2026

State of Our Unions

The Dating Recession

How Bad Is It and What Can We Do? A View Through the 2025 National Dating Landscape Survey

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Executive Summary

Young adults today are living in a depressed dating economy. In this 2026 State of Our Unions report, we pursued greater insight on the challenges of contemporary dating through the 2025 National Dating Landscape Survey, a nationally representative sample of 5,275 unmarried young adults ages 22–35 in the United States. We focused mostly on the dating experiences of those single young adults who expect to marry (86%; N = 4,539). What did we learn?

Overall, we found evidence that many young adults are experiencing a dating recession during their prime dating years. Most young adults are not dating much and many are struggling with significant barriers to initiating dating relationships and pursuing their desire to one day marry and have a family. Most young adults across our country endorse relatively traditional purposes for dating and do not express an overt fear of commitment, but many lack the needed skills for dating and the resilience to handle the natural ups and downs of relationship starts and stops along the journey of dating. Here are some of the key trends we found:

- **Only About 1 in 3 of Young Adults is Actively Dating**

  Only about 30% of young adults reported that they are dating, either casually or exclusively. When asked how often they were dating, only 31% of young adults – a quarter of women (26%) and a little more than a third of men (36%) – reported that they were active daters (dating once a month or more). Nearly three-quarters of women (74%) and nearly two-thirds of men (64%) in our survey reported they had not dated or dated only a few times in the last year. These numbers are noteworthy given that about half (51%) of the young adults in our national survey expressed interest in starting a relationship.

- **Young Adults Lack Confidence in Their Dating Skills**

  We also found that many young adults lack faith in their dating skills and their ability to initiate a promising romantic relationship. In fact, it is safe to say that among the rising generation dating confidence is low, with only about 1-in-3 young adults expressing much faith in their dating skills. Only about 1-in-3 young adult men and 1-in-5 young adult women expressed confidence in the fundamental skill of being able to approach someone they were romantically interested in. Less than 4-in-10 (37%) said they trusted their judgment when it comes to choosing a dating partner. A similar minority of young adults expressed confidence in their ability to discuss feelings with a dating partner (34%) and picking up on social cues on dates (36%).

- **Young Adults Desire a Dating Culture Aimed at Forming Serious Relationships**

  Despite a common narrative that young adults are only interested in casual dating and unattached hooks-ups, we found that young adults – both women and men, younger and older – strongly endorse a dating culture focused on forming serious relationships (83% of women and 74% of men) and creating emotional connections (83% of women and 76% of men). These more traditional purposes for dating are aimed at building committed romantic relationships and learning how to facilitate personal growth in those relationships. While dating frequency may be low, most young adults seem to yearn for the connection of serious dating and marriage relationships.

- **Money Worries, Self-confidence, and Past Dating Experiences are Big Barriers in the Modern Dating Landscape**

  Young adults reported significant financial and social/emotional barriers to dating. The biggest barrier to dating they expressed was not having enough money, endorsed by more than half (52%) of respondents (58% of men and 46% of women). Contemporary dating is often focused on commercial activities, and young adults often feel they can't afford to date in this way. Respondents also frequently reported that personal factors get in their way with dating. At the top of this list were lack of confidence (49%) and bad dating experiences in the past (48%).

- **Dating Resilience is Low Among Young Adults**

  Dating resilience is low among young adults, with only about a quarter (28%) reporting that they can stay positive after a bad date or relationship setback. More than half (55%) agreed that their breakups have made them more reluctant to begin new romantic relationships.

This study shows that there is a marital-expectations vs. dating-skills gap for most young adults today. This gap calls for a concerted effort to teach young adults healthy dating skills, something that receives little attention from the general culture or even the relationship education field. Young adults could use some basic help in building dating skills. Their desires and attitudes are not the problem. They want to build real human connections, form serious relationships, explore what they want in a future long-term partner, and desire the personal growth that comes from forming serious romantic relationships. And contrary to common beliefs, most are not afraid of commitment or losing personal freedom, and few fear that dating will interfere with their educational and career plans. Our young adults need effective road maps that guide them to and through the dating experiences that will connect their marital expectations to actual unions.

The Dating Recession: How Bad Is It and What Can We Do?

A View Through the 2025 National Dating Landscape Survey

There is good news about marriage that all can cheer: Marriages are significantly more stable today than they were four to five decades ago.[1] Granted, much of this stability bonus is a result of who is marrying. Couples with riskier profiles for marital breakup have become a decreasing proportion of all marrying couples. Couples who marry today are more likely to have a set of characteristics that lend themselves to more stable marriages.[2] For instance, they are better educated, more financially stable, more religious, and less likely to marry as teens. Still, regardless of its causes, greater marital stability is something to celebrate because of the known benefits that stable, healthy marriages give to children, adults, and their communities.[3]

Hidden in this encouraging trend, however, is a paradox: Increasing marital stability exists alongside a strong trend of fewer adults getting married. First-marriage rates have fallen by more than 10% over the past two decades,[4] continuing a steady descent since the 1970s.[5] Demographers now estimate that a third of young adults born in the early decades of the twenty-first century will never marry.[6] (Remarriage rates are tanking, too.[7])

If our only goal is to promote marital stability, then a falling marriage rate, with couples who possess riskier divorce profiles opting out, is not a concern. But if marriage itself is a crucial social and personal good,[8] then **a substantial decrease in the number of adults who marry across the life course is a discouraging counterweight to the good news of increasing marital stability.** It is hard to celebrate stronger marriages when fewer and fewer young people are entering them. Socially, this is ambivalent news.

> One straightforward reason for the decline in marriage rates that has not received much attention is the dating system.

Numerous scholars have explored why fewer young adults are marrying.[9] Increased focus on post-secondary education and careers during young adulthood and a declining cultural emphasis on needing to be married – a phenomenon dubbed "the Midas Mindset"[10] – are commonly cited factors. But one straightforward reason for the decline in marriage rates that has not received much attention is the dating system. Many young adults today complain that the dating system is badly broken. They grumble about dating apps that present an abundance of options a mere swipe away and that promote an attitude of relational consumerism. And the repetitive cycle of matching, messaging, and meeting that ends in disappointment leads to significant dating fatigue and cynicism about the whole process. Similarly, they dislike the hook-up culture that pervades dating and its emphasis on casual sex over building soulful relationships.

If the onramps to our marital highways are bumpy, broken, or blocked, it is no mystery why many young adults struggle to reach their expected marital destinations. Or to use another analogy, the contemporary dating economy is struggling, perhaps in a recession. Despite a broken dating system, a healthy majority of young people today still expect a future that includes marriage.[11] (Although this is less and less so for contemporary young women who lean left ideologically.[12]) Can the contemporary dating system – such as it is – get them there? What is the state of the modern dating economy as we begin the second quarter of America's twenty-first century?

This report details findings from a new national survey of American young adults' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences about dating in contemporary America, with a special focus on those young adults who have expectations for marriage – some strong, some modest, and some just uncertain but open to possibilities. What are their attitudes and beliefs about dating and marriage? What are their current dating behaviors and experiences? Importantly, what are the barriers and challenges they face in this dating economy? And, importantly, if we are in a dating recession, what can we do to revive this economy?

If the onramps to our marital highways are bumpy, broken, or blocked, it is no mystery why many young adults struggle to reach their expected marital destinations.

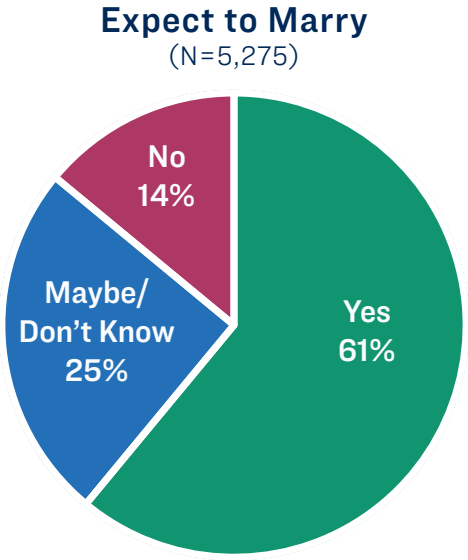
To preview our findings, the story that emerges out of this national survey is one of a dating recession for young adults in their prime dating years; they simply are not dating much, struggle with significant barriers, and lack confidence in their dating skills. They endorse relatively traditional purposes for dating (and do not fear commitment) but they lack the needed skills for dating and the resilience to handle its inevitable emotional wounds. As a result, they experience a loss of romantic connections – connections that prime their souls for the richest experiences humans can have.

We hope this *State of Our Unions* report can kindle cultural and professional conversation about this new challenge to marital formation and spur efforts on the part of parents, relationship educators, counselors, and even policy makers to help young adults improve their dating skills and opportunities.

2025 National Dating Landscape Survey

We pursued greater insight on contemporary dating in the 2025 National Dating Landscape Survey, a nationally representative sample of 5,275 unmarried young adults ages 22–35 in the United States.[13] We see these as the prime dating years for first marriages. The dating experiences of younger 18–21-year-olds are even more disconnected from marriage, which is more than a decade away for most of them. So they are not our focus here. Similarly, dating for those over age 35 may be qualitatively distinct from that of younger adults. We limit our focus to those in the prime dating period for first marriages.

In addition, our focus in this report is on those unmarried young adults who say they expect to marry someday. Fourteen percent of our sample (N = 736) said that they do not expect to marry. Their stories are worth understanding too, but their dating experiences are disconnected from expectations for a future marriage. So instead, we focus on the 86% of respondents (N = 4,539) whose dating experiences are potentially connected to a future marriage,[14] including those who definitely have expectations to marry (61%, n = 3,233) and those who maybe have expectations or just don't know (25%, n = 1,306).



Findings: Marital Expectations and Salience

IDEAL AGE TO MARRY

Before diving into young adults' specific dating experiences, we were curious if young adults who were open to a future marriage believed there was an ideal age to marry. Such beliefs could influence their dating attitudes and behavior. Only 30% said yes, there is an ideal age to marry. So, most young adults do not subscribe to an ideal age for marriage. Of those who do subscribe to an ideal age to marry, however, 30 was by far the age most nominated.[15] Younger male respondents (< 27) said that 29 was the ideal for marriage, while younger female respondents said it was about 28. Older male respondents (>27) said that 30–31 was the ideal age, while older women said it was about 29–30. And even those who were older than 30 reported the ideal age of marriage close to 30. (Note that the ideal age for marriage was uncorrelated with indicators of religiosity and spirituality.)

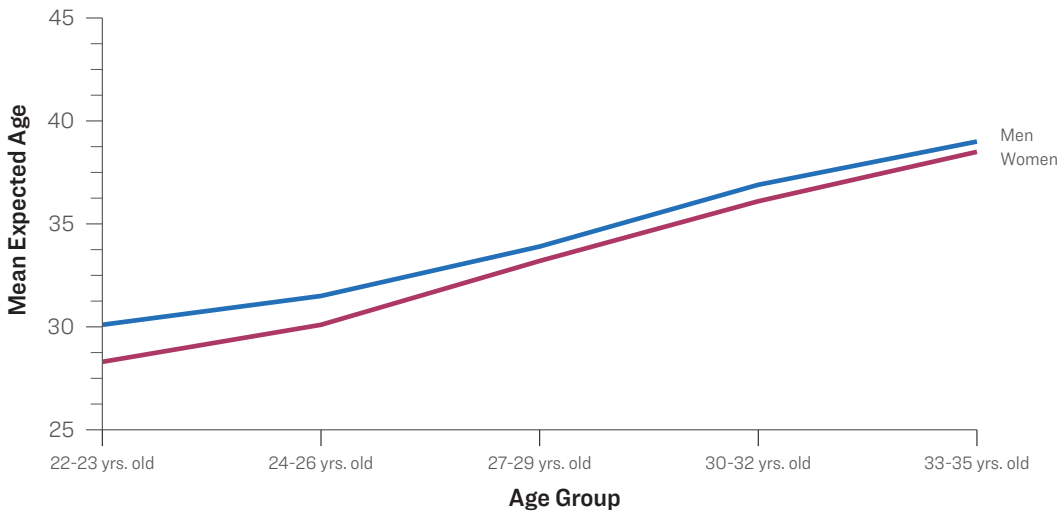
> Most young adults do not subscribe to an ideal age for marriage. Of those who do subscribe to an ideal age to marry, however, 30 was by far the age most nominated.

The average age of first marriage is now approaching 30. Our findings suggest that contemporary young adults probably do not want this number to get any higher. At least for those who have an ideal age for marriage in mind, 29–31 seems to be the sweet spot. And it's important to note that for a minority of young adults, their ideal age of marriage is already in the rearview mirror.

AGE EXPECT TO MARRY

We also asked respondents at what age they expected to marry, which also could shape dating behavior. The overall median age of expected marriage was 33 for women and almost 35 for men.[16] But here age – and to a lesser extent, gender – mattered. For the youngest group (ages 22–23), their average expected age to marry was 28 for women and 30 for men. For 24–26-year-olds, their average expected age to marry was almost 30 for women and almost 32 for men. For 27–29-year-olds, it was 33 for women and 34 for men; for 30–32-year-olds, it was 36 for women and 37 for men. And for the oldest respondents (33–35), the average expected age to marry was about 39 for both women and men.

Mean Expected Age of Marriage
by Age Group



Except for the youngest women in our survey, the average expected age of marriage was at least 30 (even slightly higher than the current actual age at first marriage in the United States). And, importantly, note that **regardless of current age, respondents' marital horizon[17] – the temporal distance between now and the age they expect to marry – was about 5–6 years in the future** (M_{all} = 5.6; M_{women} = 5.2; M_{men} = 6.0). So, the age they expect to marry is not fixed: it appears to slide upward as they get older rather than shrink with the passage of time. As a result, young adult dating lives are temporally disconnected from marriage expectations and may be only abstractly associated with the idea of marriage. (Note that for 1%–2% of respondents, their marital horizon was negative – they were already older than their expected age of marriage.)

MARITAL SALIENCE

> Young adult dating lives are temporally disconnected from marriage expectations and may be only abstractly associated with the idea of marriage.

Given this temporal disconnect between dating and the expected age for marriage, we probed specifically for how prominent or salient the idea of marriage was for our survey respondents. We asked them five questions about the importance of marriage for them personally, which created a marital salience scale.[18] We found that marital salience was moderate with this sample of young adults. The average rating was 3.3 (on a 6-point scale), although those who said "maybe/don't know" about expecting to marry in the future were significantly lower on the scale than those who said "yes."[19] Interestingly, the level of marital salience did not differ by age groups. That is, older respondents reported the same levels of marital salience as younger respondents, so the personal importance of marriage to our respondents was independent of their age.

Still, a look at some of the individual items in this marital salience scale finds that nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that marriage was an important life goal for them, although less than half (47%) said marriage was a top priority for them at this time in their life. (Younger and older respondents were not significantly different on this item.) Nearly half (46%) reported that they would like to be married now. So, for a large minority of young adults, marriage may be a more proximate aspiration than the average marital salience score would suggest.

Findings: Dating Experiences and Attitudes

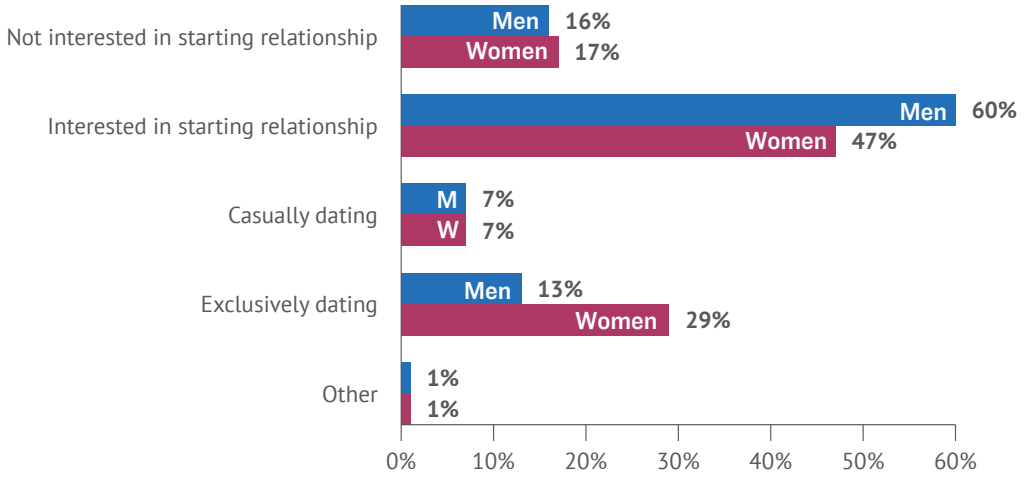
Now we shift to explore young adults' dating experiences and attitudes. Note that 11% (n = 493) of our respondents reported that they were living together with a romantic partner and another 3% (n = 133) were engaged to be married. For these individuals, dating is qualitatively different than for other singles; they are focused exclusively on a committed partner rather than exploring other potential romantic partnerships. Because of this, we excluded cohabitors and engaged individuals from our analyses of many of the dating experience questions below. (And again, our analyses exclude survey respondents who do not expect to marry.)

DATING EXPERIENCE, FREQUENCY, AND SATISFACTION

Respondents reported a median of three exclusive romantic dating partners in their lifetime. Only 15% reported no exclusive dating partners. Another third (32%) reported 1–2 lifetime dating partners. But more than half (52%) have had significant dating experience in the past (three or more exclusive relationships) and we found few gender differences in this reported experience.

However, at the time of the survey, only about 30% of our respondents reported that they were dating, either casually or exclusively. About half (51%) of our respondents reported they were single but interested in starting a relationship, although this was much more the case for men (60%) than for women (43%). Only about one in six of both women and men reported being single but not interested in starting a relationship. Accordingly, dating is clearly a salient element of their lives – either behaviorally or cognitively – for a strong majority of our respondents.

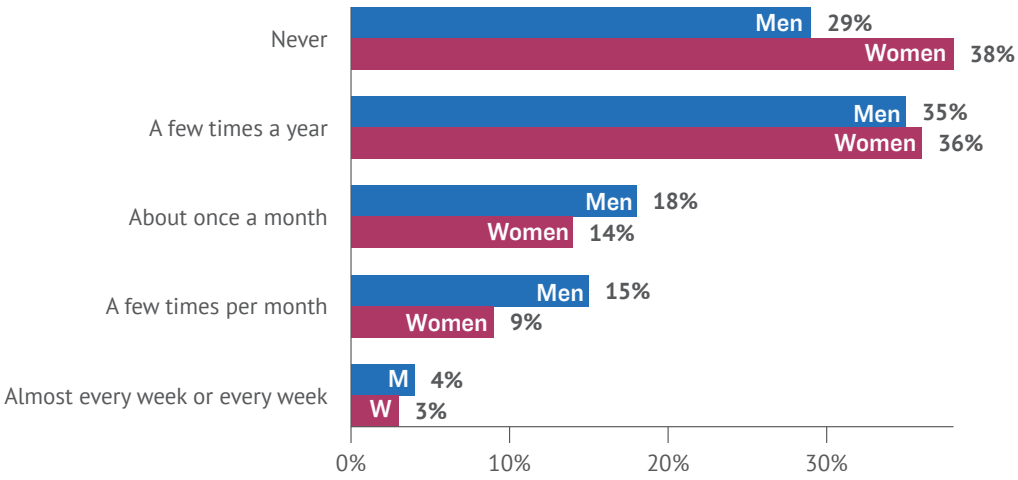
Dating Frequency



We also asked how often they were dating. Nearly three-quarters of women (74%) and nearly two-thirds of men (64%) in our survey reported they had not dated or dated only a few times in the last year.[20] Only 31% of these young adults – a quarter of women (26%) and a little more than a third of men (36%) – were active daters (dating once a month or more). Those who said they definitely expected to marry reported dating a little more often than those who said "maybe/don't know."[21] (Interestingly, respondents in our survey who did not expect to marry (14%) reported the same low level of active dating.)

Only 31% of these young adults – a quarter of women (26%) and a little more than a third of men (36%) – were active daters (dating once a month or more).

Current Dating Status



The frequency of dating could be related to their satisfaction with dating options, of course. Only 21% reported they were satisfied with their options. And 39% reported they were dissatisfied (with 30% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied). (Gender differences here were minimal.) However, dating frequency and satisfaction with options were only weakly correlated ($r = .16$, $p < .001$). Active daters had higher marital salience scores than less active daters,[22] but the correlation was still weak ($r = .16$, $p < .001$).

Dating for contemporary young adults is infrequent, especially so for women. The relatively small proportion of young adults who are actively dating – and the general lack of satisfaction with dating options – lends support to the complaint we often hear from young people, that the dating system is broken.

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DATING CONFIDENCE/EFFICACY

Of course, low rates of dating would not be surprising if young adults lack confidence in their dating skills. Do they believe they have what it takes for dating? We might call this "dating efficacy." We asked our sample to respond to a set of seven valuable dating skills. Overall, we found that dating efficacy was low; only about one in three respondents expressed much faith in their skills. (Those who said they definitely expected to marry scored a little higher on dating efficacy than those who said "maybe/don't know."[23]) Only a quarter expressed confidence in the fundamental skill of being able to approach someone they were romantically interested in (men = 29%; women = 21%). A little over a third (37%) said they trusted their judgment when it comes to choosing a dating partner. They expressed similar levels of struggles with discussing their feelings with a dating partner (34%) and picking up on social cues on dates (36%). Thirty-eight percent were confident that they were attractive to potential dating partners (females = 37%; males = 39%). There was a small-to-medium, positive correlation between dating efficacy and dating frequency ($r = .26$, $p < .001$).

Overall, we found that dating efficacy was low; only about one in three respondents expressed much faith in their skills.

In addition, only about a quarter (28%) reported being able to stay positive after a bad date or relationship setback. A subsequent set of questions in our survey about breakup experiences allowed us to dive a little deeper into this response. More than half (55%) agreed that their breakups have made them more reluctant to begin new romantic relationships. And nearly half (45%) agreed that they have passed up opportunities for new romantic relationships because of bad experiences from previous relationships. Also, more than a third (36%) agreed that they now end relationships too quickly to avoid the possible pain of bad breakups. (Gender differences in these responses were minimal. And we found no significant differences between those who said they definitely expected to marry and those who said "maybe/don't know.")

Our findings suggest that a large proportion of young adults lack confidence in their dating skills. So, it's not surprising that few are regularly dating. Later, we return to this crucial point to explore how we might improve dating skills.

DATING SKILL / ATTRIBUTE	All % Agree	Men % Agree	Women % Agree
I believe I am attractive to potential dating partners.	38%	39%	37%
I feel confident when approaching someone I'm interested in.	25%	29%	21%
I feel comfortable discussing my feelings with a potential dating partner.	34%	35%	32%
I am good at managing my emotions when on a date.	42%	42%	41%
I am good at picking up on social cues when dating.	36%	33%	39%
I trust my judgment when it comes to choosing a romantic partner.	37%	39%	36%
I stay positive after a bad date or relationship setback.	28%	31%	25%

NOTES: (N_{all} = 3,995; n_{men} = 1,969; n_{women} = 2,026).

RESPONSE CATEGORIES: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Somewhat Disagree, 4= Neutral, 5= Somewhat Agree, 6= Agree, 7= Strongly Agree. Reporting % Agree or Strongly Agree (does not include % Somewhat Agree).

DATING PURPOSES

Even if dating is infrequent and their sense of dating efficacy is low, what reasons do young adults give for dating? We asked respondents to report on their purposes or intentions for dating. (Admittedly, for the many infrequent daters in our survey this may have been an abstract exercise.) The 14 items fell into two relatively distinct categories: (1) building relationships and personal growth; and (2) participating in social experiences. We found it noteworthy that the relational and growth purposes – which may be what we traditionally associate with young adult dating – were much more endorsed than the general social purposes (such as fitting in with others (17%), gaining social validation (16%), and being a part of social activities (24%)). Creating emotional connections was the highest rated purpose by both men and women (but was even higher for women: 83% vs. 76%.) A close second purpose for dating was forming serious relationships (78%). (Again, women rated this purpose higher: 83% vs. 74%.) Other purposes that were widely endorsed by both women and men were exploring potential romantic partners (69%); enjoying romantic experiences (69%); personal growth (67%); and learning about myself and what I want in a future partner (63%). Gender differences here were minimal. And somewhat surprisingly, our analyses surfaced few significant and meaningful age differences in dating purposes.[24]

We found it noteworthy that the relational and growth purposes – which may be what we traditionally associate with young adult dating – were much more endorsed than the general social purposes

Dating frequency may be low, but young adults seem to want it for emotional connection, forming serious relationships, and enjoying romantic experiences. In an age of dramatic increases in loneliness and social isolation,[25] young adults seem to yearn for the connection and relationship benefits of dating.

Engaging in physical intimacy (45%) was also endorsed as a purpose for dating, but it was unclear from the survey wording whether this served primarily a relational or just a social purpose. (Statistically, it leaned more toward just a social purpose.) Not surprisingly, engaging in physical intimacy as a purpose for dating produced the largest gender difference (males = 55%; females = 35%).

Young adults – both women and men, younger and older – in our survey strongly endorsed the more traditional purposes of dating to build serious romantic relationships and to explore self and learn and facilitate personal growth in those relationships. Perhaps many of their frustrations with dating stem in significant part from the gap between what their avowed purposes are for dating and their current capacities or skills for dating.

DATING PURPOSES	All % Agree	Men % Agree	Women % Agree
Building Relationships & Personal Growth:			
Creating emotional connection	80%	76%	83%
Forming serious relationships	78%	74%	83%
Exploring potential romantic partners	69%	70%	68%
Enjoying romantic experiences	67%	70%	64%
Learning about myself and what I want for a future partner	63%	62%	63%
Figuring out relationship goals	60%	61%	59%
Personal growth	67%	69%	65%
Facilitating Social Experiences:			
Feeling social pressure to date	28%	30%	26%
To be part of social activities	24%	27%	20%
Fitting in with others	17%	21%	13%
Because friends are dating	13%	16%	10%
Gaining social validation	16%	20%	13%
Engaging in physical intimacy	45%	55%	35%

NOTES: N=3,995; n_{men} = 1,969; n_{women} = 2,026.

RESPONSE CATEGORIES: = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

BARRIERS TO MARRIAGE AND DATING

Feeling financially prepared to begin a marriage may be a significant reason that marriage for many young adults is well over the temporal horizon and dating seems disconnected from marriage. Most young adults in our survey agreed that you should achieve a certain financial threshold before marrying and that finances were a barrier to getting married (M = 4.3, SD = 1.02, 6-point scale[26]). **For instance, nearly 75% of our respondents agreed that "money and finances are a major barrier to getting married."** This was especially so for the younger respondents (ages 22–29). But we found no differences on this item between those who definitely expected to marry and those who said "maybe/don't know."[27]

In addition, we asked respondents to tell us what specific barriers they experienced in their dating lives. Interestingly, the biggest barrier to dating they expressed was not enough money, endorsed by more than half (52%) of respondents. This was more so for men (58%), but it was noteworthy for women, as well (46%).[28] **Dating for contemporary young adults has a price tag, and they feel the pinch.** Money concerns are not just future-abstract in the sense of reaching a certain financial status to be able to marry; they are current-tangible about affording actual dates to explore serious relationships.

Respondents also frequently endorsed a set of social/emotional factors as barriers to dating. At the top of this list were lack of confidence (49%) and bad dating experiences in the past (48%). **Echoing an earlier finding in this report, bad dating experience from the past was the most endorsed barrier for women (50%), and it was it was only a little lower for men (46%)**. Respondents also frequently endorsed lack of relationship experience (38%), not emotionally ready (35%), social component of dating difficult (38%), and not ready for the physical aspects of dating (27%).

Although there is a common notion that young adults want to avoid loss of personal freedom and commitment, we found that these potential barriers to dating were endorsed by relatively few young adults. For example, only a minority of young adults identified the fear of getting into a serious relationship (34%). And neither losing personal freedom (27%) or not wanting to commit long-term (18%) were significant barriers to dating. Gender differences in these dating barriers were minimal. (Those who said "maybe/don't know" about getting married in the future compared to those who said they definitely expected to marry were a little more likely to report wanting to avoid long-term commitments in dating.[29])

So, few young adults express a fear of commitment and serious romantic relationships. But they lack dating confidence, worry about being emotionally ready or financially prepared for serious dating, and are inhibited by bad relationship experiences in the past.

DATING BARRIERS	All % Agree	Men % Agree	Women % Agree
Financial:			
Not enough money for dating activities	52%	58%	47%
Social/emotional factors:			
Lack confidence	49%	48%	50%
Bad experience in the past	48%	46%	50%
Social component challenging	39%	41%	36%
Lack relationship experience	38%	40%	36%
Not emotionally ready	35%	36%	33%
Not ready for physical aspects	27%	26%	28%
Freedom/Commitment Issues:			
Fear getting into serious relationship	34%	33%	35%
Don't want to lose personal freedom	27%	28%	26%
Don't want to commit long-term	18%	21%	16%
Not enough time because of career/education priorities	29%	29%	28%
Pressures:			
Family disapproves of dating choices	26%	25%	26%
Feel pressure to date	24%	25%	23%
Cultural/Religious restrictions	17%	20%	15%

NOTES: N=3,995; n_{men} = 1,969; n_{women} = 2,026.

RESPONSE CATEGORIES: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Moderately Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree, 4 = Moderately Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. Engaged respondents were not included in these analyses.

BREAKUP FEELINGS/DATING RESILIENCE

We have already outlined a dating challenge that many respondents endorsed – dealing with past bad dating and relationship experiences. We explore that important finding in more depth in this section. We asked respondents a set of seven questions about their dating relationship breakups and how they affected their feelings about forming future romantic relationships. On the positive side, many agreed their relationship breakups were necessary and facilitated personal growth and development (63%) and that they are now better at ending relationships quicker when they do not meet their needs (67%).

On the negative side, however, half of both men and women agreed that their breakups left them with negative feelings about romantic relationships, and nearly half (48%) agreed that they felt personally injured by their breakups. Even more significantly, more than half (55%) agreed that their breakups have made them more reluctant to begin new romantic relationships. And nearly half (45%) agreed that they have passed up opportunities for new romantic relationships because of bad experiences from previous relationships. Also, more than a third (36%) agreed that they now end relationships too quickly to avoid the possible pain of bad breakups. (We did not find meaningful gender differences in these responses.)

Clearly, these young adults could use a boost in "dating resilience." Breakups are an inevitable part of dating. Being able to absorb the losses and transmute them into productive learning is a fundamental dating skill.

BREAKUP FEELINGS	All % Agree	Men % Agree	Women % Agree
My relationship breakups have generally left me with negative feelings and attitudes about relationships.	50%	50%	50%
My relationship breakups have generally left me feeling personally injured.	48%	47%	48%
My relationship breakups have generally left me feeling more reluctant to engage in future relationships	55%	55%	55%
I have passed up many opportunities to get in new relationships because of my experiences with previous relationships.	45%	45%	44%
I feel that I am now too quick to end my relationships for fear that they will end up causing me too much pain if I let them go on.	36%	36%	35%
My relationship breakups have generally left me feeling that these were necessary experiences that needed to happen for my growth and development.	63%	59%	66%
I feel that I am much better now with ending a relationship that does not seem to be meeting my needs	36%	36%	35%

NOTES: (Nall = 4,046; n_{men} = 1,986; n_{women} = 2,060).

RESPONSE CATEGORIES: 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=It Depends; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree. (Note: engaged respondents were included in these analyses.)

Implications: Need for Dating Education

Young adults today are living in a depressed dating economy. A large majority expect to marry, but only a small proportion are actively dating.

Young adults today are living in a depressed dating economy. A large majority expect to marry, but only a small proportion are actively dating. Regardless of their age, their marital horizon keeps sliding, remaining 5–6 years out. So, dating has only a distant connection to marriage and efforts to find a potential spouse are probably more of an abstract goal than a concrete objective for most. Still, a significant proportion would like to be married now. And these young adults endorse traditional purposes for dating – creating connection, forming serious relationships, exploring potential romantic partners and what they want in a future spouse – over dating just for fun or sex or social engagement. They yearn for connection and the benefits of healthy romantic relationships. But few report a sense of dating efficacy – a feeling of confidence in their dating skills, such as approaching people they are interested in, trusting their judgment about good dating partners, sharing emotions on dates, and – importantly – staying positive about dating and romantic relationships after a bad experience. Dating resilience is low. Almost half of young adults report they are more reluctant to date because of bad dating experiences in the past. And they encounter numerous barriers to dating, including the financial expenses, lacking experience and confidence, and not feeling emotionally ready. On a more optimistic note, only a small percentage of young men and women report that fear of commitment or serious relationships are dating barriers, contradicting a common cultural notion about young adults today. Finally, those who reported they definitely expect to marry compared to those who say "maybe/don't know" date a little more often, have somewhat higher scores on dating confidence or efficacy, and have even less fear of commitment in dating.

There is a marital-expectations vs. dating-skills gap for most young adults today. How should we respond to this gap? How can we grow our way out of this dating recession if we want to increase the chances that young adults will form serious relationships that may lead to healthy marriages? We need a concerted effort to teach young adults healthy dating skills, something that receives little attention from the general culture or even the relationship education field. While the professional field of relationship education is admirably dedicated to helping couples form and sustain healthy marriages, it has not given enough attention to the dating experiences of young adults – the onramps to marriage. Our young adults need effective road maps that guide them to and through the dating experiences that will connect their marital expectations to actual unions.

Accordingly, one straightforward implication of the findings from our study is that **young adults could use some basic help in building dating skills**. Their desires and attitudes are not the problem. They want to build real human connections, form serious relationships, explore what they want in a future long-term partner, and desire the personal growth that comes from forming serious romantic relationships. And contrary to common beliefs, most are not afraid of commitment or losing personal freedom, and few fear that dating will interfere with their educational and career plans.

Nevertheless, few are regularly dating. They report being unprepared and having a low sense of dating efficacy. They lack experience, social and emotional confidence, and need to stretch their basic social skills. They struggle to know how to express their interest to a potential dating partner and to communicate effectively on a date. Also, they are discouraged by the cost of dating.

Yet these are hardly unsurmountable barriers. Motivated young adults can learn dating skills, how to approach partners they are interested in, how to improve their ability to make smart dating choices, and how to improve their general communication skills for dating. But relationship educators – who do so much to provide basic relationship literacy to teens, marriage preparation classes for engaged couples, ongoing marital enrichment workshops for married couples, and even intensive retreats for struggling couples thinking about divorce – need to develop a new niche – dating education. Generic relationship skills education does not sufficiently address the A-B-C's of how to date. Parents, schools, churches, media, and the general culture are not meeting a clear need.

Relationship educators could consider offering creative dating "bootcamps" for young adults who need skill practice and confidence boosts, systematically addressing the pragmatic skill deficits and confidence arrears identified in our survey. And given the digital natives that are their prime target audience, they will likely have greater success with online educational offerings, like the "DatingREADY" e-course offered by the Utah Marriage Commission.[30]

However, this TikTok generation may not sit still for traditional didactic curricular programs (in-person or online), which have been the bread-and-butter of relationship education. Dating educators may need to grab young minds with engaging "infotainment" on digital platforms to reach their audience. And pragmatics will be as important as principles, we think. Relationship educators will need to provide opportunities not just to listen and learn but to practice and improve. We also suspect that "peer educators" will be more effective as instructors than older adults who experienced a very different dating regime than their students.

In addition, we think this dating education "space" is ripe for creative, hands-on approaches. We have been impressed with a few efforts to provide structured dating opportunities infused with skills education. One colleague we know sponsors carefully constructed speed dating events for young adults who are struggling with knowing how to date or just overcoming the inertia of interminable scrolling.[31] The primary purpose of these structured dating events is to teach skills and then break inertia – to get young adults learning, practicing, and dating. Success is not necessarily associated with continued dating, although there is a good deal of that too.

Whatever approach relationship educators take to help young adults improve their dating skills and opportunities, we recommend including training on how to deal with bad dating experiences and painful breakups. Our survey revealed that bad dating and relationship experiences in the past were one of the biggest barriers to current dating. Dating life brings hurt, heartbreak, rejection, confusion, and body blows to confidence. And this comes on top of this generation's well-documented mental-health challenges.[32] These bad experiences make them less likely to pursue relationships in the future because they are in recovery mode. Relationship educators should anticipate that their students need help building dating resilience, including understanding what went wrong in past relationships, normalizing the experience, healing from the pain, overcoming fear of being hurt or rejected again, building grit, making intentional plans going forward, etc.

Relationship educators should anticipate that their students need help building dating resilience, including understanding what went wrong in past relationships, normalizing the experience, healing from the pain, overcoming fear of being hurt or rejected again, building grit, making intentional plans going forward, etc.

Given relationship education's prevention orientation, educators could be doing more to steel young adults against these inevitable painful experiences so that they don't result in foreclosing on the dating scene during their prime dating years.

And there is an important practical matter too – the cost of dating was also a big barrier (reported by both women and men). Perhaps relationship educators could help young adults get around this challenge by providing lists of creative dating options with cheaper price tags. Creative social media influencers undoubtedly could help with this. Maybe they can help shift the general dating culture so that an average date is defined not as a formal activity that requires a large financial outlay – such as a dinner for two at a nice restaurant and tickets to a concert – but as simply a time and place to pair off, talk, and get to know someone better, enjoy opportunities for fun interaction, share life stories and future aspirations, etc. In other words, dating should be oriented more to its relational and personal growth purposes that young adults strongly endorse and less to its general social purposes that they are less enthusiastic about.[33]

It would be wise for relationship educators, as they build learning opportunities for healthy dating, not to present dating in maritally neutral terms. There is a teleology to dating. The institution of marriage needs a robust dating system to bring couples to the altar.

One final comment here for dating educators regarding finances. Given young adults' current money constraints and their future financial worries, dating education probably will need to be more akin to a public service than a gainful enterprise. Dating education will need generous sponsors and institutional supporters as much as talented social entrepreneurs.

Note that dating education for young adults will not need to differentiate much based on gender. Our survey revealed overall remarkable similarity of dating experience and challenges for women and men, at least as far as we probed. And this would be a fascinating area for further exploration and research.

A final reflection on the 5–6-year marital horizon we observed in this survey regardless of respondents' age: With this temporal distance, it will be hard to create a stronger connection between the present act of dating and the future expectation of marriage for young adults. To some extent, perhaps we don't need to be overly anxious about this. If we stimulate the dating economy and give young adults the skills they need to prosper in this challenging market, then more dating should lead to more serious relationships that will, in turn, spur more thoughts about marriage and more decisions to tie the knot. Still, it would be wise for relationship educators, as they build learning opportunities for healthy dating, not to present dating in maritally neutral terms. There is a teleology to dating. The institution of marriage needs a robust dating system to bring couples to the altar. And recall our findings that, regardless of age, nearly half of young adults say they would like to be married now. Dating educators should keep these findings in mind. And at a minimum, they should help daters be more aware and intentional, to be cognizant of their short-, medium-, and long-term purposes for dating, to inquire about these things of their dating partners, and to align couple purposes and plans – especially regarding marriage.

Recommendations for Relationship Educators Teaching Dating Skills

Generic relationship skills education does not sufficiently address the A-B-C's of how to date. Professional and lay relationship educators need to pay more attention to this educational void for young adults. Here are several concrete recommendations for effective dating skills education.

- Offer creative dating "bootcamps" for young adults who need skill practice and confidence boosts. Include sufficient practice time.
- Prioritize online platforms.
- Grab young TikTok eyes and minds with engaging "infotainment" rather than traditional didactic instruction.
- Make dating skills education low- or no-cost. Find financial supports to offset instructional costs.
- Consider using peer educators who understand better the contemporary dating environment.
- Build greater dating resilience by including preventative training on how to deal with bad dating experiences and painful breakups.
- Include lists of creative dating options with cheaper price tags to avoid the sticker shock of dating.
- Understand that differences in dating experiences for women and men are minimal; there is little need to accentuate gender differences in instruction.
- Reconnect dating and marital goals; gently remind young adult participants of the connection of dating to their expectations and aspirations for marriage.

We acknowledge that we have not covered in this study the full range of issues that impact the contemporary dating landscape. For instance, we did not explore in our survey how AI and the new world of AI companions may be impacting young adult dating lives.[34] Nor did our survey differentiate between distinct dating types or the longitudinal course of dating – how casual dating grows into more serious dating and progresses to committed, exclusive dating, and even engagement. Our focus was primarily on the early stages of dating, on initiating relationships that may eventually develop into long-term unions. We hope this study can spur more research to better understand young adult dating.

Moreover, we acknowledge that our focus here has been on individual behavior and personal experiences of dating. And as such, we have explored how relationship education efforts could help to improve young adults' dating lives. In this focus, however, we acknowledge that young adults are embedded in broader cultural and social systems that also influence their dating experiences. Our recommendations for educational efforts do not diminish the need for broader cultural and policy responses to improve the dating economy. For instance, worries about the "marriageability" of men[35] lead some to believe that the marriage pool is too shallow to accommodate many women's aspirations for marriage. To the extent this is true – or women perceive it to be true – this would likely reduce dating and sour dating experiences. Broad social efforts to improve men's marriageability should improve the dating landscape. Nor have we explored directly how the growing ideological and political divide between young men and women may be impacting the dating scene.[36] Also, we believe that young adult dating lives will be impacted positively by public actions to reduce the cost barriers to marital formation, such as employment barriers, higher education costs, and unaffordable housing. More directly, public funds now being allocated by the federal Administration for Children and Families to provide relationship education to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages could expand their reach to include healthy dating skills education (which they currently do not allow).[37]

Nevertheless, we emphasized in this report a more immediate stimulus for the current dating recession in the form of attention to a new kind of relationship education: dating education. Many of the challenges young adults face in their dating lives can be surmounted with better knowledge and concrete skills. We are optimistic that talented relationship educators will rise to fill this void, assisted by parents, social media influencers, religious leaders, and others. The alternative, we believe, is an ongoing dating recession that will depress future marriage rates and all the known benefits of healthy marriages for adults, their children, and their communities.

Many of the challenges young adults face in their dating lives can be surmounted with better knowledge and concrete skills.

This dating recession is more than just another instrumental challenge facing young adults today. Their lack of dating experiences is a deficit of connections – connections that prime their souls for one of the richest experiences humans can have – romantic love. So, young adults risk more than they know when they are not falling in (and out) of love during this formative time of life.

The New York Times columnist David Brooks describes this risk well recalling his first real love affair in his late teens and early adulthood: "I was transformed by my time in college classrooms, but that love affair might still have been the most important educational experience of my youth. It taught me that there are emotions more joyous and more painful than I ever knew existed. It taught me what it's like when the self gets decentered and things most precious to you are in another. I even learned a few things about the complex art of being close to another. . . . We all need energy sources to power us through life, and love is the most powerful energy source known to humans."[38]

Endnotes

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7 Remarriage may well be the triumph of hope over experience and a signal of enduring faith in the institution of marriage, but fewer couples are saying "I do" again: The remarriage rate has been cut if half since 1990. Loo, J. (2024). Age variation in remarriage rate, 1990–2022. Family Profile No. 9. National Center for Family & Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University. https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/FP-24-09.html

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9 For instance, see: Wilcox, B. (2024). Get married. Broadside Books; Willoughby, B. J., & James, S. L. (2017). The marriage paradox: Why emerging adults love marriage but push it aside. Oxford University Press.

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12 Wilcox, B., & Bailey, G. (2025, November 24). Marriage and kids cratering among liberal young adults. Institute for Family Studies. https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-lefts-family-problem-marriage-and-kids-cratering-among-liberal-young-adults

13 We employed Qualtrics to field the survey in early 2025. For the overall survey, the racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample was as follows: African American = 14%; Asian = 6%; Hispanic = 12%; Mixed/Bi-racial = 2%; Native American = 1%; Other = 2%; White = 64%. The breakdown by education was as follows: < HS = 3%; HS/GED = 33%; Some College/Associates = 29%; BS = 27%; Graduate/Professional = 8%.

Endnotes cont.

14 There were somewhat lower proportions of African Americans (10% vs. 14%) and Whites (62% vs. 64%) in this expect-to-marry subsample compared to the overall sample. And there were somewhat higher proportions of Hispanics (15% vs. 12%) in this subsample. The breakdown by education for this subsample was as follows: < HS = 3%; HS/GED = 32%; Some College/Associates = 29%; BS = 28%; Graduate/Professional = 8%.

15 Responses were widely distributed, however; standard deviations for the five age groups on the ideal for marriage were between 4.5–-6.1.

16 For this analysis, we excluded respondents (n = 47, 1%) who reported that their expected age of marriage was less than 22 or greater than 75. All our respondents were at least 22 years old and unmarried. And expecting to marry beyond age 75 (including 10 responses at age 99 or 100) is probably an indicator of a nonserious response.

17 Carroll, J. S., Willoughby, B., Badger, S., Nelson, L. J., Barry, C. N., & Madsen, S. D. (2007). So close, yet so far away: The impact of varying marital horizons on emerging adulthood. Journal of Adolescent Research, 22(3), 219–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407299697

18 The five items for this scale were: "Getting married is more important to me than having a successful career"; "Getting married is more important than my educational pursuits and achievements"; "Getting married is among my top priorities during this time in my life"; "Getting married is a very important goal for me"; "I would like to be married now." The response categories were: 1=Very Strongly Disagree, 2=Strongly Disagree, 3=Disagree, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, 6=Very Strongly Agree. Alpha = .86.

19 Myes = 3.6, SDyes = .99, n = 2,765; Mmaybe = 2.6, SDmaybe = 1.05, n = 1,230; t(3993) = 28.5, p < .001; d = .98.

20 Respondents who were in committed, exclusive dating relationships were not included in this analysis.

21 Myes = 2.3, SDyes = 1.14, n = 2,245; Mmaybe = 1.9, SDmaybe = 1.00, n = 1,100; t(3343) = 10.3, p < .001; d = .38.

22 F (4, 3,418) = 23.1, p < .001. Still, dating frequency was only weakly correlated with their sense of marital salience (r = .16),

23 Myes = 4.7, SDyes = 1.05, n = 2,765; Mmaybe = 4.3, SDmaybe = 1.05, n = 1,230; t(3993) = 9.9, p < .001; d = .34

24 There were a few differences. For instance, older respondents were more likely to report dating for the purpose of engaging in physical intimacy compared to younger respondents (F = 8.6, p < .001); younger respondents were more likely to prefer casual dating than older respondents (F = 2.7, p < .05).

25 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. (2023). Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation. Office of the Surgeon General. https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

26 The four items for this scale were: Money and finances are a major barrier to getting married; I need to have a certain amount of money saved before getting married; Couples should be able to afford their own wedding before they get married; Finances are a major factor I consider when thinking about getting married. The response categories were: 1 = Not true at all, 2 = Mostly not true, 3 = Slightly not true, 4 = Slightly true, 5 = Mostly true, 6 = Very true. Alpha = .75.

27 Myes = 4.2, SDyes = 1.34, n = 2,765; Mmaybe = 4.2, SDmaybe = 1.29, n = 1,230; t(3993) = .44, ns.

28 We can't tell from our survey question if women were reflecting a general concern about the costs of dating or if they were also shouldering the costs of dating more than previous generations.

29 Myes = 2.1, SDyes = 1.25, n = 2,765; Mmaybe = 2.4, SDmaybe = 1.23, n = 1,230; t(3993) = 6.3, p < .001; d = .21.

30 See: https://extension.usu.edu/strongermarriage/course/datingready. Still, even this fresh and innovative learning tool may need to be more concrete and provide greater structure for inexperienced daters.

Endnotes cont.

31 Our colleague recruits about 60–80 young women and men for these events. (She first screens them with a Big 5 Personality test. Those who score low on "agreeableness" are referred out to a class on general social skills.) To participate in the event, young adults agree beforehand to accept who they are matched with and date for 2 weeks (two dates a week, with daily check-in texts – unless they sense a safety issue). At the event, they first learn some basic healthy dating skills. Then they have a 2-hour speed dating session. Five trained student-in-training therapists are present and circulate to listen in on their conversations, judging who are making good connections. Then the therapist team creates "good" matches. Participants also say who they think their top three connections were, but again, they agree beforehand to abide by the therapist team decision. An instructor then urges the paired-off participants to emphasize developing a friendship over a romantic relationship on their coming dates and not judge too quickly. One week later there is a required breakfast event where more dating education skills are taught. At the end of the 2 weeks, participants are free to continue dating or move on.

32 Haidt, J. (2024). The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness. Penguin Books.

33 Also, it would be nice if dating educators could help young adults view the financial threshold for marriage differently than they do now, perhaps by presenting marriage as a way to build wealth rather than a signal of reaching a certain threshold of financial stability. They can also show how early marital financial constraints can be a means of strengthening partnership and building commitment.

34 Willoughby, B. J., Carroll, J. S., Dover, C., & Hakala, R. H. (2025). Counterfeit connections: The rise of romantic AI companions and sexualized media among the rising generation. The Wheatley Institute. https://wheatley.byu.edu/counterfeit-connections-ai-romantic-companions

35 Reeves, R. V. (2022). Of boys and men: Why the modern male is struggling, why it matters, and what to do about it. Brookings Institution Press.

36 Cox, D. A. (2025, February 14.) Are political differences behind America's dating woes? Survey Center on American Life, American Enterprise Institute. https://www.americansurveycenter.org/commentary/are-political-differences-behind-americas-dating-woes/

37 Hawkins, A. J. (2024, May 15). Reflections on 25 years of public policy support for relationship education. Institute for Family Studies Blog. https://ifstudies.org/blog/reflections-on-25-years-of-public-policy-support-for-relationship-education

38 Brooks, D. (2026, January 2). We're Living through the Great Detachment. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/02/opinion/americans-marriage-loneliness-love.html?campaign_id=257&emc=edit_ntdb_20260102&instance_id=168717&nl=david-brooks&regi_id=96299610&segment_id=213015&user_id=fbaf9ea66b7e13bbc0ae30d7d9cda59c

Social Indicators of Marital Health and Well-Being

Compiled and annotated by Spencer L. James

This report summarizes current and historical patterns in American family life. In what follows, we discuss marriage and divorce; unmarried cohabitation; fertility; fragile families and children's role in society; and teenage attitudes toward marriage and family. Readers interested in additional information regarding American family trends may consult the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green University (https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/) or, for global trends, the Global Families project at Brigham Young University (globalfamilies.byu.edu).

Marriage (Figures 1, 2, 3A, 3B, 4, 5)

KEY FINDING:
Marriage trends indicate that contemporary Americans, compared to historical trends, are less likely to marry. A greater proportion of White and Asian men and women marry when compared to Hispanic and Black men and women, suggesting important variability across racial and ethnic lines. Of those who do marry, the percentage of couples who consider their marriage to be "very happy" has experienced only minor declines, suggesting that marital quality has been stable.

Compared to its historic peak at the end of World War II, the marriage rate has declined dramatically from about 16 marriages per 1,000 people in 1946 to about 6 in 2023, following a slight rebound from COVID-19 lows (**Figure 1**). Continual declines over the past 50 years have resulted in marriage rates below even those observed at the nadir of the Great Depression, despite a stabilization that lasted through most of the 2010s.

Figure 1. MARRIAGES PER 1,000 POPULATION
1867-2023, UNITED STATES

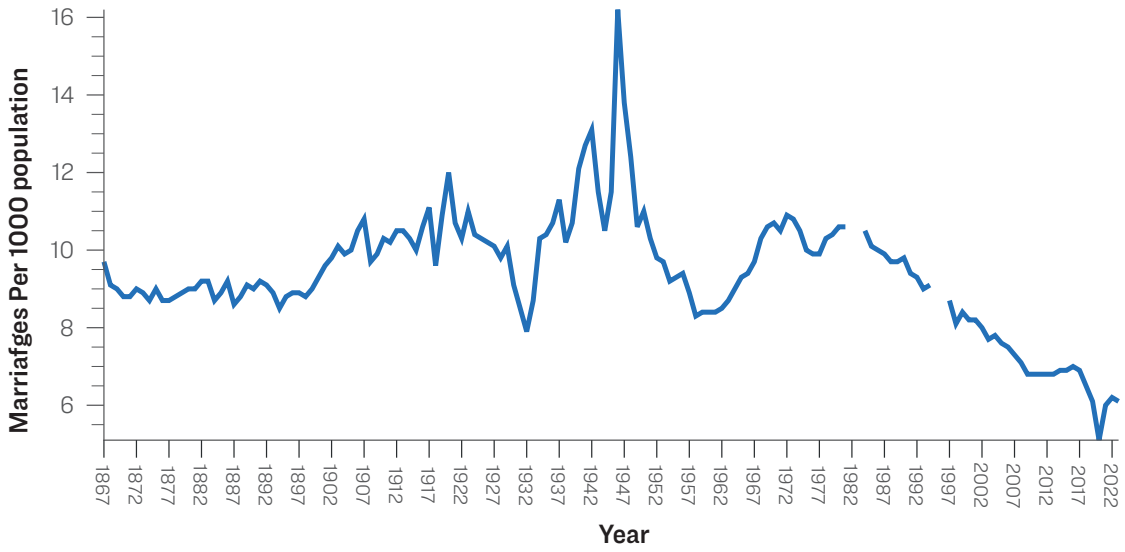
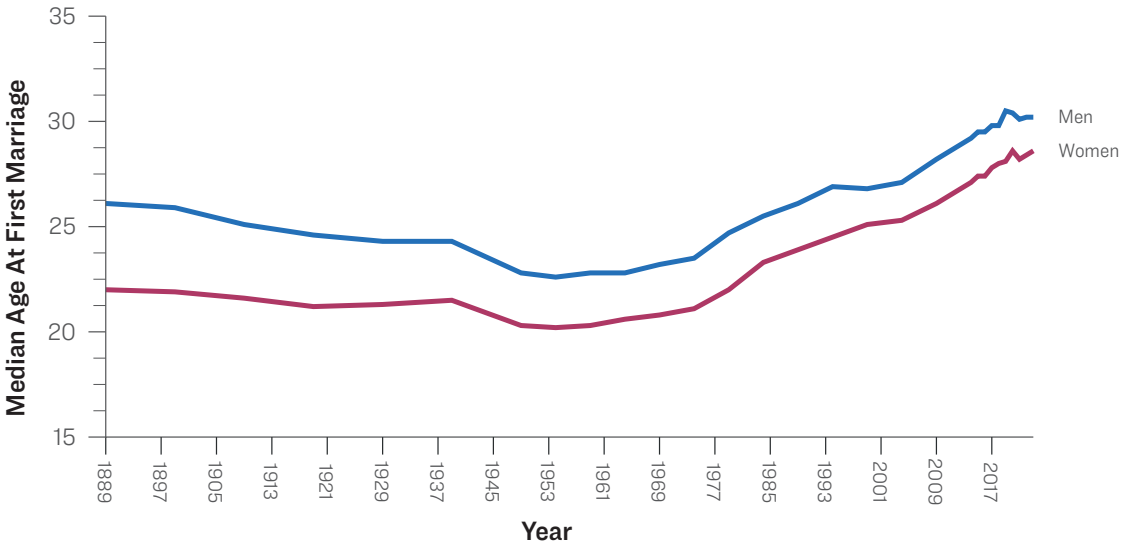
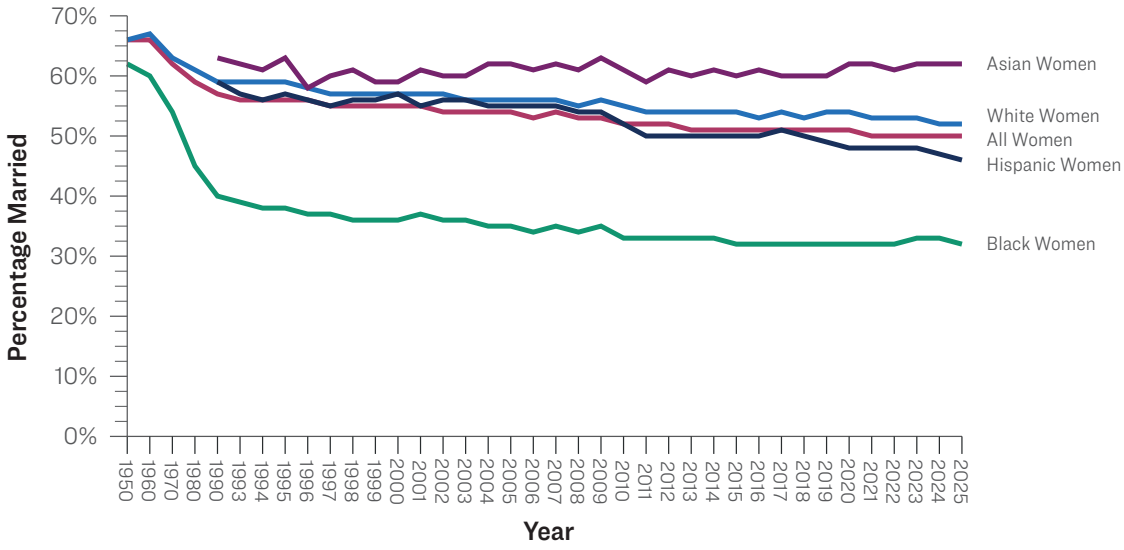


Figure 2. ESTIMATED MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE
1890-2024, UNITED STATES



Much of this decline is due to delays in the age at marriage (**Figure 2**). At the turn of the 20th century, median age at first marriage was 26 for men and 22 for women. By the mid 1950s, these numbers had declined to about 22.5 (men) and 20 (women). Despite frequent references to the 1950s as the quintessential ideal for many American families, from this vantage point we can see that the 1950s were actually something of an aberration in terms of age at first marriage for both men and women, constituting the lowest ages at which people married since official estimates have been kept in 1890. Since that time, age at marriage has steadily increased from the early 20s in the middle of the 20th century. Today, men are typically 30 when they marry, while women tend to be about 1.5 years younger. Other key factors explaining declining marriage rates are the growth of unmarried cohabitation, which we discuss later, as well as shifting economic fortunes among those with less than a college degree, along with an increase in lifelong singlehood.

Figure 3A. PERCENTAGE OF ALL WOMEN AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE MARRIED, BY SEX AND RACE
1950–2025 UNITED STATES



These changes in the marriage rate are also reflected in the decline in the percent of men and women who are currently married (**Figures 3A and 3B**). Since 1950, the percent of currently married women age 15 and older in the population has declined between 15 and 20 percentage points. This overall number masks significant racial-ethnic variation. The percent of currently married Black men and women, for instance, has declined by 28 percent and 30 percent, respectively, by far the largest decline observed. Among White men and women, the decline has been by 17 percent and 14 percent. Since 1990, the first year Census data is available for Asians and Hispanics, the percent of Asians 15 years and older who are currently married has remained unchanged whereas Hispanics have experienced about a 12 and 13 percentage point drop among men and women, respectively.

Figure 3B. PERCENTAGE OF ALL MEN AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE MARRIED, BY SEX AND RACE
1950–2025, UNITED STATES

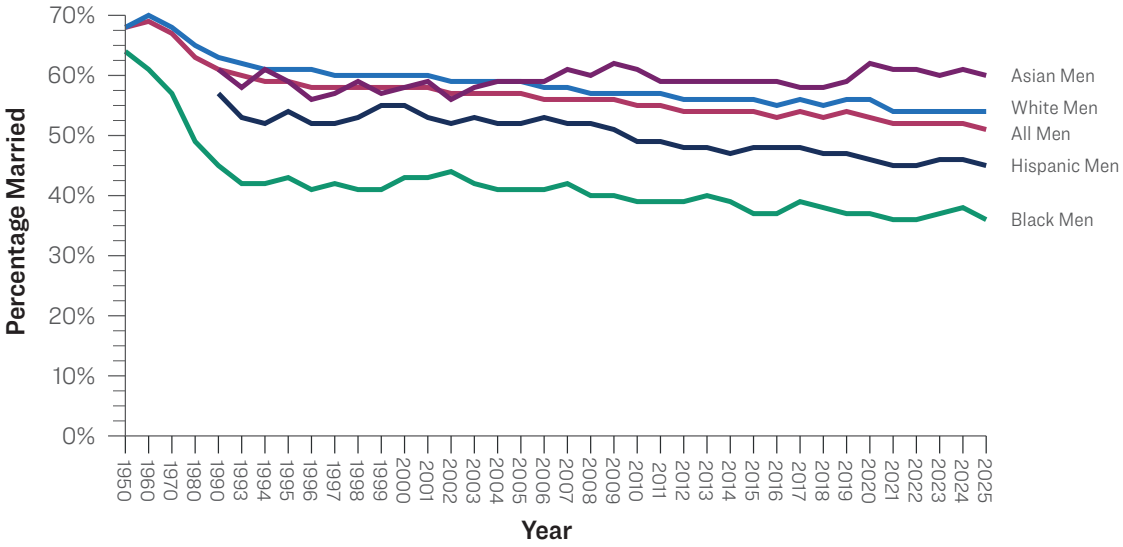
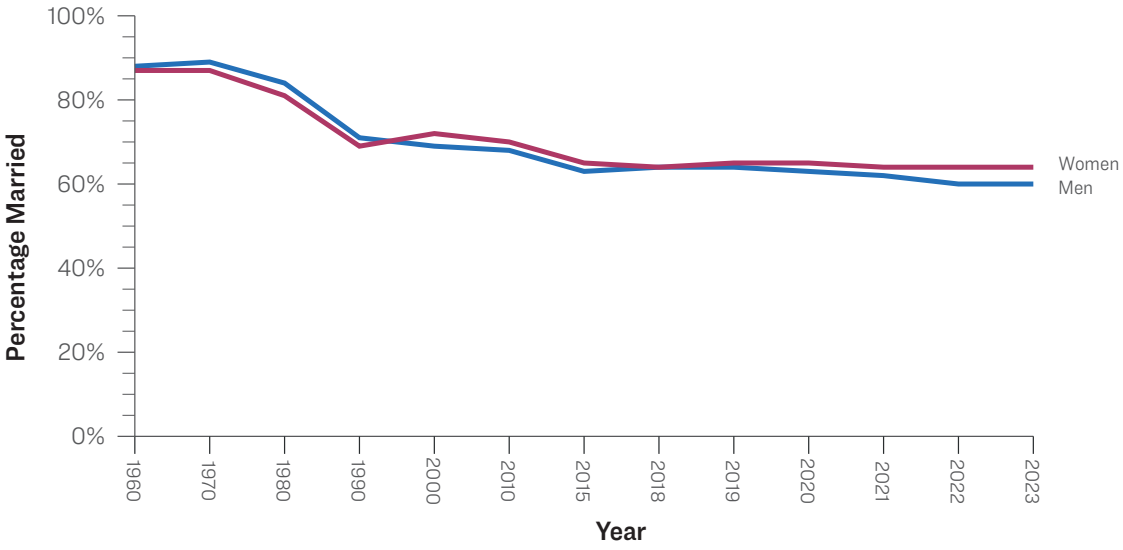


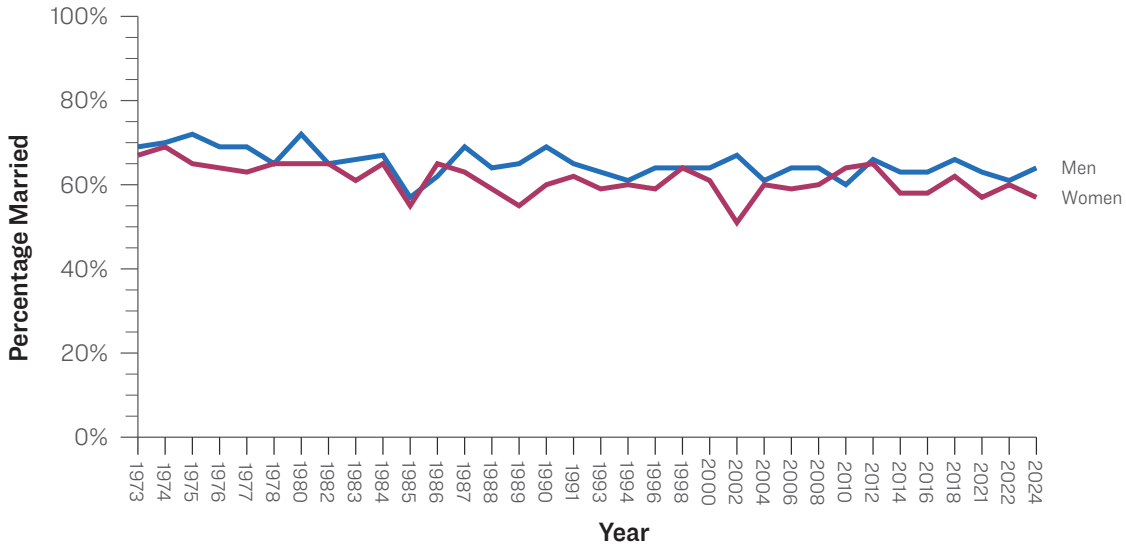
Figure 4. PERCENTAGE OF PERSONS AGE 35–44 WHO WERE MARRIED BY SEX
1960–2023, UNITED STATES



To partially account for declining marriage rates due to delaying marriage to later ages, we examined changes in the percentage of persons age 35 through 44 who were married (**Figure 4**). We examined this age range because most people who are going to marry in their lifetimes have done so by these ages. Since 1960, there has been a pronounced drop, most precipitously in the 1980s, in the percentage of person 35-44 who were married. These patterns do not differ by sex and suggest that low marriage rates are likely the new norm for American family life. These declines among adults aged 35-44 are also suggestive of potential increases in lifelong singlehood. In every time period for which we have records, the large majority of all persons who marry during their lifetimes have done so by age 45. Whereas historical data indicate that more than 90 percent of women have eventually married, today those numbers are lower; nearly 1/3 of American adults are single today, up from less than a quarter in 1950 (Miller, 2020), suggesting that an increasing number of people may never marry during their lifetimes (Martin, Astone, & Peters, 2014).

Of course, diminishing marriage rates do not mean people are foregoing romantic unions altogether. Rather, rapid increases in cohabitation means marriage is yielding ground to unwed unions. Most first marriages today are preceded by cohabitation and an even higher percentage of people in second or third marriages lived together before marrying. An increasing number of people live together with no intention of getting married. Thus, although singlehood, if defined as never marrying, is increasing in the United States, this does not mean people are forsaking long-term romantic relationships; often people are simply cutting marriage out of their long-term plans in favor of cohabitation.

Figure 5. PERCENTAGE OF MARRIED PERSONS AGE 18 AND OLDER WHO SAID THEIR MARRIAGES WERE "VERY HAPPY"
1973-2024, UNITED STATES



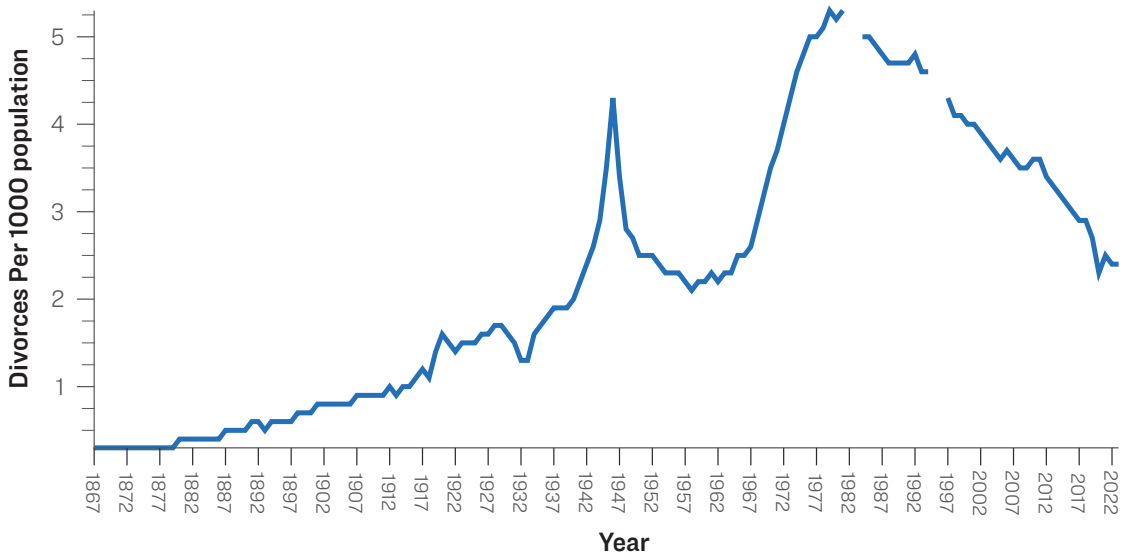
One commonly held belief about marriage is that today's marriages are higher quality. After all, if divorce removes poor marriages from the proverbial marital 'pool' and cohabitation ensures some bad marriages never happen, then the remaining marriages ought to be happier, at least on average. On the other hand, if we place more and more pressure on our marriages, expecting them to fulfill roles and expectations not previously asked of marriage, as some scholars have argued (Finkel 2017), marriages might be less happy than they used to be. The best data we have on long-term trends in marital happiness (**Figure 5**) suggest these countervailing influences may be cancelling each other out, as marital happiness has remained largely steady over the past 50 years. Since 1973, the General Social Survey has asked representative samples of Americans to rate their marriages as "very happy", "pretty happy", or "not too happy". The percentage of both men and women who said their marriages were "very happy" has only modestly declined since the 1970s and remained essentially unchanged since the turn of the 21st century. Women continue to be slightly less likely than men to report being very happy but the difference is quite small. It therefore remains possible that only the most committed, happiest people marry today, but the goalposts for marital happiness have moved, making happy, fulfilling marriages difficult but attainable.

Divorce (Figures 6, 7A, 7B, 8, 9)

KEY FINDING:

The American divorce rate is about where it was in the late 1960s and has been continually declining since its peak in the early 1980s. Societal acceptance of divorce continues to climb, with nearly 80 percent of Americans agreeing that divorce is morally acceptable, up from less than 60 percent at the turn of the 21st century. Accompanying this trend, fewer Americans than ever before believe that getting a divorce should be more difficult. For the average couple marrying for the first time, the lifetime probability of divorce is probably around 40 percent. Racial-ethnic variation in divorce is significant. Roughly equal proportions of White and Black adults have experienced a divorce and lower levels among Hispanics and Asians.

Figure 6. NUMBER OF DIVORCES PER 1,000 POPULATION
1867-2023, UNITED STATES



Divorce has experienced a massive increase since 1867, the first year that data are available, when the United States had just 0.3 divorces per 1,000 people in the population (**Figure 6**). While continuously climbing since the days of Reconstruction, there have been two major 'peaks', one at the end of World War II, with 4.3 divorces per 1,000 population, followed by relative stability from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s, and another around 1980, with about 5 divorces per 1,000 people, the culmination of a decade and a half spike in divorce. Since that time, however, divorce has been on the decline. In 2023, the divorce rate stood at 2.4 per 1,000 population. Demographers have suggested two reasons for this: increasing age at marriage and an educational gradient in marital stability. Both increasing age at marriage, due to increased maturity, and increasing marriage rates among the college educated (where it is nearly universal, albeit at later ages) mean that marrying individuals have often settled themselves personally, financially, and socially before marriage and thereby are less likely to get divorced.

Figure 7A. PERCENTAGE OF ALL WOMEN AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE DIVORCED, BY SEX AND RACE

1960–2025, UNITED STATES

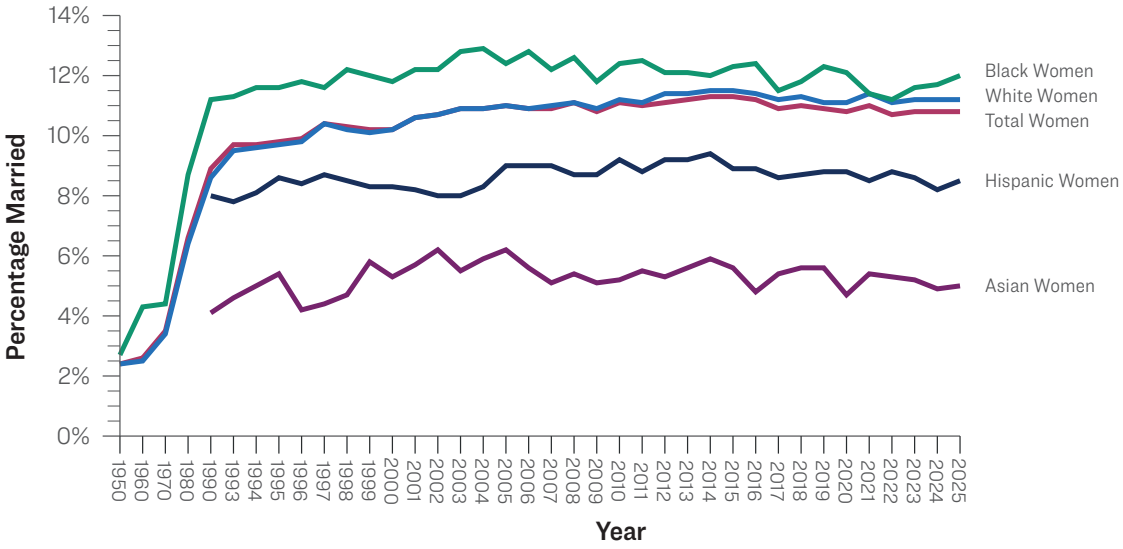
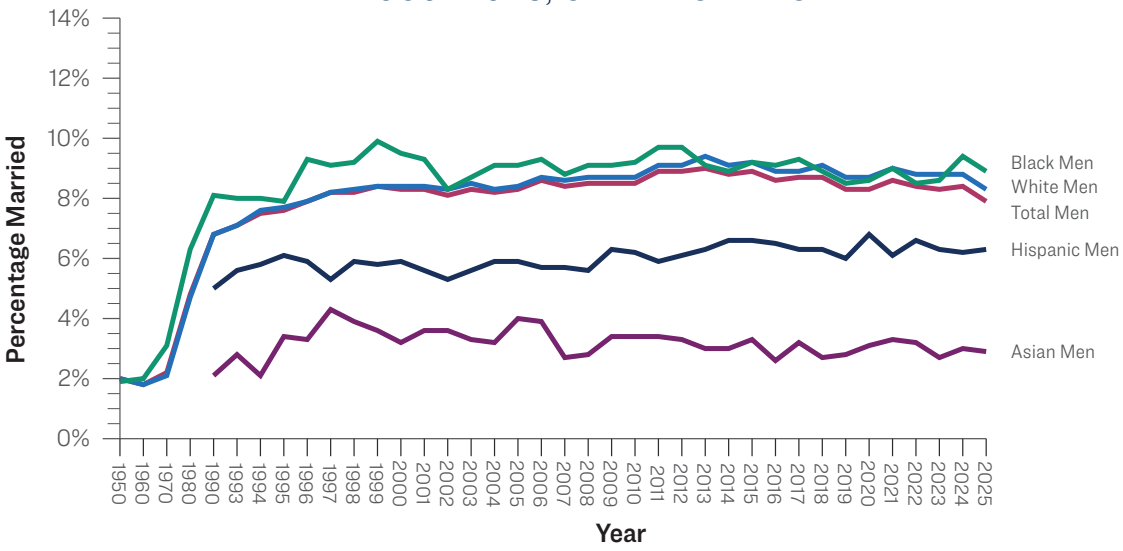


Figure 7B. PERCENTAGE OF ALL MEN AGE 15 AND OLDER WHO WERE DIVORCED, BY SEX AND RACE

1960–2025, UNITED STATES

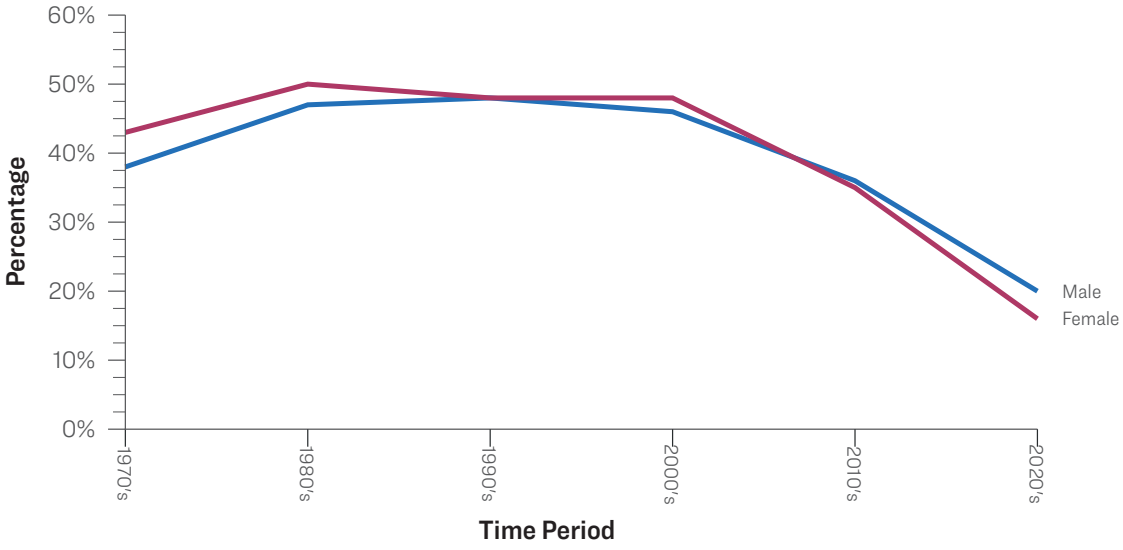


Even though most divorced persons eventually remarry, the growth of divorce has led to an increase in the number of women and men who are currently divorced (**Figures 7A and 7B**). In 1950, less than 3 percent of women and 2 percent of men were divorced, with very little difference between White and Black men and women. These numbers have increased several times since that time, with 10.8% and 7.9%[1] of women and men in 2025 currently divorced. Recent years have seen something of a convergence, compared to historical levels, in the percentage of White and Black adults who are divorced, with lower levels among Hispanics and much lower levels among Asian adults.

[1] The gender difference is because divorced men are both more likely to remarry and to remarry sooner than divorced women.

Figure 8. PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS AGE 18–45 WHO SAID THAT DIVORCE LAWS SHOULD BE CHANGED TO MAKE GETTING A DIVORCE "MORE DIFFICULT"

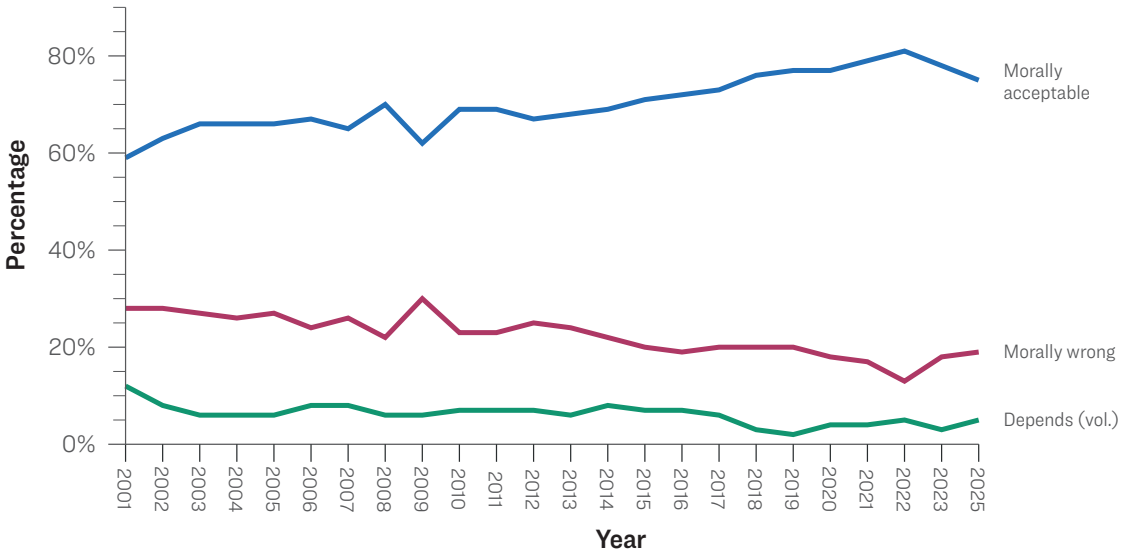
BY DECADE, UNITED STATES



Have increasing divorce rates been accompanied by greater acceptance of divorce? Recent poll data suggests the public has become more tolerant of divorce. Americans today are more likely to oppose changing divorce laws (**Figure 8**). Less than 20% of American adults support changing the law to making divorce more difficult to obtain, down from 50% in the 1980s.

Figure 9. PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS 18 AND OVER WHO BELIEVE DIVORCE IS MORALLY ACCEPTABLE, MORALLY WRONG, OR IT DEPENDS

2001-2025, UNITED STATES



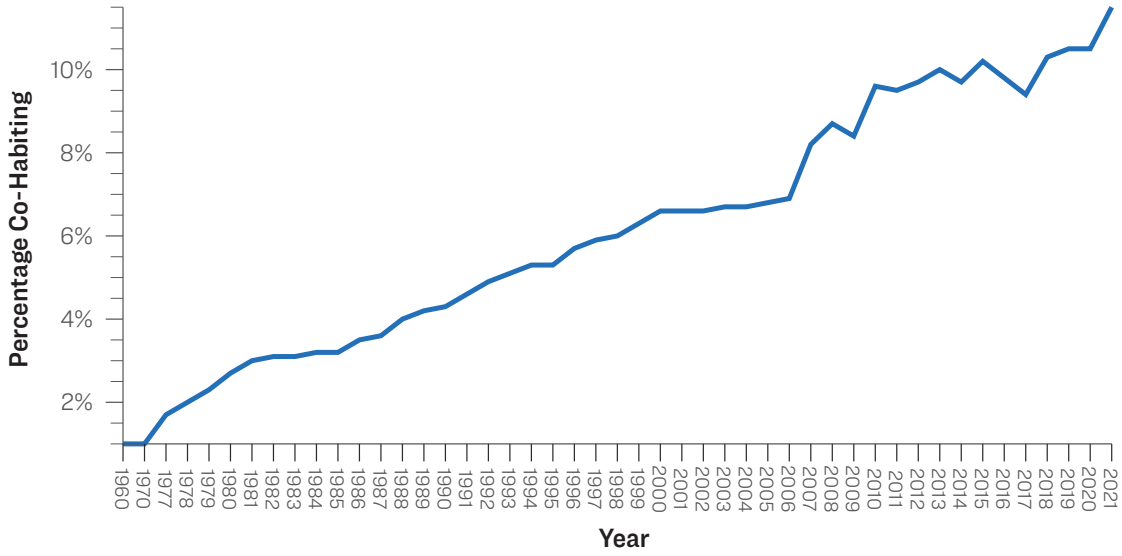
Americans are also increasingly more likely to believe that divorce is morally acceptable (**Figure 9**). Belief that divorce is morally acceptable has increased from 59 percent in 2001 to 75 percent in 2025.

Unmarried Cohabitation (Figures 10, 11)

KEY FINDING:
Cohabitation has become a common feature of the American domestic landscape, with the number of unmarried couples increasing dramatically over the past five decades. Consequently, cohabiting households now constitute nearly one in eight family households in the United States, up from less than 1 in 100 fifty years ago.

Figure 10. COHABITING, UNMARRIED, ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX AS A PERCENT OF FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS

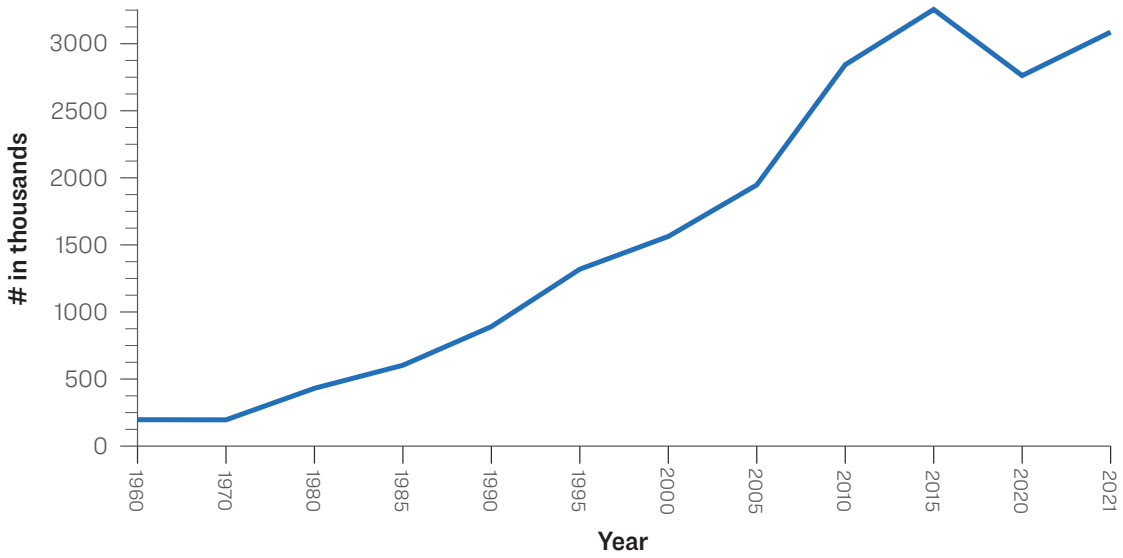
1960-2023, UNITED STATES



Between 1970 and 2021, the percent of cohabiting, unmarried opposite-sex couples (**Figure 10**) that were cohabiting increased more than tenfold. In 1970, these couples made up just under 1 percent of all family households and increased their share of family households continuously to about 6 percent until the mid 2000s, when their share increased more dramatically so that today about 11%, nearly 1 in 8, family households comprise cohabiting opposite-sex couples.

Figure 11. NUMBER (IN THOUSANDS) OF COHABITING, UNMARRIED, ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX LIVING WITH ONE OR MORE CHILDREN

1960-2023 UNITED STATES

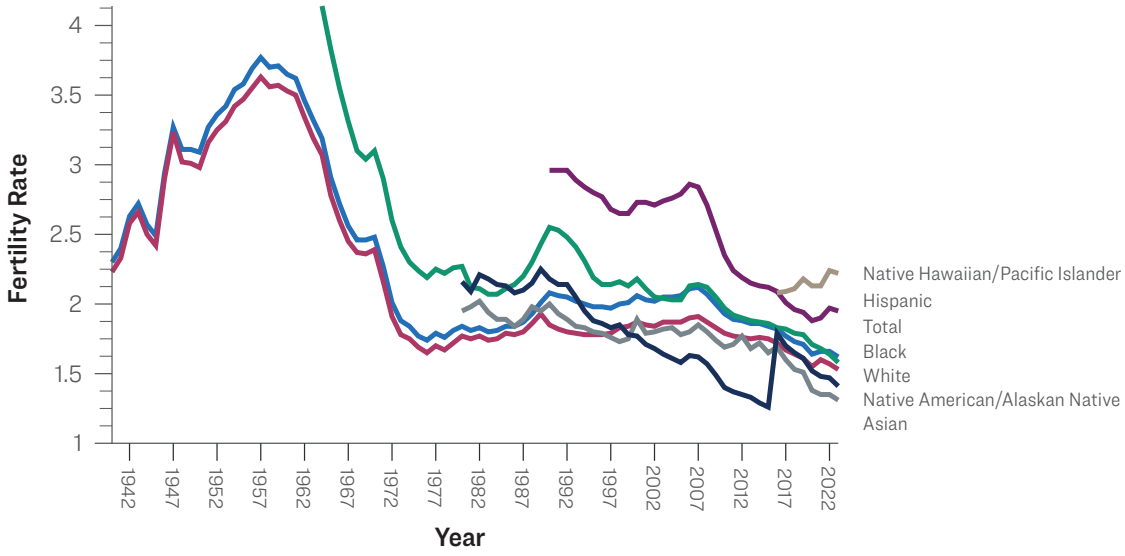


Consequently, there are more children living with cohabiting, unmarried opposite-sex couples than ever before. **Figure 11** shows this dramatic increase. Because more cohabiting couples are having children—or bringing them into their newly formed cohabiting relationship—there has been more than a fifteen-fold increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children since 1960. In 1960, there were slightly less than 200,000 cohabiting couples living with at least one child. This number remained flat through the 1960s but quickly grew to 431,000 in 1980. Between 1990 and 1995, the number of cohabiting couples living with children reached 1 million for the first time. The ensuing period has seen the tripling of that to over 3 million in 2023. Importantly, nearly half of all children are expected to spend some time living with cohabiting parents before age 18 (Brown, Stykes, & Manning, 2016).

Fertility and Children (Figures 12, 13)

KEY FINDING:
The presence of American children has declined significantly since World War II, as seen in declining fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Fertility rates are now below replacement levels for nearly all major ethnic groups (except Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders) and only 40% of American family households contain children under 18, reflecting both the declining presence of children in American society but also population aging, as American parents live longer after children leave home.
Throughout most human history, marriage has been geared around the bearing and raising of children and the organization of sexuality, both male and female. Yet recent trends suggest children play an increasingly diminished role in American family life.

Figure 12. FERTILITY RATES OF WOMEN AGE 15–44, BY RACE
1941-2023 UNITED STATES

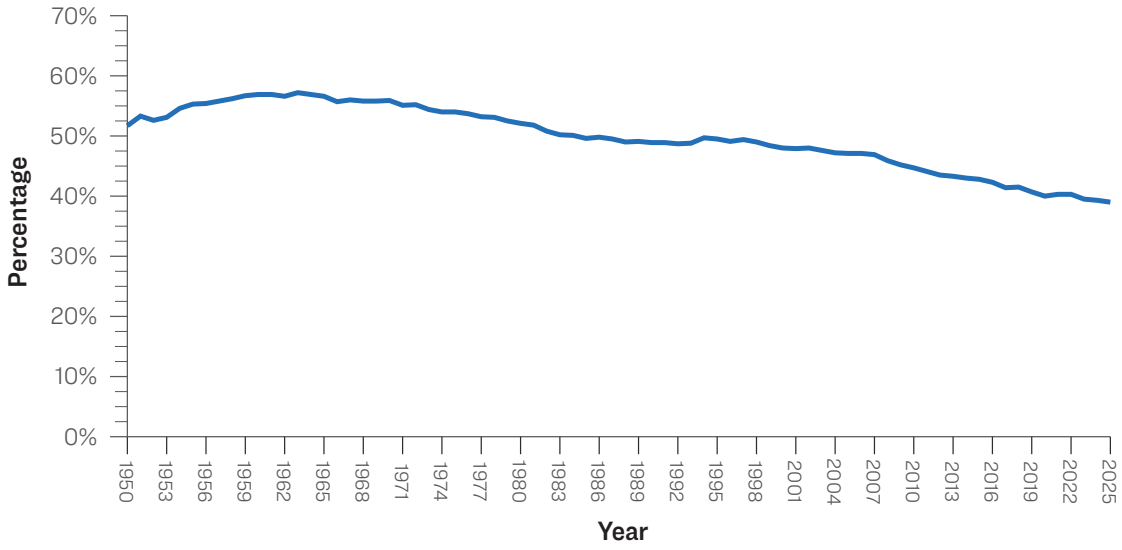


Americans have fewer children today than at any point in history. Figure 12 shows that fertility rates have dropped dramatically from their peak in the 1950s and 1960s. Fertility has been gradually declining throughout American history, bottoming out during the Great Depression of the 1930s before accelerating during the postwar Baby Boom of the 1940s through early 1960s. By 1960, the birth rate had returned to where it was in 1920 and the average woman was expected to have about three and a half children during her lifetime. Since 1960, however, the birth rate has declined sharply, with the greatest declines occurring between 1960 and 1980. Since then, the birth rate has slowly decreased each year.

In 2025, the total fertility rate (TFR) was about 1.6, less than half the 3.5 children per woman in 1960. In 2023, the latest year for which we have data by race, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders had the highest fertility at 2.218 births per woman, followed by Hispanic women at 1.946. Asian women were the lowest at 1.31. While this places the United States at the higher end of fertility rates among wealthy, developed countries, where many European and Asian nations have TFRs below 1.3, the United States remains well below the “replacement level” of 2.1 (the average number of children each woman needs to have over her lifetime to maintain or “replace” the population at its current level solely via births). The United States’ relatively high fertility rate is largely attributable to births among immigrant women and children of immigrants.

This long-term decline in births is directly reflected in the composition of U.S. family households. Our analysis shows that more than 90 percent of American households contained children in 1850. A century later (**Figure 13**), the percentage of families with one or more children was at 52 percent. While rising throughout the Baby Boom period of the fifties and sixties, it began a steep decline thereafter. In the 1980s, for the first time in American history, less than half of all households contained one or more children. In 2025, only 39 percent of U.S. family households included children, marking the continuation of a decades-long move toward childless households. Consequently, fewer adults now share households or neighborhoods with children, making children less present in many adults' daily lives. This shift reflects not only declining fertility but also the broader consequences of rapid population aging in the United States, with implications for social cohesion and intergenerational connection.

Figure 13. PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH ONE OR MORE CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18
1950–2025, UNITED STATES



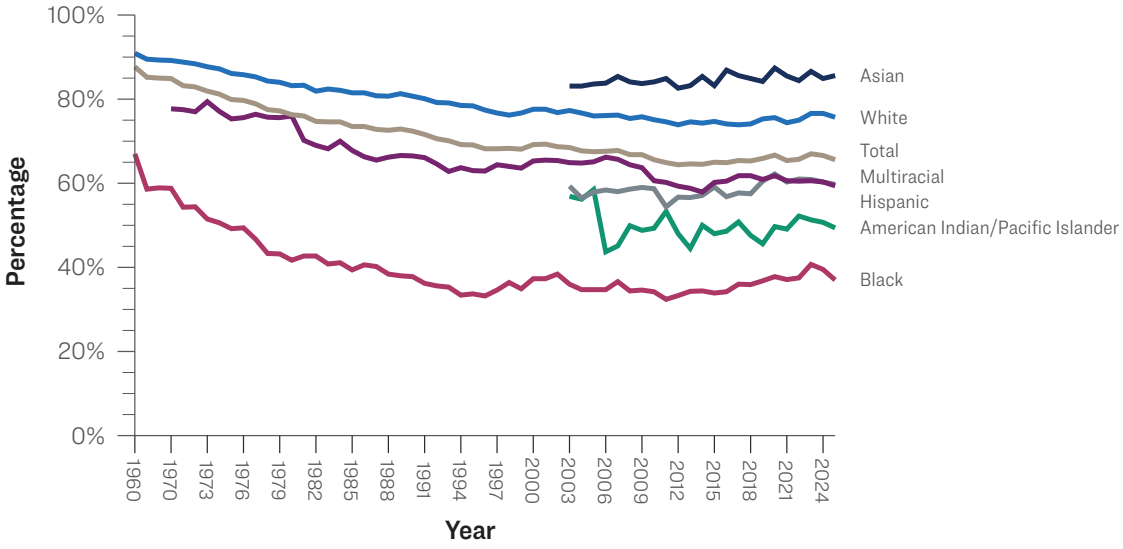
[2] Author estimates based on IPUMS 1850 Census 1 percent sample data. Does not include group quarters or similar.

Fragile Families with Children (Figures 14, 15, 16, 17)

KEY FINDING:
The percentage of children growing up in fragile—typically fatherless—families has continued to grow over the past several decades, although trends suggest a leveling off over the past decade. Racial and ethnic variation persists, with Black children, only about 40% of whom live with both married parents, much more likely to live in a single-parent home than any other group. In contrast, 85% of Asian children today live with both parents. Nonmarital fertility appears to have plateaued over the past decade, albeit at high levels, with nearly 40 percent of all births to unmarried, often cohabiting, parents. Consequently, the number of children living in fragile families is at historically high, though perhaps stable, levels. Income, education, and religion continue to be primary drivers behind childhood living arrangements.

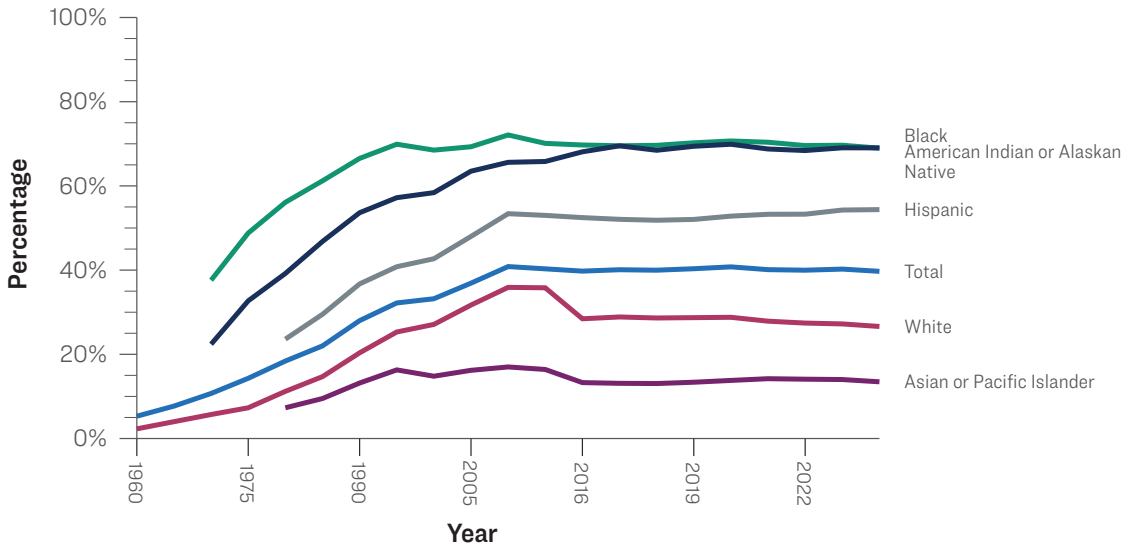
The social science literature is clear—stable and happy relationships, most often marriages, form a crucial part of wellbeing for adults. Such relationships are even more important for the socialization and wellbeing of children. A central feature of the institution of marriage is to maximize the chances that both parents remain invested and involved in the welfare of children from birth to adulthood and beyond.

Figure 14. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 LIVING WITH TWO MARRIED PARENTS BY RACE
1960-2025, UNITED STATES



Long-term trends indicate a substantial decline in the share of children living with two married parents across all racial and ethnic groups (**Figure 14**). In 1960, nearly 90 percent of U.S. children lived with married parents; by 2025, one-third do not. While this decline is evident for all groups, levels and trajectories vary considerably by race. Asian children have consistently been the most likely to live with two married parents, though their rates have also fallen modestly over time. White and Hispanic children experienced steady declines beginning in the 1960s, with some stabilization in recent decades, while multiracial children—tracked more recently—show levels comparable to or slightly below the national average. In contrast, African American children experienced the most pronounced and sustained decline: by 2025, fewer than two in five live with married parents. American Indian and Pacific Islander children also exhibit lower and more volatile rates in the years observed. Together, these patterns reflect the cumulative effects of rising divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation, reshaping children's family environments and widening disparities in exposure to the documented benefits of stable, married-parent households. As seen earlier, divorce rose dramatically between 1960-1980. Consequently, the number of children less than 18 who found themselves with divorced parents each year grew from less than 500,000 in 1960 to over a million by 1975. After peaking around 1980, the number has leveled off and remains close to a million new children each year, mostly because decreasing numbers of children per family is offsetting the effects of population growth, so each divorce today affects a smaller number of children.

Figure 15. PERCENTAGE OF LIVE BIRTHS THAT WERE TO UNMARRIED WOMEN
1960-2024, UNITED STATES



The second reason for this shift in children's living arrangements is the rapid increase in the percentage of children born to unwed mothers (**Figure 15**), which took off in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of all live births that were to unmarried women has skyrocketed from around 5 percent to 40 percent today. Fortunately, these numbers seem to have levelled off in the wake of the Great Recession. The large majority, nearly 70 percent, of births to Black and American Indian/Alaska Native women were nonmarital, compared to roughly 25 percent among Whites, about 50 percent among Hispanics, and less than 15 percent among Asians.

Figure 16. PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS ARE SEPARATED, DIVORCED OR SINGLE, BY PARENTAL GENDER AND INCOME

2005-2024, UNITED STATES

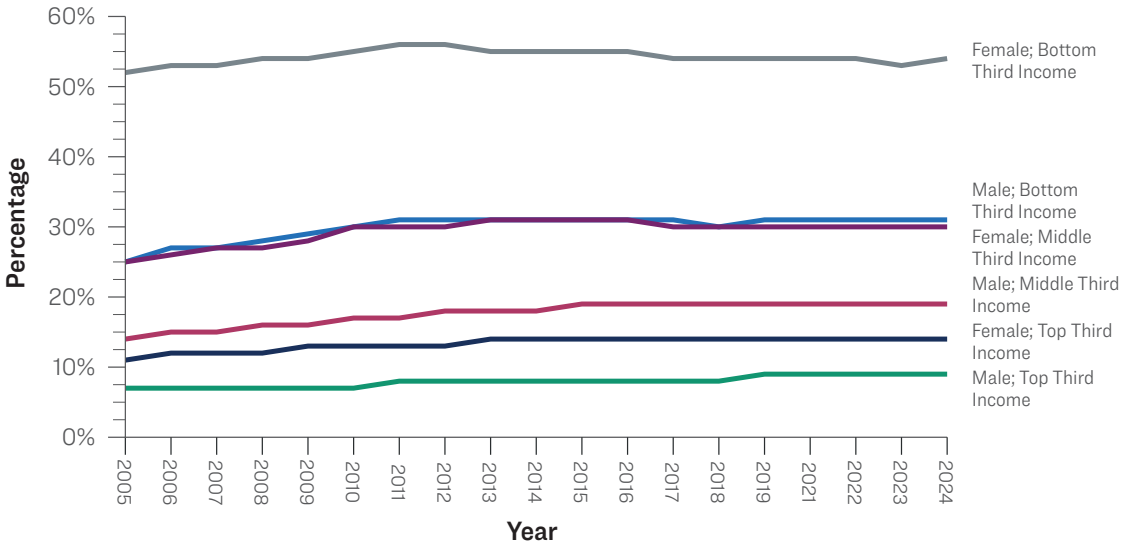
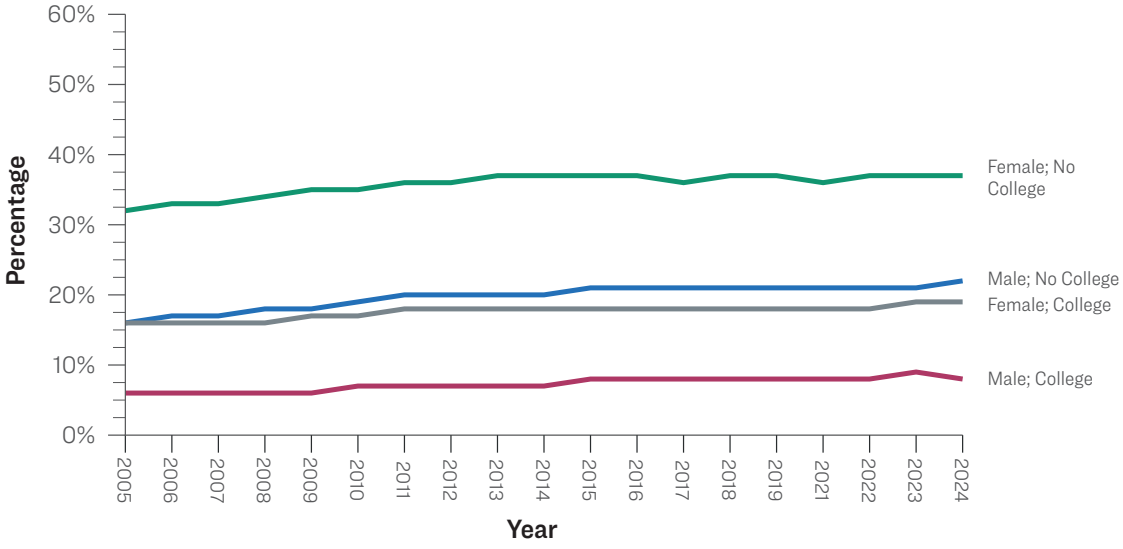


Figure 17. PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS ARE SEPARATED, DIVORCED OR SINGLE, BY PARENTAL GENDER AND COLLEGE DEGREE

2005-2024, UNITED STATES

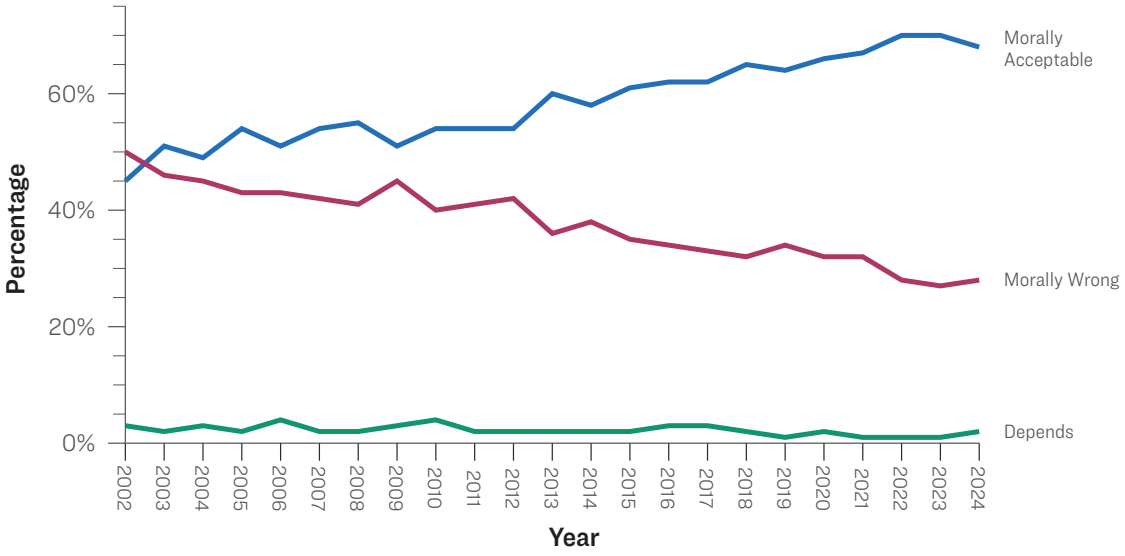


A third, previously mentioned, trend driving changes in children's living arrangements is the widespread occurrence of parents giving birth and bringing children into cohabiting relationships (**Figure 11**). In 1960, there were less than 200,000 cohabiting opposite-sex couples living with one or more children. While remaining flat throughout the 1960s, this number began to grow rapidly in the 1970s through 2015, when the number of cohabiting couples living with children experienced a particularly steep spike. Since peaking in 2015 at about 3.2 million cohabiting couples living with children, this number has since come down to about 3 million couples today.

To further illuminate the forces underlying these trends, we examine differences in the share of households with children whose parents are separated, divorced, or single (SDS) by parental gender and income (**Figure 16**) and education (**Figure 17**). The updated patterns remain clear and persistent: mothers are substantially more likely than fathers to be raising children while separated, divorced, or single, and income and education continue to strongly structure family arrangements. Among mothers in the bottom third of the income distribution, the prevalence of SDS households has remained consistently high—exceeding 50 percent throughout the period and reaching the mid-50 percent range by 2024—indicating that a majority of children in these families experience parental separation or single parenthood. In contrast, fathers in the top income third remain far less likely to be SDS, with rates below 10 percent. A similar gradient emerges by education. Among fathers with a college degree, fewer than one in ten households with children are SDS, a figure that has changed little over time. By contrast, among mothers without a college degree, more than one-third of households with children are SDS, with only modest increases since the mid-2000s. Taken together, these trends suggest that widening socioeconomic disparities, rather than sharp temporal shifts, continue to shape children's living arrangements through the intersecting roles of income, education, and parental gender.

Figure 18. PERCENTAGE OF U.S. ADULTS WHO SAID HAVING A CHILD WITHOUT BEING MARRIED IS MORALLY ACCEPTABLE

2002-2024, UNITED STATES



Another explanation for the diversification of American family life has to do with attitudes toward the moral acceptability of nonmarital fertility (**Figure 18**). When American adults were asked whether having a child without being married is 'morally acceptable', 'morally wrong', or 'depends', increasing numbers of them have stated it is acceptable nearly every year since 2002. In 2002, more adults believed it was morally wrong (50%) than believed it was morally acceptable (45%). Since 2002, however, those who believe nonmarital births are acceptable have overtaken those who believe it to be morally wrong by a wide margin. In 2024, nearly 70% of American adults expressed that having a nonmarital birth was morally acceptable compared to 28 percent who believed it was morally wrong.

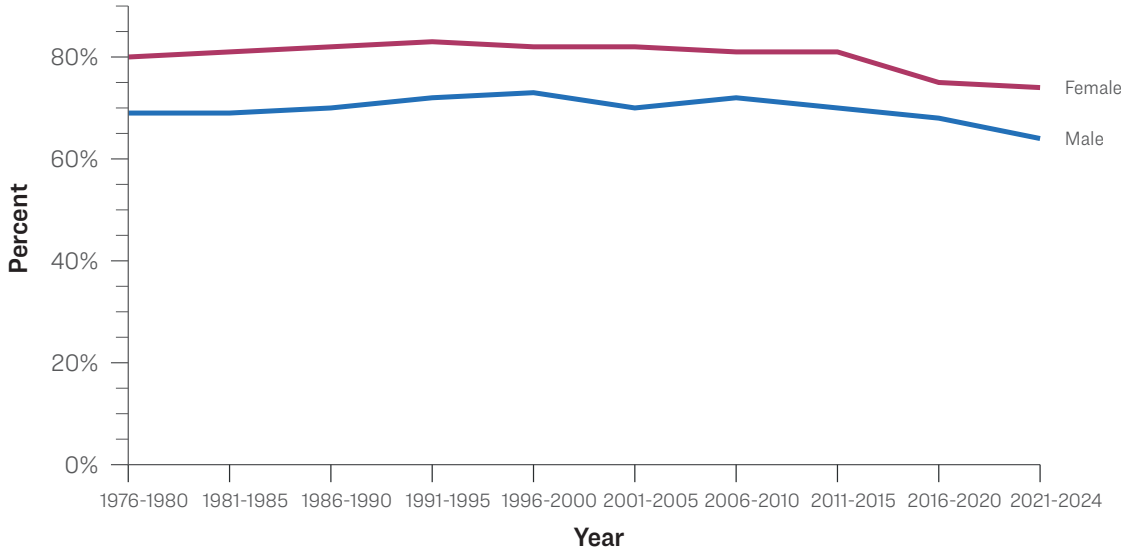
Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family (Figures 19, 20, 21, 22)

KEY FINDING:
Future trends in family formation are reflected in the opinion of teenagers, where both sexes have consistently desired "a good marriage and family life" for several decades now, although boys are less desirous than girls. Recent trends, however, suggest a convergence between boys and girls on this, driven by declining desire for marriage and family life among girls. Teenage boys are also less optimistic than girls about the prospect of lifelong marriage, although declining optimism among girls is closing the gap.

Future trends in family formation are reflected in the expectations of teenagers. For several decades, large majorities of high school seniors of both sexes have expressed strong support for "a good marriage and family life," though boys have consistently been less likely than girls to place the highest importance on these goals. Recent trends, however, point to a convergence between boys and girls, driven largely by declining enthusiasm among girls. This convergence is evident not only in the perceived importance of marriage and family life, but also in expectations about marriage itself and about having children. Teenage boys have long been less optimistic than girls about lifelong marriage and future family formation, yet declining expectations among girls have steadily narrowed—and in some cases reversed—these gender gaps. By the early 2020s, boys are slightly more likely than girls to expect they will marry, remain married for life, and have children.

Figure 19. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID HAVING A GOOD MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IS "EXTREMELY IMPORTANT," BY PERIOD

1976-2024, UNITED STATES



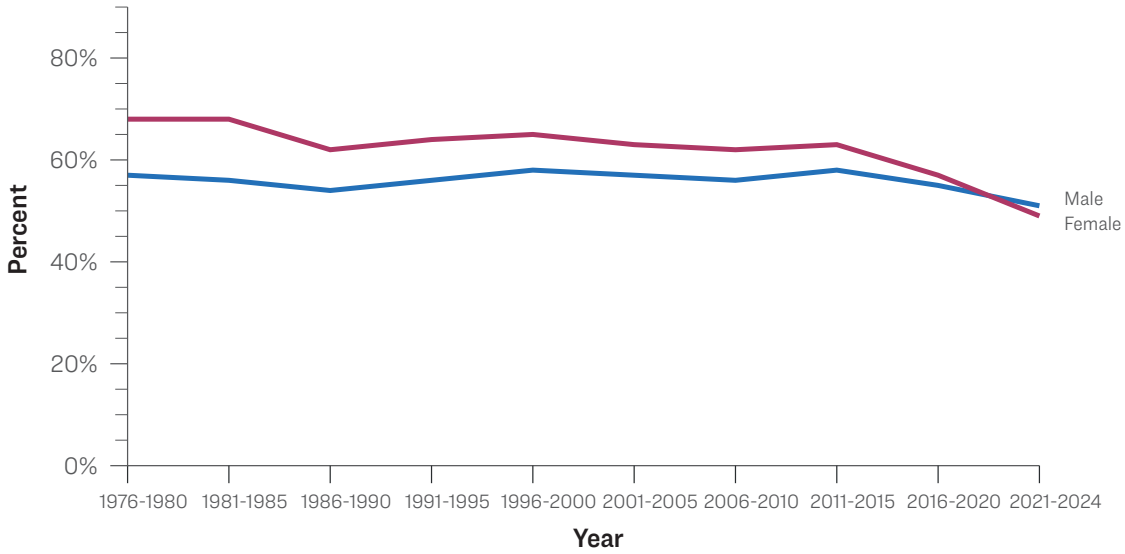
If we wish to glimpse what the future may hold, one of the most revealing places to look is at the beliefs and expectations of today's youth. By asking young people what they think about marriage and family life, we gain insight into the social patterns that may shape the coming decades. These attitudes reflect both personal aspirations and the broader cultural and economic realities young people anticipate facing as adults. Whether current trends in marriage and family formation continue or whether a new generation charts a different course to match its hopes for stability, commitment, and fulfillment will depend in part on how today's expectations translate into tomorrow's choices.

To examine these expectations, we draw on data from the annual Monitoring the Future survey of high school seniors. Across nearly five decades, the share of adolescents who say that having a "good marriage and family life" is extremely important has remained consistently high for both young women and young men (**Figure 19**). From the late 1970s through the early 2010s, roughly three-quarters of female seniors and about two-thirds to seventy percent of male seniors expressed this view, with only modest fluctuations over time. During this period, a persistent gender gap favored young women, who were more likely than young men to place a high priority on marriage and family life. In recent years, however—especially since the mid-2010s and into the 2021–2024 period—that gap has narrowed substantially, driven almost entirely by a decline in the share of young women reporting that marriage and family life are extremely important, while attitudes among young men have changed more gradually . Although a clear majority of today's seniors of both sexes continue to highly value marriage and family life, the convergence of male and female attitudes toward marriage signals a meaningful shift in how young people weigh these priorities.

Other data from the Monitoring the Future survey show that beliefs about lifelong marriage remain fairly common among high school seniors, though they have declined since the late 1970s. In the late 1970s, about 68 percent of senior girls and 57 percent of senior boys believed it was very likely they would stay married to the same person throughout their lifetime. For decades thereafter, girls were consistently 5–10 percentage points more likely than boys to hold this expectation. By 2021–2024, however, beliefs in lifelong marriage had fallen to roughly half of seniors, and the long-standing gender gap had reversed: about 49 percent of senior girls, compared with 51 percent of senior boys, now say it is very likely they will remain married to the same person for life (**Figure 20**). This marks the first time in the survey's history that young women are (slightly) less likely than young men to expect a lifelong marriage.

Figure 20. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL STAY MARRIED TO THE SAME PERSON FOR LIFE, BY PERIOD

1976-2024, UNITED STATES



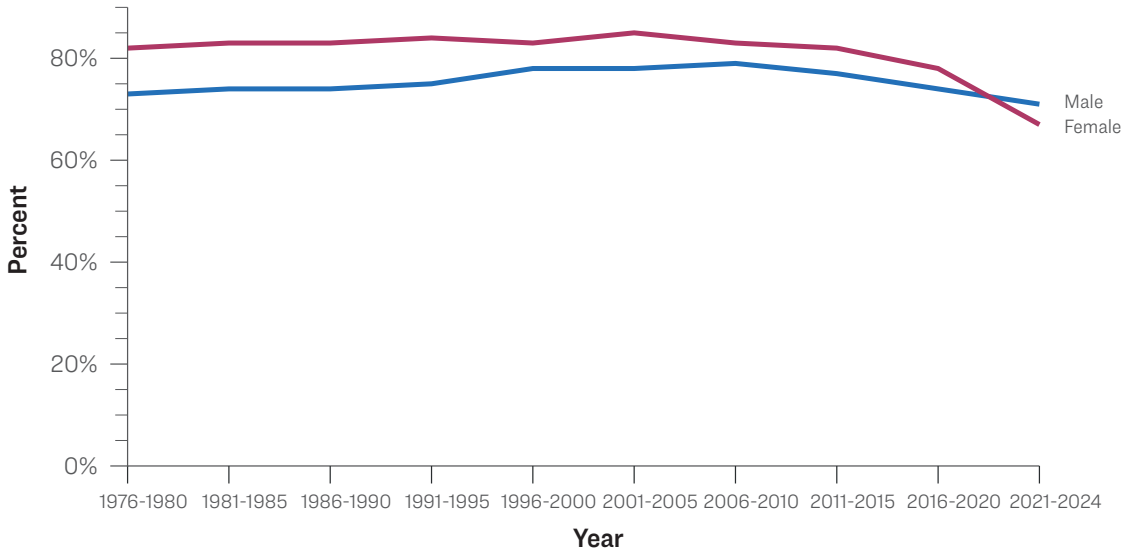
[3] The survey asked respondents whether marriage and family life were not/somewhat/quite/extremely important. Nearly all of the decline observed is due to high school seniors saying marriage and family life are "quite" instead of "extremely" important.

Of course, lifelong marriage presumes marriage itself. The Monitoring the Future survey also asks high school seniors whether they believe it is very likely that they themselves will actually get married. Across most of the survey's history, expectations of eventual marriage have been both high and stable (**Figure 21**). From the late 1970s through the early 2000s, roughly three-quarters to four-fifths of senior boys and more than four-fifths of senior girls reported that it was very likely they would marry. During this period, young women consistently expressed stronger expectations of marriage than young men, and expectations among both sexes rose modestly through the 1990s and early 2000s.

More recently, however, expectations of marriage have declined, especially among young women. Since about 2011–2015, the share of seniors who say they are very likely to marry has fallen steadily, with a particularly sharp drop in the most recent period. Between 2016–2020 and 2021–2024, expectations among senior girls declined from about 78 percent to 67 percent, while expectations among boys fell more modestly, from roughly 74 percent to 71 percent. As a result, the long-standing gender gap has narrowed substantially, and in the most recent period young men are slightly more likely than young women to say they expect to marry.

Figure 21. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL GET MARRIED, BY PERIOD

1976-2024, UNITED STATES

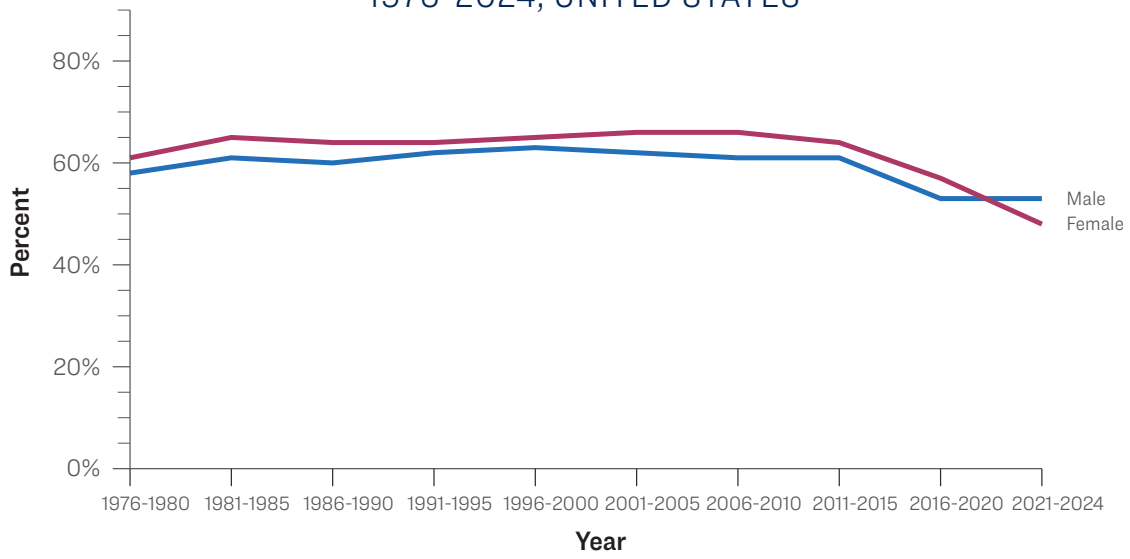


Expectations about having children have followed a similar trajectory. For much of the past five decades, most high school seniors have expected that they will become parents (**Figure 22**). From the late 1970s through the early 2000s, roughly 60 to 66 percent of senior girls and about 58 to 63 percent of senior boys said it was very likely they would have children, with only modest variation over time. Throughout this period, young women were consistently more likely than young men to anticipate parenthood.

As with marriage expectations, however, beliefs about future childbearing have declined in recent years. Since the mid-2010s, the share of seniors who say they are very likely to have children has fallen for both sexes, with sharper declines among young women. By 2021–2024, slightly less than half of senior girls (48 percent) said they were very likely to have children, compared with 53 percent of senior boys. This represents a reversal of the historical gender pattern and underscores the extent to which expectations of parenthood—like expectations of marriage—have become more uncertain among today's adolescents.

Figure 22. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO SAID IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL HAVE CHILDREN, BY PERIOD

1976-2024, UNITED STATES



In summary, marriage and family in the mid 2020s remain dominant and the most consequential social institution for both adults and children in the United States, even as marriage is entered later in life and by a smaller share of the population than in the past. Although marriage rates have declined from mid-20th-century highs, the large majority of Americans who form long-term partnerships continue to do so through marriage, and those who marry report levels of marital happiness that have remained remarkably stable and high over the past five decades. Declines in divorce since the early 1980s underscore both the changes marriage is undergoing and the durability of contemporary marriages, which appear increasingly selective. At the same time, the rise of cohabitation, delayed childbearing, and nonmarital family forms has reduced marriage's universality and weakened its traditional link to fertility and childrearing. Attitudes among today's teenagers reflect this mixed picture: most continue to value marriage and family life highly, yet they are less confident in marriage's permanence and more accepting of alternatives. Taken together, these trends suggest not the eclipse of marriage, but its transformation—from a near-universal social expectation to a powerful, but more selectively chosen institution that remains uniquely associated with stable, enduring adult relationships and well-being.