Institute for American Values

University of Virginia
The National Marriage Project

The **State** *of Our* **Unions**

Marriage in America
2012

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THE STATE *of* OUR UNIONS

The State of Our Unions monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America. Produced annually, it is a joint publication of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values.

THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT

The National Marriage Project (NMP) is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative located at the University of Virginia. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability. The NMP has five goals: (1) publish the *State of Our Unions*, which monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America; (2) investigate and report on the state of marriage among young adults; (3) provide accurate information and analysis regarding marriage to journalists, policy makers, religious leaders, and the general public—especially young adults; (4) conduct research on the ways in which children, race, class, immigration, ethnicity, religion, and poverty shape the quality and stability of contemporary marriage; and (5) bring marriage and family experts together to develop strategies for strengthening marriage. The NMP was founded in 1997 by family scholars David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. The Project is now directed by W. Bradford Wilcox, associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

THE CENTER FOR MARRIAGE & FAMILIES AT THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN VALUES

The Center for Marriage and Families is located at the Institute for American Values, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. Directed by Elizabeth Marquardt, the Center's mission is to increase the proportion of U.S. children growing up with their two married parents. The Center's website, FamilyScholars.org, features emerging voices and senior scholars who blog with expertise and from varied points of view on today's key debates on the family.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the state of marriage in America?

On the one hand, as a culture we seem fixated on marriage, from the extravagant $50 billion we spend annually on weddings to our active debate about same-sex marriage. Yet we are also witnessing a striking exodus from marriage, especially among high school but not college educated young people, for whom raising children amid unstable cohabiting relationships and serial partnerships is in danger of becoming the new norm. This rapid decline of marriage among the almost 60 percent of the nation who are high school educated but not college educated, those whom we might call "Middle America," has been dramatic. As recently as the 1980s, only 13 percent of the children of moderately-educated mothers were born outside of marriage. By the late 2000s, this figure rose to a striking 44 percent. And in marked contrast to past calls for attention to changing trends in family structure, today almost none of our political and social leaders are talking about this dramatic change.

Why should we care? Marriage is not merely a private arrangement; it is also a complex social institution. Marriage fosters small cooperative unions—also known as stable families—that enable children to thrive, shore up communities, and help family members to succeed during good times and to weather the bad times. Researchers are finding that the disappearance of marriage in Middle America is tracking with the disappearance of the middle class in the same communities, a change that strikes at the heart of the American Dream.

Yet in the face of today's marriage challenge, most of what we hear even from political and social leaders who think marriage is important is silence, tentativeness, or worse, despair. Even those who believe marriage matters seem to think that nothing can be done.

We beg to differ. We come together to offer America's leaders, including our president, a marriage agenda. These proposals for federal and state policies and cultural change include eliminating marriage penalties and disincentives for the poor, for unwed mothers, and for older Americans; tripling the child tax credit; helping young men to become marriageable men; ending anonymous fatherhood; preventing unnecessary divorce; providing marriage education for newly-forming stepfamilies; investing in and evaluating marriage and relationship education programs; engaging Hollywood; launching social media campaigns about the facts and fun of marriage; and modeling how to talk about our shared marriage values despite our differences. As we explain, even small, incremental changes that improve the health of marriage in America will reduce suffering for

children and their families and will yield significant cost savings for taxpayers.

In America, marriage has always been and remains a vital pathway to opening social opportunity. For the sake of today's young people and their children, we invite our president and our nation's leaders to confront the challenge facing marriage in Middle America, and to join us in improving the health of marriage for all Americans in the years to come.

The PRESIDENT'S MARRIAGE AGENDA

FOR THE FORGOTTEN SIXTY PERCENT

THE MARRIAGE TREND

Our culture is flooded with marriage talk. We have an active debate about who can legally marry. Celebrity weddings dominate entertainment news. The wedding industry generates an estimated $50 billion annually.[1] Annual surveys continue to report that high schoolers plan to marry one day and that having a good marriage is "extremely important" to them.[2] As Americans, we still expect to see a married couple in the White House.

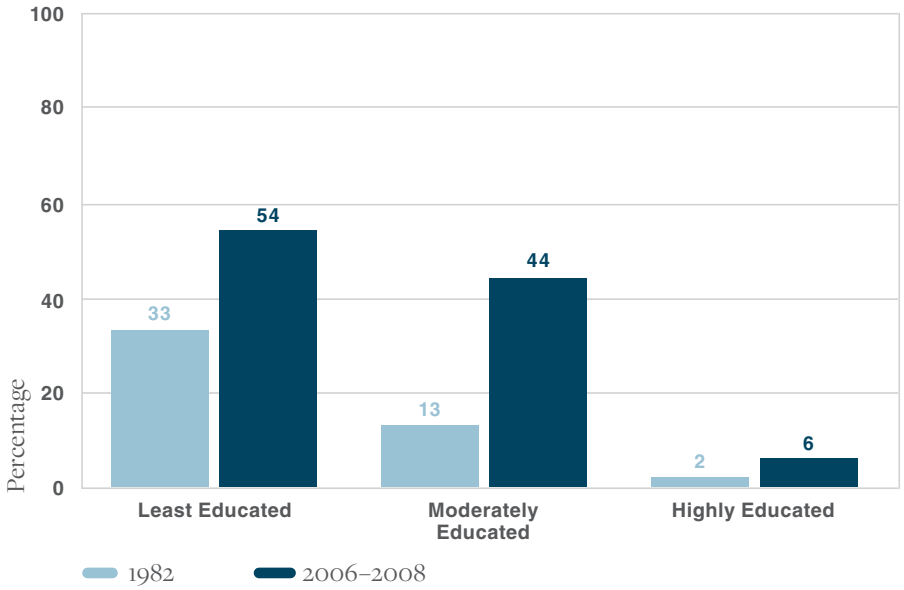
At the same time, we recognize the signs of change. The rising median age of first marriage, now 27 for women and 29 for men, is linked to a rapid rise in cohabitation prior to marriage and a dramatic increase in the number of children born outside of marriage. A growing number of couples, both young and old, now live together with no plans to marry eventually. For first marriages recently formed, between 40 and 50 percent are likely to end in divorce. The divorce rate for remarriages is higher than that for first marriages. In the meantime, an active public

debate about the right to gay marriage has occupied American minds and the media in recent years, becoming arguably the most covered, and most contested, marriage issue of our time.

Yet amid these familiar trends, something astonishing has happened. In "Middle America," defined here as the nearly 60 percent of Americans aged 25 to 60 who have a high school but not a four-year college degree, marriage is rapidly slipping away. As historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead recently wrote, "Four decades ago, these moderately educated Americans led the kind of family lives that looked much like the family lives of the more highly educated. They were just as likely to be happily married, and just as likely to be in first marriages."[3] Today, she continues, "they are significantly less likely to achieve a stable marriage, or even to form one in the first place."[4] The plight of this population who once married in high proportions and formed families within marriage—and who still aspire to marriage but increasingly are unable to achieve it—is *the* social challenge for our times. And virtually no one is talking about it.

How dramatic is the change? As recently as the 1980s, only 13 percent of the children of moderately-educated mothers were born outside of marriage. By the late 2000s, that figure had risen to a whopping 44 percent (see **Figure 1**). And earlier this year, a striking threshold was crossed. Based on a recent Child Trends analysis of data from the National Center for Health Statistics, a front-page story in the *New York Times* revealed that in the U.S. today among women under 30, more than half of births—53 percent—now occur outside of marriage. Reporters

Figure 1. **PERCENTAGE OF BIRTHS TO NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN 15–44 YEARS OLD, BY EDUCATION AND YEAR**



NOTE: Figures for 2006–2008 include all nonmarital births, including the small number of women who were divorced or widowed at their child's birth.

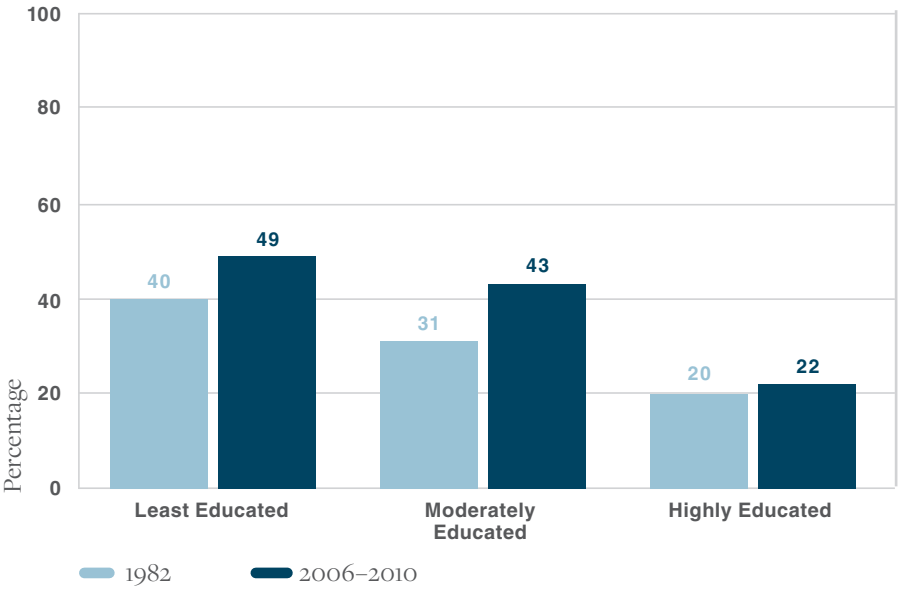
SOURCE: National Surveys of Family Growth, 1982 and 2006–2008.

Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise wrote that unwed childbearing has become "the new norm."[5]

As W. Bradford Wilcox argued in a recent edition of *State of Our Unions*, when marriage among the moderately-educated middle begins to resemble the fragile state of marriage among the poor, the family patterns of the high school educated become "more likely to resemble those of high school dropouts, with all the attendant problems of economic stress, partner conflict, single parenting, and troubled children."[6] Indeed, **Figure 2** indicates that family instability can now be found in Middle America almost as frequently as it is among the least educated sector of the population. In the early 1980s, only 31 percent of female adolescents from moderately educated homes were living in a non-intact family. Now, 43 percent of female adolescents from moderately educated homes live in a non-intact family—close to the 49 percent of female adolescents from the least educated homes (see Figure 2). By contrast, over this period of time, family stability has remained high in college-educated homes, with only about 21 percent of female adolescents from college-educated homes living in a non-intact family.

In the past, when America has experienced dramatic changes in family formation and stability there have been calls to national action. The Moynihan Report of 1965 called attention to the troubling rise in African American out-of-wedlock births (the white out-of-wedlock birth rate has now surpassed what the African American out-of-wedlock birth rate was then).[7] In the 1990s, a decades-long rise in divorce and single mothering

Figure 2. **PERCENTAGE OF 14-YEAR-OLD GIRLS LIVING IN NON-INTACT FAMILY, BY MATERNAL EDUCATION AND YEAR**



NOTE: Figures refer to females ages 15 to 19 who said that they did not live with both of their biological parents at age 14.

SOURCE: National Surveys of Family Growth, 1982 and 2006–2010.

sparked marriage and fatherhood movements and welfare reform. In the early 2000s, newly visible gay and lesbian couples launched a national debate about same-sex marriage. But as a nation we have devoted scant attention to the rapid disappearance of marriage in Middle America.[8] Even as unstable cohabiting relationships, breakups, and serial partnerships have become increasingly common in Middle American families, our national leaders, presidential candidates, and political parties seem to have barely noticed. Family structure and child well-being were seldom mentioned during the October 2012 presidential debates.

THE MARRIAGE IDEA

Why should we care? Marriage is not merely a private arrangement; it is also a complex social institution. Marriage helps to unite the needs and desires of couples and the children their unions produce. Because marriage fosters small cooperative unions—otherwise known as stable families—it not only enables children to thrive, but also shores up communities, helping family members to succeed during good times and to weather the bad times.

Researchers are now finding that the disappearance of marriage in Middle America is tracking with the disappearance of the middle class in the same communities. For example, the Pew Research Center found that from 1971 to 2011, the proportion of middle-income households dropped from 61 percent to 51

percent. During the same period, the proportion of middle-income households headed by married couples dropped dramatically, from 74 to 55 percent.[9] Researchers such as David and Amber Lapp are documenting that Middle America's couples express reservations about marriage but still want, and are having, children. Yet their children are exposed to precisely the kinds of instability—serial cohabitations and breakups— that their parents hoped to avoid by not rushing into marriage in the first place.[10]

What is left behind?

Today, the average woman bearing a child outside of marriage is a twenty-something white woman with a high school degree.[11] Like their fellow young adults, she and her child's father are beset by economic stress and institutional change on many fronts.[12] Many jobs have disappeared from their communities, health care is uncertain, and the costs of housing and higher education have shot up. While most children born outside of marriage are born to cohabiting couples, such unions are far more likely to break up than married ones.[13] Which means that today's children of Middle America are growing up without stable families to help them weather economic change, deregulation, and globalization. The loss of social opportunity for these children and their families, and the national cost to taxpayers when stable families fail to form—about $112 billion annually, or more than $1 trillion per decade, by one cautious estimate—are significant. [14]3

Some observers suggest that cohabitation is simply replacing marriage as the preferred setting for raising children. But

while many couples may be living together when their child is born, in the U.S. these unions are proving far more unstable than married ones. As sociologist Andrew Cherlin has noted, Americans are stepping "on and off the carousel of intimate relationships" increasingly rapidly.[15] Cohabiting couples who have a child together are about twice as likely as married couples to break up before their child turns twelve.[16]

This decline of marriage in Middle America imperils the middle class and fosters a society of winners and losers. Those born to married, well-educated parents are increasingly likely to have the same advantages when they become adults, graduating from four-year colleges and establishing marriages that are, on average, more stable and of better quality than in the recent past.[17] But those born to fragmented families are increasingly likely to repeat their parents' patterns and to experience the heartache, hardship, and risks that result.

As a team of family scholars recently concluded in *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences*:

> Children are less likely to thrive in cohabiting households, compared to intact, married families. On many social, educational, and psychological outcomes, children in cohabiting households do significantly worse than children in intact, married families, and about as poorly as children living in single-parent families. And when it comes to abuse, *recent federal data indicate that children in cohabiting households are markedly more likely*

> *to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused* than children in both intact, married families and single-parent families (see Figure 3 in WMM).[18] (emphasis added)

A 2012 paper by Brookings Institution economist Isabel Sawhill, "Pathways to the Middle Class," further affirms the crucial link between family structure and the ability of young people to enter and be sustained in the middle class.[19]

THE MARRIAGE CHALLENGE

Today we have a marriage challenge. For our president, supporting policy and cultural solutions for strengthening marriage will be vital to opening social opportunity for young people. Like any challenge, this one requires belief and hope that we can marshal our strengths and overcome the odds. But in the face of this challenge, most of what we encounter even from policy experts who think marriage is important is silence, tentativeness, or worse, despair.

Earlier this year, a debate on the decline of marriage in Middle America was sparked by the publication of a widely-reviewed book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, by Charles Murray. Murray writes that a large swath of America that is made up of poor and working-class whites is turning away from core values that had formerly sustained them. At the same time, elites have been quietly recovering their cultural moorings after a flirtation with the counterculture in

the 1960s and 1970s. Proffering extensive data, Murray argues that today the greatest source of inequality in America is not economic but cultural, stemming from millions of Americans losing touch with founding virtues. He identifies a rapid rise in the number of children born outside of marriage as one manifestation of this trend. Yet Murray is not optimistic that much can be done to help improve the marriage culture in America. He sees the problem as arising from a kind of "cognitive sorting" in which better-educated people who make good choices are raising their children in marriage, while less-educated people are making bad choices that negatively impact their children.[20]

Others also have their doubts about our nation's ability to have much direct impact on marriage trends in Middle America. Scholars prefer to emphasize family planning and contraception for twenty-somethings who are at risk of unwed parenthood, opportunities for job training beyond high school, and sending more high school graduates to college. Yet these strategies, however desirable they may be, have not been very successful thus far. Levels of unwed childbearing among women in their twenties have soared in recent decades, job training programs have only modest effects on earnings, and college graduation rates are essentially flat.[21]

The point is that these often ineffective if laudable efforts to improve social opportunity and indirectly improve family formation in Middle America have not led policy makers to conclude that nothing can be done and abandon these approaches. Quite to the contrary, experts who support these efforts simply

call for *more* investment in family planning, job training, and post-secondary education. It is only with respect to marriage formation that the policy world seems to have decided that very little or nothing can be done.

Sawhill and fellow Brookings Institution scholar Ron Haskins addressed this set of issues recently in *Creating an Opportunity Society*. Their approach (presented with parenthetical comments containing Sawhill's and Haskins's individual points of view) highlights the tension in the policy world:

> Although there is now widespread agreement that changes in family composition have adverse impacts on children, there is less agreement about what can or should be done about these changes. To some, any attempt to change patterns of family formation is an unwelcome intrusion into a private domain. Others (including Isabel Sawhill) believe that government should primarily focus on reducing births to young women who are not yet married and worry less about promoting marriage. . . . Still others (including Ron Haskins) believe that the agenda to increase opportunity should include efforts to encourage marriage.[22]

One consequence of the silence and uncertainty around marriage is a paucity of ideas about what to *do* to improve the culture of marriage in Middle America. With that challenge in mind, we come together to offer a marriage agenda.

But first, one more point: Of course, we know that the president alone cannot strengthen marriage in America. This requires a concerted effort that brings together our nation's leaders from diverse sectors. When it comes to renewing marriage in America, perhaps one of the most important opportunities open to the president is as a cultural leader who can inspire citizens, especially young people, to embrace the goals in which they want to believe. If we are to strengthen marriage and families in America, ultimately this will happen because young people want to bond with one another and give their children the gift of their father and mother in a lasting marriage.

THE MARRIAGE AGENDA

Researchers and policy makers have for years been hard at work on interventions aimed at strengthening marriage, many of which have direct relevance to the decline of marriage in Middle America, and some of which more directly target the poor.

While considering these recommendations, keep in mind that even small changes in the rates of marriage and marital stability in America would reduce suffering for children and their families and yield significant cost savings for taxpayers.

For example, in 2008 a team led by economist Ben Scafidi suggested that even very modest increases in stable marriage rates would result in large savings for taxpayers. These scholars calculated that if family fragmentation were reduced by just 1 percent, U.S. taxpayers would save an estimated $1.1 billion annually.[23]

In a widely-cited 2005 analysis, Penn State sociologist and international expert on children of divorce Paul Amato offered this insight:

> Increasing the share of adolescents living with two biological parents to the 1970 level . . . would mean that 643,264 fewer children would repeat a grade. Increasing the share of adolescents in two-parent families to the 1960 level suggests that nearly three-quarters of a million fewer children would repeat a grade. Similarly, increasing marital stability to its 1980 level would result in nearly half a million fewer children suspended from school, about 200,000 fewer children engaging in delinquency or violence, a quarter of a million fewer children receiving therapy, about a quarter of a million fewer smokers, about 80,000 fewer children thinking about suicide, and about 28,000 fewer children attempting suicide.[24]

Using this frame of reference, we offer ten recommendations—for federal policy, state policy, and cultural change—for renewing marriage in Middle America.

1) END MARRIAGE PENALTIES

Marriage penalties or disincentives to marriage continue to exist in a number of federal laws and policies, which results in the unintentional and systematical disadvantaging of marriage by the government. We propose ending the marriage penalty for

low-income Americans, ending the marriage penalty in Medicaid for unwed mothers, and examining disincentives to marriage in entitlement programs for older Americans.

End the Marriage Penalty for Low-Income Americans

The U.S. tax and transfer (welfare) systems frequently impose substantial financial penalties on low-income couples who choose to marry. In relative terms, these marriage penalties tend to be much greater than those experienced by non-poor couples, and in some cases amount to family income losses of 20 percent or more. These marriage-discouraging financial penalties markedly undermine efforts to strengthen marriage among low-income Americans, contributing to their inability to reach or sustain themselves in the middle class.

Experts have long debated how to amend complex and often overlapping government assistance programs in order to eliminate marriage penalties for low-income couples. A recent proposal suggests a new solution: give low-income couples a refundable tax credit for the exact amount of their marriage penalty for the first years of their marriage. This measure can eradicate the marriage penalty without overspending on broad structural reforms.

There is already a technology to support such a reform. The Urban Institute and the Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services have created a "Marriage Calculator," an easy-to-use online program that can determine a low-income couple's penalty.[25] As part of

the process of filing taxes, low-income couples could—with the assistance of civil society and governmental organizations as needed—calculate their penalty and be reimbursed.[26]

End the Marriage Penalty in Medicaid for Unwed Mothers

While considerable scholarly debate has focused on the existence and size of marriage penalties in the welfare system and their potential effects on unmarried childbearing, less attention has been paid to Medicaid. How much, if any, of the large increase in births to cohabiting parents has been driven by Medicaid policy—especially combined with drops in health insurance benefits for men who work sporadically or at low-income jobs? More research is needed, but one analysis of reforms to extend Medicaid coverage to more children concluded: "[T]hese reforms were associated with an increase in the probability of marriage."[27] The impact on marriage of Medicaid extensions appeared to be larger among mothers of infants than other mothers. Studies that target the marriage decisions of Medicaid-dependent pregnant single women are specifically needed to determine if, at the key point of entry (the birth of the first child), Medicaid policies are discouraging parents from marrying and therefore increasing the long-term risk of poverty and welfare dependency. More consideration and better understanding of the effects on marriage of Medicaid coverage policies for pregnant women and mothers of newborns should be a high priority.[28]

Examine Disincentives to Marriage for Older Americans

Do grandchildren notice when grandma lives with her boyfriend—and why might it matter?

In the U.S., our public discussion about marriage has tended to focus on family formation, childbearing, the vulnerability of children, and the needs of young families. Aside from a body of work on marriage and mortality,[29] little research and conversation has occurred around marriage and aging. This conversation is more important than ever. In fall 2010, the first baby boomers became Medicare eligible. The generation born between 1946 and 1964—who came of age in an era of unprecedented prosperity, is famously skeptical of institutions including marriage, and makes up approximately 29 percent of the U.S. population—is poised to become America's next generation of elders. Due in large part to high divorce rates and increasing cohabitation, the McKinsey Global Institute predicts that by 2015 a full 46 percent of baby boomers will live in unmarried households. This is more than twice the proportion of unmarried households in the same age bracket in 1985.[30]

One problem is that in the U.S. our current entitlement programs appear to unintentionally encourage single, widowed, or divorced older Americans to live together rather than to marry in order to remain eligible for Social Security and other benefits from a deceased or divorced spouse. Similarly, these programs also seem to encourage older Americans to consider divorce when confronting a long-term illness in order to help the ill spouse qualify for long-term care through Medicaid and

protect assets for the healthier spouse.[31] While more research needs to be done, it appears that not only might such policies undermine the comforts and security that older Americans should be able to enjoy through marriage if they choose it, they also arguably contribute to a weakening marriage culture among older Americans that sets yet another misleading example to the young that marriage does not matter.[32]

2) TRIPLE THE CHILD TAX CREDIT FOR CHILDREN UNDER AGE THREE

Tripling the child tax credit for children under age three is an important intervention that would help shore up the economic foundations of family life in Middle America. Research conducted in the U.S. shows that married couples have more children when they are able to protect more family income through child tax credits and dependent exemptions.[33] Even marginal improvement in the economic well-being of families causes married parents to consider having a second or third child, which can in turn reduce the proportion of children raised outside of intact, married families. Comparison of trends in European and American fertility (including marital fertility) highlight the likely effects of policy changes.[34] As journalist Ramesh Ponneru pointed out in a recent analysis, the younger generation still takes care of the elderly, but in Western nations assistance for the elderly is "financed by successive generations…now it's all the children providing for all the elderly, collectively." We can appreciate the necessity of this approach even

as we acknowledge, Ponneru writes, that it "imposes a heavy, if hidden, burden on parents, especially those with several children."[35] Strengthening supports for parents who choose to raise children—children who will be the workers and taxpayers of the future—is one important way to help balance the equation.

3) HELP YOUNG MEN BECOME MARRIAGEABLE MEN

Recent popular analyses have suggested that we are seeing the "end of men." From new trade books by opinion leaders Hanna Rosin and Liza Mundy to op-eds in the *New York Times* and responses at *Slate*, an active social debate has arisen about what is happening to men, and if men even still matter.[36]

We believe men *do* matter—a great deal—and that a vital key to renewing marriage in Middle America is to help young men become marriageable men. We offer ideas for how to reach, inspire, and equip young men to be better husbands and fathers, through apprenticeships, in the military, and through service delivery options available in the nation's large criminal justice system. These interventions are also open to women, but because of the populations they would reach most of them are especially relevant to the question of how to inspire and equip men.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship is a time-honored method for preparing workers to master occupational skills and achieve career success.

It is widely used outside the U.S. Under apprenticeship programs, individuals earn a salary while receiving training primarily through supervised, work-based learning, but also take related academic instruction usually equivalent to at least one year of community college. Apprentices are employees at the firms and organizations where they are training and combine productive work along with learning experiences that lead to demonstrated proficiency in a significant array of tasks. Apprenticeship helps workers master relevant occupational skills as well as other work-related skills, including communication, problem-solving, resource allocation, and dealing with supervisors and a diverse set of co-workers. In completing apprenticeship training, workers earn a recognized and valued credential attesting to their mastery of skill required in the relevant occupation.

Young people reap developmental benefits from apprenticeships. They work with adult mentors who can guide them but allow them to make their own mistakes. Young people see themselves judged by the established standards of a discipline, including deadlines and the genuine constraints and unexpected difficulties that arise in a chosen profession. Mentors provide close monitoring and frequent feedback, which help apprentices keep their focus on performing well at the work site and in the classroom.[37]

Apprenticeship is particularly appealing as a way of integrating minorities, especially minority young men, into rewarding careers. Having learning take place mostly on the job, making the tasks and classroom work highly relevant to their careers,

and providing wages while they learn can give apprentices increased confidence that personal effort and an investment in skill development will pay off. In addition, mastering a skill by completing an apprenticeship gives graduates a genuine sense of occupational identity and pride.

By significantly raising the earnings potential, stability, relationship skills, and pride of young adults, expanding apprenticeship is likely to increase marriageability, especially among men without a four-year college degree. In turn, marriage itself is likely to contribute to the success of men and women in apprenticeships. Currently, young men are falling well behind young women in terms of educational attainment. By widening the routes to career success beyond purely classroom-based systems, apprenticeships will offer enhanced opportunities for young men who learn best by doing and are motivated most by gaining skills.

Military

In the U.S. military there are a number of innovative efforts underway in a variety of settings to reach singles and to educate individuals about healthy relationships, strategies for making wise partner choices, and the impact of their romantic lives on the children they may have from prior relationships. Other services and programs offered in all branches of the armed services help couples to keep their marriages strong and healthy in the face of repeated deployments, high operational tempos, intense training cycles, and the challenges some couples face

due to exposure of the service-person(s) to stressful events such as combat. Such efforts have grown in the past ten years and include endeavors to reach people who would simply not have had access to such preventive education in the past.

One of the larger, more organized efforts is the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Strong Bonds Program that offers retreats, workshops, and training opportunities worldwide to help couples build and maintain strong and happy marriages. One of the programs used extensively in the Strong Bonds initiative is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) for couples, a highly developed, evidence-based model for teaching couples strategies for protecting their marriages. The Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development is funding a randomized, controlled outcome study of the impacts of PREP on Army couples. To date, research from this study documents short-term gains in relationship quality for participating couples and longer term reduction in the likelihood of divorcing.

In addition to such efforts, there are numerous Department of Defense studies underway to build knowledge on how deployment and combat exposure is impacting couples and families, including studies focused on post-traumatic stress disorder and other risks. Such research efforts (funded by various branches of the federal government) are in response to the widespread recognition that military families confront extraordinary stressors and may need a broadening array of innovative programs to help them succeed in family life. These types of

research projects will inform and refine future efforts to develop and field programs designed to help military families and strengthen the marriages of those serving our country.[38]

Criminal Justice System

In 2010, about 7.1 million people, or one in thirty-three adults, were involved in the U.S. criminal justice system—that is, they were part of the state or federal prison population, on probation or parole, or held in local jails.[39] These numbers are especially concentrated in some communities, a phenomenon some refer to as "mass incarceration."[40] For example, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reports: "One-third of African American male high school dropouts under age 40 are currently behind bars. Among all African American men born since the mid-1960s, more than 20 percent will go to prison, nearly twice the number that will graduate college."[41] In 2007, more than 1.7 million U.S. children had a parent in a state or federal prison.[42]

In our public conversations about marriage, the dramatic decline in marriage among African Americans in recent decades is often attributed in part to there being so many "unmarriageable" men—jobless men who are locked up or have criminal records or seem headed in that direction. While the term "unmarriageable men" has origins among sociologists and social observers deeply concerned about these trends,[43] it seems to have taken on a descriptive, deterministic quality in our national conversation. But are some 20 percent or more of our young African American men really "unmarriageable"? We don't

think so, and for the sake of these young men, their current and future children, and their children's mothers, we want to challenge such fatalism.

Certainly, we would not want to encourage girls and women to think of men guilty of violent crimes as potential husbands. But for the many young men caught up in minor drug arrests or first-time infractions, there is a rich opportunity to use the resources of the criminal justice system to help intervene and offer relationship education and hope for a good marriage—hope that could be part of their turning their lives around.[44] Most of these young men will have children, whether we intervene or not. Let's commit to improving their odds of forming decent marriages with the mothers of their children and increase the likelihood that they will be present, stable fathers.

Promising initiatives around the country are already offering marriage and relationships skills education to inmates when they're on the inside to better prepare them for when they get out.[45] For example, a curriculum called Within My Reach (from PREP) has been used to help incarcerated individuals develop more awareness and skill in handling conflict, and also to help deepen awareness of patterns associated with healthy, unhealthy, and dangerous or damaging relationships. Included in such efforts is a strong emphasis on helping individuals understand the impact of their choices on their children as well as successful reintegration back into society.[46]

Let's put national energy into improving provision of and access to these resources, so that the next generation of children

has the chance to grow up in stable families with less risk of being the victim or perpetrator of crime.[47, 48]

4) END ANONYMOUS FATHERHOOD

In the U.S. today we have a fundamental contradiction in our policy on fatherhood. If a woman gets pregnant after a one-night stand, the father can be held accountable financially for that child for eighteen years. An elaborate, nationwide child support enforcement apparatus has been erected in support of this goal. But if a woman buys anonymous sperm from a sperm bank, the anonymous man who provided his sperm walks away with no obligation. In the first case the state has decided that children have the right at the bare minimum to the financial support of two parents. In the second case, the state has decided that children have no such right.

While only a small (but possibly growing) minority of would-be parents use sperm donation or similar technologies to get pregnant,[49] the cultural power of the idea that it's acceptable deliberately to create a fatherless child and for biological fathers to walk away from their children is real. Further, studies reveal that majorities of adults who were conceived via sperm donation believe that anonymity should be ended. Therefore, we propose that the United States follow the model of other nations that have banned anonymity in sperm donation—such as Britain, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and Switzerland—and reinforce the consistent message that fathers matter.[50]

5) ENACT THE SECOND CHANCES ACT TO REDUCE UNNECESSARY DIVORCE

New research shows that about 40 percent of couples already deep into the divorce process say that one or both spouses would be interested in the possibility of reconciliation.[51] A recent report by retired Georgia Supreme Court chief justice Leah Ward Sears and University of Minnesota professor of family social science William J. Doherty suggests as well that a modest reduction in divorce would benefit more than 400,000 U.S. children each year and would produce significant savings for U.S. taxpayers. In their Second Chances Act proposal, they recommend that state legislatures:

- extend the waiting period for divorce to at least one year
- provide high-quality education about the option of reconciliation for those couples who wish to learn more
- create university-based centers of excellence to improve the education available to couples at risk of divorce[52]

6) REQUIRE PREMARITAL EDUCATION FOR PERSONS FORMING STEPFAMILIES

Most states currently have some form of mandatory education for divorcing parents because of the potential consequences of divorce for children. Risks for children in stepfamilies are equally serious. Research studies have documented higher risks for children in stepfamilies of child adjustment problems, physical abuse, infanticide, sexual abuse, spousal

violence, and exposure to another divorce (though it's important to note that most stepfamilies are *not* characterized by child or spousal abuse).[53]

Under this proposal, a state would mandate four hours of premarital education for couples forming a stepfamily (that is, a family in which one or both parties have a minor child from a previous married or unmarried relationship). The course, which could be taken online or in person, would cover coparenting and marital adjustment in stepfamilies, the unique challenges for parents and stepparents, and how to help children succeed in stepfamilies. The availability of online courses to be taken at home or in libraries would alleviate concerns about burdensome delays in getting married. Approved courses would have to meet scientific standards for effectiveness. Expense would be borne by the couple and not by the state, with waivers for low-income couples. Finally, compliance would be handled by requiring a certificate of class completion in order to secure a marriage license.

7) Encourage state and federal policy makers to invest in and evaluate marriage and relationship education activities and programs

There is an early, growing body of evidence that well designed and executed marriage and relationship education programs can have positive effects on the quality of low-income couples' relationships, which in turn is likely to promote increased child well-being. (See page 47, "Marriage and Relationship Education: A Promising Strategy for Strengthening Low-

Income, Vulnerable Families," by Theodora Ooms and Alan Hawkins.) These findings are mixed but encouraging, which is not surprising since social reforms typically take time to bear fruit. Yet the efforts to provide this low-cost, potentially effective policy intervention of offering marriage and relationship education are overall modest in number and their sustainability remains in question.

Based on this recent research, we recommend that federal and state governments continue to invest in marriage and relationship education services, taking steps to improve them and make them more accessible especially to "at-risk" individuals and couples. Such services for low-income populations will be more effective if better coordinated and integrated with father engagement, domestic violence prevention, employment, family planning, and other family and child support services. Relationships skills education in high schools is also surely at least as important as the widely applauded and laudable effort to provide young people with financial education. In addition, the federal government should continue to invest in rigorous evaluations of these efforts and promote promising practices.

The federal government has provided valuable leadership over the past decade, but given looming budget challenges, states now will need to do more and should be encouraged (even incentivized) by the federal government to do so. For over a decade, Oklahoma has devoted substantial funds to a comprehensive strengthening marriage and relationships initiative[54] and Utah has also funded a more modest ongoing effort (see http://strongermarriage.org/).

We recommend that states devote 1 to 2 percent of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant funds to preventative efforts to help at-risk individuals and couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships with the goal of improving child well-being. A strategic, integrated set of marriage and relationship education services across the early life course is more likely to yield positive results than a scattershot of uncoordinated, free-standing programs. State governments can take policy actions to provide incentives, encouragement, and sometimes even requirements for engaged, step-, or divorcing couples to participate in such services. Two national resource centers are available to provided states with technical assistance toward this goal: the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center and the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families (www.healthymarriageinfo.org and http://healthymarriageandfamilies.org).

8) ENGAGE HOLLYWOOD

Our nation's leaders, including the president, must engage Hollywood in a conversation about popular culture ideas about marriage and family formation, including constructive critiques and positive ideas for changes in media depictions of marriage and fatherhood.

9) LAUNCH COMMUNITY-ORIENTED CAMPAIGNS ABOUT THE FACTS AND FUN OF MARRIAGE

If the Surgeon General can talk about vitally important and sometimes controversial issues such as domestic violence

or childhood obesity, then surely our nation's top health policy leader can talk also about why marriage matters. Leadership from the top, for example, could help inspire community-based and focused public service announcements that convey the truth about marriage, family stability, and child well-being to the next generation of parents.[55] Such campaigns in the past have been part of successful social efforts to reduce smoking, drunk driving, and teen pregnancy. We can do the same for marriage.

10) FIND YOUR MARRIAGE VOICE

If the president is going to make progress on a marriage agenda, he—and all of us—have to be ready to talk about marriage. Talking about marriage can be challenging. We have active public debates about gay marriage, single parenthood, welfare reform, women's rights, men's opportunity, and more. But going silent on marriage isn't an option—not if we want the next generation of Americans to thrive.

Here are some pointers:

- If you are divorced or a single parent, you can talk about marriage. None of us longs for our children to grow up and get divorced or to have their own children outside marriage. Whatever your circumstances, you can honestly share your story and what inspires you to want something different for the next generation.
- If you are a human service professional, you can talk about marriage. You may feel that having conversations about marriage is not part of your job, or that such

conversations could seem judgmental or prescriptive. But in order to provide the best services to your clients, it's important that you understand the value of marriage and the desires your clients might have for it.

- If you are relatively well-off, you can talk about marriage. College-educated persons are doing pretty well on marriage these days. It's important to recognize that marriage is good for all kinds of families. Let's make it easier for other people to have access to the hopes and securities that can come with marriage.
- If you are for, against, or uncertain about gay marriage, you can talk about marriage. Talk about gay marriage—and then talk about why marriage is important for the vast majority of people who identify as heterosexual and whose sexual lives quite often produce children. Why does marriage matter for those kids?
- If you support women's rights, you can talk about marriage. Most women want to have children, and raising children in marriage is on average a much easier road for women and their families. If you are concerned about the issue of domestic violence, acquaint yourself with the large body of work showing that the risks of domestic violence for women—and children—are far higher with boyfriends and live-in partners than in marriage.[56]

- If you're worried about the economy, you can talk about marriage. The recession and high unemployment have brought tragic losses to many communities and have hit working-class men especially hard. Marriage alone is no panacea. But married couples on average build greater wealth than single persons do, even controlling for the likelihood that better-off people marry in the first place.[57] It stands to reason that stable families with two parents and two potential earners will have greater resources to weather bad times and to enjoy good times. The president can promote a jobs agenda *and* a marriage agenda—and these agendas will strengthen each other.
- If you're afraid of divorce, you can talk about marriage. Many young people today live together before or instead of marriage because they are afraid of divorce. Given the consequences that widespread divorce has had on several generations of young people, their fears are not unreasonable. But living together is even more unstable than marriage, especially for children, and the pain of breakups does not appear to be much mitigated if no marriage vow was made in the first place. If you're young, take advantage of the fact that one upside of generations of widespread divorce is that we've now learned a lot about what makes a marriage succeed. Get support for your marriage dreams, make a good choice, and take the leap.

CONCLUSION

Today we have a marriage challenge. As human beings we respond to challenges in different ways. Some despair, get angry, or tell themselves that whatever is being lost was not so important in the first place. But those who emerge as leaders do something different. They confront their uncertainties, team with others who believe in what they're doing, and meet the challenge. They don't let a bad day or a dip in trend lines divert them from their goal. For those convinced that stable families are critical for child well-being and thriving communities, strengthening marriage is the goal from which we will not turn away. We ask our fellow citizens and our nation's leaders, including our president, to join us in supporting marriage as a vital pathway to opening social opportunity—for today's young people, and for their children.

ENDNOTES

1 See The Wedding Report, http://www.theweddingreport.com/.

2 Since 1976, an annual, nationally representative survey of high school seniors titled "Monitoring the Future," conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, has asked numerous questions about family-related topics. See http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/ and the Social Indicators section of this report.

3 Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "What's Missing from Our Middle Class Debate?" *Propositions 9* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2012).

4 Ibid.

5 Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, "For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside Marriage," *New York Times*, February 17, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/us/for-women-under-30-most-births-occur-outside-marriage.html?pagewanted=all.

6 W. Bradford Wilcox, "When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America," *The State of Our Unions 2010* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and the Institute for American Values, 2010), xi.

7 David Blankenhorn and Alex Roberts, "A Call for a New Revisionism: Scholarship on the Black Family since the Moynihan Report," Research Brief No. 9 (New York: Institute for American Values, 2008).

8 Whitehead, "What's Missing?"

9 Pew Research Center, *Fewer, Poorer, Gloomier: The Lost Decade of the Middle Class* (Washington, DC: Pew Social and Demographic Trends, 2012), available at http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/22/the-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class/.

10 Amber Lapp and David Lapp, "A New Normal for the American Family: Kids Outside of Marriage," *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/03/a-new-normal-for-the-americanfamily-kids-outside-of-marriage/254280/.

11 On white women with high school but not four-year college degrees and likelihood of multiple partnerships, see Andrew Cherlin, "Family Patterns of

Moderately Educated Americans," in Marcia Carlson and Paula England, eds., *Social Class and Changing Families in an Unequal America* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 73:

> Using the 2002 NSFG data, I calculated, according to education and race/ethnicity, the percentage of 35-to 44-year-old women who had already experienced three marital or cohabiting partnerships. For example, a woman may have been married, ended that marriage, moved in with another man, ended that relationship, and moved in with a third man. (A cohabiting relationship that led to marriage was counted as one partnership, not two.) You might expect that the less education people have, the more partnerships they would form and dissolve, and that African Americans and Hispanics would have more partnerships than whites. But that is not what the data show. Figure 3.1 displays the percentages for women by education and race. Looking first at education, we see that the highest percentage was for women with high school degrees, and the second highest percentage was for women without high school degrees. To be sure, the difference between the two groups is modest, but we can conclude that multiple unions were at least as common among high school graduates as they were among the women who had not graduated from high school. Additional tabulations that distinguish between marriages and cohabiting unions show that high school graduates had the largest percentage of two or three marriages of any educational group and the second highest percentage (after the less-than-high-school group) of multiple cohabiting unions. In addition, the bottom half of the figure shows that the race/ethnicity with the highest number of multiple partners was non-Hispanic whites by a substantial margin over African Americans and Hispanics. Thus, having multiple partnerships was not a minority-group pattern. Further analyses showed that non-Hispanic whites were most likely to have had multiple marriages, whereas Hispanics were more likely to have married once, and African Americans were much more likely than either group to have never married.

On births to women with high school degrees, see ibid., 78–79:

> Figure 3.3 shows the trend during the 1990s, as indicated by the 1995 and 2002 NSFG samples. In both surveys, women without high school degrees

had the highest percentage of births occurring in cohabitations. But between the two surveys, the greatest growth in births to cohabiting couples occurred among the two middle categories: high school degree recipients and those with some college, among whom the percentages doubled. By the latter period nearly one-fourth of births to women with high school degrees occurred within cohabiting relationships….Recall that moderately educated women are far more numerous among the 19-to-44 age group than are the least- and most-educated. Therefore, we can say with confidence that the growth of childbearing in cohabiting relationships has been driven by the increase in the number of the moderately educated.

12 W. Bradford Wilcox, Andrew J. Cherlin, Jeremy E. Uecker, and Matthew Messel, "No Money, No Honey, No Church: The Deinstitutionalization of Religious Life Among the White Working Class," in *Research in the Sociology of Work*, vol. 23, *Religion, Work and Inequality*, Lisa A. Keister, John McCarthy, and Roger Finke, eds. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012), 227–50.

13 W. Bradford Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York: National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and Institute for American Values, 2011).

14 Ben Scafidi, principal investigator, *The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States* (New York: Institute for American Values and the Georgia Family Council, 2008).

15 Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

16 Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters*, Figure 2, "Percent of Children Experiencing Parental Divorce/Separation and Parental Cohabitation, by Age 12; Period Life Table Estimates 2002–2007," 44.

17 See for example, Wilcox, "When Marriage Disappears"; Kay Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007); and Mitch Pearlstein, *From Family Collapse to America's Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2011).

18 Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters*, 7.

19 See Isabel V. Sawhill, Scott Winship, and Kerry Searle Grannis, *Pathways to the Middle Class: Balancing Personal and Public Responsibilities* (Washington, DC: Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, 2012), 13:

> Family Formation. The first responsibility of parents is not to have a child before they are ready. Yet 70 percent of pregnancies to women in their twenties are unplanned and, partly as a consequence, more than half of births to women under 30 occur outside of wedlock. In the past, most adults married before having children. Now childbearing outside of marriage is becoming the norm for women without a college degree. To many people, this is an issue of values; to others, it is simple common sense to note that two parents are more likely to have the time and financial resources to raise a child well. Many young people in their twenties have children with a cohabiting partner, but these cohabiting relationships have proven to be quite unstable, leading to a lot of turmoil for both the children and the adults in such households. Government can help to ensure that more children are born into supportive circumstances by funding social marketing campaigns and nongovernmental institutions that encourage young people to think and act responsibly. It can also help by providing access to effective forms of contraception, and by funding teen pregnancy prevention efforts that have had some success in reducing the nation's high rates of very early pregnancies, abortions, and unwed births. A number of well-evaluated programs have accomplished these goals and they easily pass a cost-benefit test and end up saving taxpayers money.

20 Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "The New Segregation," review of *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, by Charles Murray, *Commonweal*, May 4, 2012.

21 A 2001 study by David T. Ellwood demonstrates that in the period 2000–2020, American society will generate less than half of the number of college graduates it produced in the previous twenty years, despite growth in the size of the total population. See "The Sputtering Labour Force of the Twenty-First Century: Can Social Policy Help?" in *The Roaring Nineties: Can Full Employment Be Sustained?* A. Krueger and R. Solow, eds. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 421–89, cited in James J. Heckman, "Schools, Skills and Synapses," Discussion Paper No. 3515 (Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2008), 9.

22 Ron Haskins and Isabel V. Sawhill, *Creating an Opportunity Society* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 215.

23 Scafidi, *Taxpayer Costs of Divorce*.

24 Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 88–89; see also Table 2, on 89.

25 See http://web.archive.org/web/20101101181939/http://marriagecalculator.acf.hhs.gov/marriage/. We urge the Administration of Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services to restore this calculator to their main website and keep this vital project updated.

26 Alex Roberts and David Blankenhorn, "The Other Marriage Penalty: A New Proposal to Eliminate the Marriage Penalty for Low-Income Americans," Research Brief No. 3 (New York: Institute for American Values, 2006). See also the abstract of a recent working paper by Hayley Fisher of the University of Sydney School of Economics:

> I examine the effect of marriage penalties in the US income tax system on marital status. I construct a simulated instrument that exploits variation in the tax code over time and between US states to deal with potential endogeneity between the marriage penalty a couple faces and their marital status. I find that a $1000 increase in the marriage penalty faced reduces the probability of marriage by 1.7 percentage points, an effect four times larger than previously estimated. Those in the lowest education groups respond by as much as 2.7 percentage points, with the average response declining as education increases. (http://hdl.handle.net/2123/7884)

27 See Aaron S. Yelowitz, "Will Extending Medicaid to Two-Parent Families Encourage Marriage?" *Journal of Human Resources* 33, no. 4 (1998): 833–65.

28 See Maggie Gallagher, *Can Government Strengthen Marriage? Evidence from the Social Sciences* (New York: National Fatherhood Initiative, Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, and Institute for American Values, 2004), 25–26.

29 See, for example, Lamberto Manzoli et al., "Marital Status and Mortality in the Elderly: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Social Science & Medicine* 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 77–94; Lee A. Lillard and Linda J. Waite, "'Til

Death Do Us Part: Marital Disruption and Mortality," *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 5 (March 1995): 1131–56; Catherine E. Ross et al., "The Impact of the Family on Health: Decade in Review," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52, no. 4 (November 1990): 1059–78; Yuanreng Hu and Noreen Goldman, "Mortality Differentials by Marital Status: An International Comparison," *Demography* 27, no. 2 (May 1990): 233–50; Hui Liu, "Till Death Do Us Part: Marital Status and U.S. Mortality Trends, 1986–2000," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71, no. 5 (December 2009): 1158–73; Matthew E. Dupre, Audry N. Beck, and Sarah O. Meadows, "Marital Trajectories and Mortality among US Adults," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 170, no. 5 (September 2009): 546–55; Paul R. Amato, "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62, no. 4 (November 2000): 1269ff; Linda J. Waite and Mary Elizabeth Hughes, "At the Cusp of Old Age: Living Arrangements and Functional Status Among Black, White and Hispanic Adults," *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 54, no. 3 (May 1999): S136–44; Charlotte A. Schoenborn, "Marital Status and Health: United States, 1999–2002," *Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics*, Centers for Disease Control, no. 351, December 15, 2004, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad351.pdf; Lee A. Lillard and Constantijn Panis, "Marital Status and Mortality: The Role of Health," *Demography* 33, no. 3 (August 1996): 313–27; James S. Goodwin et al., "The Effect of Marital Status on Stage, Treatment, and Survival of Cancer Patients," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 258, no. 21 (December 4, 1987): 3125–30; Janice K. Kiecolt-Glaser and Tamara L. Newton, "Marriage and Health: His and Hers," *Psychological Bulletin* 127, no. 4 (July 2001): 472–503; Debra Umberson et al., "You Make Me Sick: Marital Quality and Health Over the Life Course," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 47, no. 1 (March 2006): 1–16; Daniel N. Hawkins and Alan Booth, "Unhappily Ever After: Effects of Long-Term, Low-Quality Marriages on Well-Being," *Social Forces* 84, no. 1 (September 2005): 451–71; and Matthew E. Dupre and Sarah O. Meadows, "Disaggregating the Effects of Marital Trajectories on Health," *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 5 (May 2007): 623–52.

30 David Court, Diana Farrell, and John E. Forsyth, "Serving Aging Baby Boomers," *McKinsey Quarterly*, November 2007, https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Serving_aging_baby_boomers_2068.

31 See for example Elizabeth Marquardt, "Gov. Cuomo Should Not Jettison the 'Spousal Refusal' Allowance in State's Medicaid Program," *Huffington Post*, March 27, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elizabeth-marquardt/gov-cuomo-should-not-jett_b_1381274.html; Amy Ziettlow, "The Coming Age of the Family Caregiver," *Huffington Post*, January 23, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-amy-ziettlow/caregiving_b_1220053.html.

32 In the 2013 edition of *State of Our Unions*, a team of scholars will address the question of marriage and older Americans.

33 L. A. Whittington, "Taxes and the Family: The Impact of the Tax Exemption for Dependents on Marital Fertility," *Demography* 29, no. 22 (1991): 215–26; L.A. Whittington et al., "The Personal Exemption and Fertility: Implicit Pronatalist Policy in the U.S.," *American Economic Review* 80, no. 2 (1991): 545–56.

34 See, for example, Anne Helen Gautheir and Jan Hatzius, "Family Benefits and Fertility: An Econometric Analysis," *Population Studies* 51, no. 3 (1997): 295–306; Allan Carlson, "New Ideas in Family Policy: A Presentation to Members of Sweden's Parliament," *The Family in America* 18, no. 4 (2003): 1–8, 5; Jean-Claude Chesnais, "Fertility, Family, and Social Policy in Contemporary Western Europe," *Population and Development Review* 22, no. 4 (1996): 729–39; Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, *Replacement Migration: Is It a Solution to Declining and Aging Populations?* (United Nations, 2001), available at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/migration/migration.htm.

35 Ramesh Ponnuru, "The Empty Playground and the Welfare State," *National Review Online*, May 29, 2012, http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/301108/empty-playground-and-welfare-state-ramesh-ponnuru.

36 See, for example Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* (New York: Riverhead, 2012); Liza Mundy, *The Richer Sex: How the New Majority of Female Breadwinners Is Transforming Sex, Love, and Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012); Stephanie Coontz, "The Myth of Male Decline," *New York Times*, September 29, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/30/opinion/sunday/the-myth-of-male-decline.html?pagewanted=all; Hanna Rosin, "Male Decline Is No Myth," *Slate*, October 2, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2012/10/male_decline_is_no_myth_why_that_new_york_times_op_ed_has_it_wrong_.html.

37 See Robert Halpern, *The Means to Grow Up: Reinventing Apprenticeship as a Developmental Support in Adolescence* (New York: Routledge, 2009). Robert Lerman of the Urban Institute (and co-author of this essay) welcomes further inquiries about the apprenticeship proposal.

38 This summary was prepared by Scott Stanley. Citations he recommends include: Elizabeth S. Allen et al., "Marriage Education in the Army: Results of a Randomized Clinical Trial," *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy* 10, no. 4 (2011): 309–26; Scott M. Stanley et al., "Decreasing Divorce in U.S. Army Couples: Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial Using PREP for Strong Bonds," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 9, no. 2 (2010): 149–60; Elizabeth S. Allen, Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman, "Hitting Home: Relationships between Recent Deployment, Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms, and Marital Functioning for Army Couples," *Journal of Family Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2010): 280–88; Benjamin R. Karney and John S. Crown, *Families Under Stress: An Assessment of Data, Theory, and Research on Marriage and Divorce in the Military* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007); Candice M. Monson, Paula P. Schnurr, Susan P. Stevens, and Karen A. Guthrie, "Cognitive-Behavioral Couple's Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Initial Findings," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 17, no. 4 (2004): 341–44; Keith D. Renshaw et al., "Distress in Spouses of Service Members with Symptoms of Combat-Related PTSD: Secondary Traumatic Stress or General Psychological Distress?" *Journal of Family Psychology* 25, no. 4 (2011): 461–69; and David S. Riggs, Christina A. Byrne, Frank W. Weathers, and Brett T. Litz, "The Quality of the Intimate Relationships of Male Vietnam Veterans: Problems Associated with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 11, no. 1 (1998): 87–101.

39 Statistics cited are taken from a Bureau of Justice Statistics press release (http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/press/p10cpus10pr.cfm) based on Lauren E. Glaze, *Correctional Population in the United States, 2010*, NCJ 236319 (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011) and Paul Guerino, Paige M. Harrison, and William J. Sabol, *Prisoners in 2010*, NCJ 236096 (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011).

40 *The New York Times* reports that Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*, sold more than 175,000 copies after an initial printing of 3,000

copies—an impressive indication of national interest in criminal justice system reform. See Jennifer Schuessler, "Drug Policy as Race Policy: Best Seller Galvanizes the Debate," *New York Times*, March 6, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/07/books/michelle-alexanders-new-jim-crow-raises-drug-law-debates.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

41 See "The Challenge of Mass Incarceration in America," available at the website of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, http://www.amacad.org/projects/incarceration.aspx. The summary is based on the Summer 2010 *Daedalus* special issue on mass incarceration edited by Glenn C. Loury and Bruce Wester.

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43 The language of men made "unmarriageable" by the disappearance of factory jobs in cities was extensively developed by noted sociologist William Julius Wilson.

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48 Any engagement with twenty-somethings will also have to place special attention on reaching young men, and not only in schools and colleges, but wherever they may be, such as the workplace, military, or the criminal justice system. And while the education model is laudable, how about seeing what happens if we get young men out from behind small desks listening to teachers tell them what to do? For example, Alana and Rickard Newman, a Brooklyn-based couple, have started a new program called the Happy Couple Workout (they are also guest bloggers at FamilyScholars.org, based at the Institute for American Values). In the program, young couples use the weight and resistance of each other's bodies to get a great workout without paying a lot of money for gym memberships or special equipment, while spending time together doing something positive and fun that is underscored by a message of why nurturing

your marriage is good for you and for your children. It's a wonderful example of what today's twenty-somethings are dreaming up. Let's listen to them.

49 While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracks egg and embryo transfers, it does not track pregnancies resulting from sperm donation. See Saswati Sunderam et. al., "Assisted Reproductive Technology Surveillance—United States, 2009," *Surveillance Summaries* 61 (SS7), November 2, 2012, 1–23, http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6107a1.htm?s_cid=ss6107a1_x.

50 The 2010 report, *My Daddy's Name Is Donor: A New Study of Young Adults Conceived Via Sperm Donation*, co-investigated by Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval Glenn, and Karen Clark and released by the Commission on Parenthood's Future, includes as its first recommendation: "The U.S. should follow the lead of Britain, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and other nations, and end the practice of anonymous donation of sperm and eggs. Registries should be supported that help those born before the law is changed to find their biological kin, when mutually agreeable." See recommendations on 77–81, and the chapter "Secrets and Anonymity." The full report is available at http://familyscholars.org/my-daddys-name-is-donor-2/. For more stories about how anonymity impacts those conceived this way, see the Anonymous Us Project at www.anonymousus.org.

51 William J. Doherty, Brian J. Willoughby, and Bruce Peterson, "Interest in Reconciliation among Divorcing Parents," *Family Court Review* 49, no. 2 (2011): 313–21.

52 William J. Doherty and Leah Ward Sears, *Second Chances: A Proposal to Reduce Unnecessary Divorce, Presented to U.S. State Legislatures* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011).

53 This proposal is offered by William J. Doherty of the University of Minnesota. The Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project website is located at www.mncouplesonthebrink.org. Prof. Doherty's citations include those on:

- Child adjustment problems: Higher rates of a variety of behavioral and mental health problems than in original families, and comparable rates to single parent families (Cherlin, 2009; Zill, 1988).

- Physical abuse: Up to five times the rate of physical abuse of children in stepfamilies in comparison to two-parent biological families (Creighton, 1985; Daly and Wilson, 1996; Sedlack et al., 2010; Turner, Finkelhor, and Ormrod, 2007).
- Infanticide: Far higher rates of homicide against babies and young children. Three studies have documented that young children in stepfamilies are sixty to one hundred times more likely to be murdered by a stepparent than by a biological parent (Daly and Wilson, 1988a, b; Daly and Wilson, 1994).
- Sexual abuse: Eight times the rate of sexual abuse in comparison to married, biological parents. Much higher rates of sexual abuse by stepfathers than by biological fathers (Creighton, 1985; Russell, 1984; Sedlack et al., 2010).
- Spousal violence: Women in stepfamilies are at greater risk for abuse. One study found four times more likelihood of these women accessing shelters for partner violence (Daly, Singh and Wilson, 1993).
- Exposure to another divorce: Second marriages have higher divorce rates than first marriages, putting children at risk for another set of painful adjustments and dislocations (Cherlin, 2009). See Susan J. Creighton, "An Epidemiological Study of Abused Children and Their Families in the United Kingdom between 1977 and 1982," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 9, no. 4 (1985): 441–48; Cherlin, *Marriage-Go-Round*; M. Daly, L.S. Singh, and M.I. Wilson, "Children Fathered by Previous Partners: A Risk Factor for Violence against Women," *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 84 (1993): 209–10; Martin Daly and Margo I. Wilson, "Evolutionary Social Psychology and Family Homicide," *Science* 242 (1988a): 519–524; Martin Daly and Margo I. Wilson, *Homicide* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988b); Martin Daly and Margo I. Wilson, "Some Differential Attributes of Lethal Assaults on Small Children by Stepfathers Versus Genetic Fathers," *Ethnology and Sociobiology* 15, no. 4 (1995): 207–17; Martin Daly and Margo I. Wilson, "Violence against Stepchildren," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 5, no. 3 (1996): 77–81.
- The prevalence and seriousness of incestuous abuse: stepfathers versus biological fathers. Andrea J. Sedlak et al., *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress* (Washington, DC:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2010); Heather A. Turner, David Finkelhor, and Richard Ormrod, "Family Structure Variations in Patterns and Predictors of Child Victimization," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 77, no. 2 (2007): 282–95.

- Behavior, achievement, and health problems among children in stepfamilies: Findings from a national survey of child health. In E. Mavis Hetherington and Josephine D. Arasteh, eds., *Impact of Divorce, Single Parenting, and Stepparenting on Children* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1988).

54 M. Robin Dion et al., *Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program* (Washington DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2008), http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/bsfimplementation.pdf.

55 This recommendation is found in Haskins and Sawhill, *Creating an Opportunity Society*. First Things First of Chattanooga, Tennessee, is a great example of an organization using this strategy as part of its mission fulfillment. See http://firstthings.org/.

56 Margo I. Wilson and Martin Daly, "Who Kills Whom in Spouse Killings? On the Exceptional Sex Ratio of Spousal Homicides in the United States," *Criminology* 30, no. 2 (1992): 189–215; Susan L. Brown and Jennifer Roebuck Bulanda, "Relationship Violence in Young Adulthood: A Comparison of Daters, Cohabitors, and Marrieds," *Social Science Research* 37, no. 1 (2008): 73–87; John Wooldredge and Amy Thistlethwaite, "Neighborhood Structure and Race-Specific Rates of Intimate Assault," *Criminology* 41, no. 2 (May 2003): 393–418; Nicky Ali Jackson, "Observational Experiences of Intrapersonal Conflict and Teenage Victimization: A Comparative Study among Spouses and Cohabitors," *Journal of Family Violence* 11, no. 3 (1996): 191–203; Catherine T. Kenney and Sara S. McLanahan, "Why Are Cohabiting Relationships More Violent than Marriages?" *Demography* 43, no. 1 (February 2006):127–40; Jan E. Stets, "Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, no. 3 (August 1991): 669–80; Lawrence Sherman et al., *Policing Domestic Violence: Experiments and Dilemmas* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), chap. 7, cited in Richard J. Gelles, *Intimate Violence in Families*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 138.

57 See, "A Word about Selection Effects" in Wilcox et. al, *Why Marriage Matters*, 9, and the Economics section (conclusions 9 through 15), 23–28.

Marriage & Relationship Education:

A promising strategy for strengthening low-income, vulnerable families

by Theodora Ooms, *National Healthy Marriage Resource Center*
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Marriage and relationship education is a newcomer to public policy efforts to assist low-income families. The field began in the 1950s and 1960s, when university and faith-based educators—drawing upon family theory and research—began to develop prevention curricula delivered

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in small-group community settings primarily to middle-class white populations. In the late 1990s, a handful of states began to fund healthy marriage and relationship education programs and initiatives intended as a promising new preventive strategy for strengthening families, reducing divorce, decreasing poverty, and improving child well-being.

In 1996, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) legislation enacted as part of welfare reform was the first federal law to declare promoting marriage and two-parent families and reducing nonmarital childbearing as goals of national policy.

In 2001, the Bush administration declared that strengthening marriage would be one of nine priorities of the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services, and began to use discretionary program dollars to fund community marriage and relationship education programs targeted to lower-income individuals and couples and university-based training programs. These programs addressed relationship factors that research has found are associated with relationship quality and stability and can be improved by effective educational interventions. They focus on providing knowledge and relationship skills to single youth and adults, and engaged, married, and remarried couples.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 set up the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Act, which provided $150 million a year for five years in competitive grants to community organizations for research and demonstration programs throughout the country. Of this yearly allocation, $100 million was dedicated to marriage and relationship programs and $50 million to responsible fatherhood programs (NHMRC 2009). Federal funding for these programs was renewed in 2011 for three more years, but the amount allocated was divided equally between healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs. Although there was no requirement in the law to serve economically disadvantaged populations with these funds, services provided were free, and most of the programs served primarily lower-income individuals and couples.

What have we learned from this modest government investment that can inform the new administration, Congress, and state legislatures as they develop an agenda for strengthening marriage and two-parent families?

We briefly address two sets of questions here.[1]

1. Can we successfully deliver marriage and relationship services to disadvantaged individuals, mothers and fathers who generally have not had access to such services

and who face many barriers to participation? Will they attend? Do participants think the services are useful? What trends are emerging to improve services in the field and reach those most in need?

2. What do we know about the effects of these programs on participants, particularly low-income participants? What are the measures of success? What have we learned from the handful of rigorously designed evaluations about the effects of the programs on adults and children? What additional studies need to be done to address the gaps in our knowledge?

LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES

- Many programs have learned effective, creative ways to recruit and retain participants, and they now serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged individuals and couples from diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds.
- The successful participation of men and fathers in many of these programs is especially promising, because it helps them become more involved with their children.
- Marriage and relationship education programs are popular and highly valued by participants who appreci-

ate learning specific relationships skills and tools, and the opportunity the group setting provides to learn from others.

- No one type of organization seems best suited to deliver these programs, but upfront investment in organizational development, training, and program management is crucial. To date, few education or social service programs serving low-income populations have experience in engaging males and working with couples.
- As required, federally funded marriage and relationship education programs have collaborated with experts on domestic violence to find appropriate ways to address and integrate information about intimate partner violence. This collaboration has helped allay many of the concerns of those studying domestic violence and provided another means of addressing the problem in our society.

Those in the marriage and relationship education field are beginning to draw upon these lessons to target more at-risk populations using a wider variety of program settings and different formats and delivery vehicles. For instance:

- A growing number of curricula are being developed and tested for high school students, disconnected youth, and single adults to help them learn to make wiser relationship choices, avoid dating violence, and achieve their goals for a healthy family life.
- Some programs are striving effectively to coordinate with employment, training, and other support services. This is because marriage and relationship education is increasingly viewed as a valuable component of a comprehensive package of programs and services needed to strengthen low-income families.
- Marriage and relationship education components are being added to services provided in different institutional settings, such as Head Start, prisons, child welfare agencies, and welfare and child support offices.[2]
- Leaders are beginning to explore how to integrate a relationship focus into health care settings such as programs that help couples manage a serious chronic illness or disability[3] and at government-funded family planning clinics.[4]
- New initiatives are targeting individuals and couples on the brink of divorce with information, educational programs, and discernment counseling designed to help

individuals think clearly about their choices and the best direction to take.[5]

LESSONS FROM EVALUATION STUDIES

- The first generation of marriage and relationship education program evaluation research found a consistent pattern of moderate positive effects on relationship skills and satisfaction. However, these studies focused almost exclusively on middle-class white couples.[6]
- A good deal of research attention since 2005 has focused on the effectiveness of such programs targeted to more disadvantaged and diverse individuals and couples. An emerging body of research is documenting their potential to help lower-income families. Two rigorous, large-scale randomized controlled trials were funded by the Administration for Children and Families over the last decade.
- The Building Strong Families (BSF) project studied marriage and relationship education and support services provided at eight sites to low-income, unmarried parents having a baby. This study had somewhat mixed results. The study found no significant differences between treatment and control couples overall approximately

one year after the program except at one site, Oklahoma City, which showed a consistent pattern of small but significant effects for treatment couples.[7] In addition, at all sites African American couples showed small but significant positive program effects. The three-year results found that many of these significant effects had disappeared, with one important, positive exception, again at the Oklahoma City program, where 49 percent of the BSF couples lived continuously together, compared with 41 percent in the control group.[8]

- Couple participation in the BSF program was low; on average, only about 10 percent of couples had significant levels of participation, which reveals the difficulty of serving low-income couples. The Oklahoma City site was most successful at retaining participants, however, with nearly half of couples enrolled receiving a strong dosage of the program.

The Supporting Healthy Marriage program was the second large-scale, randomized controlled trial. It studied low-income married couples participating in marriage education and support services. This study reported small but significant positive effects across the sites approximately one

year after the program.[9] Effects appeared to be stronger for Hispanic couples and for more distressed couples.

- A handful of other rigorous randomized controlled trials conducted with lower-income couples have shown significant positive differences between treatment and control couples on an array of relationship outcomes, including lower divorce rates,[10] domestic violence,[11] and child well-being.[12]
- A body of emerging marriage and relationship research is beginning to show potential for helping at-risk youth,[13] low-income cohabiting young adults,[14] and couples in stepfamilies,[15] although these studies were less rigorous than the large-scale studies described above.
- A recent study of all fifty states and Washington, D.C., found evidence that differences in (per capita) federal and state funding for these programs from 2005 to 2010 was associated with small but significant effects on family stability and child poverty. The strongest effects occurred in Washington D.C., which had the highest investment of federal funds for marriage and relationship education programs.[16]

Overall, the results are mixed but we believe they are encouraging. Important limitations and gaps in studies of marriage and relationship interventions remain. For example, in the future we need to collect long-term data on family stability, health, and child outcomes and to measure changes in attitudes, parenting behavior, and spillover effects of these services into the workplace.

ENDNOTES

1 For greater detail, see Alan J. Hawkins and Theodora Ooms, *What Works in Marriage and Relationship Education? A Review of Lessons Learned with a Focus on Low-Income Couples* (Washington, DC: National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2010).

2 M. Robin Dion et al., *Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program* (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2008), http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/bsfimplementation.pdf.

3 Jana Staton and Theodora Ooms, "Marriage and Relationship Factors in Health: Implications for Improving Health Care Quality and Reducing Costs, *NHMRC Issue Brief* (September 2011); available at www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

4 Robert Rector, *Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon against Child Poverty*, Special Report #117 (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2012).

5 Alan J. Hawkins and Tamara A. Fackrell, *Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out? A Guidebook for Individuals and Couples at the Crossroads of Divorce (and Before)* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2009); see also William Doherty's Minnesota Couples on the Brink program: http://www.mncouplesonthebrink.org/.

6 Hawkins et al., 2008; Victoria L. Blanchard, Alan J. Hawkins, Scott A. Baldwin, and Elizabeth B Fawcett, "Investigating the Effects of Marriage and Relationship Education on Couples' Communication Skills: A Meta-Analytic Study," *Journal of Family Psychology* 23, no.

2 (2009): 203–14; and Elizabeth B. Fawcett, Alan J. Hawkins, Victoria L. Blanchard, and Jason S. Carroll "Do Premarital Education Programs Really Work? A Meta-Analytic Study," *Family Relations* 59, no. 3 (2010): 232–39.

7 Robert G. Wood et al., *The Building Strong Families Project: Strengthening Unmarried Parents' Relationships: The Early Impacts of Building Strong Families* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2010).

8 Wood et al., forthcoming.

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10 Scott M. Stanley et al., "Decreasing Divorce in U.S. Army Couples: Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial Using PREP for Strong Bonds," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 9, no. 2 (2010): 149–60.

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12 Philip A. Cowan et al., "Promoting Fathers' Engagement with Children: Preventative Interventions for Low-Income Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71, no. 3 (2009): 663–79.

13 Francesca Adler-Baeder et al., "Overall Youth: Findings for Youth Participants in Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) in Years

1–5" (Auburn, AL: Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative, Auburn University, 2011); http://www.alabamamarriage.org/documents/YouthOverallResearchBrief_2011_Updated5.25.12.pdf; Jennifer Kerpleman et al., "What Adolescents Bring to and Learn from Relationship Education Classes: Does Social Address Matter?" *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 9, no. 2 (2010): 95–112.

14 Becky F. Antle et al., "The Impact of the *Within My Reach* Relationship Training on Relationship Skills and Outcomes for Low-Income Individuals, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (in press); Ronald B. Cox and Karen A. Shirer, "Caring for My Family: A Pilot Study of a Relationship and Marriage Education Program for Low-Income Unmarried Parents," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 8, no. 4 (2009): 343–64; and Jesse Owen et al., "The Effectiveness of PREP with Lower Income Racial/Ethnic Minority Couples," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 38, no. 1 (2012): 296–307.

15 Brian J. Higginbotham and Linda Skogrand, "Relationship Education with Both Married and Unmarried Stepcouples: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 9, no. 2 (2010): 133–48.

16 Alan J. Hawkins, Paul R. Amato, and A. Kinghorn, "Are Government-Supported Healthy Marriage Initiatives Affecting Family Demographics? A State-Level Analysis," *Family Relations* (in press).

SOCIAL INDICATORS *of* MARITAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

TRENDS OF THE PAST FIVE DECADES

MARRIAGE

DIVORCE

UNMARRIED COHABITATION

LOSS OF CHILD-CENTEREDNESS

FRAGILE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

TEEN ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

MARRIAGE

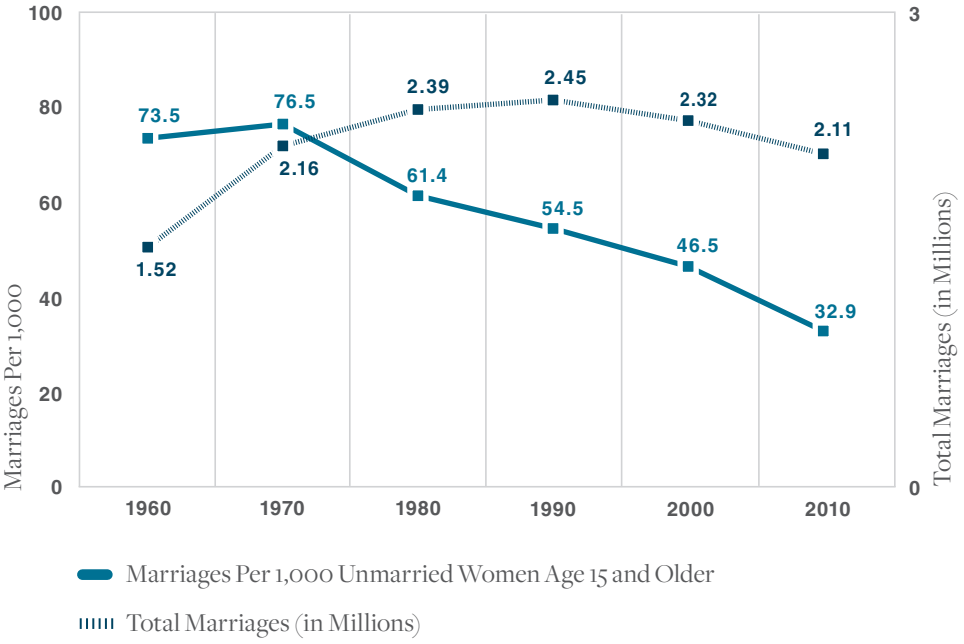
KEY FINDING: Marriage trends in recent decades indicate that Americans have become less likely to marry, and the most recent data show that the marriage rate in the United States continues to decline. Of those who do marry, there has been a moderate drop since the 1970s in the percentage of couples who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

Americans have become less likely to marry. This is reflected in a decline of more than 50 percent, from 1970 to 2010, in the annual number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried adult women (**Figure 1**). In real terms, the total number of marriages fell from 2.45 million in 1990 to 2.11 million in 2010. 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 20.3 for females and 22.8 for males in 1960 to 26.5 and 28.7, respectively, in 2011. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced persons to remarry. Finally, U.S. Census data indicate that the retreat from marriage has accelerated in the wake of the Great Recession.

The decline also reflects some increase in lifelong singlehood, though the actual amount cannot 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

Figure 1. MARRIAGES PER 1,000 UNMARRIED WOMEN AGE 15 AND OLDER AND TOTAL MARRIAGES, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: We have used the number of new marriages per 1,000 unmarried women age 15 and older, rather than the Crude Marriage Rate of marriages per 1,000 population, to help avoid the problem of compositional changes in the population, that is, changes that stem merely from there being more or less people in the marriageable ages. Even this more refined measure is somewhat susceptible to compositional changes.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Table 117; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1986, Table 124; and *American Community Survey*, 2010, Tables S-1201 and S-1251; available online at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml.

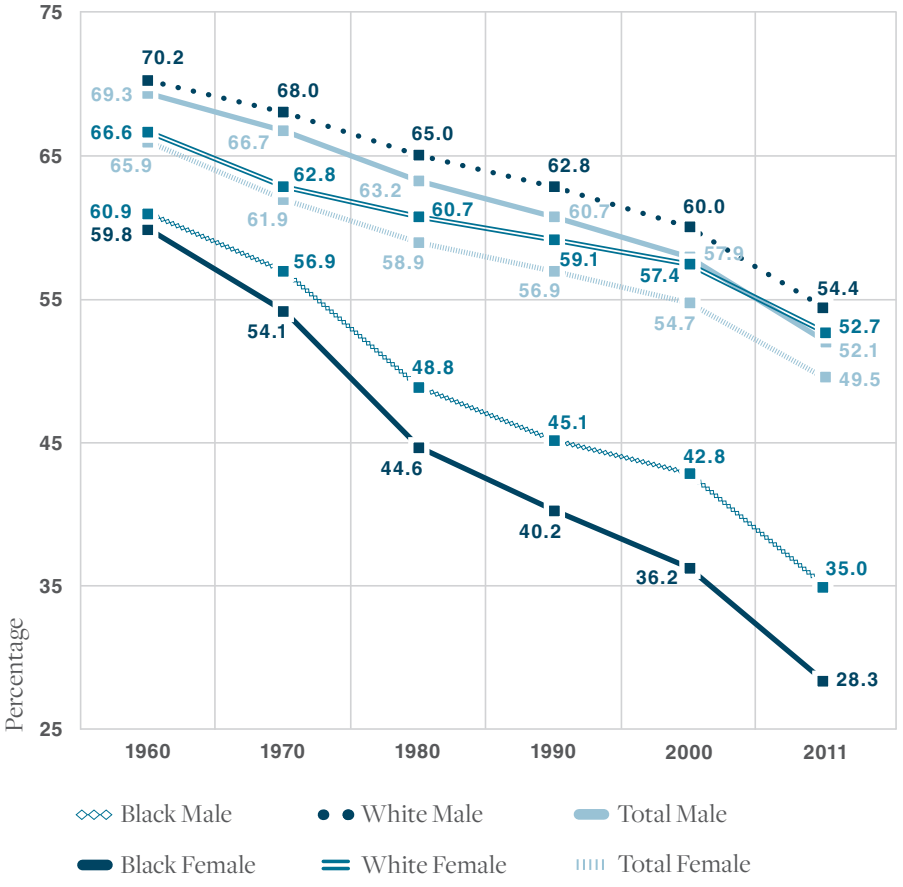
of those married among all persons age 15 and older has been more than 16 percentage points—and approximately 31 points among black females (**Figure 2**). It should be noted that these data include people who have never married, those who have married and then divorced, and widows or widowers.

In order partially to control for a decline in married adults due solely 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 more than 23 percentage points for married men and 22 points for married women.

Marriage trends in the age range of 35 to 44 are suggestive of lifelong singlehood. In the 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 eventually married in every generation for which records exist, going back to the mid-1800s. By 1960, 94 percent of women then living had been married at least once by age 45—probably a 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] Now, given recent declines in the marriage rate, the percentage of women and men ever marrying is likely lower.

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

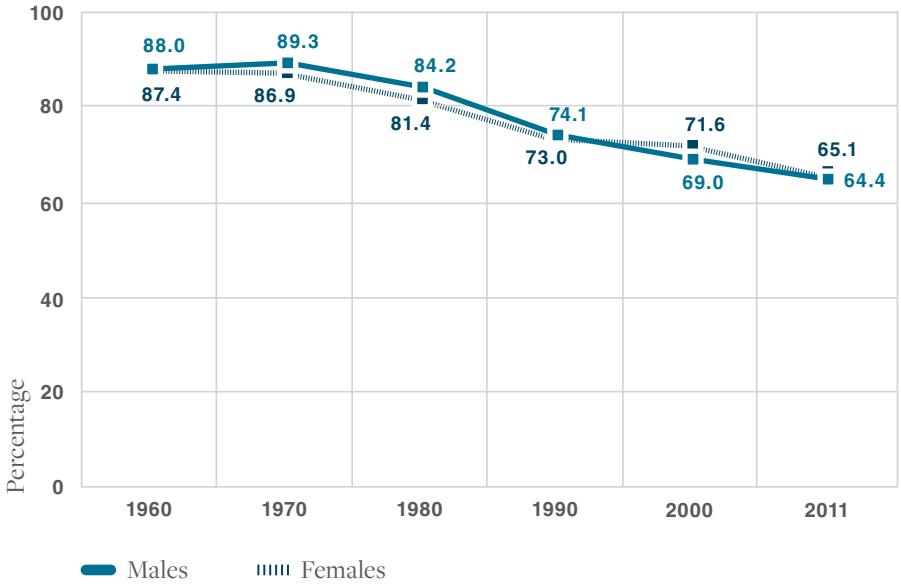
Figure 2. PERCENTAGE OF ALL PERSONS AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE MARRIED, BY SEX AND RACE, 1960–2011, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Percentages of total males and total females include races other than black and white. 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. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table A1, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

Figure 3. **PERCENTAGE OF PERSONS AGE 35–44 WHO WERE MARRIED BY SEX, 1960–2011, UNITED STATES**



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1961, Table 27; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1971, Table 38; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1981, Table 49; *General Population Characteristics*, 1990, Table 34; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Table 51; and *Current Population Reports,* "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table UC3, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

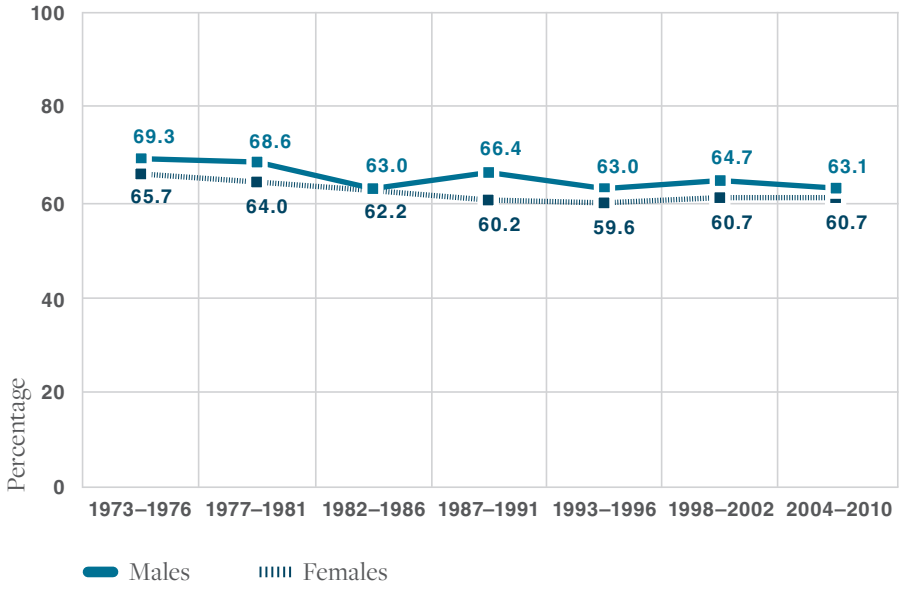
live together before they marry for the first time. An even higher percentage of divorced persons who subsequently remarry live together first. And a growing number of persons, both young and old, are living together with no plans to marry eventually.

There is a common belief that, although a smaller percentage of Americans are marrying than was the case a few decades ago, those who now marry have marriages of higher quality. It seems reasonable to surmise 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 should, on average, 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 responding "very happy" has declined moderately over the past forty years.[4] This trend, however, has essentially flattened out over the last two decades.

DIVORCE

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

Figure 4. **PERCENTAGE OF MARRIED PERSONS AGE 18 AND OLDER WHO SAID THEIR MARRIAGES WERE "VERY HAPPY," BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES**



NOTE: The number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 2,000—except for 1977–1981, 1998–2002, and 2004–2008, with about 1,500 respondents for each sex.

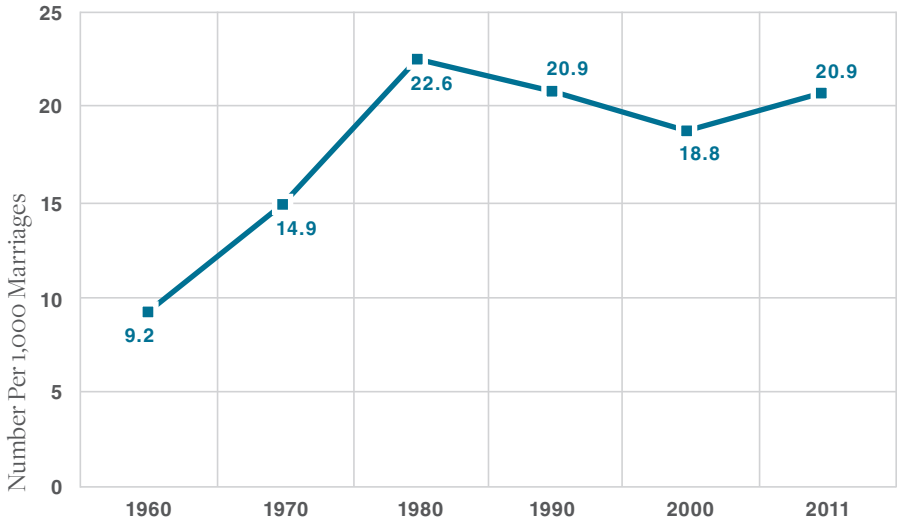
SOURCE: "The General Social Survey," conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.

The increase in divorce, shown by the trend reported in **Figure 5**, has probably 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 a historical high point in the early 1980s.

Since then, the divorce rate has modestly declined. The decline apparently represents a slight increase in marital stability.[5] Two probable reasons for this are an increase in the age at which people marry for the first time, and that marriage is progressively becoming the preserve of the well-educated. Both of these factors are associated with greater marital stability.[6] (Note: The observed increase in divorce rates from 2000 to 2011 could be a true increase back to the divorce rates of 1990. However, this trend could also be explained at least in part by a change in how the U.S. gathers divorce data.)

Although a majority of divorced persons eventually remarry, the growth of divorce, and declines in remarriage, have 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, had quadrupled by the year 2000. The percentage of divorced persons 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.

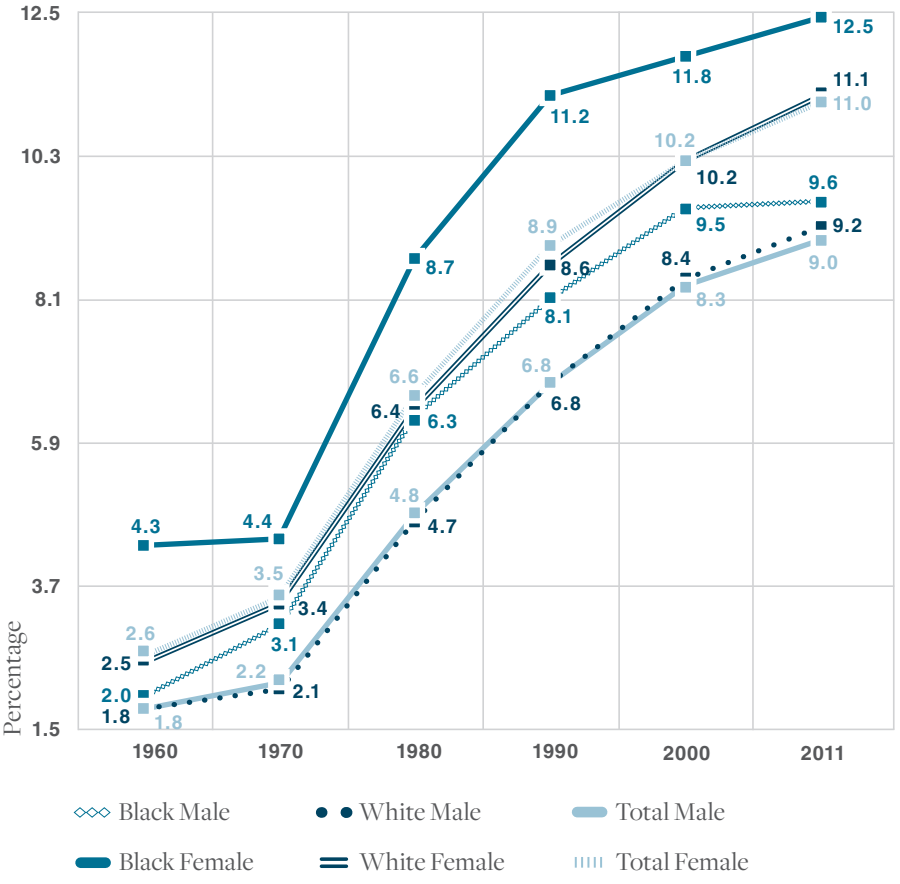
Figure 5. NUMBER OF DIVORCES PER 1,000 MARRIED WOMEN AGE 15 AND OLDER, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: 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. Calculations for this table up to 2000 are based on National Center for Health Statistics data for the United States, less California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota. The 2011 estimate is based on nationally representative data from the American Community Survey that does not exclude these six states. Thus, the 2011 estimate is not strictly comparable to estimates from earlier years.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Table 117; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data," 2000, in *National Vital Statistics Report* 49; and U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*, 2011, Tables S-1201 and S-1251.

Figure 6. PERCENTAGE OF ALL PERSONS AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE DIVORCED, BY SEX AND RACE, 1960–2011, UNITED STATES



NOTE: 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. "Divorced" indicates family status at the time of survey. Divorced respondents who later marry are counted as "married."

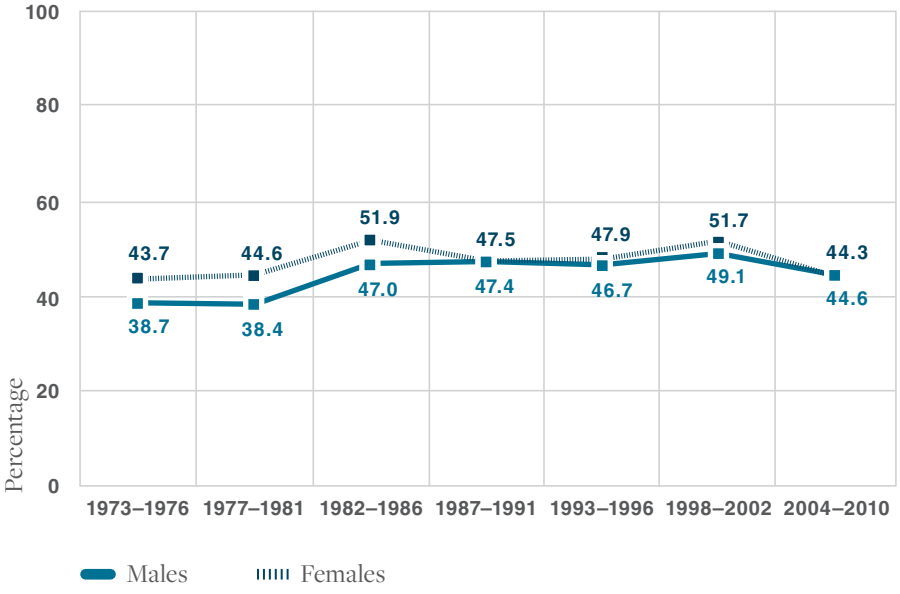
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table A1 and earlier similar reports, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

When it comes to cultural attitudes, **Figure 7** indicates that the public has become rather more accepting of divorce in recent years, after turning against divorce somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s. This is a sobering development, insofar as more permissive divorce attitudes are associated with lower-quality and more unstable marriages.[7]

Overall, the chances remain high—estimated between 40 and 50 percent—that a first marriage entered into in recent years will end in either divorce or separation before one partner dies.[8] (However, see the accompanying sidebar: "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: the figures are 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.[9]

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 and the nonreligious compared to the religiously committed. Teenagers and the nonreligious who marry have higher divorce rates.[10] As noted in the 2010 edition of *The State of Our Unions*, there is also a growing educational divide in divorce in the United States: less-educated Americans face a much higher divorce rate than their college-educated fellow citizens.

Figure 7. **PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS AGE 18–45 WHO SAID THAT DIVORCE LAWS SHOULD BE CHANGED TO MAKE GETTING A DIVORCE "MORE DIFFICULT," BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES**



NOTE: The number of respondents for each sex for each period is about 2,000—except for 1977–1981, 1998–2002, and 2004–2008, with about 1,500 respondents for each sex.

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

Your Chances of Divorce
may be much lower than you think

By now almost everyone has heard that the national divorce rate is almost 50 percent of all marriages. This is basically true for the married population as a whole. But 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:[1]

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
Family of origin intact (vs. divorced parents)	-14
Religious affiliation (vs. none)	-14
College (vs. high school dropout)	-25

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 25 without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are very low indeed.

Also, the "close to 50 percent" 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 peaking around 1980, and the rate could be lower (or higher) in the future than it is today.[2]

1 Matthew D. Bramlett and William D. Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States,* Vital and Health Statistics 23 (Washington, DC: National Center for Health Statistics, 2002); and W. Bradford Wilcox, "When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America," *The State of Our Unions 2010* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project and Institute for American Values, 2010). The risks are calculated for women only.

2 Rose M. Kreider and Jason M. Fields, "Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces, 2001," *Current Population Reports*, P70-80 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

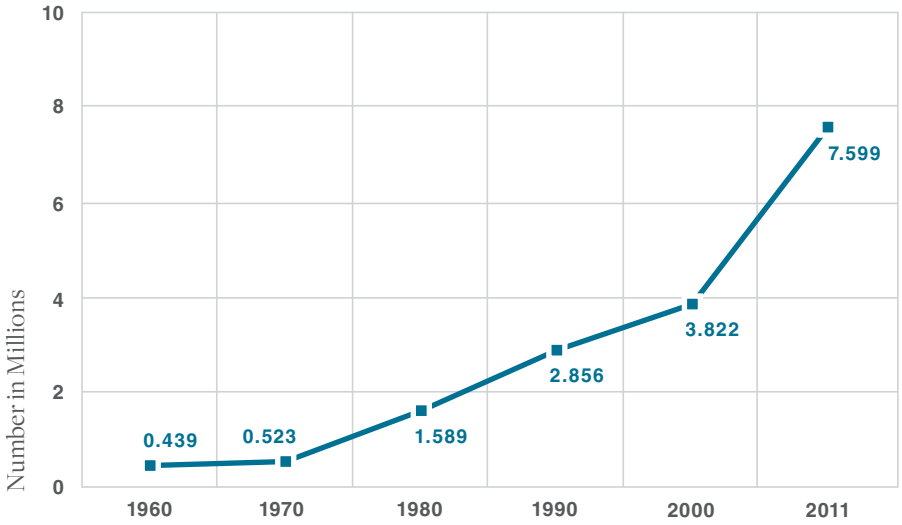
UNMARRIED COHABITATION

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

Between 1960 and 2011, as indicated in **Figure 8**, the number of unmarried couples in America increased more than seventeen-fold. 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. More than 60 percent of first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none fifty years ago.[11]

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. Our 2010 report indicates that among women in the 25 to 44 age range, 75 percent of high school dropouts have cohabited compared to 50 percent of college graduates. 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

Figure 8. **NUMBER OF COHABITING, UNMARRIED, ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES**



NOTE: Prior to 1996, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated unmarried-couple households based on two unmarried adults of the opposite sex living in the same household. After 1996, respondents could identify themselves as unmarried partners.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table UC3, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

cohabiting couple households, now over 40 percent, contains 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 studies on the effects of cohabitation are mixed. In fact, some 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. For instance, a recent study based on a nationally-representative sample of more than 1,000 married men and women concluded that premarital cohabitation, when limited to the period after engagement, is not associated with an elevated risk of marital problems; however, this study also found that couples who cohabited prior to engagement were more likely to have marital problems and less likely to be happy in their marriages.[12] What can be said is that the research does not provide consistent evidence that cohabitation helps couples prepare for marriage.[13]

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. Marriage is a wealth-generating institution. Married couples create more economic assets on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples. A 2002 study of retirement data concluded that "individuals who do not participate in legal marriage (e.g., never married or cohabiting) have significantly lower wealth than those who are continuously married." Compared to those continuously married, those who never married had a reduction in wealth of 75 percent, those who were currently cohabiting had a reduction of 58 percent, and those who divorced and didn't remarry had a reduction of 72 percent.[1]

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 spouse.

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.[2] 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 20 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.[3] 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.[4]

Beyond the economic advantages of marriage for the married couples themselves, marriage has a tremendous economic impact on society. Marriage trends have a big impact on family income levels and inequality. After more

than doubling between 1947 and 1977, the growth of median family income has slowed in recent years. A major 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 twenty-year period, and in large part because of changes in family structure, family income inequality has significantly increased.[5]

Research has consistently shown that 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.[6] 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 percent rather than 45.6 percent, and the white child poverty rate would have been 11.4 percent rather than 15.4 percent.[7] 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 factors as the increased 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.[8]

ENDNOTES

1 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): 265.

2 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 (2003): 927–38; Joseph Lupton and James P. Smith, "Marriage, Assets and Savings," in Shoshana A. Grossbard-Schectman, ed., *Marriage and the Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 129–52.

3 Hyunbae Chun and Injae Lee, "Why Do Married Men Earn More: Productivity or Marriage Selection?" *Economic Inquiry* 39 (2001): 307–19; Sanders Korenman and David Neumark, "Does Marriage Really Make Men More Productive?" *Journal of Human Resources* 26 (1991): 282–307; Kermit Daniel, "The Marriage Premium," in Mariano Tomassi and Kathryn Ierulli, eds., *The New Economics of Human Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 113–25.

4 Lingxin Hao, "Family Structure, Private Transfers, and the Economic Well-Being of Families with Children," *Social Forces* 75 (1996): 269–92.

5 U.S. Census Bureau, "Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change Using the March Current Population Survey," *Current Population Reports*, P60–203 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1998); John Iceland, "Why Poverty Remains High: The Role of Income Growth, Economic Inequality, and Changes in Family Structure, 1949–1999," *Demography* 40 (2003): 499–519.

6 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): 1058–67.

7 Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill, "For Richer or For Poorer: Marriage as an Antipoverty Strategy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21 (2002): 4.

8 David Schramm, "Individual and Social Costs of Divorce in Utah," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 27 (2006): 1.

LOSS OF CHILD-CENTEREDNESS

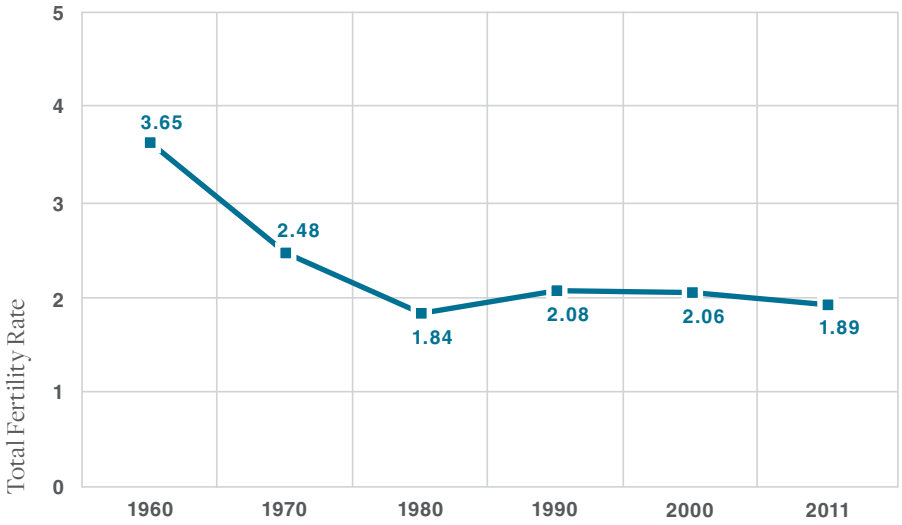
KEY FINDING: The presence of children in America has declined significantly since 1960, as measured by fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Other indicators suggest that this decline has reduced the child-centeredness of our nation and contributed to the weakening of the institution 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 connect the father to his children by binding him to the mother of his children. Yet in recent times, children have increasingly been pushed from center stage.

Americans on average have been having fewer children. **Figure 9** 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 declined sharply for two decades before leveling off around 1990.

In 2011, the latest year for which we have complete information, the American "total fertility rate" (TFR) stood at 1.89, below the 1990 level and slightly below two children per woman. This rate is below the "replacement level" of 2.1, the

Figure 9. FERTILITY RATES OF WOMEN AGE 15–44, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: 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 2.11 represents "replacement level" fertility under current mortality conditions (assuming no net migration).

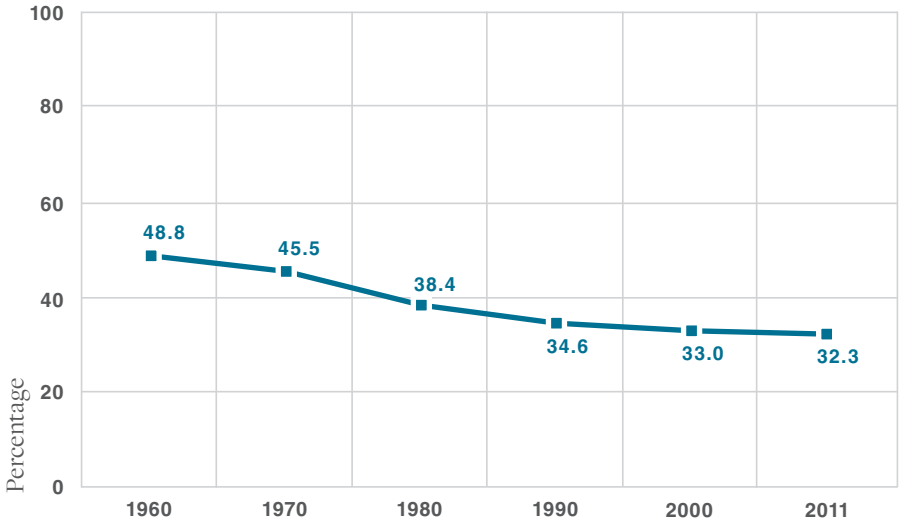
SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Vital Statistics Report*, 1993 and 2001; "Births: Preliminary Data for 2011," *National Vital Statistics Report* 61:5, October 3, 2012.

level at which the population would be replaced through births alone, and is one of the highest rates found in modern industrialized societies. Nevertheless, 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 slightly more than one child per woman.[14] The U.S. fertility rate is relatively high due in part 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 mid-1800s more than 75 percent of all households contained children under the age of 18.[15] One hundred years later, in 1960, this number had dropped to slightly less than half of all households. In 2011, just five decades later, only 32 percent of households included children (**Figure 10**). 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—may gradually 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.

Figure 10. **PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH ONE OR MORE CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18, 1960–2011, UNITED STATES**



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1964, Tables 36 and 54; 1980, Tables 62 and 67; 1985, Tables 54 and 63; and 1994, Table 67; *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Tables F1 and H1, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

By 1985, however, just twenty-five years later, the proportion of one's life spent with spouse and children dropped to 43 percent—the lowest in our history.[16] 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 of those disagreeing with this statement: "The main purpose of marriage is having children."[17] Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else, compared, for example, to 51 percent of Norwegians and 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.[18] 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."[19]

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 rather than female).[20]

FRAGILE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

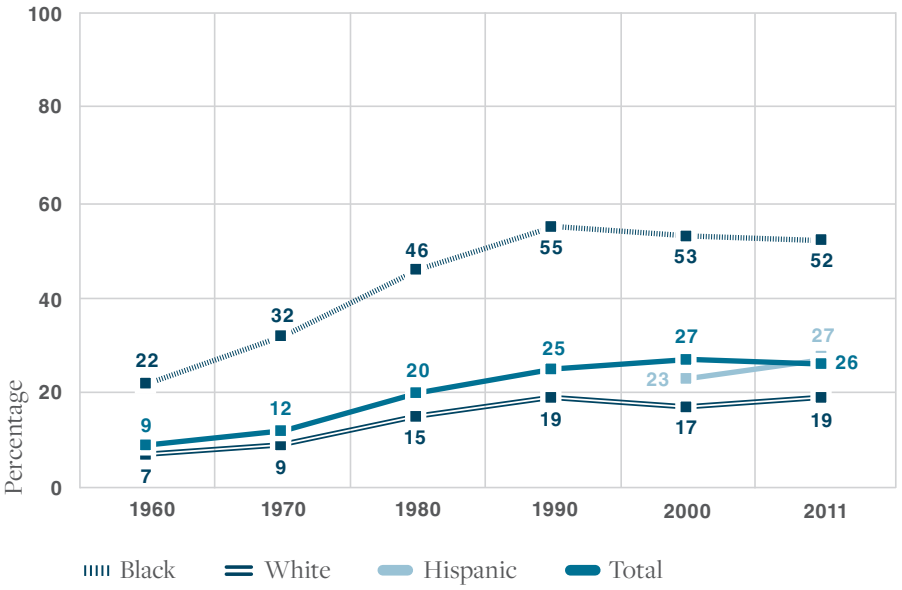
KEY FINDING: The percentage of children who grow up in fragile—typically fatherless—families has grown enormously over the past five decades. This is mainly due to increases in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and unmarried cohabitation. The trend toward fragile families leveled off in the late 1990s, 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 well-being 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 11**). 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.[21] While in 1960 only 9 percent of all children lived in single-parent families, a figure that had changed little over the course of the twentieth century, by 2011 the percentage had risen to 26.

An indirect indicator of fragile families is the percentage of children under age 18 living with two married parents. Since 1960 this percentage has declined substantially, by 23 percentage points (**Figure 12**). Unfortunately, this measure makes no

Figure 11. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 LIVING WITH A SINGLE PARENT, BY YEAR AND RACE, UNITED STATES



NOTE: 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 figure above, were classified as living with no parent. 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. In 2000 and 2010, whites is redefined to white, non-Hispanic, and Hispanic is separated out as its own group. Prior to 2007, the U.S. Census counted children living with two cohabiting parents as children in single parent households. See "Improvements to Data Collection about Families in CPS 2007," available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html.

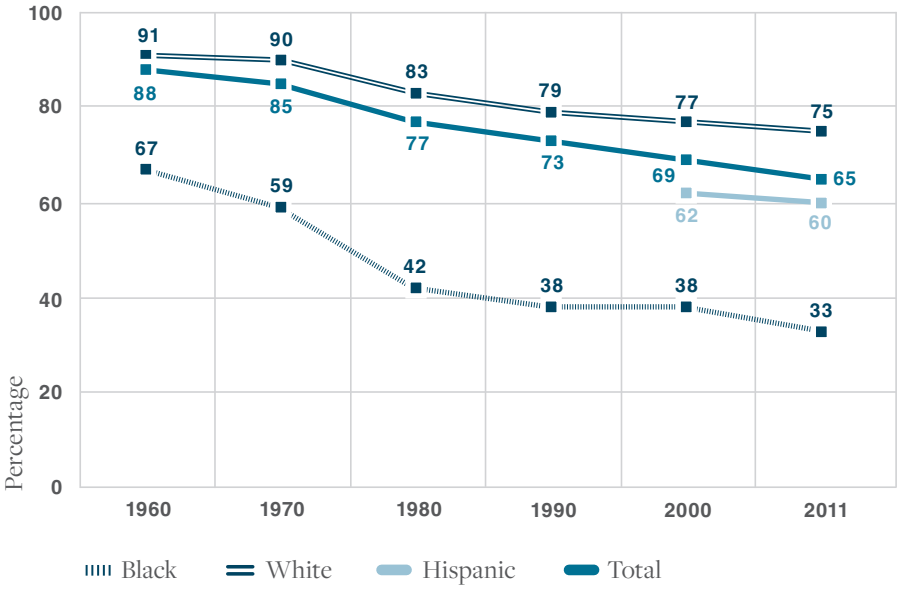
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table C3, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

distinction between natural and stepfamilies; it is estimated that some 88 percent of two-parent families consist of both biological parents, while 9 percent are stepfamilies.[22] 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.[23] Data on stepfamilies, therefore, probably are more reasonably combined with single-parent than with biological two-parent families. An important indicator that helps 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.[24]

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, grew from under 500,000 in 1960 to well over a million in 1975. After peaking around 1980, that 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 the past.

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

Figure 12. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 LIVING WITH TWO MARRIED PARENTS, BY YEAR AND RACE, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Total includes blacks, whites, and all other racial and ethnic groupings. 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. "Married Parents" may be step- or natural parents of children in the household. In 2000 and 2011, whites is redefined to white, non-Hispanic, and Hispanic is separated out as its own group.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table C3, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

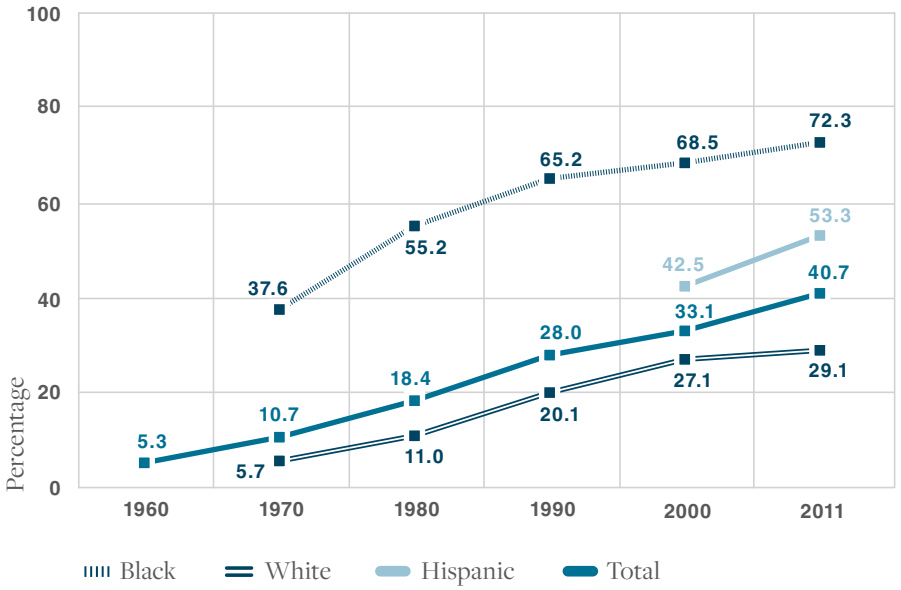
mothers has increased more than sevenfold (**Figure 13**). More than four in ten births and more than two-thirds of black births in 2011, the latest year for which we have complete data, were out-of-wedlock.

A third and still more recent family trend that has affected family structure is the rapid growth of unmarried cohabitation. In fact, more cohabiting couples are having children, or bringing children into their relationship. Consequently, there has been about a fifteen-fold increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children since 1960 (**Figure 14**). Slightly more than 40 percent of all children are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household during their childhood years.[25]

In 2000, about 40 percent of unmarried-couple households included one or more children under age 18.[26] For unmarried couples in the 25 to 34 age group, the percentage with children is higher still, approaching half of all such households.[27] Seventy percent of the children in unmarried-couple households are the children of only one partner.[28] 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.[29]

Children who grow up with cohabiting couples tend to have worse life outcomes compared to those growing up with married couples.[30] The primary reasons are that cohabiting couples have a much higher breakup rate than married couples, a lower level of household income, and higher levels of child abuse and domestic violence. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who

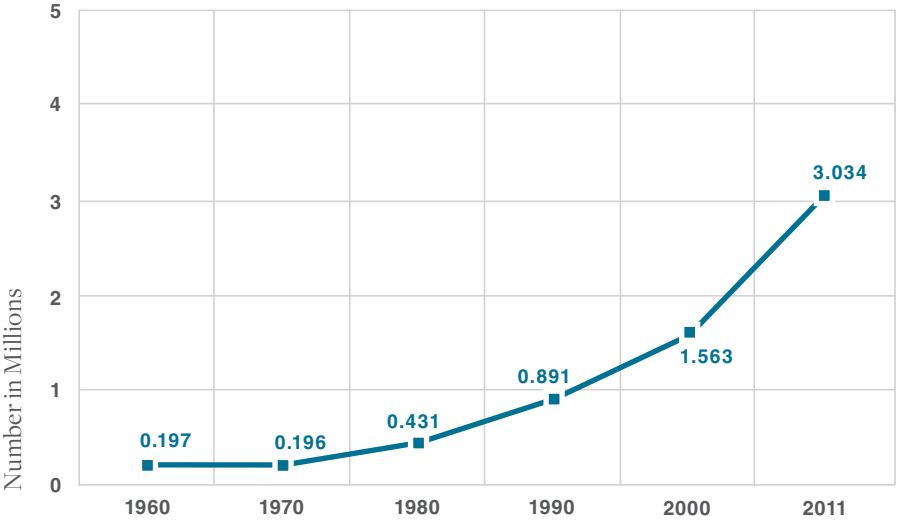
Figure 13. PERCENTAGE OF LIVE BIRTHS THAT WERE TO UNMARRIED WOMEN, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES



NOTE: Total includes whites, blacks, and all other racial and ethnic groupings.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1995, Table 94; 1999, Table 99; 2000, Table 85; and 2001, Table 76, available online at www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html. Centers for Disease Control Prevention, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2011," *National Vital Statistics Report* 61, Table 1, available online at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr61/nvsr61_05.pdf.

Figure 14. NUMBER OF COHABITING, UNMARRIED, ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX LIVING WITH ONE OR MORE CHILDREN, BY YEAR,UNITED STATES



SOURCE: Prior to 1996, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated unmarried-couple households based on two unmarried adults of the opposite sex living in the same household. After 1996, respondents could identify themselves as unmarried partners. The Census also identified households with children under 15 until 1996 when they began identifying children under 18.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," 2011, Table UC3, available online at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html.

eventually marry the fathers of their children is declining, a decline sadly predictive of increased problems for children.[31]

TEEN ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

KEY FINDING: The desire of teenagers of both sexes for "a good marriage and family life" has remained high over the past few decades. Boys are almost 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, including unwed childbearing and 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.[32] Based on this survey, the percentage of teenagers of both sexes who said that having a good marriage

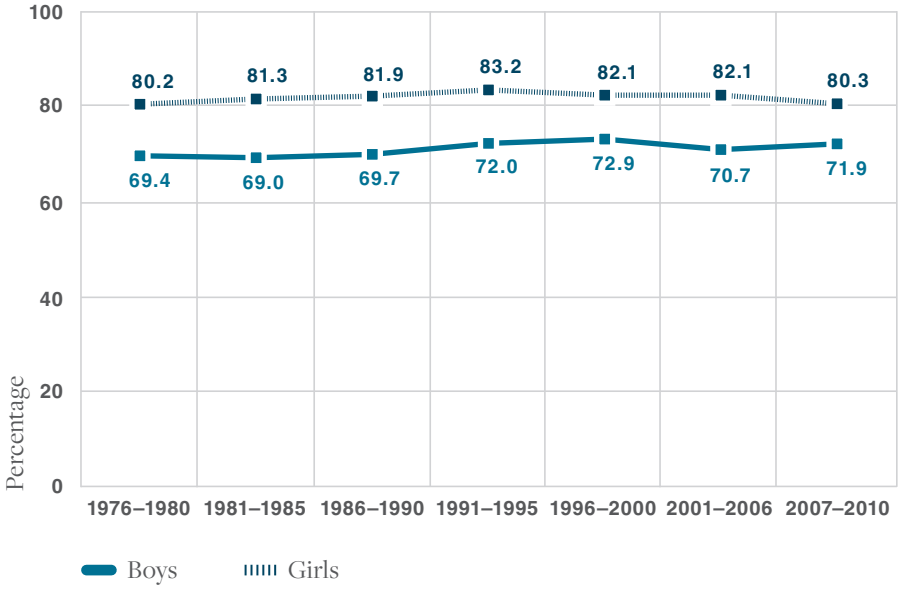
and family life was "extremely important" to them has remained high over the decades. Eighty percent of girls stated this belief in the latest period, with boys lagging behind at 72 percent (**Figure 15**).

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.[33] Among teenagers, boys are a little more pessimistic than girls about the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime. But this difference has recently diminished and, since 1986 to 1990, the trend has flattened out (**Figure 16**).

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 17**). Less than a third of the girls and only slightly more than a third of the boys seem to believe, based on their response to this statement, that marriage is more beneficial to individuals than the alternatives. Note also that young women have seen their faith in marriage's capacity to deliver happiness fall markedly over the last thirty years. Yet this belief is contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.[34]

Witness the remarkable increase in recent decades in the acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing among teens

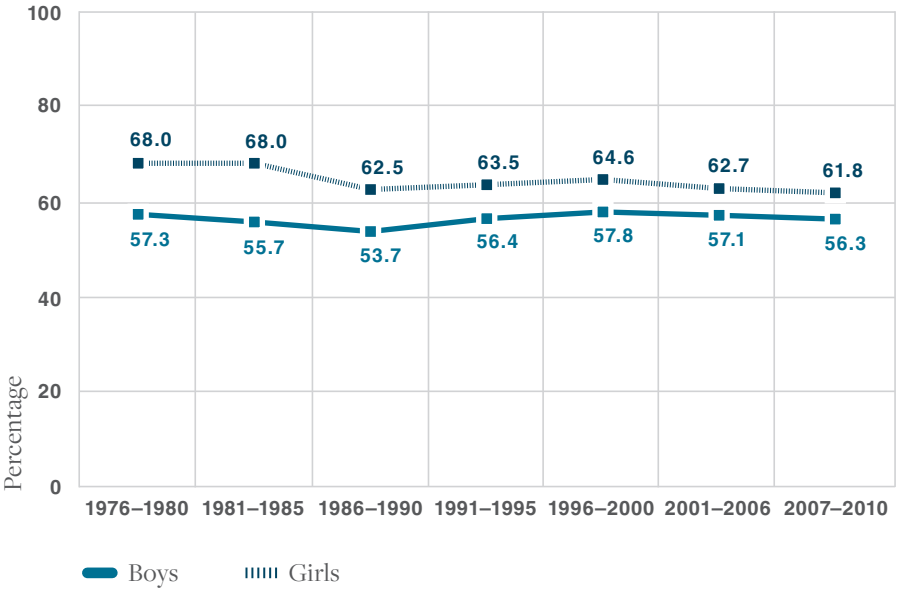
Figure 15. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A GOOD MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IS "EXTREMELY IMPORTANT," BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES



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

SOURCE: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malle, "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors, 2010" (Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, 2011). Monitoring the Future surveys are conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

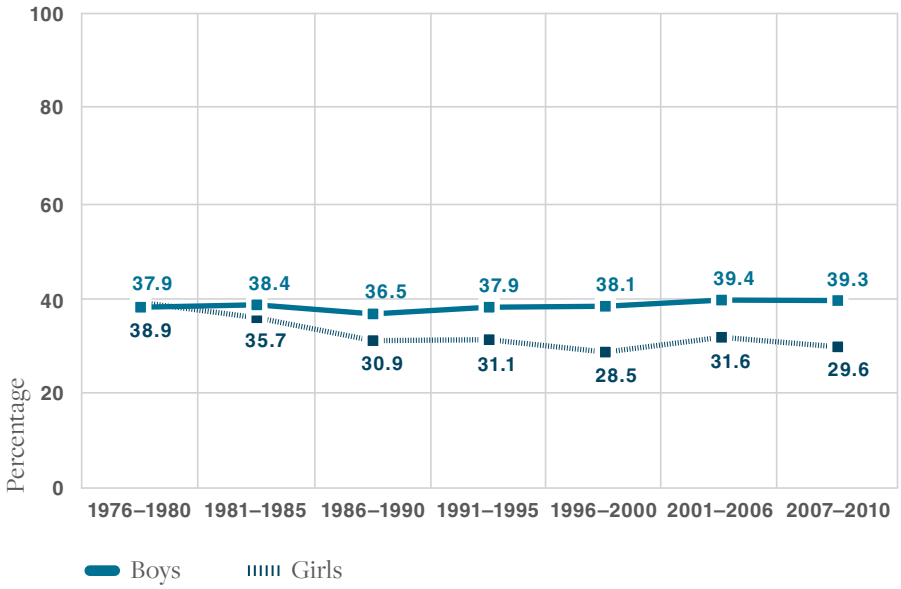
Figure 16. **PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL STAY MARRIED TO THE SAME PERSON FOR LIFE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES**



NOTE: 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: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malle, "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors, 2010" (Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, 2011). Monitoring the Future surveys are conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

Figure 17. **PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO 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**



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

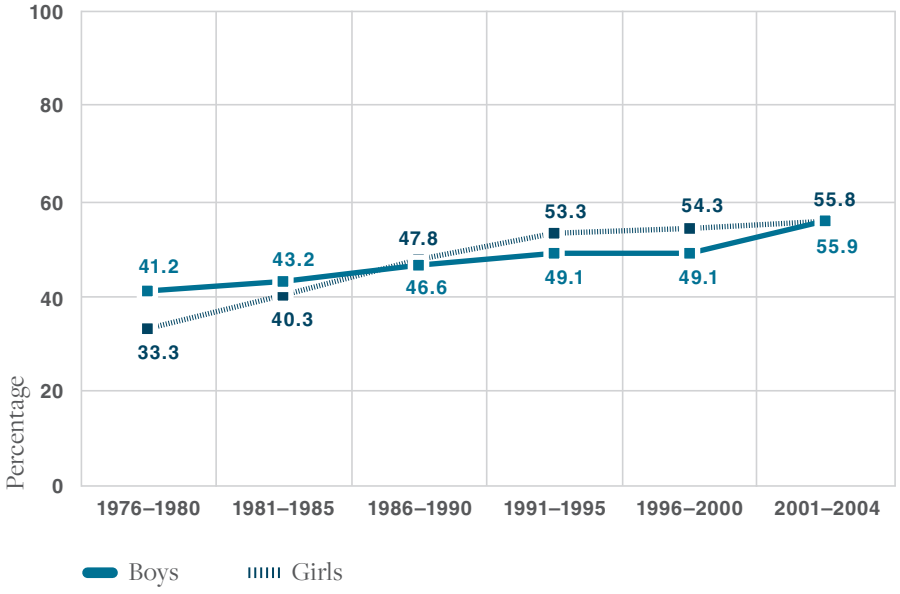
SOURCE: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malle, "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors, 2010" (Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, 2011). Monitoring the Future surveys are conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

(**Figure 18**). 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 seem to grasp the enormous economic, social, and personal costs of nonmarital childbearing.

Another remarkable increase is in the percentage of teenagers who are accepting of living together before marriage—now well over half of all teenagers (**Figure 19**). In this case, girls remain more traditional than boys. The growing cultural acceptance of cohabitation among high school seniors is congruent with the growth in cohabitation demonstrated earlier in this report.

In summary, marriage and family life remain very important goals for today's teenagers. Nevertheless, teens are also increasingly accepting of a range of nonmarital lifestyles that can stand in tension with these goals. Given the ambiguous character of teenage attitudes regarding marriage, there are no strong signs yet of a generational cultural shift that could lead to a reversal of the nation's recent retreat from marriage.

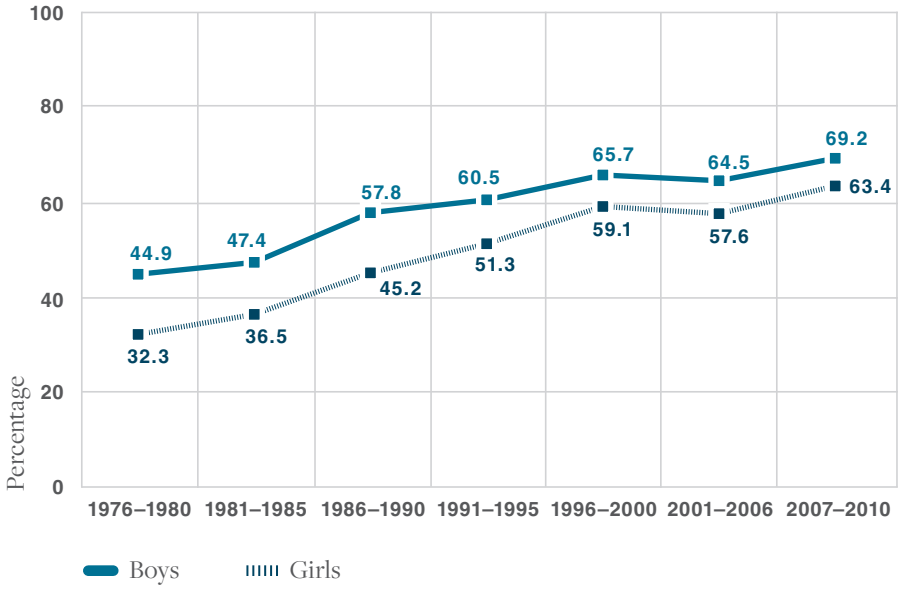
Figure 18. **PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A CHILD WITHOUT BEING MARRIED IS EXPERIMENTING WITH A WORTHWHILE LIFESTYLE OR NOT AFFECTING ANYONE ELSE, BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES**



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

SOURCE: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malle, "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors, 2010" (Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, 2011). Monitoring the Future surveys are conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

Figure 19. **PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO AGREED OR MOSTLY AGREED WITH THE STATEMENT, "IT IS USUALLY A GOOD IDEA FOR A COUPLE TO LIVE TOGETHER BEFORE GETTING MARRIED IN ORDER TO FIND OUT WHETHER THEY REALLY GET ALONG," BY PERIOD, UNITED STATES**



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

SOURCE: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malle, "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors, 2010" (Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, 2011). Monitoring the Future surveys are conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

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