




THE STATE OF OUR UNIONS 2005
THE SOCIAL HEALTH OF MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

THE
NATIONAL
MARRIAGE
PROJECT

- 
- 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 and former social and behavioral sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of *Life Without Father*, *Disturbing the Nest*, *War Over the Family* (2005) 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* and *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.

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As the first university-based initiative devoted exclusively to the study of contemporary marriage, the National Marriage Project provides research and analysis on the state of marriage and marital relationships in America. This year's The State of Our Unions is our seventh annual report. As in previous years, the publication is divided into two parts. The first, an essay by David Popenoe, looks at marriage and family trends in the U.S. and Scandinavia, with a special focus on Sweden. The second part features what we consider the most important annually or biennially updated indicators concerning marriage, divorce, unmarried cohabitation, child-centeredness, fragile families, and teen attitudes about marriage and family.

The divorce rate, one indicator of marital stability, continued to drop last year, continuing a downward trend that began around 1980 when the rate was 22.6 per 1000 married women. It fell to 17.7 in 2004 from 18.1 in the prior year. However, the marriage rate, the number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women, has also been dropping—by nearly 50 percent since 1970 when the rate was 76.5. It fell to 39.9 in 2004 from 40.8 the prior year. The number of unwed cohabitating couples continues to rise. Both the percentage of births to unwed mothers and the percentage of children living with a single parent increased slightly, reaching record highs. Overall, except for the drop in divorce, the latest indicators point to little improvement in marital health and wellbeing.

There are some small indications that attitudes among high school seniors are changing in a pro-marriage direction. The percentage of seniors who agreed or mostly agreed with the statement “it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along” has shown a surprising decrease since the late 1990s. The empirical reality that cohabitation is not good for marriage may be becoming more widely known. On the other hand, more than 50 percent of both boys and girls now say that “having a child without being married is experimenting with a worthwhile lifestyle and not affecting anyone else,” the percentage having increased sharply over the years, especially among girls.

DAVID POPENOE

BARBARA DAFOE WHITEHEAD

July 2005



About This Year's Essay

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

American progressives look to Scandinavia as a model for achieving family and child well-being. If only the U.S. would adopt Sweden or Norway's generous family leave and other health and welfare policies, they argue, we too could achieve similarly low rates of child poverty, teen pregnancy, and single parenthood. Social conservatives, on the other hand, point to Sweden as a cautionary example of how generous social welfare policies weaken marriage and the family. But neither side tells the whole story.

This year's essay by David Popenoe provides a more complete picture of the Scandinavian experience, with a focus on Sweden. It finds support for the progressive view that Sweden's social welfare policies have helped to create a child-friendly society. Child poverty barely exists. Teen birthrates are very low. Few infants are in daycare because mothers enjoy one full year of paid family leave after the birth of a child.

The essay also finds support for the conservative view that Swedish policies have contributed to the weakening of marriage and the family. There are no economic or other incentives to marry and, not surprisingly, the Swedish marriage rate is one of the lowest in the world and considerably lower than other Western European nations. Meanwhile, the risk of divorce is high and continues to rise for married couples. Sweden also leads the Western nations in nonmarital cohabitation where the risk of breakup is twice that of married parents.

At the same time, because of its concern for children, the Swedish approach includes policies that many American social conservatives would embrace, such as strict limits on abortion, a six-month waiting period before parents are allowed to divorce, and a ban on *in vitro* fertilization for single women and on anonymous sperm donations for all couples.

Both the U.S. and Sweden are among the industrialized nations with the lowest percentage of children growing up with both biological parents. Both have similarly high family breakup rates. Both share post-modernist outlooks. Yet despite these commonalities, the two societies have very different cultural traditions. Sweden is highly communitarian, ethnically homogeneous, socially cohesive, and resolutely secular. America is highly libertarian, ethnically diverse and strongly religious. Though Scandinavian family policies may be inspirational models for creating a more child and family-friendly society, Americans can't simply import Scandinavian policies and achieve Scandinavian results. To achieve a more child-centered society, Americans will have to find ways to check the corrosive effects of its consumerist and radically individualist culture on marriage and the family.



Marriage and Family: What Does the Scandinavian Experience Tell Us?

David Popenoe

Many Americans have long had a ready answer to America's family problems: We should become more like Scandinavia. Whether the issues are work-family, teen sex, child poverty, or marital break-up, a range of Scandinavian family and welfare policies is commonly put forth with the assertion that, if only these could be instituted in America, family life in our nation would significantly be improved. But what can we in the United States really learn from Scandinavia? The Scandinavian nations are so small and demographically homogeneous that the idea of simply transferring their social policies to this country must be viewed as problematic. Sweden, for example, the largest Scandinavian nation and the one featured in this essay, has only 9 million people compared to our population of nearly 300 million. And how well have these policies actually worked in Scandinavia? As this essay will make clear, some of the Scandinavian family policies have, indeed, been quite successful on their own home ground. Yet aside from the potential non-transferability of these policies, by focusing so much attention on them we may be overlooking some even more important aspects of the Scandinavian family experience.

Comparative Family Change: Sweden and the United States

It is now well known that there has been a weakening of marriage and the nuclear family in advanced, industrialized societies, especially since the 1960s. What is not well known is the surprising fact that the two nations which lead in this weakening are Sweden and the United States—two nations which stand at almost opposite extremes in terms of their socioeconomic systems. Let us look at one telling statistical measure. Defining the nuclear family as a mother and father living together with their own biological children, a good measure of nuclear familism in a society is the percentage of children under the age of 18 who live with both biological parents. This percentage for the United States is 63, the lowest among Western industrialized nations. The second from lowest is Sweden, at 73!¹

How is this possible? At the one socioeconomic extreme Sweden has the strongest public sector, the highest taxes, and is the most secular. At the other, the United States has the weakest public sector, the lowest taxes, and is the most religious. Could these fundamental factors mostly be irrelevant to family change? And if so, what key factors are involved? As we shall see, the answer to this intellectual puzzle is to be found largely in the realm of a post-modern trend shared by both nations. But first we need to consider other family differences between the two nations. Two key differences stand out: in the United States more people marry, but they also divorce in large numbers; in Sweden, fewer people marry, but the Swedish divorce rate is a little lower than ours.

Here is the recent statistical record, beginning with Sweden. The Swedish marriage rate by the late 1990s was *one of the lowest in the world*; indeed, one of the lowest marriage rates ever recorded and considerably lower than the rates of other Western European nations.² If this

rate holds, only about 60 percent of Swedish women today will “ever marry,” compared to over 85 percent in the U.S. This is a quite recent development. Not so long ago the two nations were quite similar: For the generation marrying in the 1950s, the figure for Sweden was 91 percent and for the US 95 percent.

Sweden’s low marriage rate does not mean that Swedes are living alone; rather, they are living together outside of marriage—another area in which Sweden has been in the vanguard. In fact, Sweden leads the Western nations in the degree to which nonmarital cohabitation has replaced marriage. The United States, on the other hand, has a lower rate of nonmarital cohabitation than all but the Catholic nations of southern Europe. About 28 percent of all couples in Sweden are cohabiting, versus eight percent of all American couples. In Sweden virtually all couples live together before marriage, compared to around two-thirds of couples currently in America. Many couples in Sweden don’t marry even when they have children. In a recent opinion poll Swedish young adults were asked whether it was OK to cohabit even after having children; 89 percent of women and 86 percent of men answered “yes.”³

Why is the Swedish marriage rate so low rela-

³ Reported in E. Bernhardt, Att gifta sig—eller bara bo ihop (To marry, or just live together) *Valfardsbulletinen* 4 (2001)

¹ Data for U.S. from *Living Arrangements of Children* (Washington, DC: Census Bureau, 1996); for Sweden, *Barn och deras familjer 2001* (Children and their families), Demografiska Rapporter 2003:2, (Statistics Sweden, 2003)

² Number of marriages per 1000 unmarried women in 2002—Sweden: 17.5; US: 43.4. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics in this essay were gathered or computed by the National Marriage Project from official statistical sources in each nation.



The Sweden Nobody Knows

In the U.S., Sweden has long been identified with liberated sexuality. But there's another side to Sweden. When it comes to the lives and well-being of children, this secular society imposes more stringent legal restrictions on sexual and family behavior than the U.S. Here are four issues affecting children where Sweden takes a more conservative approach than the U.S.

LEGAL DIVORCE

Sweden: All married couples with children, 16 or under, must wait six months before a divorce becomes final

U.S.: Most states make no distinction in their divorce laws between couples with children and couples without

IN VITRO FERTILIZATION

Sweden: Allowable only if a woman is married or cohabiting in a long-term relationship resembling marriage

U.S.: No restrictions

ANONYMOUS SPERM DONATION

Sweden: Prohibited

U.S.: No restrictions

ABORTION

Sweden: No abortion allowed after the 18th week of pregnancy without review and permission from the National Board of health

U.S.: Abortions allowed for pregnancies through the third trimester in all but three states

tive to other nations? In brief, because religion there is weak, a left-wing political ideology has long been dominant, and almost all governmental incentives for marriage have been removed. First, the religious pressure for marriage in Sweden is all but gone (although of the marriages that do occur, many are for vague religious reasons). Any religious or cultural stigma in Sweden against cohabitation is no longer in evidence; it is regarded as irrelevant to question whether a couple is married or just living together. Second, the political left wing throughout Europe has generally been antagonistic to strong families, based on a combination of feminist concerns about patriarchy and oppression, an antipathy toward a bourgeois social institution with traditional ties to nobility and privilege, and the belief that families have been an impediment to full equality. Finally, unlike in the United States all government benefits in Sweden are given to individuals irrespective of their intimate relationships or family form. There is no such thing, for example, as spousal benefits in health care. There is also no joint-income taxation for married couples; all income taxation is individual.

Turning to the United States, if Sweden stands out for having the lowest marriage rate, the United States is notable for having the world's highest divorce rate. Given the divorce rates of recent years, the risk of a marriage ending in divorce in the United States is close to 50 percent, compared to a little over 40 percent in Sweden. Why is the American divorce rate so high relative to other nations? Mainly because of our relatively high ethnic, racial and religious

diversity, inequality of incomes with a large underclass, and extensive residential mobility, each of which is associated with high divorce. Revealingly, if one looks at the divorce rate of the relatively homogeneous and Scandinavian-settled state of Minnesota, it is only slightly higher than that of Sweden.⁴ Another big divorce risk factor in America is marrying at a young age; the average U.S. ages of first marriage today are 26 for women and 27 for men, versus 31 and 33 in Sweden. As a more consumer-oriented and economically dynamic society, in addition, there is probably something about this nation that promotes a more throw-away attitude toward life. And let us not overlook the dominant influence of Hollywood and pop culture in general, with their emphasis on feel good and forget the consequences.

Of course if people don't marry, they can't divorce. And that is one reason why, by certain measures, Sweden has a lower divorce rate. But if couples just cohabit they certainly can break-up, and that is what Swedish nonmarital couples do in large numbers. It is estimated that the risk of breakup for cohabiting couples in Sweden, even those with children, is several times higher than for married couples. By one indication, in the year 2000 there were two-and-one-half separations or divorces per 100 children among married parents, almost twice that number among unmarried cohabiting parents living with their own biological children, and three times that number among cohabiting couples living with

⁴ Number of divorces per 1000 married women in 2002—Sweden: 13.7; Minnesota: 14.7; US: 18.4.

children from a previous relationship.⁵ Already one of the highest in Western Europe, the Swedish divorce rate has been growing in recent years, while the U.S. rate has been declining. If we consider this convergence of divorce rates, and count both cohabiting couples and married couples, *the total family breakup rate in the two nations today is actually quite similar.*

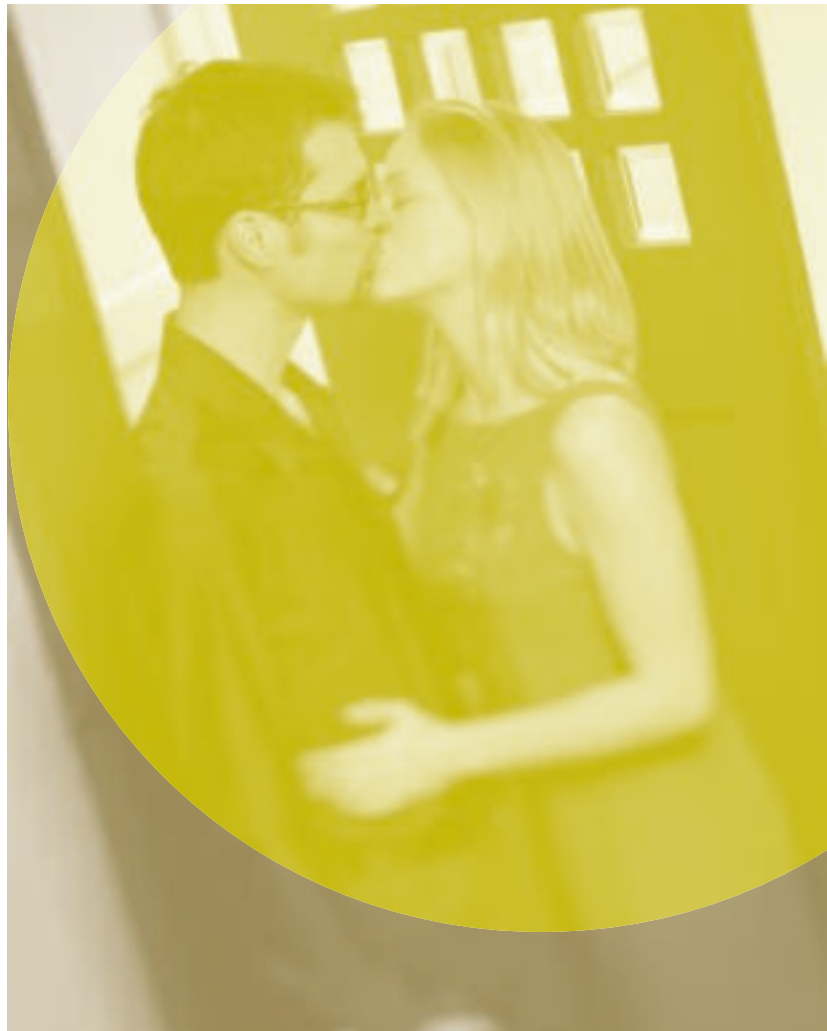
So why, in view of the similarity of overall family breakup rates, are more Swedish than American children living with their biological parents? This is especially surprising in view of the fact that the Swedish nonmarital birth percentage is much higher than that of the United States (56 percent in Sweden vs. 35 percent in the U.S.). The main reason is that far more nonmarital births in Sweden, about 90 percent, are actually to biological parents who are living together but have not married, compared to just 40 percent in the United States. The great majority of nonmarital births in the U.S., 60 percent, are to truly single, non-cohabiting mothers. This discrepancy reflects the far higher rate of births in the United States to teenagers, the stage of life at which the father is least likely to remain involved with the mother and child.⁶ The relatively high U.S. teen birthrate, in turn, is commonly accounted for by more teen sexual activity combined with less use of contraceptives. There is also a discrepancy between the two countries in that the United States has about twice Sweden's rate of "unwanted" children.⁷

Having sketched out these noteworthy differences in family structure between the United States and Sweden, together with some causal explanations for the differences, what are some reasonable conclusions that can be drawn from the Scandinavian family experience?

⁵ *Barn och deras familjer2000* (Children and their families), Demografiska Rapporten 2002:2 (Statistics Sweden, 2002). A recent study found that 50 percent of children born to a cohabiting couple in the United States see their parents' union end by age five, compared to only 15 percent of children born to a married couple. Wendy D. Manning, Pamela J. Smock and Debarum Majumdar, "The relative stability of cohabiting and marital unions for children," *Population Research and Policy Review* 23:135-159 (2004)

⁶ Births per 1000 girls ages 15-19 in 2002—US: 43; Sweden: 5.

⁷ Elise F. Jones et. al., *Pregnancy, Contraception, and Family Planning Services in Industrialized Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989) Appendix B, p. 243



The Decline of Marriage

If a society deinstitutionalizes marriage, as Sweden has done through its tax and benefit policies and the secularization of its culture, marriage will weaken. In addition, because most adults still like to live as couples, human pair-bonding doesn't disappear when this happens. Rather, the institution of marriage is replaced by nonmarital cohabitation—marriage lite. Then, if one institutionalizes nonmarital cohabitation in the laws and government policies, as Sweden has also done, making it the virtual equivalent of marriage, marriage will decline still further.

In the modern world people are reluctant to make strong commitments if they don't have to; it's easier to hang loose. The problem is that society ends up with adult intimate relationships that are much more fragile. It is, indeed, surprising



that Sweden has such a high a level of couple breakup, because it is the kind of society—stable, homogeneous, and egalitarian—where one would expect such breakups to be minimal. Yet the high breakup level is testimony to the fragility of modern marriage in which most of the institutional bonds have been stripped away—economic dependence, legal definitions, religious sentiments, and family pressures—leaving marriage and other pair-bonds held together solely by the thin and unstable reed of affection.

The losers in this social trend, of course, are the children. They are highly dependent for their development and success in life on the family in which they are born and raised, and a convincing mass of scientific evidence now exists pointing to the fact that not growing up in an intact nuclear family is one of the most deleterious events that can befall a child. In Sweden, just as in the United States, children from non-intact families—compared to those from intact families—have two to three times the number of

serious problems in life.⁸ We can only speculate about the extent of psychological damage that future generations will suffer owing to today's family trends. That the very low marriage rate and high level of parental break-up are such non-issues in Sweden, something which few Swedes ever talk about, should be, in my opinion, a cause there for national soul searching.

Scandinavian Child Rearing

All that said, however, there are other important conclusions one can draw from the Scandinavian family experience. What most Americans don't realize is that, in a strict comparison, Scandinavia is probably preferable to the United States today as a place to raise young chil-

⁸ Gunilla Ringback Weitof, Anders Hjerm, Bengt Haglund and Mans Rosen, "Mortality, severe morbidity, and injury in children living with single parents in Sweden: A population-based study" *The Lancet* 361: 289-295 (2003)

dren. In other writings I have suggested that the ideal family environment for raising young children has the following traits: an enduring two-biological parent family that engages regularly in activities together, has developed its own routines, traditions and stories, and provides a great deal of contact time between adults and children. Surrounded by a community that is child friendly and supportive of parents, the family is able to develop a vibrant family subculture that provides a rich legacy of meaning and values for children throughout their lives.⁹ Scandinavians certainly fall short on the enduring two-biological parent part of this ideal (yet even there they are currently ahead of the United States), but on the key ingredients of structured and consistent contact time between parents and their children in a family friendly environment, they are well ahead of us.

In America today the achievement of this ideal family environment requires what many parents are coming to consider a Herculean countercultural effort, one that involves trying to work fewer hours and adopting the mantra of “voluntary simplicity” for those who can afford it; turning off the TV set and avoiding popular culture; seeking employment in firms that have family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours; and residing in areas that are better designed for children and where the cost of living is lower. Families in Scandinavia need not be so countercultural to achieve these goals because the traits of the ideal child-rearing environment are to a larger degree already built into their societies.

The Scandinavian societies tend to be “soft” or low-key, with much more leisure time and not so much frantic consumerism and economic striving as in the United States. Perhaps one could even say that they practice “involuntary simplicity.” The average American would probably find life in Scandinavia rather uncomfortable due to high taxes, strict government regulation, limited consumer choice, smaller dwelling units, social conformity, and a soft work ethic, not to mention possible boredom. There are also growing concerns about the quality of education in Scandinavia. Moreover, the Scandinavian system

may ultimately prove to be so counterproductive for economic growth that it becomes unsustainable. (At any one time more than 20% of working-age Swedes are either on sick leave, unemployed, or have taken early retirement, and the nation has recently sunk to one of the lowest per capita income levels in Western Europe!¹⁰) But in the meantime, and compared to other modern nations, the system seems particularly good for the rearing of young children.

The Scandinavian child-rearing advantage is probably as much cultural as governmental, as much due to the way Scandinavians think about children as to specific welfare state policies (although the two are, of course, interrelated.) Scandinavian culture has always been more child centered than the more individualistic Anglo societies. The emphasis in Scandinavian culture on nature and the outdoor environment, conflict-aversion, and even social conformity happens to be especially child friendly. Children benefit from highly structured, stable, and low-conflict settings. There are in Scandinavia many statues of children and mothers in public parks (in place of war heroes!), and planned housing environments are heavily oriented to pedestrian access and children’s play. Scandinavian children even have their own Ombudsmen who represent them officially in the government and monitor children’s rights and interests. Interestingly, Minnesota—the most Scandinavian-settled U.S. state—was recently ranked the number one state in the nation for child wellbeing by the Kids Count Data Book.¹¹

The Scandinavian concern for children, sometimes even smacking of “traditional family values,” is expressed in some areas that should surprise those Americans who think only of “decadent welfare states.” For example, all Swedish married couples with children aged 16 and younger, should they want a divorce, have a six month waiting period before a divorce becomes final. Most American states make no distinction in their divorce laws between couples with children and those without. *In vitro* fertilization in Sweden can be performed only if the woman is married or cohabiting in a relationship

⁹ See David Popenoe, *War over the Family* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005) Chapter 1

¹⁰ Reported in Sweden’s leading newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, on August 23, 2004

¹¹ (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004)

resembling marriage, and completely anonymous sperm donations are not allowed, whereas the practice of “assisted reproduction” in America goes virtually unregulated. And no Swedish abortion can take place after the 18th week of pregnancy except under special circumstances and only with permission from the National Board of Health. The laws permitting abortion are much more liberal in the United States. Some of these positions are made possible, of course, by the fact that the Scandinavian societies are more homogeneous, unified and less rights-oriented than the United States.

Scandinavian Family Policies

Just as in the United States at least up until welfare reform, welfare policies in Scandinavia have not been drawn up with an eye toward encouraging marriage and limiting family breakup, a very serious problem as noted above. There are relatively few economic disincentives to becoming a single parent in Sweden, in fact probably fewer than in any other society in the

world. Nevertheless, many Scandinavian welfare-state policies have brought significant benefits to children and to child-rearing families. Scandinavian family leave policies, especially, seem highly desirable for young children. Almost all mothers in Sweden, for example, and far more than in the United States, are at home with their infants up until age one—which is the critical year for mother-child connection. They have one year off from their job at 80% or more of their salary (and an additional six months at reduced salary), with a guarantee of returning to their old job or its equivalent when they reenter the labor force. Recently, two months have been set aside solely for fathers to take; if they don’t take it, the benefit is lost. Because of these family leave policies very few Swedish infants under the age of one are in day care or other out-of-home childcare arrangement, a quite different situation from the United States. In addition, to help defray the expenses of child rearing, all Swedish parents receive a non-means-tested child allowance and there is also a means-tested housing allowance.

Beyond these benefits, Scandinavian mothers



and fathers have far more flex-time from their work to be home with children during the growing-up years, and most women with young children work just part-time. There are certainly fewer full-time, non-working, stay-at-home mothers in Sweden than in the United States, in fact almost none because it is economically prohibitive. But in actual parenting time—although good comparative data are unavailable—Sweden may well be in the lead. The larger number of stay-at-home moms in America is off-set by the larger number of full-time working mothers, many of whom return to work during their child's first year. It is of interest to note that many fewer Swedish women have top positions in the private sector than is the case in America, and this has long been a bone of contention for American feminists when they look at Sweden. By one recent analysis only one-and-a-half percent of senior management positions are filled by women in Sweden, compared to eleven percent in the United States.¹² The amount of time that Swedish mothers devote to child care clearly has affected their ability to rise in the private sector hierarchy of jobs, although this is off-set in some degree by their much stronger status in the public sector where a high percentage of the jobs are located.

Finally, let us not forget that as a result of welfare state policies child poverty in Sweden is virtually nonexistent (for the 1990s, one percent compared to 15 percent in the United States) and all children are covered by health insurance. These and related factors are doubtless of importance in placing Sweden at the top of the list of the best places in the world to live, surpassed only by Norway according to the Human Development Index prepared by the United Nations Development Program, and based on income, life expectancy and education.¹³ The United States ranks well down the list, at eighth place, doubtless due in part to the fact that we have a far different population mix than these other nations.

Again, the two societies are such polar opposites at least among Western nations, as we have indicated, that it is a mistake to think that what



works in Sweden could necessarily be transplanted to America. Up to now, at least, the Scandinavian nations have had that strong sense of “brotherhood” or “sisterhood” that is required for a strong welfare state. The common sentiment has been that the high taxes are going for a good cause, “my fellow Swede.” Indeed, the lack of outcry against high taxation in Scandinavia comes as a shock to most visiting Americans. To suggest that this communal spirit and attitude toward government and taxation could ever exist in the United States, with all its diversity and individualism, is to enter the realm of utopian thinking. So it is unclear how many of these family policies could be implemented in the United States, and what their actual effect would be if they were. But, given their often beneficial effects in Scandinavia, they should not be rejected out of hand.

¹² Cited in Catherine Hakim, *Key Issues in Women's Work* (London, Glasshouse Press, 2004)

¹³ (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2004)



The Trend of Modernity

This leaves us with a final conclusion from the Scandinavian family experience, a more general one. The fact that family breakdown has occurred so prevalently in both the United States and Scandinavia, two almost opposite socio-economic systems, suggests that the root cause lies beyond politics and economics and even national culture in an over-arching trend of modernity that affects all advanced, industrial societies. Basic to this trend is the growth of a modern form of individualism, the single-minded pursuit of personal autonomy and self-interest, which takes place at the expense of established social institutions such as marriage. This shows up in low marriage and high cohabitation rates in the Scandinavian societies, even though they are relatively communitarian. And it is expressed in high divorce and high solo parenting rates in the United States, despite our nation's relatively religious character.

One paramount family goal for modern societies today, put forward by many experts, is to create the conditions whereby an increasing

number of children are able to grow up with their own two married parents. If this is a worthy goal, and I think it is, both Scandinavia and the United States have failed badly, and millions of children have been hurt. If we are to take seriously the record of recent history in these nations, the market economy on its own, no matter how strong, is unlikely to be of much help in achieving this goal. The wealthier we become, the weaker the family. But neither, apparently, are the many governmental policies of the welfare state. They may help to soften the impact of family breakup, but the state appears relatively powerless to contain family decline and often even contributes to it. What we must look for, instead, are ways to curtail the growth of modern individualism. While in Scandinavia the main thrust of such efforts probably should focus on resisting the anti-marriage influences of political ideologies and social policies, in the United States the main issue is surely to find better ways to insulate marriage and the family from the pernicious effects of a self-interest-fostering market economy that is tethered increasingly to a coarsening popular culture.



Social Indicators of Marital Health and Wellbeing

TRENDS OF THE PAST FOUR DECADES

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

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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 2004, in the annual number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried adult women (Figure 1). Some of this decline—it is not clear just how much—results from the delaying of first marriages until older ages: the median age at first marriage went from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to about 26 and 27, respectively, in 2004. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry.

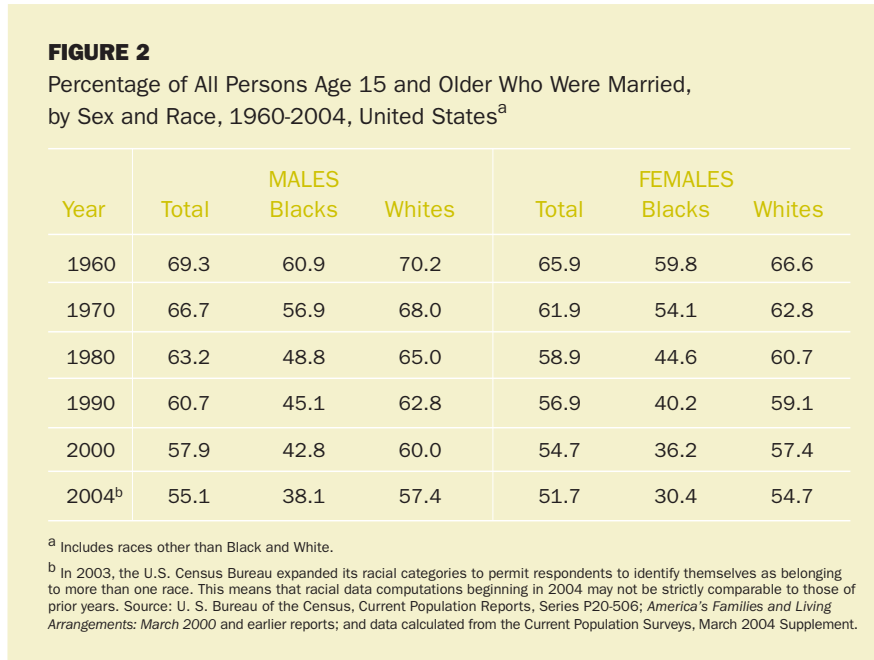
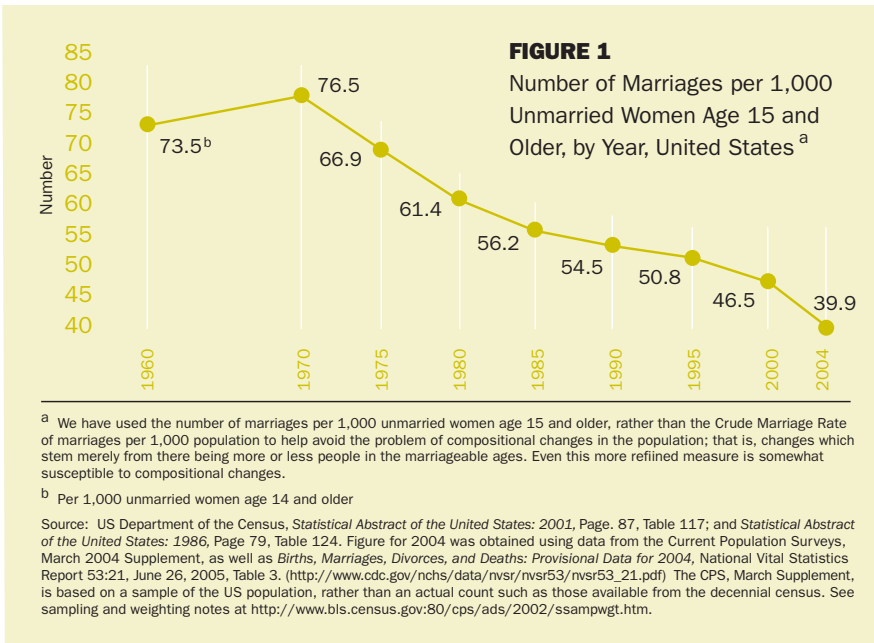
The decline also reflects some increase in lifelong singlehood, though the actual amount can not be known until current young and middle-aged adults pass through the life course.

The percentage of adults in the population who are currently married has also diminished. Since 1960, the decline of those married among all persons age 15 and older has been 14 percentage points—and over 29 points among black females (Figure 2). It should be noted that these data include both people who have never married and those who have married and then divorced. (For some economic implications of the decline of marriage, see the accompanying box: “The Surprising Economic Benefits of Marriage.”)

In order partially to control for a decline in married adults simply due to delayed first marriages, we have looked at changes in the percentage of persons age 35 through 44 who were married (Figure 3). Since 1960, there has been a drop of 22 percentage points for married men and 20 points for married women.

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

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



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 majori-

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

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 fig-

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

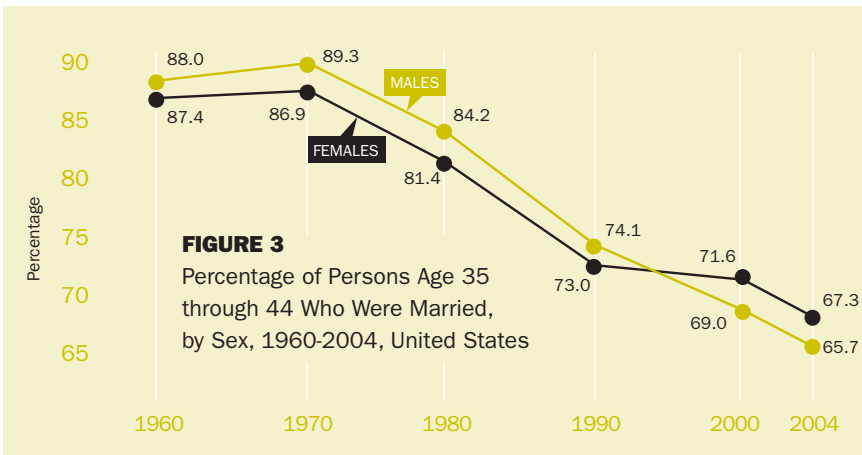
It is important to note that the decline in marriage does not mean that people are giving up on living together with a sexual partner. On the contrary, with the incidence of unmarried cohabitation increasing rapidly, marriage is giv-

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.

ing 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 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.

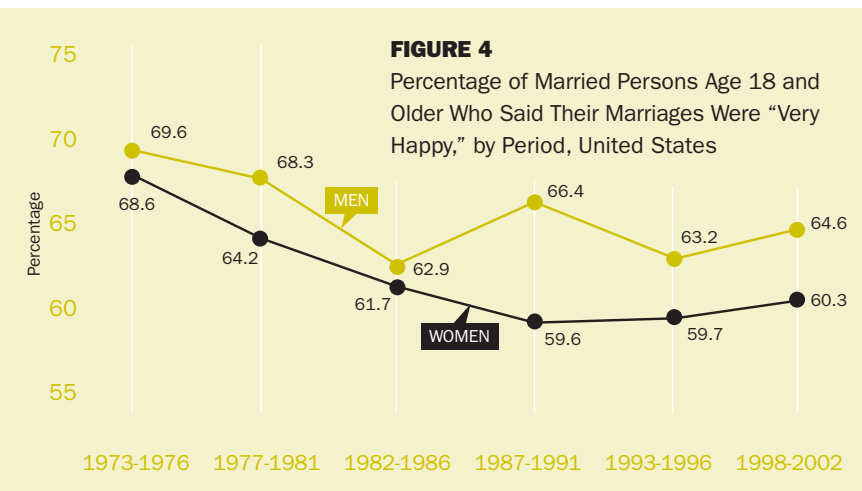


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1961, Page 34, Table 27; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1971, Page 32, Table 38; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1981, Page 38, Table 49; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *General Population Characteristics*, 1990, Page 45, Table 34; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Page 48, Table 51; internet tables (www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2003/tabA1-all.pdf) and data calculated from the Current Population Surveys, March 2004 Supplement. Figure for 2004 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 US population, rather than an actual count such as those available from the decennial census. See sampling and weighting notes at <http://www.bls.census.gov/80/cps/ads/2002/ssampwgt.htm>.

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 in recent years, the lifetime 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



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).

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

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

Your Chances of Divorce May Be Lower Than You Think

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

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

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

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

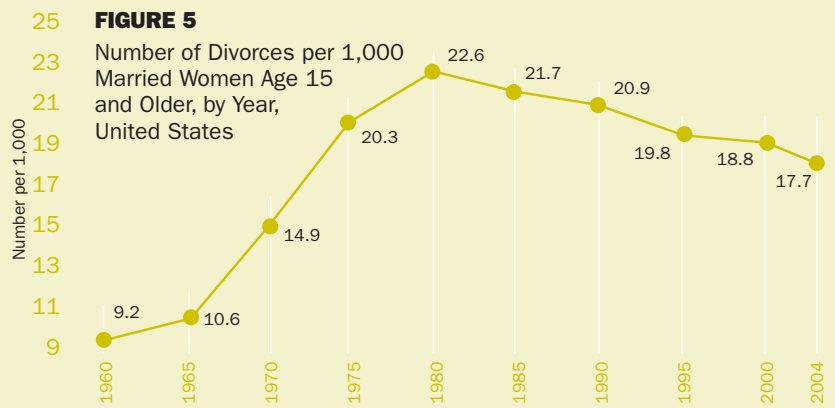
Also, it should be realized that the “close to 50%” divorce rate refers to the percentage of marriages entered into during a particular year that are projected to end in divorce or separation before one spouse dies. Such projections assume that the divorce and death rates occurring that year will continue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

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

^b Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields, “Number, Timing and Duration of Marriages and Divorces, 1996,” *Current Population Reports*, P70-80, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2002.

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



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; and 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 2004*, National Vital Statistics Report 53:21, June 26, 2005, Table 3. (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr53/nvsr53_21.pdf) and calculations by the National Marriage Project for the US less California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana and Oklahoma using the Current Population Surveys, 2004.

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

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 mar-

FIGURE 6

Percentage of All Persons Age 15 and Older Who Were Divorced, by Sex and Race, 1960-2004, United States

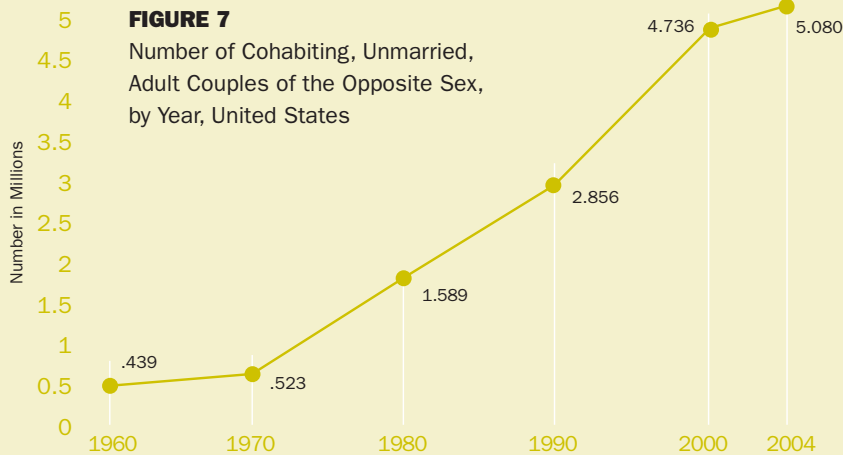
Year	Total	MALES		Total	FEMALES	
		Blacks	Whites		Blacks	Whites
1960	1.8	2.0	1.8	2.6	4.3	2.5
1970	2.2	3.1	2.1	3.5	4.4	3.4
1980	4.8	6.3	4.7	6.6	8.7	6.4
1990	6.8	8.1	6.8	8.9	11.2	8.6
2000	8.3	9.5	8.4	10.2	11.8	10.2
2004 ^a	8.2	9.1	8.3	10.9	12.9	10.9

^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.

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 Survey, March 2004 supplement, raw data.

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 West than in other parts of the country. But these variations have been diminishing. The trend toward a greater similarity of divorce rates between Whites and Blacks is largely attributable to the fact that fewer blacks are marrying.⁴ Divorce rates in the South and Midwest have come to resemble those in the West, for reasons that are not well understood, leaving only the Eastern Seaboard and the Central Plains with significantly lower divorce.

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



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, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2004>).

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 2004, as indicated in Figure 7, the number of unmarried couples in America increased by nearly 1200 percent. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household—is particularly common among the young. It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women age 25 to 39 are currently living with a partner and an additional quarter have lived with a partner at some time in the past. Over half of all first mar-

riage started in recent years will end in either divorce or separation before one partner dies.³ (But see the accompanying box: “Your Chances

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

riages 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 considered an alternative to marriage.

Cohabitation is more common among those of lower educational and income levels. Recent data show that among women in the 19 to 44 age range, 60 percent of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 37 percent of college graduates.² Cohabitation is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers, those who have been divorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood. A growing percentage of cohabiting couple households, now 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 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

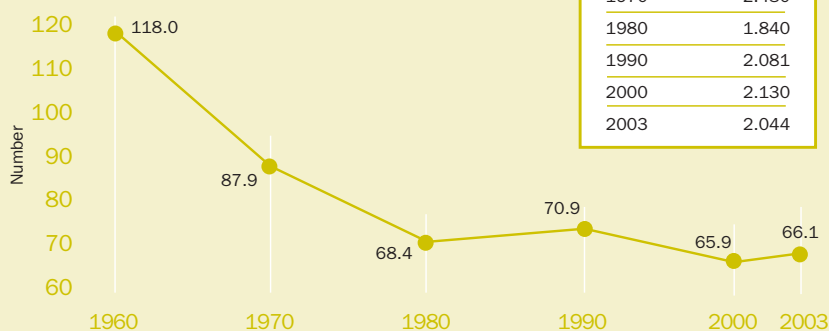
¹ Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the U. S.,” *Population Studies* 54 (2000) 29-41

² Bumpass and Lu, 2000.

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.

FIGURE 8

Fertility Rates, 1960-2003, Number of Births per 1,000 Women Age 15 through 44, United States



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

Source: National Vital Statistics Report, 1993, Pages 1, 2, 10 and 11; National Vital Statistics Report, 2001, 49:1; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999*, Pages 75, 76 and 78, Tables 91, 93 and 96. Hamilton, B., et al. *Births: Preliminary Data for 2003*, National Vital Statistics Report, 53:9, Nov. 23, 2004, p. 2.

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 increas-

⁴ For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000); and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage—A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research*, 2nd Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002).

What's Happening to Child-Rearing Families?

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

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

girls who agree. (See Figure 17.)

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

^a Calculation by Professor Norval Glenn, University of Texas, using data from the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. Data are weighted by number of persons under age 18 in the household. The trends in pre-adults living with an unmarried person and in those living with married persons in a "very happy" marriage are statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a one-tailed test).

^b General Social Surveys

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

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

ingly have been pushed from center stage. (See accompanying box: What's Happening to Child-Rearing Families?)

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

Since 2000 the birth rate has been continuing its downward trend. In 2003, the latest year for which we have complete information, the American "total fertility rate" (TFR) stood at 2.044, 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 Some observers believe that the United States birthrate will decline further in future decades to become more like that of Europe today.

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

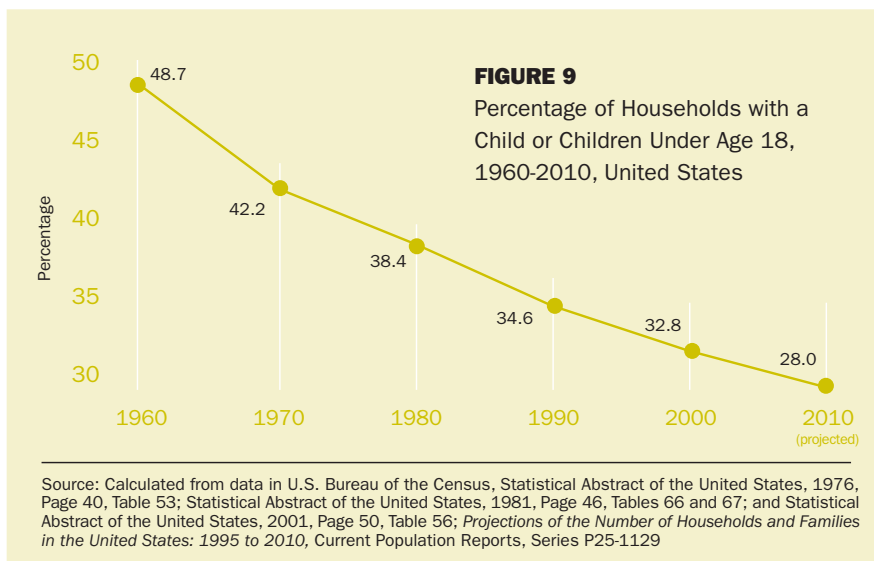
¹ The TFR in Germany, Spain, Italy and Greece is 1.3; in Japan it is 1.3 and in South Korea it is 1.2. World Population Data Sheet, (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2004).

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

households. In 2000, just four decades later, less than 33 percent of households included children, and the percentage is projected to drop to 28 by 2010 (Figure 9). This obviously means that adults are less likely to be living with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and that children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. It suggests that the needs and concerns of children—especially young children—gradually may be receding from our national consciousness.

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

In a recent cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, the United States ranked virtually at the top in the percentage disagreeing with this statement: “the main purpose of marriage is having children.”⁴ Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else compared, for example, to just 51 percent of Norwegians or 45 percent of Italians. Consistent with this view is a dramatic change in our attitudes about holding marriages together for children. In a Detroit area sample of women, the proportion of women answering “no” to the question “Should a couple stay together for the sake of the children?” jumped from 51 percent to 82 percent between 1962 and 1985.⁵ A nationally-representative 1994 sample



found only 15 percent of the population agreeing that “When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.”⁶

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

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.

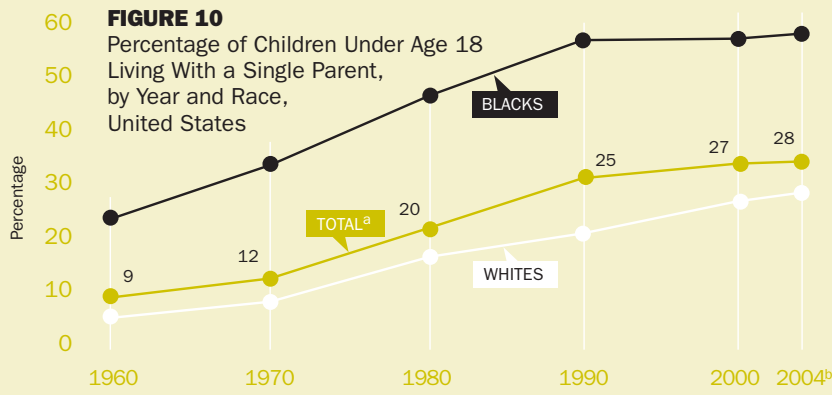
³ Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken and John Bongaarts, “Demographic Foundations of Family Change,” *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 346-358.

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

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

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

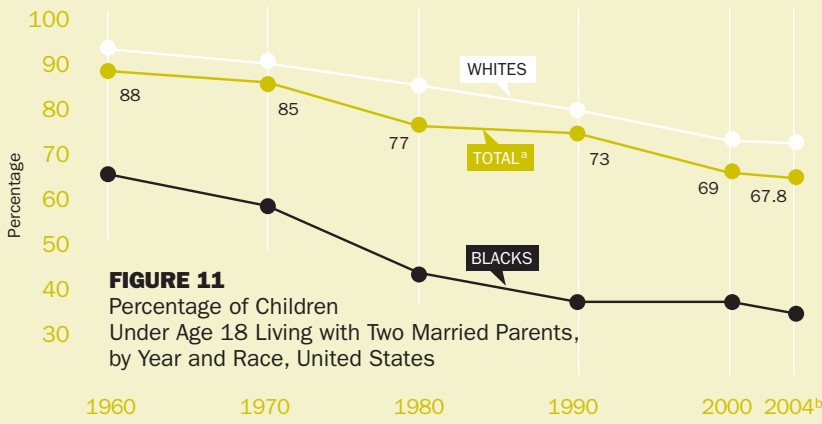
⁷ Tim B. Heaton, “Marital Stability Throughout the Child-Rearing Years,” *Demography* 27 (1990): 55-63; Philip Morgan, Diane Lye, and Gretchen Condran, “Sons, Daughters, and the Risk of Marital Disruption” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 110-129; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, “Children and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



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

^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, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2004>).



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

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Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; *America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000*; Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002, and earlier reports; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2004>).

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

The trend toward single-parent families is

probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents (Figure 10). This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families.¹ While in 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the 20th century, by 2004 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 20 percentage points (Figure 11). Unfortunately, this measure makes no distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while nine percent are stepfamilies.² The problem is that children in stepfamilies, according to a substantial and growing body of social science evidence, fare no better in life than children in single-parent families.³ Data on 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 inci-

¹ Mary Parke, *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?* (Washington, DC, Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2003); and William J. Doherty, et al., *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2002)

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

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

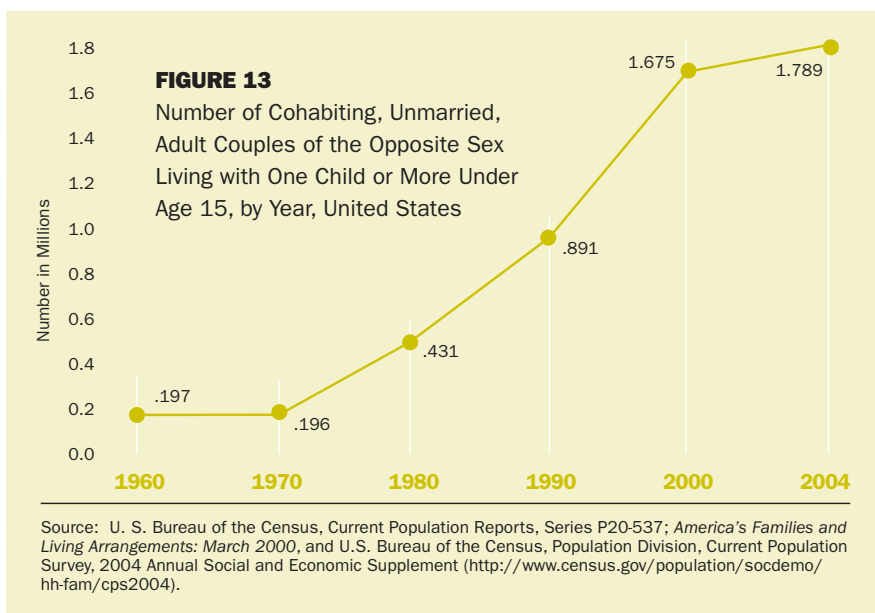
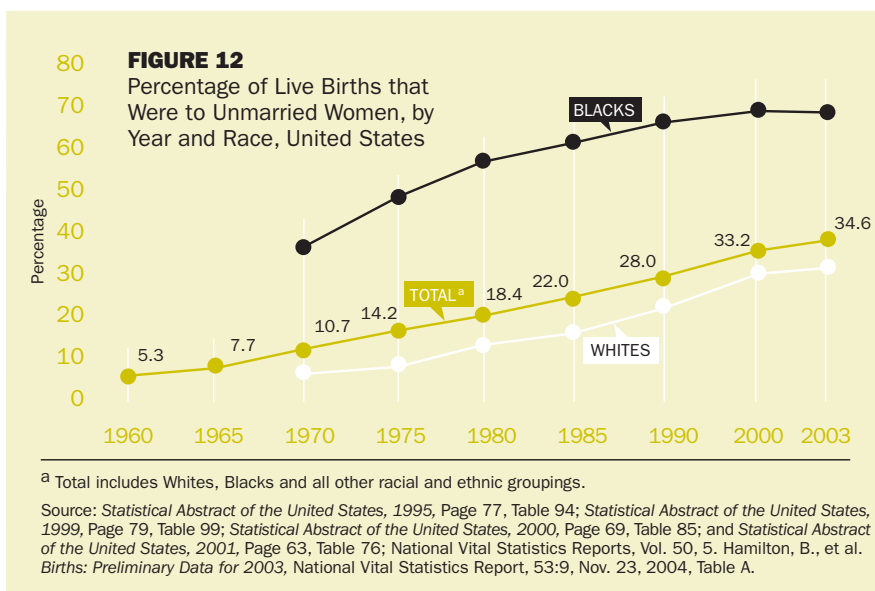
⁴ Jason Fields, op.cit.

dence of divorce began to increase rapidly during the 1960s. The number of children under age 18 newly affected by parental divorce each year, most of whom have lost a resident father, went from under 500,000 in 1960 to well over a million in 1975. After peaking around 1980, the number leveled off and remains close to a million new children each year. Much of the reason for the leveling off is a drop in average family size; each divorce that occurs today typically affects a smaller number of children than in earlier times.

The second reason for the shift in family structure is an increase in the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers, which suddenly and unexpectedly began to increase rapidly in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than sixfold (Figure 12). More than a third of all births and more than two-thirds of black births in 2003, 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 over 900 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 cou-

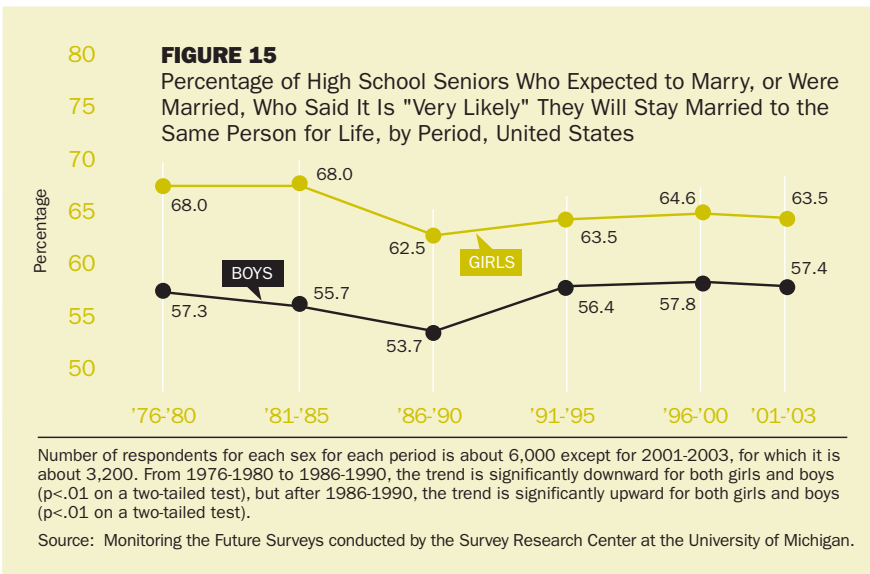
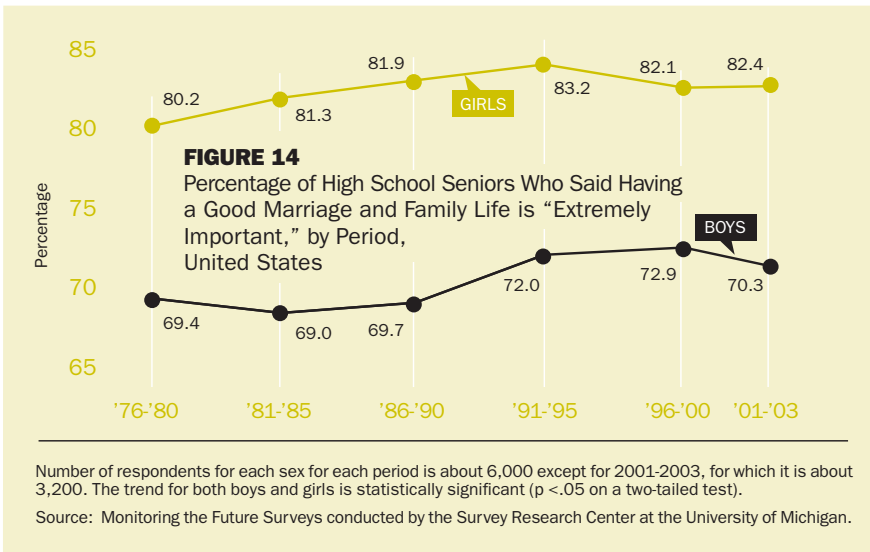
⁵ Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S.," *Population Studies* 54 (2000): 29-41

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

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.



ples 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

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

¹¹ Bumpass and Lu, op. cit.

a higher level of child abuse and domestic violence. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children is declining, to 44 percent in 1997 from 57 percent a decade earlier—a decline sadly predictive of increased problems for children.¹¹

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

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.

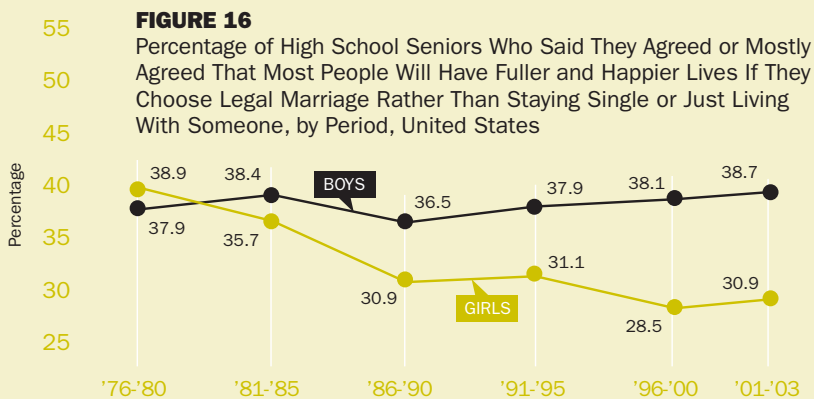
this belief in the latest period, with boys lagging behind at 70 percent (Figure 14).

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 percent for girls and 78 percent for boys.² Among teenagers, boys are a little more pessimistic than girls in the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime. But this difference has recently diminished and since 1986-90, the trend has been slightly more optimistic overall. (Figure 15).

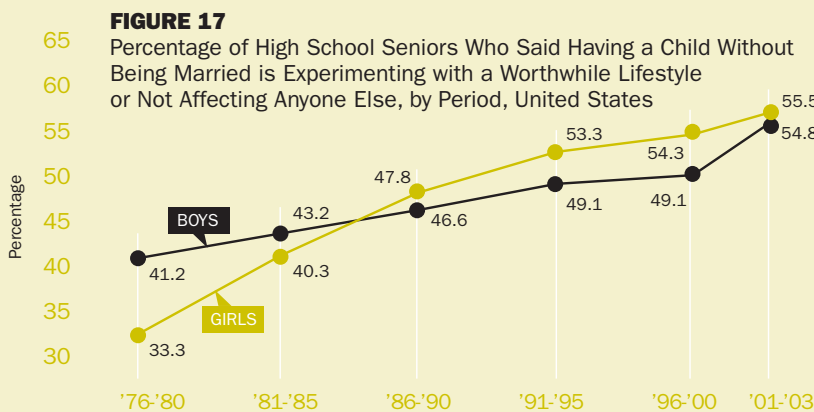
At the same time, there is widespread acceptance by teenagers of nonmarital lifestyles. Take, for example, agreement with the proposition “that most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone” (Figure 16). Less than a third of the girls and only slightly more than a third of the boys seem to believe, based on their answer to this question, that marriage is more beneficial to individuals than the alternatives. Yet this belief is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.³

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, 2001-2003, the boys' percentage jumped to 78 and the girls' to 84. A 1992 Gallup poll of youth aged 13 to 17 found an even larger percentage who thought they would marry someday—88% compared to 9% who expected to stay single. Gallup has undertaken a youth poll several times since 1977 and the proportion of youth expecting to marry someday has not varied much through the years. See Robert Bezilla, ed, *America's Youth in the 1990s* (Princeton, NJ: The George H. Gallup International Institute, 1993)

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



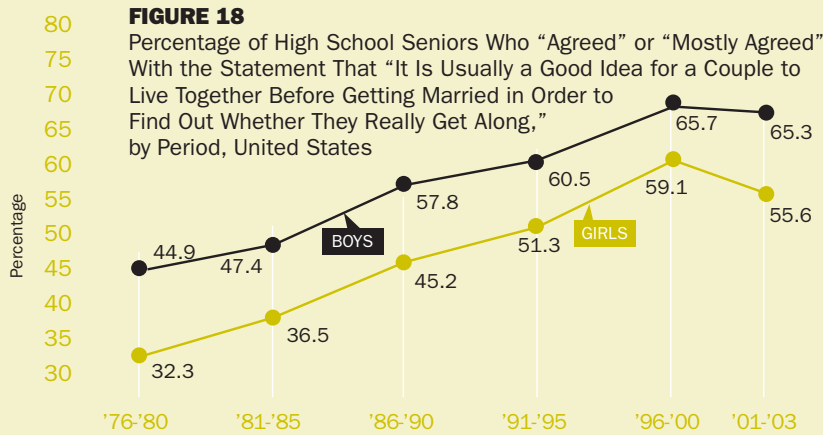
Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2003, for which it is about 3,200. The trend for girls is statistically significant ($p < .01$ on a two-tailed test).
Source: Monitoring the Future Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2003, for which it is about 3,200. 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.

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 slightly less so. 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 accept-



Number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 6,000 except for 2001-2003, for which it is about 3,200. 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.

ance of living together before marriage, now by well over half of all teenagers (Figure 18). In this case girls remain more traditional than boys. However, this trend recently has taken an unexpected reversal for both boys and girls. This may be an indication that teenagers are more aware of the evidence, widely publicized in recent years, linking premarital cohabitation to a higher divorce risk.

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

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