



Helping Families Thrive

FAMILY FORMATION TRENDS AND ANALYSIS U.S. OVERVIEW 2009

ADULTS: THE HEALTH OF MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

INSIGHT

Adults are increasingly living alone or with an unmarried partner. And women are having babies outside of marriage at an exploding rate! Cohabitation has increased 14-fold since 1960.

These categories have grown by substantial margins over the past twenty years, leaving young adults asking, "Is it possible to have a successful marriage? Do I have to get married to be happy in life?"

These questions are largely driven by the fallout young adults have personally experienced from the widespread divorce culture their parents' generation created over the past four decades. Young adults delay getting married, not out of cynicism or apathy so much, but because of a near crippling anxiety over whether they will fail at marriage like so many of their parents did. Likewise, they also see a dearth of potential mates that have the maturity and emotional health to enter marriage.

Cohabitation fills the gap. Cohabitation is growing largely as: (1) a road-test for a potential marriage or (2) an "in the mean-time" place-holder domestic relationship when no potential marriage partner is on the horizon.

But this is not the only reason for the decline in marriage and the increase in cohabitation in the U.S. Increasing individualism, narcissism, "marriage as life-adornment," as well as the loss of self-giving in marriage erodes a marriage culture. Rather than giving oneself to another to find connectedness, purpose and happiness, marriage has become just one of many individualized choices for bringing substance and happiness to one's own life.

CURRENT MARRIAGE TRENDS

- People delaying age of first marriage*
- Overall, fewer people getting married*
- Cohabitation increasing dramatically*
- Unmarried births rising dramatically*
- Divorce rate stabilizing at a high level*
- Slight increase in young adults saying that a good marriage is personally very important*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

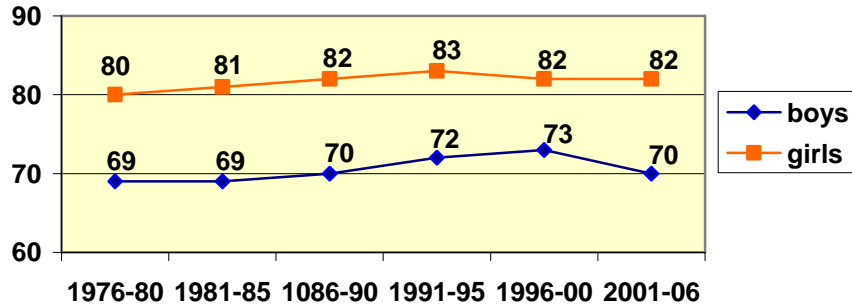
Is the decline of a marriage culture inevitable? Why, as desire for marriage remains strong and our collective knowledge of how to make marriage work has never been larger or smarter, do we find that fewer marriages are forming and that fewer are successful? How can we connect this increasing personal desire for successful marriage with our growing collective knowledge for making marriage work?



Marriage Desire: *Desire for healthy marriage is high among young people*

The vast majority of high school seniors—82 percent of girls and 70 percent of boys—agree that a good marriage is extremely important to them. A similarly large majority—83 percent of senior girls and 78 percent of senior boys—agree that they expect to marry in the future.¹

High-Schoolers Who Say a Good Marriage and Family is "Extremely Important" by Sex and Year



*"So if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after age twenty-five without having a child first, your chances of divorce are very low indeed."*²

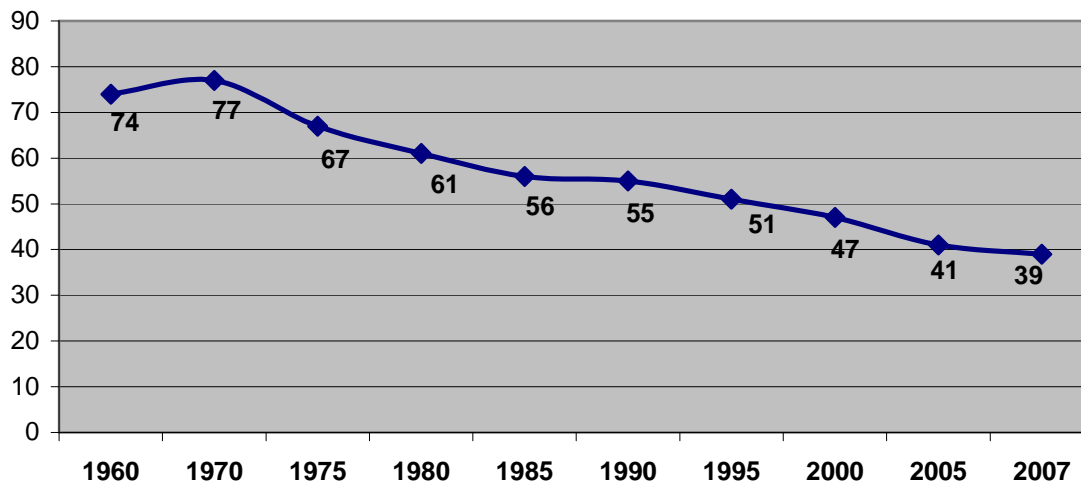
David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, National Marriage Project



Marriage: *Fewer people marrying*

The annual number of marriages³ declined nearly 50 percent between 1970 and 2007.⁴

Number of U.S. Marriages per 1,000 Unmarried Adult Women by Year



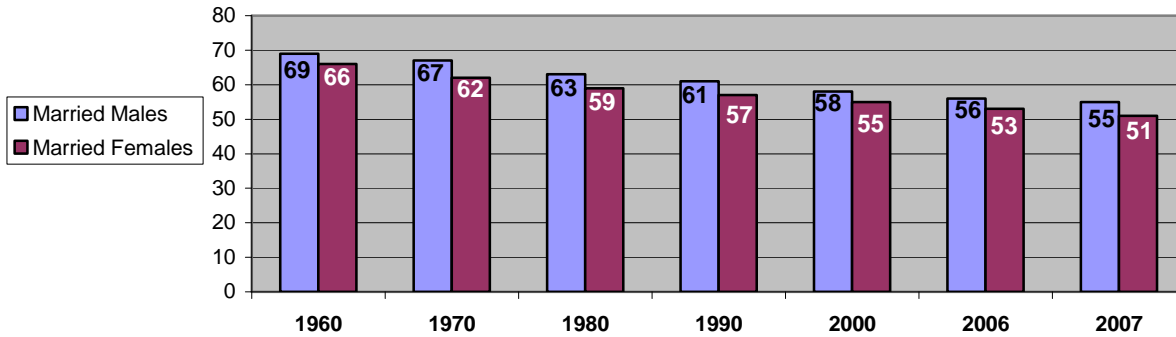
¹ *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses for the nation's high school seniors, 1975-2005* (Ann Arbor, MI; Institute for Social Research. Available at <http://monitoringthefuture.org/pubs.html>. See also *Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family in The State of Our Unions 2005*. <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2005.htm>

² David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, "The State of Our Unions 2006: The Social Health of Marriage in America," *The National Marriage Project*, (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, July 2006), p. 19.

³ ...per 1000 unmarried adult U.S. women.

⁴ Popenoe and Whitehead, 2006, p. 16.

Percentage of All U.S. Adults Who Were Married by Decade



"...at no time in history, with the possible exception of Imperial Rome, has the institution of marriage been more problematic than it is today."⁵

Distinguished demographer, Kingsley Davis

"Married people are happier than unmarried ones of the same age, not only in the United States, but in at least seventeen other countries where similar inquiries have been made. And there seems to be good reason for that happiness. People who are married not only have higher incomes and enjoy greater emotional support, they tend to be healthier. Married people live longer than unmarried ones, not only in the United States but abroad."⁶

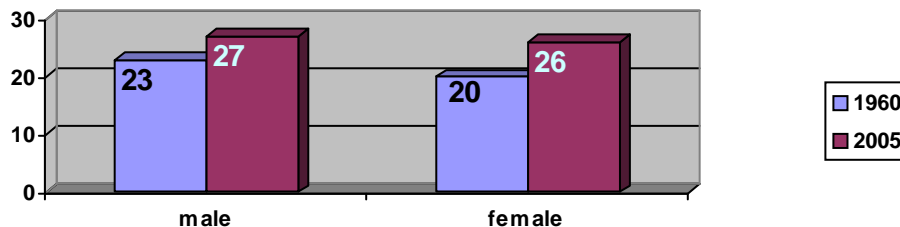
James Q. Wilson, UCLA professor



Marital Age: Increase in age at first marriage⁷

A delay in first marriage, but marrying in mid-twenties is associated with significantly lower risk of divorce.⁸

Median Age at First Marriage by Sex



"...marrying over 25 years of age (vs. under 18) is related to a 24 percent decrease in risk of divorce."⁹

**David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead
National Marriage Project, Rutgers University**



Marital Happiness: Long decline, but a recent slight increase in marital happiness

Spouses reporting being "very happy" with their marriages have decreased slightly over the last few decades, but has stayed relatively steady since the mid-90s.¹⁰

⁵ Kingsley Davis, "The Meaning and Significance of Marriage in Contemporary Society" in *Contemporary Marriage: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Institution*, Kingsley Davis, ed., (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1985), p. 21.

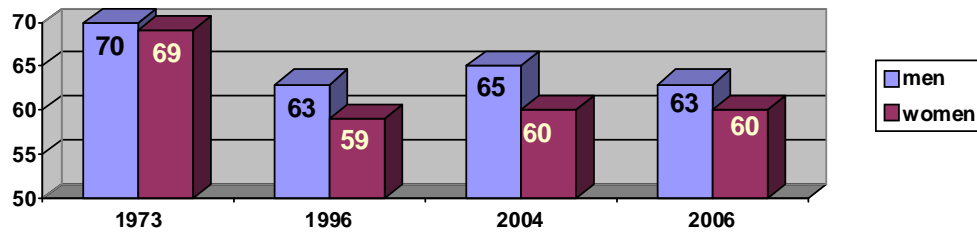
⁶ James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 16.

⁷ Popenoe and Whitehead, 2006, p. 16.

⁸ David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, "The State of Our Unions 2005: The Social Health of Marriage in America," *The National Marriage Project*, (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, July 2005), p. 19.

⁹ Popenoe and Whitehead, 2006, p. 19.

Percentage of Spouse Reporting "Very Happy" Marriage



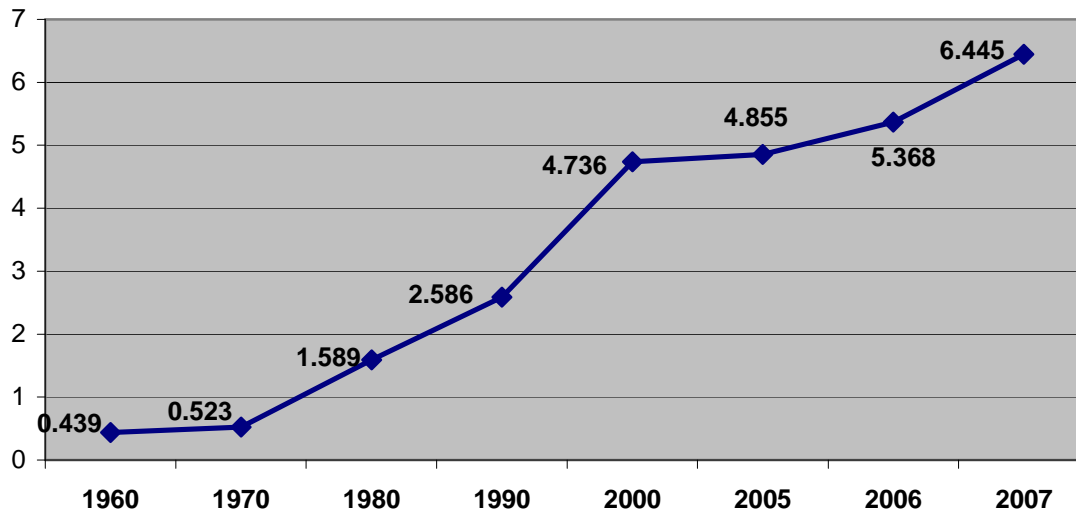
Cohabitation: *Dramatic Increase*



There has been a fourteen-fold increase in unmarried cohabitation from 1960 to 2007, particularly dramatic over the last years and more than doubling since 1990!

Nearly a quarter of unmarried women are currently living with a partner. An additional quarter has lived with an unmarried partner at some time in the past.¹¹

Number (in millions) of U.S. Cohabiting Couples by Year



“Adults who live together are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of physical health and emotional well-being and mental health, as well as in assets and earnings. ...Couples who live together also, on average, report relationships of lower quality than do married couples — with cohabitators reporting more conflict, more violence, and lower levels of satisfaction and commitment.”¹²

W. Bradford Wilcox, University of Virginia sociologist

Divorce: *Declining slightly, but at a high level*



The American divorce rate has nearly doubled since 1960, but has declined somewhat notably after hitting its historic high in the early 1980s. Scholars say the U.S. divorce rate has leveled at a dramatically high rate.¹³

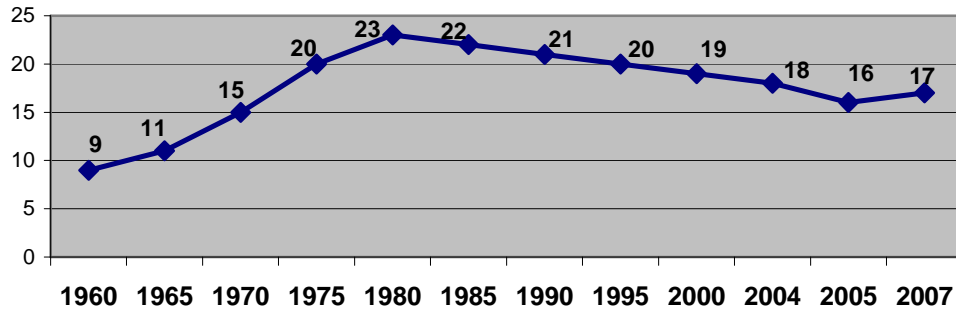
¹⁰ Popenoe and Whitehead, 2006, p. 18.

¹¹ Popenoe and Whitehead, 2006, p. 19.

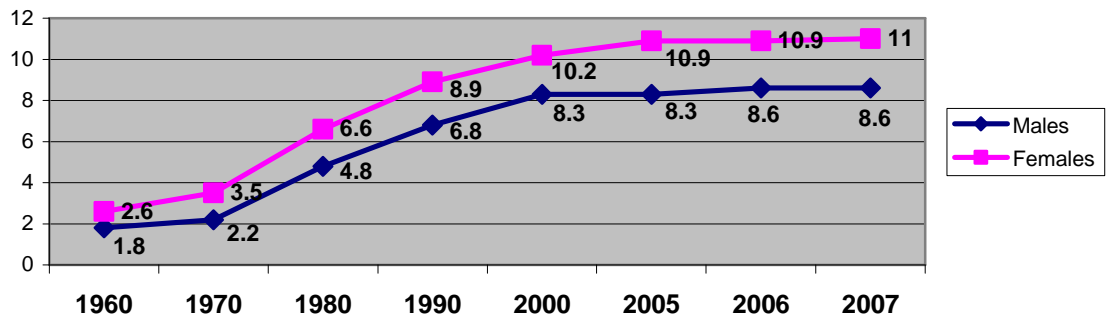
¹² W. Bradford Wilcox, et al., *Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005), p. 13.

¹³ Popenoe and Whitehead, 2006, p. 18, 19.

**Number of Divorces
per 1,000 Married Women in U.S. by Year**



Percentage of All U.S. Adults Divorced by Year and Sex



"We made radical changes in the family without realizing how it changes the experience of growing up. We embarked on a gigantic social experiment without any idea about how the next generation would be affected. If the truth be told, and if we are able to face it, the history of divorce in our society is replete with unwarranted assumptions that adults have made about children simply because such assumptions are congenial to adult needs and wishes."¹⁴

**Dr. Judith Wallerstein, UC, Berkeley professor
World's leading scholar on impact of divorce upon children**



Births to Unmarried Women Increasing / Increasing to Cohabiting Women

Births to unmarried women have just exploded over the past 30 years. In 2004, 28 percent of births to women ages 25-29 and 55 percent for women ages 20-24 were to unmarried women. Recent estimates indicate that currently 49 percent of births in major urban areas were to unmarried cohabiting mothers.¹⁵

- The increases among women ages 20-40 have been largely consistent and quite dramatic.
- Since 2002, birth rates have risen 13% for women 20-24 years old and 34% for women 30-34 years old.

Raw Numbers

- Babies born to unmarried mothers increased 4% since 2006 and 26% higher 2002.
- The 2007 total is 2.5 times the number in 1980 and 19 times higher than the estimated 1940 numbers.

Birth Rate (# of births per 1,000 *unmarried* women)

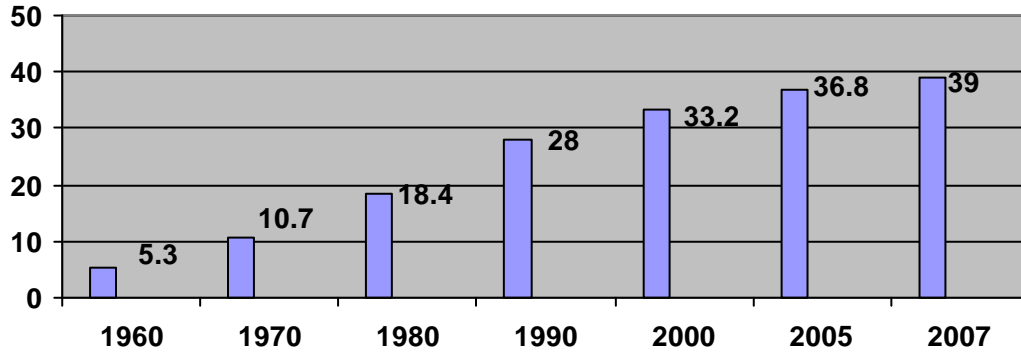
- The rate increased 5% between 2006 and 2007 and 21% since 2002.
- The rate for 2007 is 80% higher than the 1980 rate.¹⁶

¹⁴ Judith Wallerstein, *et al.*, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, (Hyperion, 2000), p. xxii.

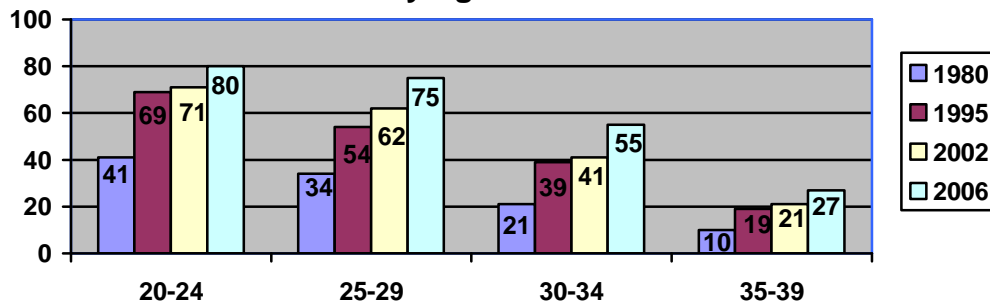
¹⁵ "Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women," Child Trends Databank, http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/75_PDF.pdf (accessed April 2007).

¹⁶ Stephanie Ventura, "Changing Patterns of Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States," *NCHS Data Brief*, No. 18, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 2009.

% of All Births which were Nonmarital by Year



Birth Rates for U.S. Unmarried Women by Age and Year



“That a low-income single mother faces a larger financial penalty than a middle income mother if she decides to marry is a serious problem that appears to run counter to the values of most Americans.”¹⁷

Princeton professor Sara McLanahan

“Many single parents, however, find it difficult to function effectively as parents. Compared with continuously married parents, they are less emotionally supportive of their children, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, are more inconsistent with dispensing discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children.”¹⁸

Paul Amato, Penn State sociologist

Glenn T. Stanton is the director of global family formation studies at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, CO and the author of [Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Postmodern Society](#) and My Crazy Imperfect Christian Family

¹⁷ Sara McLanahan, Elisabeth Donahue, Ron Haskins, “Introducing the Issue,” in *The Future of Children*, “Marriage and Child Wellbeing,” Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 2005, (Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton and The Brookings Institution) p. 9.

¹⁸ Paul Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” in *The Future of Children*, “Marriage and Child Wellbeing,” Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 2005, (Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton and The Brookings Institution), p. 83.