculations by the National Marriage Project using data downloaded from the *American Community Survey*, 2005.
 - c. Fertility rates from "Births: Preliminary Data for 2005," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 55, No. 11, December 28, 2006.
 - d. Ron J. Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert, "The Second Demographic Transition in the US: Exception or Textbook Example?," *Population and Development Review* 32:4 (December, 2006).
 - e. Unmarried mother birth data from "Births: Preliminary Data for 2005," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 55, No. 11, December 28, 2006.
 - f. Calculations by the National Marriage Project obtained using data from the *Current Population Surveys*, March 2005 Supplement less population in CA, GA, HI, IN, LA and MN to match unreported divorces in these states. Divorce counts from *Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2005*, National Vital Statistics Report 54:20, July 21, 2006, Table 3. The highest divorce rate, of course, is found in Nevada (38.4), and not considered here because of the out-of-stater problem.

MARRIAGE

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

Americans have become less likely to marry. This is reflected in a decline of nearly 50 percent, from 1970 to 2005, in the annual number of marriages per 1000 unmarried adult women

(Figure 1). Much 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 26 and 27, respectively, in 2005. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry.

The decline also reflects some increase in life-long singlehood, though the actual amount can not be known until current young and middle-aged adults pass through the life course.

The percentage of adults in the population who are currently married has also diminished. Since 1960, the decline of those married among all persons age 15 and older has been 13 percent-

The Marriage Gap

There is good news and bad news on the marriage front. For the college-educated segment of our population, the institution of marriage appears to have gained strength in recent years. For everyone else, however, marriage continues to weaken. Thus there is a growing “marriage gap” in America, between those who are well educated and those who are not.

Recent data indicates that, for the college-educated, the institution of marriage may actually have strengthened. It once was the case that college-educated women married at a lower rate than their less educated peers. Indeed, marriage rates for college-educated women were lower well into the late 20th Century. Since around 1980, however, this situation has reversed. College-educated women are now marrying at a *higher* rate than their peers.^a Not only that, but the divorce rate among these women is relatively low and has been dropping. This may be due partly to the fact that college-educated women, once the leaders of the divorce revolution, now hold a more restrictive view of divorce than less well educated women.^b The out-of-wedlock childbearing of college-educated women has always been well below that of other segments of the population. Now, among those who delay marriage past age 30, this is the only group becoming more likely to have children *after* marriage rather than before.^c

There is more good news. The marriages of the college-educated have become more egalitarian than ever, both in the sense that husbands and wives are matched more equally in their educational and economic backgrounds, and that they hold more egalitarian attitudes about marital gender roles.^d As icing on the cake, all of this may add up to greater marital happiness. The percentage of spouses among this group who rate their marriage as “very happy” has held fairly steady over recent decades, whereas for other parts of the population the percentage has dropped significantly.^e

In large numbers, therefore, the college-educated part of America is living the American dream—with happy, stable, two-parent families. There is one problem, however, and it is a serious one for the

future of the nation. College-educated women aren’t having enough children to replace themselves. In 2004, for example, twenty-four percent of women 40 to 44 years old with a bachelor’s degree were childless, compared to only fifteen percent of those without a high school degree.^f

For the non college-educated population, unfortunately, the marriage situation remains gloomy. Marriage rates are continuing to decline, and the percentage of out-of-wedlock births is rising. In the year 2000, fully forty percent of high-school drop-out mothers were living without husbands, compared with just twelve percent of college-grad mothers.^g Because of the many statistically well-documented benefits of marriage in such areas as income, health, and longevity, this gap is generating a society of greater inequality. America is becoming a nation divided not only by educational and income levels, but by unequal family structures.

a Joshua R. Goldstein and Catherine T. Kenney, “Marriage Delayed or Marriage Foregone? New Cohort Forecasts of First Marriages for U. S. Women,” *American Sociological Review* 66-4 (2001): 506-519

b Steven P. Martin and Sangeeta Parashar, “Women’s Changing Attitudes Toward Divorce: 1974-2002: Evidence for an Educational Crossover,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68-1 (2006): 29-40

c Steven P. Martin, “Reassessing Delayed and Foregone Marriage in the United States,” unpublished manuscript (2004), Department of Sociology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

d Robert Schoen and Yen-Hsin Alice Cheng, “Partner Choice and the Differential Retreat from Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage Family* 68-1 (2006): 1-10; Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, “Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States: the 1960s Through the 1990s,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63-4 (2001): 1009-1037.

e Calculation by the National Marriage Project of data from The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.

f Jane Lawler Dye, *Fertility of American Women: June 2004*, Current Population Report, P20-555, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau (2005): Table 7.

g David T. Ellwood and Christopher Jencks, “The Uneven Spread of Single-Parent Families,” in Kathryn M. Neckerman (ed.) *Social Inequality* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 3-77.

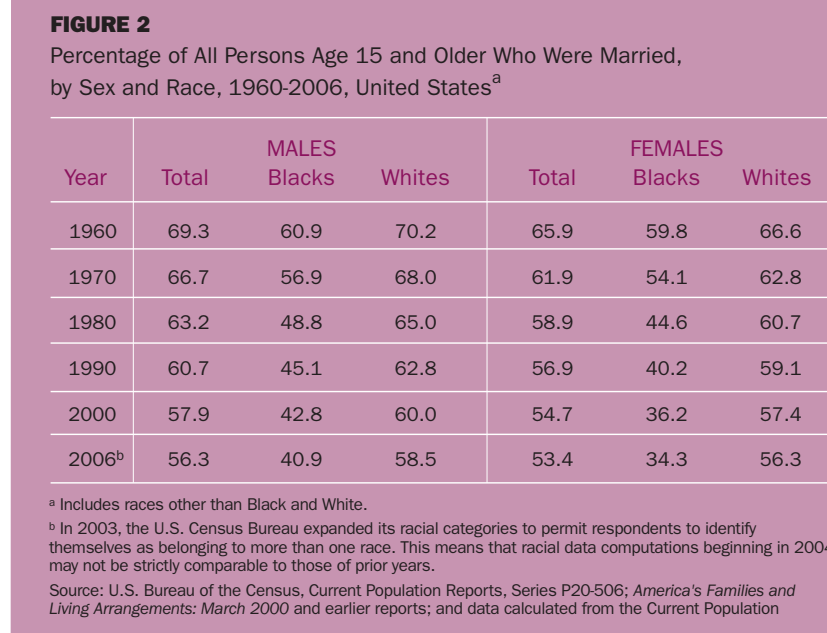
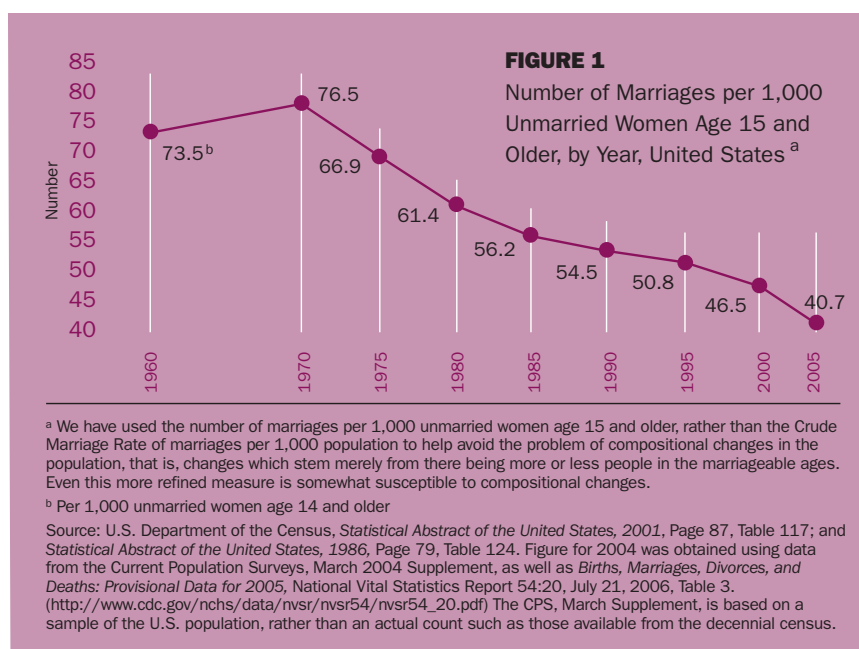
age points—and over 25 points among black females (Figure 2). It should be noted that these data include both people who have never married and those who have married and then divorced.

In order partially to control for a decline in married adults simply due to delayed first marriages, we have looked at changes in the percentage of persons age 35 through 44 who were married (Figure 3). Since 1960, there has been a drop of 20 percentage points for married men and 18 points for married women. (But the decline has not affected all segments of the population. See the accompanying box: The Marriage Gap.)

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.¹ For the generation of 1995, assuming a continuation of then current marriage rates, several demographers projected that 88 percent of women and 82 percent of men would ever marry.² If and when these figures are recalculated for the early years of the 21st century, the percentage of women and men ever marrying will almost certainly be lower.

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

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

- 1 Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 10; Michael R. Haines, “Long-Term Marriage Patterns in the United States from Colonial Times to the Present,” *The History of the Family* 1-1 (1996): 15-39
- 2 Robert Schoen and Nicola Standish, “The Retrenchment of Marriage: Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States, 1995,” *Population and Development Review* 27-3 (2001): 553-563.

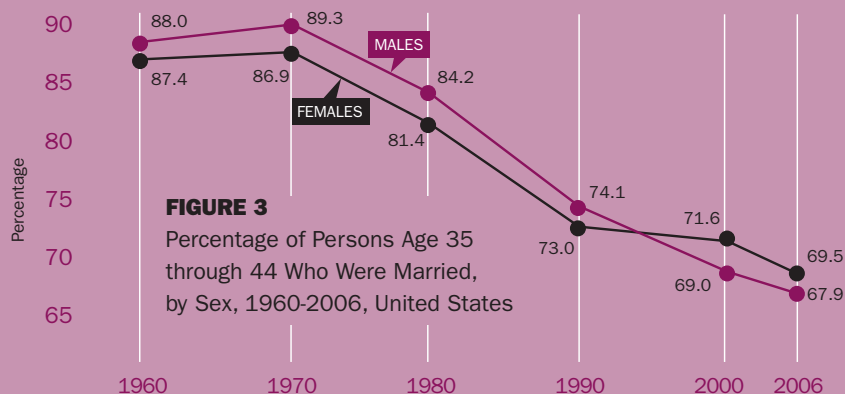
DIVORCE

KEY FINDING: The American divorce rate today is nearly twice that of 1960, but has declined slightly since hitting the highest point in our history in the early 1980s. For the average couple marrying for the first time in recent years, the life-time probability of divorce or separation remains between 40 and 50 percent.

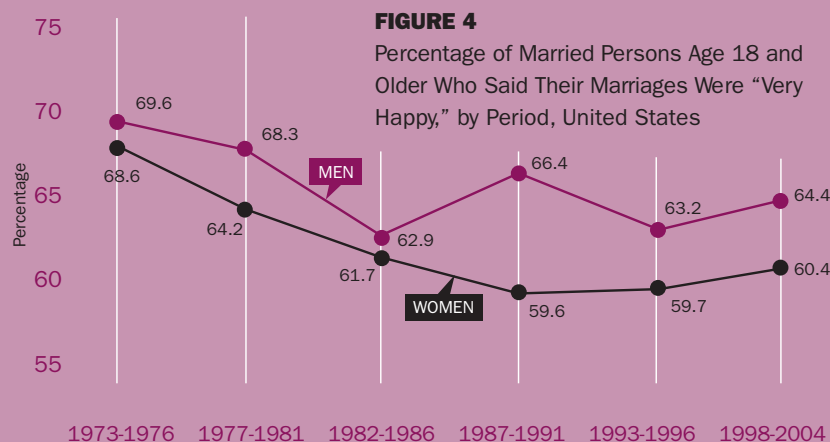
The increase in divorce, shown by the trend reported in Figure 5, probably has elicited more concern and discussion than any other family-related trend in the United States. Although the long-term trend in divorce has been upward since colonial times, the divorce rate was level for about two decades after World War II during the period of high fertility known as the baby boom. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the incidence of divorce started to increase and it more than doubled over the next fifteen years to reach an historical high point in the early 1980s. Since then the divorce rate has modestly declined, a trend described by many experts as “leveling off at a high level.” The decline apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.¹ Two probable reasons for this are an increase in the age at which people marry for the first time, and a higher educational level of those marrying, both of which are associated with greater marital stability.²

Although a majority of divorced persons eventually remarry, the growth of divorce has led to a steep increase in the percentage of all adults who are currently divorced (Figure 6). This percentage, which was only 1.8 percent for males and 2.6 percent for females in 1960, quadrupled by the year 2000. The percentage of divorced is higher for females than for males primarily because divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women. Also, among those who do remarry, men generally do so sooner than women.

Overall, the chances remain very high—estimated between 40 and 50 percent—that a first marriage started in recent years will end in either



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 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *General Population Characteristics*, 1990, Page 45, Table 34; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Page 48, Table 51; internet tables (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2005/tabA1-all.pdf>) and data calculated from the Current Population Surveys, March 2006 Supplement. Figure for 2005 was obtained using data from the Current Population Surveys rather than data from the census. The CPS, March Supplement, is based on a sample of the U.S. population, rather than an actual count such as those available from the decennial census.



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).

happy.³ As Figure 4 indicates, the percentage of both men and women saying “very happy” has declined moderately over the past 25 years.⁴ This trend, however, is now heading in a positive direction.

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

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

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

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

divorce or separation before one partner dies.³ (But see the accompanying box: “Your Chances of Divorce May Be Much Lower Than You Think.”) The likelihood of divorce has varied considerably among different segments of the American population, being higher for Blacks than for Whites, for instance, and higher in the South and West than in other parts of the country. But these variations have been diminishing. The trend toward a greater similarity of divorce rates between Whites and Blacks is largely attributable to the fact that fewer Blacks are marrying.⁴

At the same time, there has been little change in such traditionally large divorce rate differences as between those who marry when they are teenagers compared to those who marry after age 21, high-school drop outs versus college graduates, and the non-religious compared to the religiously committed. Teenagers, high-school drop outs, and the non-religious who marry have considerably higher divorce rates.⁵

UNMARRIED COHABITATION

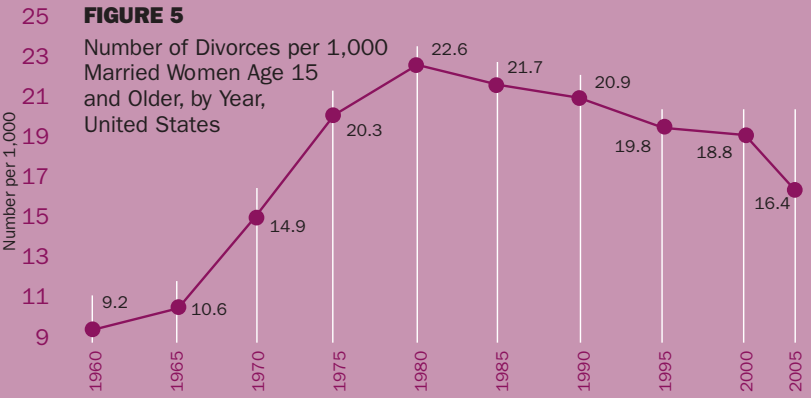
KEY FINDING: The number of unmarried couples has increased dramatically over the past four decades, and the increase is continuing. Most younger Americans now spend some time living together outside of marriage, and unmarried cohabitation commonly precedes marriage.

Between 1960 and 2006, as indicated in Figure 7, the number of unmarried couples in America increased more than twelvefold. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household—is particularly common among the young. It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women age 25 to 39 are currently living with a partner and an additional quarter have lived with a partner at some

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

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

5 Raley and Bumpass, 2003



We have used the number of divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, rather than the Crude Divorce Rate of divorces per 1,000 population to help avoid the problem of compositional changes in the population. Even this more refined measure is somewhat susceptible to compositional changes.

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001*, Page 87, Table 117; National Vital Statistics Reports, August 22, 2001; California Current Population Survey Report: 2000, Table 3, March 2001; *Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2005*, National Vital Statistics Report 54:20, July 21, 2006, Table 3. (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr54/nvsr54_20.pdf) and calculations by the National Marriage Project for the U.S. less California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana and Minnesota using the Current Population Surveys, 2005.

FIGURE 6
Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Divorced,^a by Sex and Race, 1960-2006, 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
2000	8.3	9.5	8.4	10.2	11.8	10.2
2006 ^a	8.6	9.4	8.7	10.9	12.9	10.9

^a In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

^b “Divorced” indicates family status at the time of survey. Divorced respondents who later marry are counted as “married.”

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *America’s Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000* and earlier reports; and Current Population Surveys, March 2006

time in the past. Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none 50 years ago.¹

For many, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for others, simply an alternative to living alone, and for a small but growing number, it is

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

Your Chances of Divorce May Be Lower Than You Think

By now almost everyone has heard that the national divorce rate is close to 50% of all marriages. This is true, but the rate must be interpreted with caution and several important caveats. For many people, the actual chances of divorce are far below 50/50.

The background characteristics of people entering a marriage have major implications for their risk of divorce. Here are some percentage point decreases in the risk of divorce or separation *during the first ten years of marriage*, according to various personal and social factors^a:

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

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

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

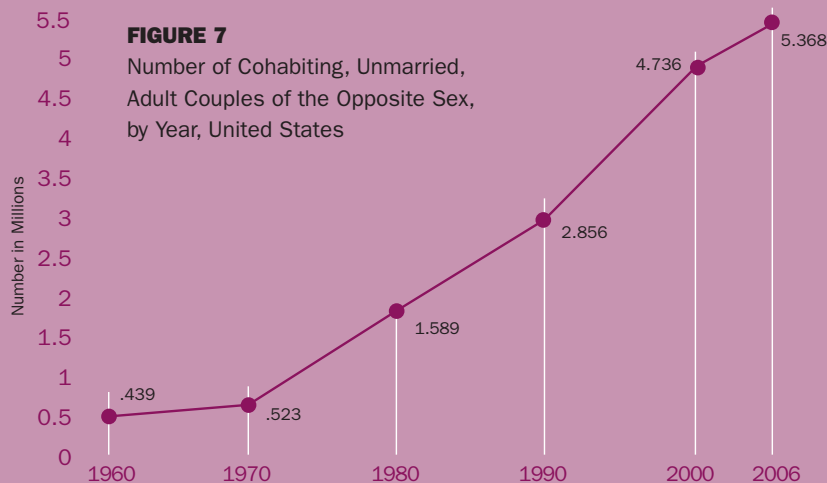
a Matthew D. Bramlett and William D. Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States*, National Center for Health Statistics, Vital and Health Statistics, 23 (22), 2002. The risks are calculated for women only.

b Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields, *Number, Timing and Duration of Marriages and Divorces, 2001*, Current Population Reports, P70-80, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2005.

considered an alternative to marriage. Cohabitation is more common among those of lower educational and income levels. One study found that among women in the 19 to 44 age range, 60 percent of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 37 percent of college grad-

uates.² Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers, those who have been divorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now over 40 percent, contain children.

The belief that living together before marriage is a useful way “to find out whether you really get along,” and thus avoid a bad marriage and an eventual divorce, is now widespread among young people. But the available data on the effects of cohabitation fail to confirm this belief. In fact, a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage. This evidence is controversial, however, because it is difficult to distinguish the “selection effect” from the “experience of cohabitation effect.” The selection effect refers to the fact that people who cohabit before marriage have different characteristics from those who do not, and it may be these characteristics, and not the experience of cohabitation, that leads to marital instability. There is some empirical support for both positions. Also, a recent study based on a nationally-representative sample of women



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000*; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006>).

2 Bumpass and Lu, 2000.

concluded that premarital cohabitation (and premarital sex), when limited to a woman's future husband, is not associated with an elevated risk of marital disruption.³ What can be said for certain is that no evidence has yet been found that those who cohabit before marriage have stronger marriages than those who do not.⁴

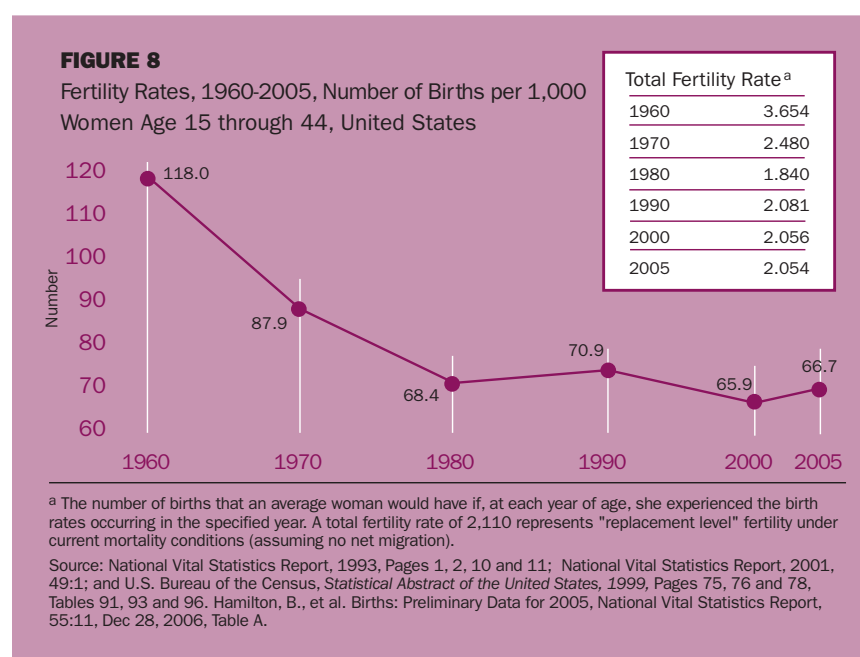
LOSS OF CHILD CENTEREDNESS

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 on average have been having fewer children. Figure 8 indicates the decline in fertility since 1960. It is important to note that fertility had been gradually declining throughout American history, reaching a low point in the Great Depression of the 1930s before suddenly accelerating with the baby-boom generation starting in 1945. By 1960 the birth rate was back to where it had been in 1920, with the average woman having about three and one half children over the course of her life. After 1960 the birth rate went down sharply for the two decades, before leveling off around 1980.

In 2005, the latest year for which we have



complete information, the American "total fertility rate" (TFR) stood at 2.054, below the 1990 level and slightly above two children per woman. This rate is below the "replacement level" of 2.1, the level at which the population would be replaced through births alone, but is still one of the highest rates found in modern, industrialized societies. In most European and several Asian nations the total fertility rate has decreased to a level well below that of the United States, in some countries to only slightly more than one child per woman.¹ The U.S. fertility rate is relatively high due mainly to the contribution of our higher-fertility Hispanic population.

The long-term decline of births has had a marked effect on the household makeup of the American population. It is estimated that in the middle of the 1800s more than 75 percent of all households contained children under the age of 18.² One hundred years later, in 1960, this number had dropped to slightly less than half of all households. In 2000, just four decades later, less than 33 percent of households included children (Figure

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

4 For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Pamela J. Smock, "Cohabitation in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000); David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage—A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research*, 2nd Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002) and Anne-Marie Ambert, "Cohabitation and Marriage: How Are They Related?" (Ottawa, Ont.: The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2005).

1 The TFR in Germany, Spain, Italy and Greece is 1.3; in Japan it is 1.3 and in South Korea it is 1.1. *World Population Data Sheet*, (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2006).

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

The Surprising Economic Benefits of Marriage

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

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

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

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

inequality has increased significantly.^e

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

Marriages that end in divorce also are very costly to the public. One researcher determined that a single divorce costs state and federal governments about \$30,000, based on such things as the higher use of food stamps and public housing as well as increased bankruptcies and juvenile delinquency. The nation’s 1.4 million divorces in 2002 are estimated to have cost the taxpayers more than \$30 billion.^h

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- a Janet Wilmoth and Gregor Koso, “Does Marital History Matter? Marital Status and Wealth Outcomes Among Preretirement Adults,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (2002): 254-68.
 - b Thomas A. Hirschl, Joyce Altobelli, and Mark R. Rank, “Does Marriage Increase the Odds of Affluence? Exploring the Life Course Probabilities,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65-4 (2003): 927-938; Joseph Lupton and James P. Smith, “Marriage, Assets and Savings,” in Shoshana A. Grossbard-Schechtman (ed.) *Marriage and the Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 129-152.
 - c Jeffrey S. Gray and Michael J. Vanderhart, “The Determination of Wages: Does Marriage Matter?,” in Linda Waite, et. al. (eds.) *The Ties that Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000): 356-367; S. Korenman and D. Neumark, “Does Marriage Really Make Men More Productive?” *Journal of Human Resources* 26-2 (1991): 282-307; K. Daniel, “The Marriage Premium,” in M. Tomassi and K. Ierulli (eds.) *The New Economics of Human Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113-125.
 - d Lingxin Hao, “Family Structure, Private Transfers, and the Economic Well-Being of Families with Children,” *Social Forces* 75 (1996): 269-292.
 - e U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P60-203, *Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change Using the March Current Population Survey*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1998; John Iceland, “Why Poverty Remains High: The Role of Income Growth, Economic Inequality, and Changes in Family Structure, 1949-1999,” *Demography* 40-3 (2003): 499-519.
 - f Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, “The Economic Risk of Childhood in America: Estimating the Probability of Poverty Across the Formative Years,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 1058-1067.
 - g Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill, “For Richer or For Poorer: Marriage as an Antipoverty Strategy,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21 (2002): 4.
 - h David Schramm, “Individual and Social Costs of Divorce in Utah,” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 27 (2006): 1.

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

Several scholars determined that in 1960 the proportion of one's life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By that year the death rate had plummeted so that fewer marriages ended through death, and the divorce revolution of recent decades had not yet begun, so that a relatively small number of marriages ended in divorce. By 1985, however, just 25 years later, the proportion of one's life spent with spouse and children dropped to 43 percent—which was the lowest in our history.³ This remarkable reversal was caused mainly by the decline of fertility and the weakening of marriage through divorce and unwed births.

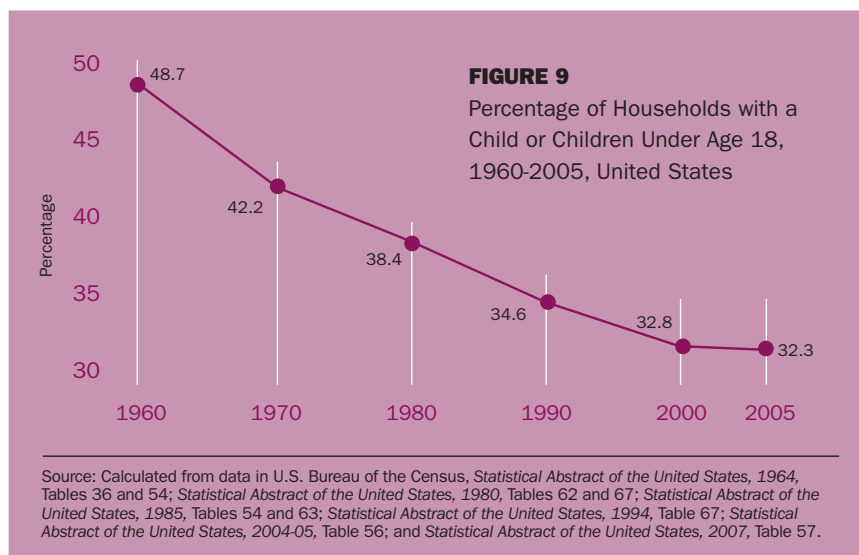
In a cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, the United States ranked virtually at the top in the percentage disagreeing with this statement: “the main purpose of marriage is having children.”⁴ Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else compared, for example, to just 51 percent of Norwegians or 45 percent of Italians. Consistent with this view is a dramatic change in our attitudes about holding marriages together for children. In a Detroit area sample of women, the proportion of women answering “no” to the question “Should a couple stay together for the sake of the children?” jumped from 51 percent to 82 percent between 1962 and 1985.⁵ A nationally-representative 1994 sample found only 15 percent of the population agreeing that “When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.”⁶

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

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

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

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



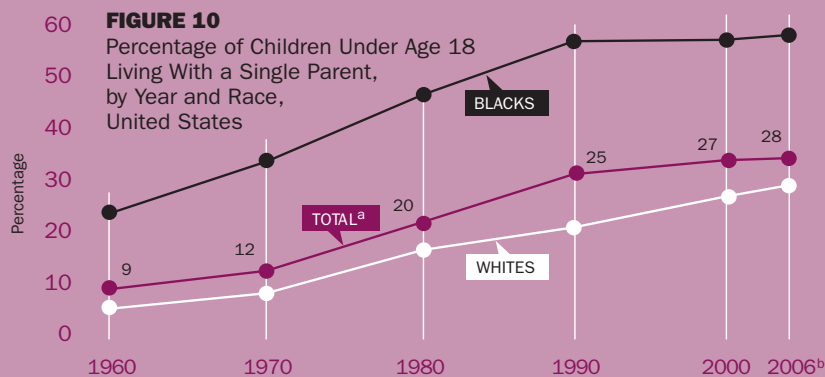
One effect of the weakening of child centeredness is clear. A careful analysis of divorce statistics shows that, beginning around 1975, the presence of children in a marriage has become only a very minor inhibitor of divorce (slightly more so when the child is male than female).⁷

FRAGILE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

KEY FINDING: The percentage of children who grow up in fragile—typically fatherless—families has grown enormously over the past four decades. This is mainly due to increases in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and unmarried cohabitation. The trend toward fragile families leveled off in the late 1990s, but the most recent data show a slight increase.

There is now ample evidence that stable and satisfactory marriages are crucial for the well-being 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 par-

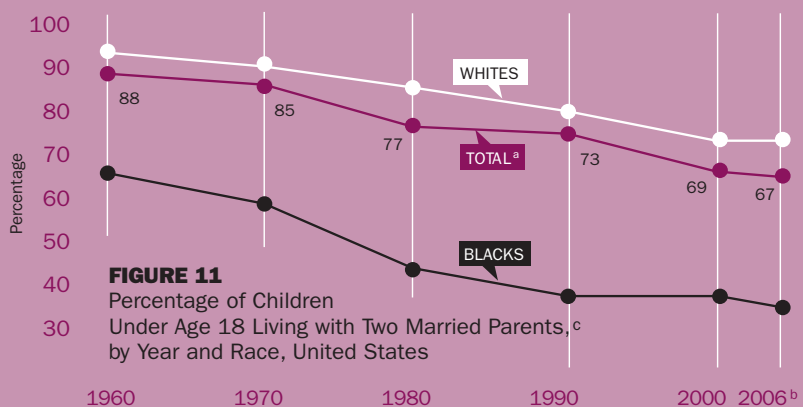
7 Tim B. Heaton, “Marital Stability Throughout the Child-Rearing Years,” *Demography* 27 (1990): 55-63; Philip Morgan, Diane Lye, and Gretchen Condran, “Sons, Daughters, and the Risk of Marital Disruption,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 110-129; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, “Children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



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

^b In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006>).



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

^b In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

^c "Married Parents" may be step or natural parents of children in the household.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *America's Families and Living Arrangements, March 2000*; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006>).

ents in the difficult and time-consuming task of raising the next generation.

The trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents (Figure 10). This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families.¹ While in 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the 20th century, by 2006 the percentage had jumped to 28 percent. The overwhelming majority

of single-parent families are mother-only, although the percentage of father-only families recently has grown to about 18 percent.

An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of persons under age 18 living with two parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by more than 20 percentage points (Figure 11). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and step-families; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while nine percent are stepfamilies.² The problem is that children in stepfamilies, according to a substantial and growing body of social science evidence, fare no better in life than children in single-parent families.³ Data on 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 doubled since 1960, from 17 percent to 34 percent.⁴

The dramatic shift in family structure indicated by these measures has been generated mainly by three burgeoning trends: divorce, unmarried births, and unmarried cohabitation. The incidence of divorce began to increase rapidly during the 1960s. The number of children under age 18 newly affected by parental divorce each year, most of whom have lost a resident father, went from under 500,000 in 1960 to well over a million in 1975. After peaking around 1980, the number leveled off and remains close to a million new children each year. Much of the reason for the leveling off is a drop in average family size; each divorce that occurs today typically affects a smaller number of children than in earlier times.

The second reason for the shift in family structure is an increase in the percentage of babies

1 Mary Parke, *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?* (Washington, DC, Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2003); and W. Bradford Wilcox, et. al., *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005)

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

3 Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66 (2004): 351-367; and more generally, David Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Stepfamilies," in A. Booth and J. Dunn (eds.) *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 3-27.

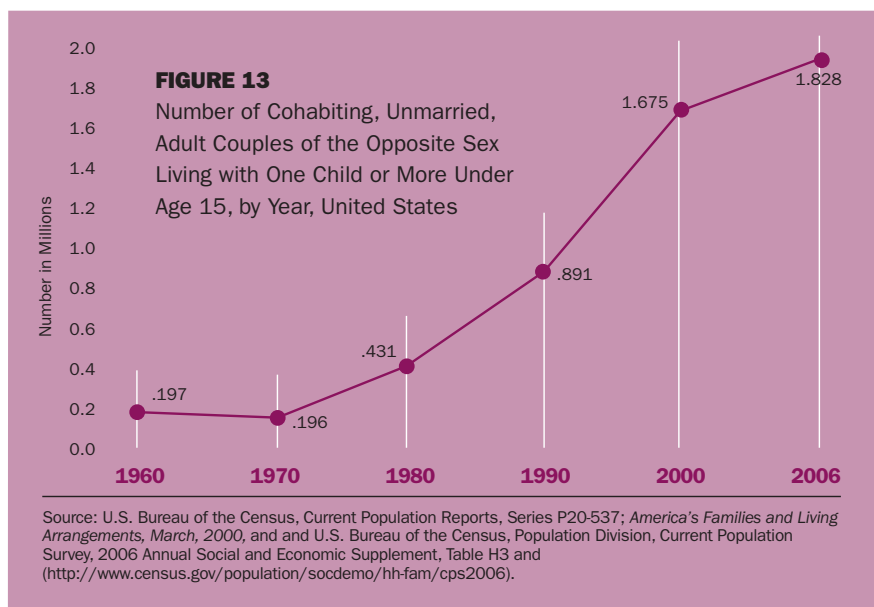
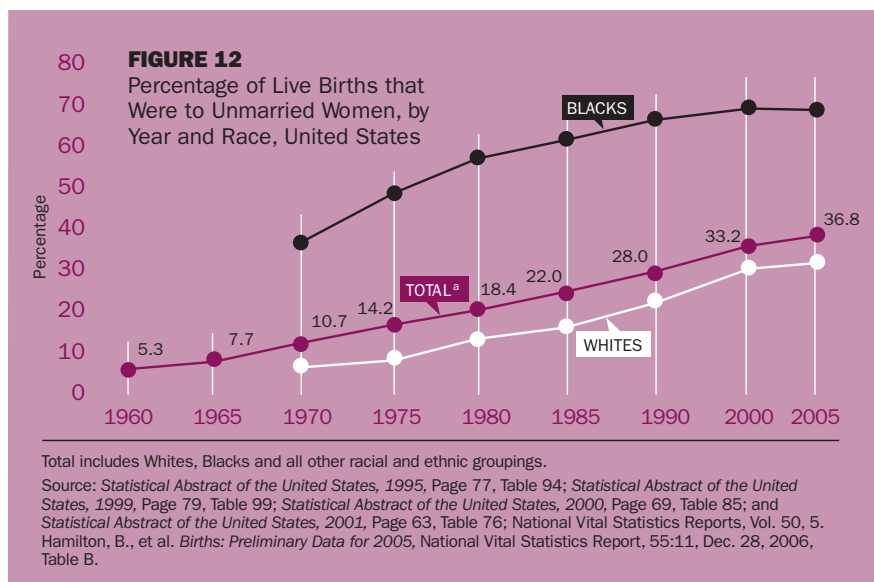
4 Jason Fields, op.cit.

born to unwed mothers, which suddenly and unexpectedly began to increase rapidly in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than seven-fold (Figure 12). More than a third of all births and more than two-thirds of black births in 2005, the latest year for which we have complete data, were out-of-wedlock. The percentage of black unwed births declined slightly in the late 1990s, but that decline now appears to have ended.

A third and still more recent family trend that has affected family structure is the rapid growth of unmarried cohabitation. Especially as cohabitation has become common among those previously married as well as the young and not-yet-married, there has been an almost 1,000 percent increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children (Figure 13). An estimated 40 percent of all children are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their growing up years.⁵

In 2000 about 40 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18.⁶ For unmarried couples in the 25 to 34 age group the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.⁷ Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.⁸ Indeed, if one includes cohabitation in the definition of stepfamily, almost one half of stepfamilies today would consist of a biological parent and unrelated cohabiting partner.⁹

Children who grow up with cohabiting couples tend to have worse life outcomes compared to those growing up with married couples.¹⁰ Prominent reasons are that cohabiting couples have a much higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower level of household income, and a higher level of child abuse and domestic violence. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventu-



ally marry the fathers of their children is declining, to 44 percent in 1997 from 57 percent a decade earlier—a decline sadly predictive of increased problems for children.¹¹

5 Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S.," *Population Studies* 54 (2000): 29-41

6 Tavia Simmons and Martin O'Connell, *Married-Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000*, Census 2000 Special Reports, CENSR-5, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003

7 Wendy D. Manning and Daniel T. Lichter, "Parental Cohabitation and Children's Economic Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 998-1010.

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

9 Larry Bumpass, R. K. Raley, and J. A. Sweet, "The Changing Character of Stepfamilies: Implications of Cohabitation and Nonmarital Childbearing," *Demography* 32 (1995): 425-436.

10 Susan L. Brown, op. cit.; Wendy Manning, "The Implications of Cohabitation for Children's Well-Being," in A. Booth and A. Crouter (eds.) *Just Living Together* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 121-152; Robin Fretwell Wilson, "Evaluating Marriage: Does Marriage Matter to the Nurturing of Children?" *San Diego Law Review* 42 (2005): 848-881; and Sandra L. Hofferth, "Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being: Investment Versus Selection," *Demography* 43 (2006): 53-77.

11 Bumpass and Lu, op. cit.

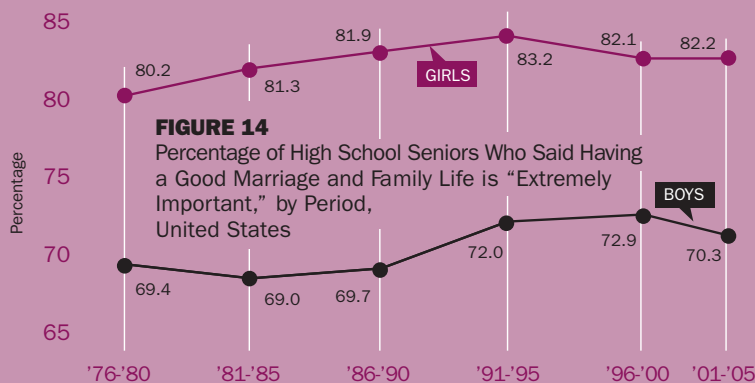


FIGURE 14
Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said Having a Good Marriage and Family Life is “Extremely Important,” by Period, United States

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

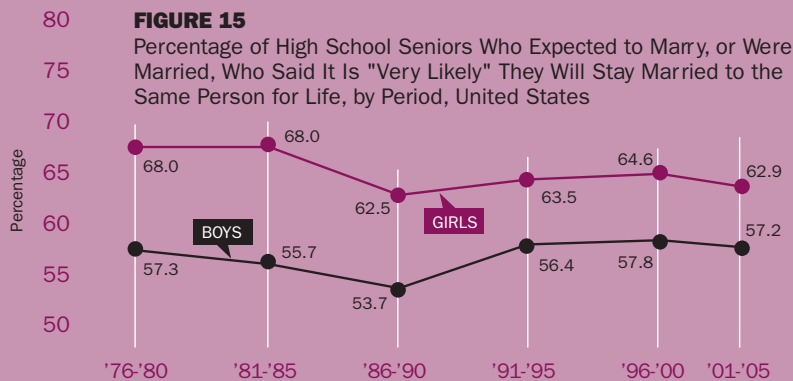


FIGURE 15
Percentage of High School Seniors Who Expected to Marry, or Were Married, Who Said It Is “Very Likely” They Will Stay Married to the Same Person for Life, by Period, United States

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

TEEN ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

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 child-bearing, 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 70 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

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

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

their answer to this question, that marriage is more beneficial to individuals than the alternatives. Yet this belief is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.³

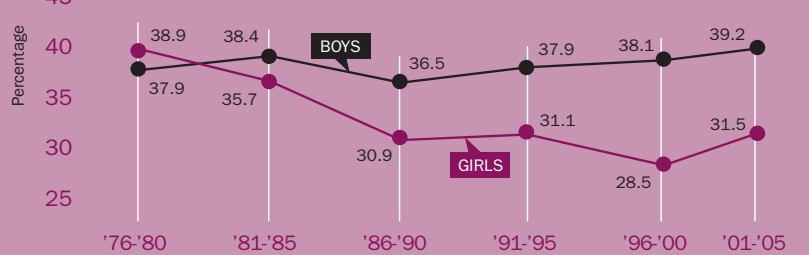
Witness the remarkable increase in recent decades in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing (Figure 17). And note that whereas in the 1970s girls tended to be more traditional than boys on this issue, now they are about the same. With more than 50 percent of teenagers now accepting out-of-wedlock 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 non-marital lifestyles. There are no strong signs yet of a generational shift that could lead to a reversal of recent family trends, but some data from the recent period suggest that the views of teenagers are, with the exception of unwed childbearing, moving in a more conservative direction.

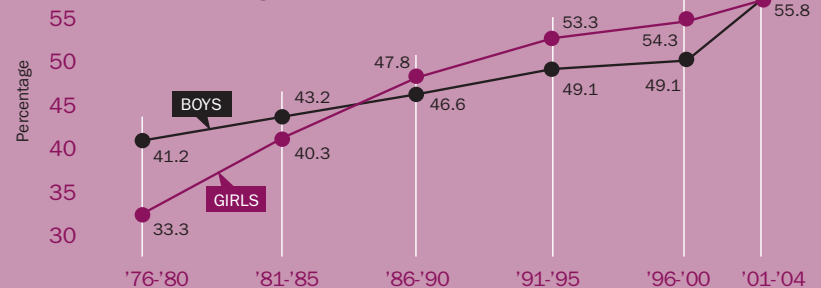
³ For instance, see: Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); David G. Myers, *The American Paradox* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, “Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study,” *Journal of Marriage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

FIGURE 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



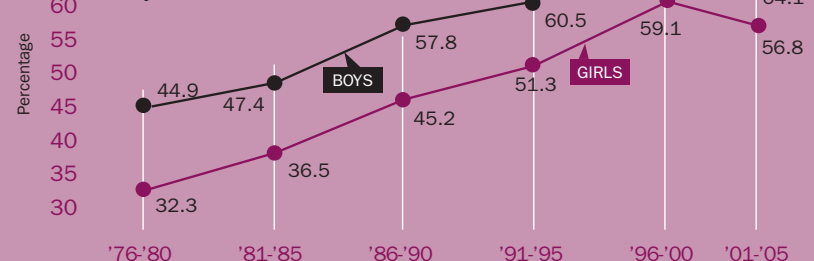
Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000. The trend for girls is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).
Source: Monitoring the Future surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

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



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

FIGURE 18
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



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000. The overall trend is significantly upward for both girls and boys ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).
Source: Monitoring the Future surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

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