

SPECIAL REPORT

No. 310 | MARCH 4, 2025

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Rachel Sheffield and Delano Squires

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RICHARD AND HELEN DEVOS CENTER FOR LIFE, RELIGION, AND FAMILY

## About the Authors

**Rachel Sheffield** is Research Fellow in the Center for Health and Welfare Policy at The Heritage Foundation.

**Delano Squires** is Research Fellow in the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Life, Religion, and Family at The Heritage Foundation.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/sr310>

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# Crossroads: American Family Life at the Intersection of Tradition and Modernity

*Rachel Sheffield and Delano Squires*

**F***amilies are the bedrock of society and marriage is its cornerstone. Research overwhelmingly shows a clear association between instability in the family and adverse social outcomes. This Special Report offers insights on American family life through analysis of trends in marriage, childbearing, divorce, cohabitation, and abortion. American family life is at a crossroads. One path is marked by declining marriage, low birth rates, high unwed childbearing, casual divorce, abortion on demand, and the rejection of biological sex. The other path believes marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman, treats all life with dignity, and acknowledges that children do best when raised by their married biological parents. The path that Americans choose will determine the future of the country.*

In 1950, married couples comprised 78 percent of all American households.<sup>1</sup> Only 4 percent of children were born to unmarried parents.<sup>2</sup> The typical life script was consistent irrespective of race, religion, or socioeconomic status. Most Americans married in young adulthood, children were born within marriage, and divorce was rare.

Today, married couples make up less than half (47 percent) of U.S. households, 40 percent of children are born outside marriage, and the birth rate has reached its lowest recorded level.<sup>3</sup> The age of first marriage has increased by about seven years for both sexes.<sup>4</sup> More adults ages 18 to 44 have cohabited (59 percent) than have been married (50 percent).<sup>5</sup> Marriage itself has been legally redefined nationwide with the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in a way that rejects the fundamental link between marriage and childbearing. In fact, for a growing and influential segment of the country, even defining “man” and “woman” seems to be an impossible task.

American culture is at a crossroads, and the clearest signs are the changes to American family life. The family is the foundation of civil society, and marriage—the union of one man and one woman for a lifetime—is its cornerstone. Children raised by their married, biological parents have better outcomes, including a far lower likelihood of poverty, better psychological well-being, higher educational attainment, and a lower likelihood of experiencing abuse or engaging in delinquent behavior.<sup>6</sup> Marriage also provides benefits for adults. Married mothers and fathers report greater levels of happiness than their unmarried and childless peers, and married adults experience less loneliness, have greater financial well-being, and enjoy better emotional health.<sup>7</sup>

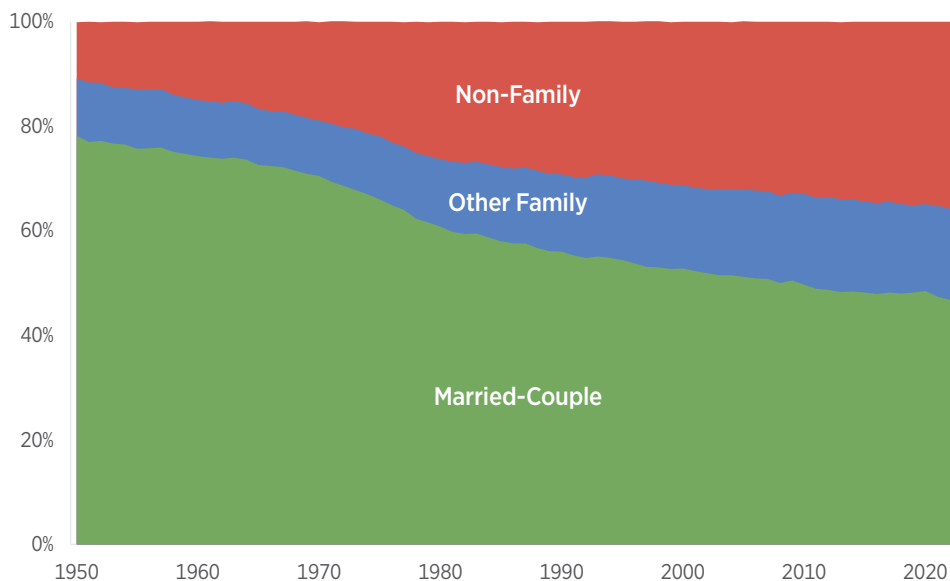
A nation that rejects the importance of stable marriages and strong families for its well-being weakens its ability to pass on the blessings of prosperity to future generations. This is the reality that Americans face today, and the direction they take now will determine the health and survival of the republic.

This *Special Report* analyzes data on important trends related to marriage, childbearing, divorce, cohabitation, and abortion, and offers insights on these trends. The report includes five key findings about family life in America today:

1. **Americans are getting married less and later.** The share of adults who are currently married has dropped more than 20 percentage points since 1960, while the median age at first marriage has gone up by about eight years for women and about seven years for men.
2. **Fewer children are being born, but more are born outside marriage.** The total fertility rate has decreased from 3.65 in 1960 to 1.62 in 2023. Forty percent of all children were born to unmarried parents in 2022 and close to 20 percent of parents have children with more than one partner.
3. **More couples are cohabiting.** The share of American adults ages 18 to 44 who have ever cohabited (59 percent) is higher than the percentage who have ever married (46 percent). In 2022, one in five first-time homebuyers were unmarried couples, the highest share ever recorded.
4. **Marriage and family are no longer priorities.** A Pew Research Center survey from 2019 found that 65 percent of respondents said society is just as well off if people have priorities other than marriage

CHART 1

## Households by Type, 1950–2023



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. For more information, see the appendix.

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and children. This included 85 percent of liberal Democrats as well as 41 percent of conservative Republicans. Further, close to 45 percent of childless adults ages 18 to 49 say they are unlikely to ever have children.

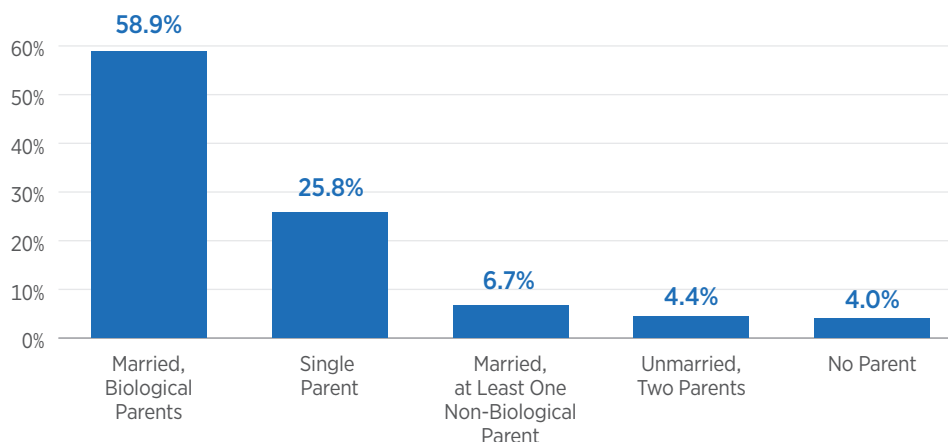
### 5. **American singles are faced with a “connection conundrum.”**

Despite the ubiquity of technology and the widespread use of dating apps, one survey found that 67 percent of respondents said their dating lives are not going well, with three-in-four saying it was hard to find people to date within the past year.

## Marriage

Marriage rates in the United States have been on a downward trajectory for decades. As marriage has declined, the percentage of married households has dropped, changing the composition of many communities. While married couples are still the most common household type, married households are no longer the majority of U.S. households. (See Chart 1.) In the 1950s and through the mid-1960s, around three-quarters of U.S. households

CHART 2

**Living Arrangements of Children, 2019**

**SOURCE:** U.S. Census Bureau. For more information, see the appendix.

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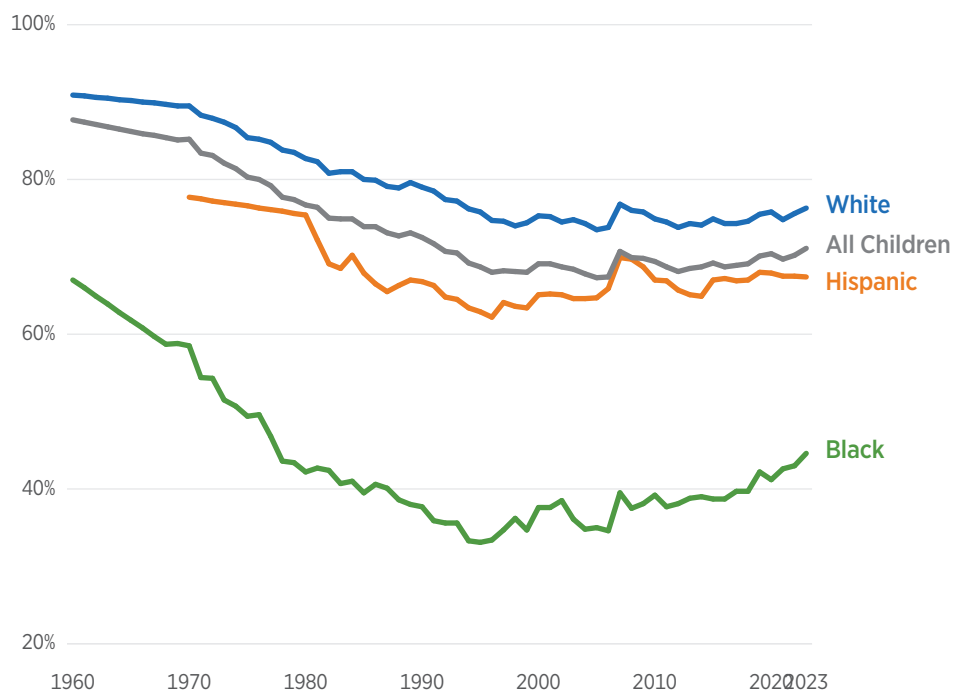
included a married couple. Today, less than half of the nation's roughly 131 million households are comprised of married couples.<sup>8</sup> More households today are headed by single mothers or fathers (included in the "other family households" category in Chart 1) than ever before. More Americans are also living in "non-family households," meaning they either live alone or with non-relatives.<sup>9</sup> In 1960, non-family households accounted for 15 percent of all U.S. households, and today that number has increased to more than one-third of American households.<sup>10</sup>

As marriage has become less common, the share of children living in a married household has also declined. In 1960, nearly 90 percent of children were living with two parents, and more than 70 percent were living with their married biological parents.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, by 2019, 70 percent of U.S. children were living with two parents, although only about 60 percent were living with their married, biological parents. (See Chart 2.) The rate of single-parent households has increased as two-parent families have declined. About a quarter of U.S. children live with a single parent, the highest rate in the world.<sup>12</sup>

The share of children in two-parent homes also varies widely by race. Only 45 percent of black children were living with two parents as of 2023, compared to 67 percent of Hispanic children and 76 percent of white children. In previous decades, substantially larger numbers of children from all racial backgrounds lived in a home with two parents. (See Chart 3.)

CHART 3

## Share of Children Living in a Two-Parent Home by Race, 1960–2023



**NOTE:** Some figures have been interpolated.

**SOURCE:** U.S. Census Bureau. For more information, see the appendix.

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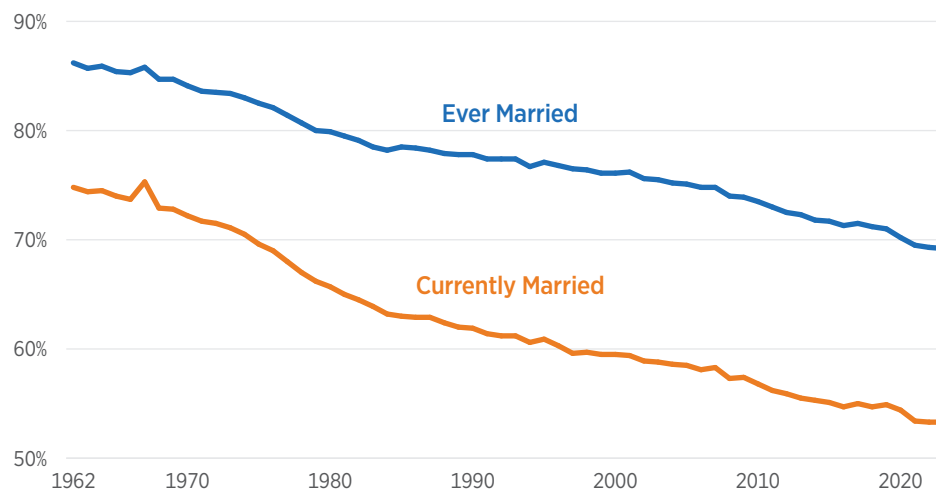
Being raised in an intact home with married parents is linked with a variety of better outcomes for children, including greater educational attainment, better physical and mental health, and increased social mobility. This holds true across income levels.<sup>13</sup>

For example, in a 2009 study using data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers Carolyn Hill, Harry Holzer, and Henry Chen found that youth who grow up without both biological parents in the home were more likely to drop out of high school, have a child outside marriage, or to become incarcerated. Adult children who grew up in a non-intact family also reported lower levels of work engagement. Researchers found that these outcomes persisted even when controlling for household income. The effects of growing up without both biological parents were particularly strong for (non-Hispanic) black men in the study.<sup>14</sup> In another study using an earlier cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1979, Marcia Carlson found that children in single-mother families had poorer



CHART 4

### Share of Adults 18 and Older Ever Married and Currently Married, 1962–2023



**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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behavioral outcomes compared to children in two-parent households. The outcomes held even when controlling for factors such as race and maternal education.<sup>15</sup>

The benefits of marriage for children extend beyond the immediate family. Children living in neighborhoods with a larger share of married parents are more likely to experience upward mobility, even if they do not have married parents themselves.<sup>16</sup>

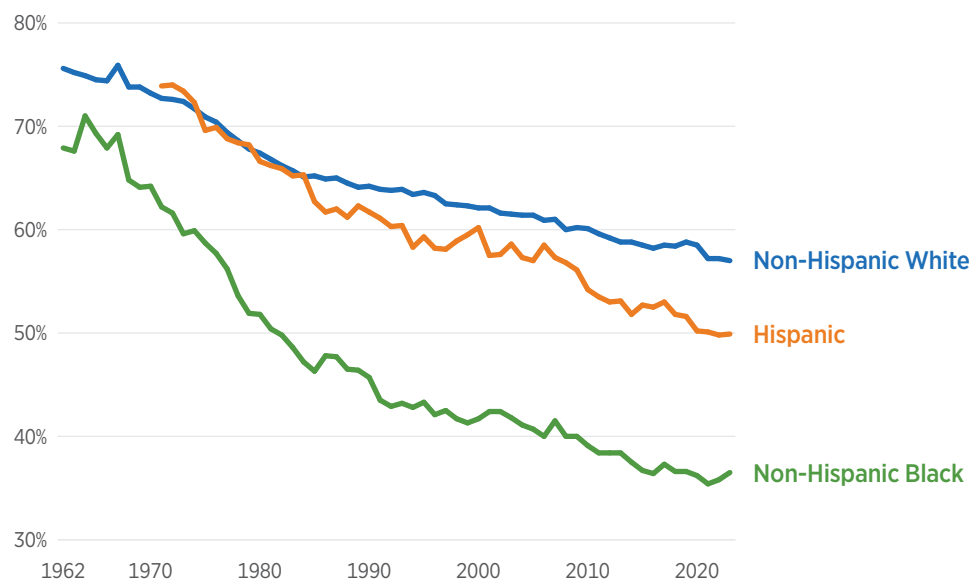
## Marriage Trends

Marriage rates in the United States have declined significantly during the past several decades. In the 1960s, about three-quarters of the adult population in the U.S. was married and 86 percent had ever been married. If a person was no longer married, it was most commonly because a spouse had died rather than due to divorce. Today, only around 50 percent of adults are married, and only 69 percent have ever been married. (See Chart 4.) For those no longer married today, the most common reason is divorce.

In 1962, 76 percent of (non-Hispanic) white adults were married, compared to 68 percent of blacks.<sup>17</sup> In 1971, the first year for which marriage data

CHART 5

## Share of Adults 18 and Older Currently Married by Race, 1962–2023



**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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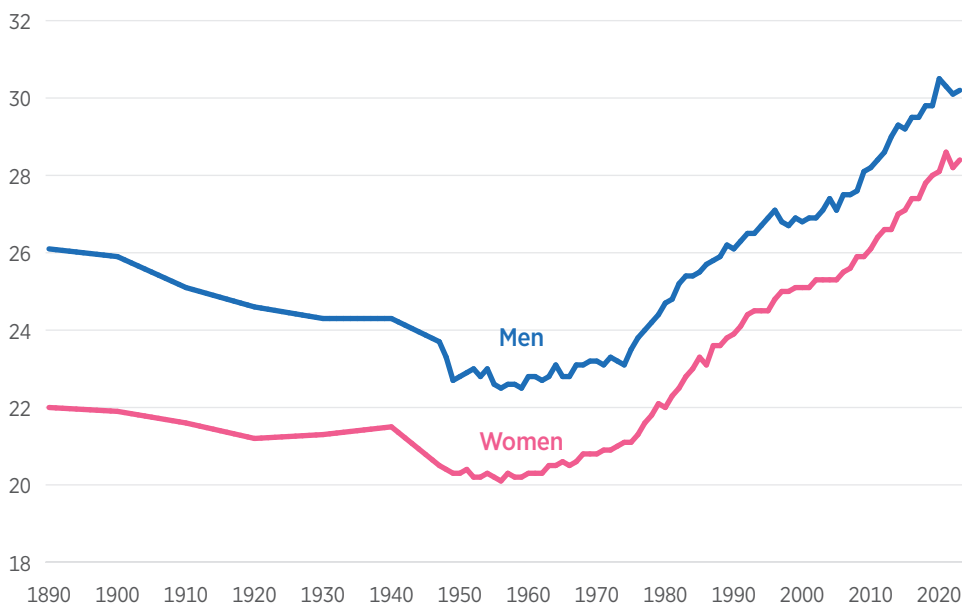
are available for Hispanics, the share of Hispanic adults who were married was 74 percent, the share of whites was very similar, at 73 percent, and the share of blacks who were married was about 10 percentage points lower, at 62 percent.

While marriage rates have declined among all groups, racial disparities have increased. For example, in 1962, there was an 8-percentage point difference in the share of adults married between whites and blacks. As of 2022, there is a 20-percentage point difference.

In 1962, the share of married adults was about the same across education levels.<sup>18</sup> Today, Americans with a college degree (64 percent) are also far more likely to be married than those with a high school degree or some college education (48 percent), or those with less than a high school education (45 percent).<sup>19</sup>


**Age at First Marriage.** One of the most noticeable changes in marriage patterns during the past several decades is that Americans are waiting longer to get married than ever before. In 1960, the median age at first marriage was 22.8 years for men and 20.3 for women. While the median age at

CHART 6

**Median Age at First Marriage by Sex, 1890–2023**

**NOTE:** Some figures have been interpolated.

**SOURCE:** U.S. Census Bureau. For more information, see the appendix.

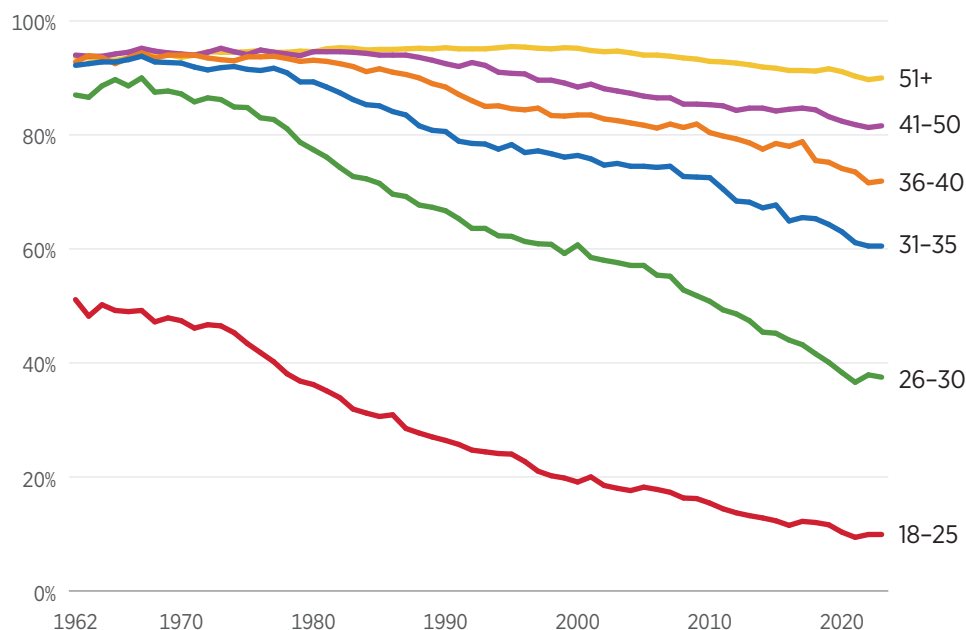
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first marriage was at historic lows in the 1960s, today it has climbed well beyond what it has been at any time in the past roughly 130 years. By 1990, the median age at first marriage had increased to 26.1 for men and to 23.9 for women. By 2023, the median age at first marriage had climbed to 30.2 for men and 28.4 years for women.

As a result of the increasing age at first marriage, less than 40 percent of American adults in their late 20s have ever been married. (See Chart 7.) Even by their later 30s, roughly a quarter of Americans have never married. Delayed marriage is associated with a decreased likelihood of marrying at all, and marriage rates are projected to decline further. Researchers estimate that roughly one-third of Gen Z'ers will have never married by the time they reach age 45.<sup>20</sup>

**Same-Sex Marriage.** Another change in American family life is the legal status of same-sex couples. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are approximately 1.2 million same-sex households in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Of those, roughly 700,000 are married, accounting for only 1 percent of American marriages.<sup>22</sup> The *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states was an inflection point in

CHART 7

**Share of Adults Ever Married by Age Group, 1962–2023**

**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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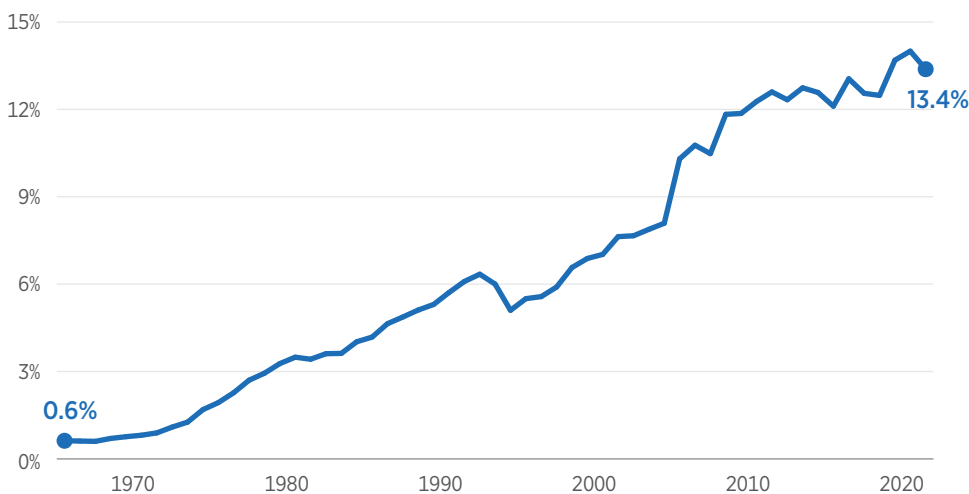
this country. Prior to the Supreme Court’s decision, most same-sex households were comprised of cohabiting couples, rather than married couples. Today, about 40 percent of cohabiting same-sex couples are unmarried.<sup>23</sup> Despite some claims at the time of *Obergefell* that same-sex marriage would strengthen the institution of marriage, the legalization of same-sex marriage did not arrest the decline in opposite-sex marriage and childbearing.<sup>24</sup>

## Cohabitation

Another change in American relationship culture is the prevalence of cohabitation. Between 1967 and 2023 the share of adults cohabiting among all adults living with a romantic partner (either a cohabiting partner or a spouse), increased from less than 1 percent to 13 percent. (See Chart 8.) A 2022 report from the National Association of Realtors found that 18 percent of first-time homebuyers were unmarried couples, the highest share ever recorded.<sup>25</sup>

CHART 8

### Share of Adults Cohabiting as a Share of All Adults Living with a Partner, 1967–2023



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. For more information, see the appendix.

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According to research by Paul Hemez and Wendy Manning, the share of women ages 25 to 29 who have ever cohabited increased from 41 percent in 1987 to 70 percent by 2013.<sup>26</sup> Among women of all age groups in their study (ages 30 to 34, 35 to 39, and 40 to 44), the share who had ever cohabited increased substantially between 1987 and 2013.<sup>27</sup>

In previous generations, living together and getting married usually happened at the same time. Since then, these two events have come to signify different stages in a couple's relationship timeline.<sup>28</sup> Roughly two-thirds of couples that marry today live together first.<sup>29</sup> But living together does not always indicate an intentional step toward marriage. In fact, most first cohabitation relationships end in a break-up.<sup>30</sup> The majority of unwed couples who move in together have not made a formal commitment to marry, and most couples who cohabit prior to marriage did not decide to do so after making a clear plan.<sup>31</sup> Instead, they frequently "slide" into cohabitation, sometimes for financial reasons or convenience.<sup>32</sup>

Cohabiting couples may anticipate marriage in the future, but this often does not happen. For example, a survey of 1,000 unmarried people from the rental website Apartment Advisor found that 48 percent said they were moving in together because they were "ready to take the relationship to the next level," and about 60 percent of respondents said they planned to

marry.<sup>33</sup> However, research by Esther Lamidi, Wendy Manning, and Susan Brown shows that among women cohabiting between 2006 and 2013, only 22 percent had transitioned to marriage within five years. A larger one-third had dissolved their relationships during this time.<sup>34</sup> The researchers also found that cohabiting relationships are much less likely to transition to marriage today than in the past. Among the group of women in the study who had cohabited between 1983 and 1988, 42 percent had transitioned to marriage within five years, roughly double the share from the 2006–2013 cohort.

The length of premarital cohabitation has also increased. A study by Nathan Yau using data from the “How Couples Meet and Stay Together” survey, found that the median path to marriage in the 1960s did not include cohabitation prior to marriage. During the 1970s, the median path to marriage included a few months of premarital cohabitation.<sup>35</sup> By the 2000s, the median married couple had lived together about a year and a half before getting married, and by the 2010s, the cohabitation period before getting married was more than three years.<sup>36</sup> Cohabitation has become a common and much longer part of romantic relationships.

Cohabitation has significant implications for future marital quality and stability. A large body of research shows that premarital cohabitation is linked with poorer marital outcomes.<sup>37</sup> This may partly be due to selection, but the characteristics of the individuals who cohabit are not the only explanation for poorer relationship outcomes.<sup>38</sup> As Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades explain, living together before marriage can reduce positive attitudes toward marriage and increase acceptance of divorce. Cohabitation can also make it harder to end a mismatched relationship, increasing the likelihood that couples “slide” into marriage rather than making a conscientious decision that their relationship has the necessary elements for a lifetime commitment.<sup>39</sup>

The growth of cohabitation has also altered life for American children. About half of all cohabiting couples have at least one child in the home.<sup>40</sup> Among single parents, more than a third are living with a cohabiting partner today, whereas in the past it was uncommon for a single mother or father to be living with a romantic partner. (Single parenthood used to be much more common due to divorce rather than to never having been married.)<sup>41</sup> While only about 4 percent of U.S. children are living with cohabiting parents at a given time, the number of children who have ever lived with a cohabiting parent is much higher. Forty percent of children are born to single mothers today, and nearly two-thirds of births to those single mothers are to women who are cohabiting with a romantic partner (either the child’s father or

another romantic partner) at the time of the child's birth. Thus, about a quarter of U.S. children live in a cohabiting parent household at some point in their lives.<sup>42</sup>

Cohabitation may give the appearance of marriage, but it is not nearly as stable. This includes cohabiting relationships with children. Approximately half of cohabiting parents who have a child together break up by the time their child turns three, compared to just 13 percent of married parents.<sup>43</sup> By age 12, two-thirds of cohabiting parents have broken up, compared to one-quarter of married parents.<sup>44</sup> Parental relationship instability is associated with poorer outcomes for children, and children living in a cohabiting household are also the most likely to experience physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, most commonly at the hands of a cohabiting, non-related adult.<sup>45</sup>

Despite cohabitation's connection with lower marital stability and with poorer child outcomes, Americans overwhelmingly believe cohabitation gives people a higher likelihood of relationship success. Close to 90 percent of respondents in the Apartment Advisor survey believed living together gave them a better chance at a successful marriage, and about 70 percent of high school seniors agree that cohabitation is a good test drive for marriage without realizing that it leads to far more crashes than they expect.<sup>46</sup>

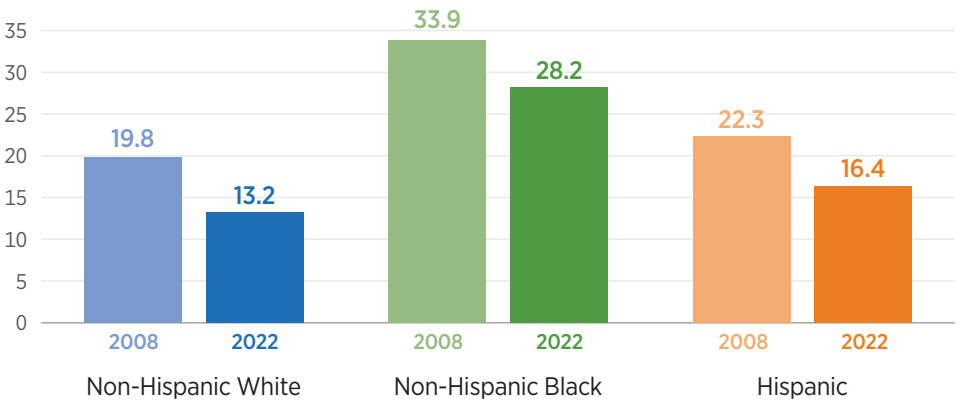
## Divorce

Although failure to form families is the largest driver of family instability, divorce is still common in the United States.<sup>47</sup> Like other factors relating to family instability, divorce began to increase in the 1960s. No-fault divorce laws became widespread in the late 1960s and particularly the 1970s, making it easier for couples to dissolve their marriages.<sup>48</sup> The divorce rate began to rise dramatically in the early 1960s, doubling between 1960 and 1970 and eventually peaking and leveling off in the 1980s.<sup>49</sup> In 1960, the divorce rate was about nine per 1,000 married women and reached a rate of 23 per 1,000 married women in 1980. Divorce has dropped, though, and in 2022 it was roughly 15 per 1,000 married women.<sup>50</sup>

The decline in divorce has been driven by lower divorce rates among adults younger than 35 years of age.<sup>51</sup> Today, fewer people marry, though, and marriages are most common among the college educated, who tend to have more stable marriages. These factors likely contribute to lower divorce rates among younger generations. Of course, divorce statistics do not include the family dissolution that comes from the break-up of cohabiting unions.

CHART 9

Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Ages 15 and Older  
by Race, 2008 and 2022

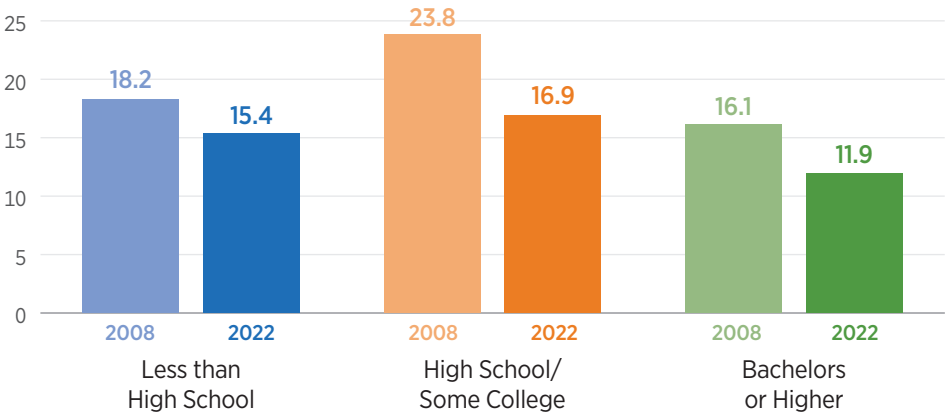


SOURCE: American Community Survey, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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CHART 10

Divorces per 1,000 Married Women by Education Level,  
2008 and 2022

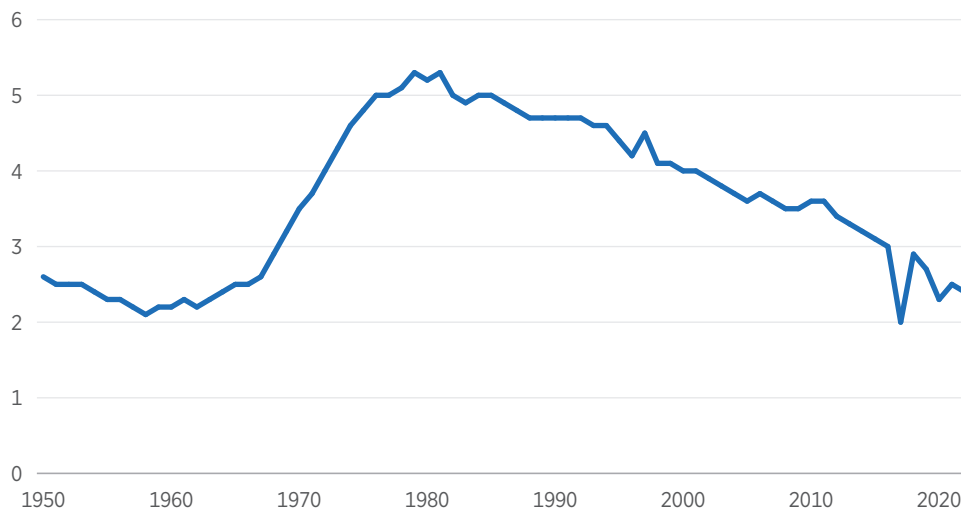



SOURCE: American Community Survey, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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CHART 11

**Divorces per 1,000 Population, 1950–2022****NOTE:** Some figures have been interpolated**SOURCE:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more information, see the appendix.SR310  heritage.org

Overall, the share of divorced adults in the population has increased during the past several decades, with about 40 percent of ever-married women ages 50 to 54 having ever divorced today, compared to 27 percent in 1960.<sup>52</sup> The share of ever-married Americans currently divorced has also increased, from 3 percent in 1962 to about 15 percent as of 2010, and has since leveled off.<sup>53</sup>

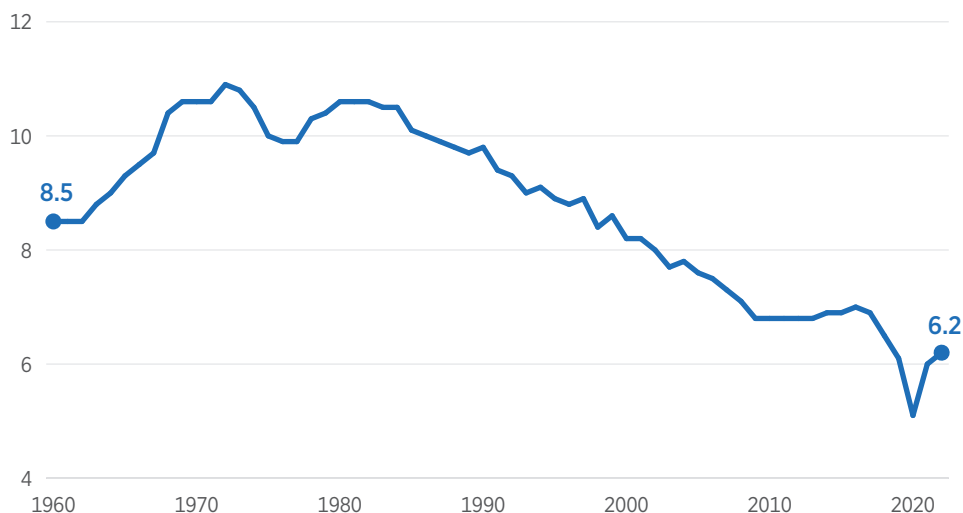
Like other measures of family stability, divorce rates are also higher among minorities, although divorces have declined across racial groups. (See Chart 9.) The divorce rate among black women was about 28 per 1,000 married women in 2022, compared to about 16 per 1,000 among Hispanic women, and 13 per 1,000 among white women.

Divorce rates have also declined across education level but are lowest among college-educated women. The divorce rate among women with less than a high school education is slightly lower than among women with a high school diploma or some college education, though. (See Chart 10.)

While divorce rates have declined, part of the reason is due to declining marriage rates. With fewer married people in the population, fewer people are “eligible” for divorce. The divorce rate per population has declined, dropping from a peak of 5.3 per 1,000 in the early 1980s to 2.4 per 1,000 in 2022. (See Chart 11.)

CHART 12

## Marriages per 1,000 Population, 1960–2022



**SOURCE:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more information, see the appendix.

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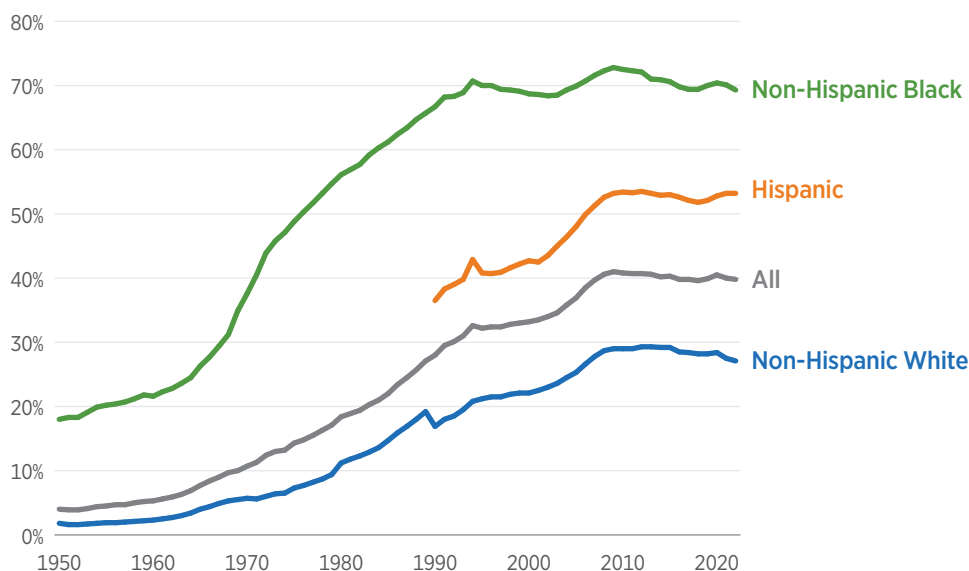
However, the marriage rate per population has also dropped substantially, declining from a high of 10.9 in 1972 to 6.2 in 2022. (See Chart 12.)

People often hear the statistic that half of all U.S. marriages end in divorce. This number was likely based on projections made in the 1980s, when the divorce rate was peaking. It is difficult to project the share of couples who will divorce, as it requires following marriages until they have either ended in divorce or death. Even then, these projections would not apply to current cohorts, as Scott Stanley of the University of Denver explains. He suggests that an estimate of the likelihood of a first marriage ending in divorce may be around 40 percent.<sup>54</sup> Factors associated with a reduced likelihood of divorce include higher educational attainment, not cohabiting before marriage (or at least not before engagement), being actively involved in a religious community, and having children only after marriage.<sup>55</sup> The overall divorce rate is higher than 40 percent, though, because the divorce rate among remarriages is higher than it is among first marriages.<sup>56</sup>


Couples are most likely to divorce in the early years of marriage. Thirteen percent of first marriages end in divorce within the first five years of marriage, and within 10 years of marriage nearly a quarter of first marriages end in divorce.<sup>57</sup>

CHART 13

### Share of Births to Unmarried Women Ages 15–44 by Race, 1950–2022



**SOURCES:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, and Vital Statistics Natality Data from the National Bureau of Economic Research. For more information, see the appendix.

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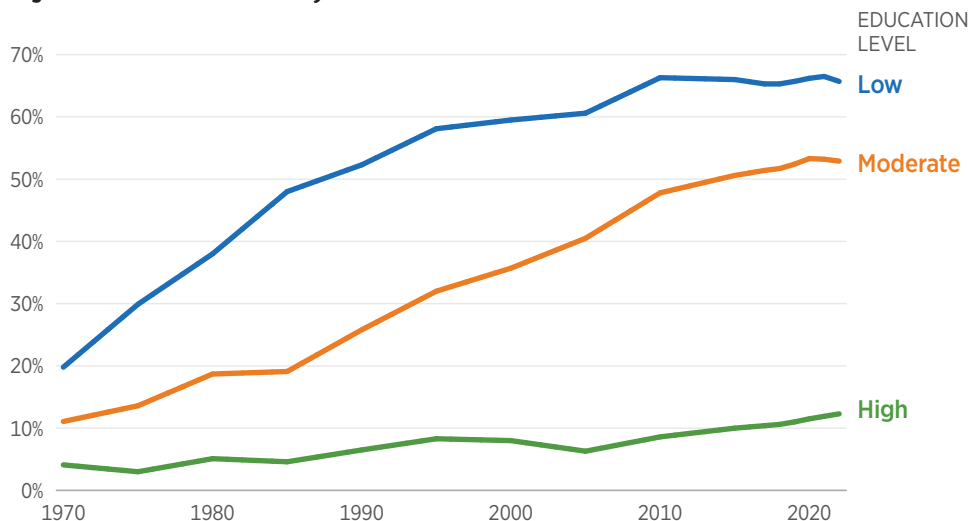
Roughly two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women.<sup>58</sup> The most common reasons people cite for divorce include: lack of commitment, infidelity, high levels of conflict, drinking and drug use, growing apart, and domestic abuse.<sup>59</sup> Paul Amato finds that about half of divorces are to couples who were in low-distress marriages, though, indicating that in many cases of divorce, the challenges couples are facing were not extreme.<sup>60</sup>

## Nonmarital Births

One major consequence of declining marriage is that fewer children are born to married parents. The share of children born to unwed mothers has soared since the early 1960s, jumping from 5 percent in 1960 to 40 percent by 2007 before leveling off. (See Chart 13.)<sup>61</sup> Unwed childbearing is the greatest driver of single-parenthood in America, while in past decades divorce was the main reason children were living in a single-parent household.<sup>62</sup>


CHART 14

## Share of Births Occurring to Unwed Mothers by Education Level, 1970–2022



**NOTES:** Some figures have been interpolated. Highly educated refers to approximately the highest quintile of educational attainment in each year for women ages 15 to 44, based on Current Population Survey data; low education refers to roughly the lowest quintile of educational attainment in that year, with moderate education referring to those in the remaining quintiles. Using these designations allows better comparison across years.

**SOURCE:** Vital Statistics Natality Birth Data, National Bureau of Economic Research. For more information, see the appendix.

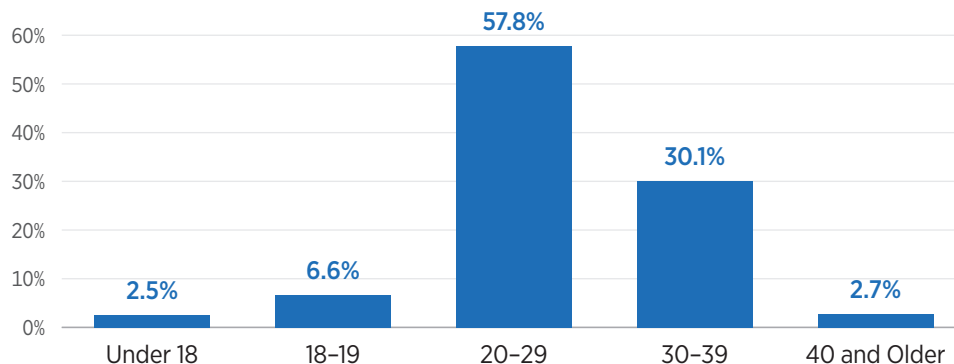
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Rates of unwed childbearing differ greatly by race as well as by a mother's education level. While unwed childbearing is common across all racial groups, 53 percent of Hispanic children and 69 percent of black children are born outside marriage. Twenty-seven percent of white children are born to single mothers. (See Chart 13.)


The differences in unwed childbearing are even larger across education level. Approximately 90 percent of births to highly educated women are within marriage. (See Chart 14.)<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the majority of children born to women without a high level of education are to unwed mothers. Two-thirds of births to mothers with low levels of education are outside marriage, and 53 percent of births to women with moderate levels of education are outside marriage. (See Chart 14.)

**Teen Births.** Teen births are sometimes thought to be the main driver of unwed childbearing in the United States. However, just a small number of unwed births occur to women in their teens, and teen childbearing has declined a great deal during the past three decades. (See Charts 15 and 16.)

CHART 15

**Share of Unwed Births by Age of Mother, 2022**

**SOURCE:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. For more information, see the appendix.

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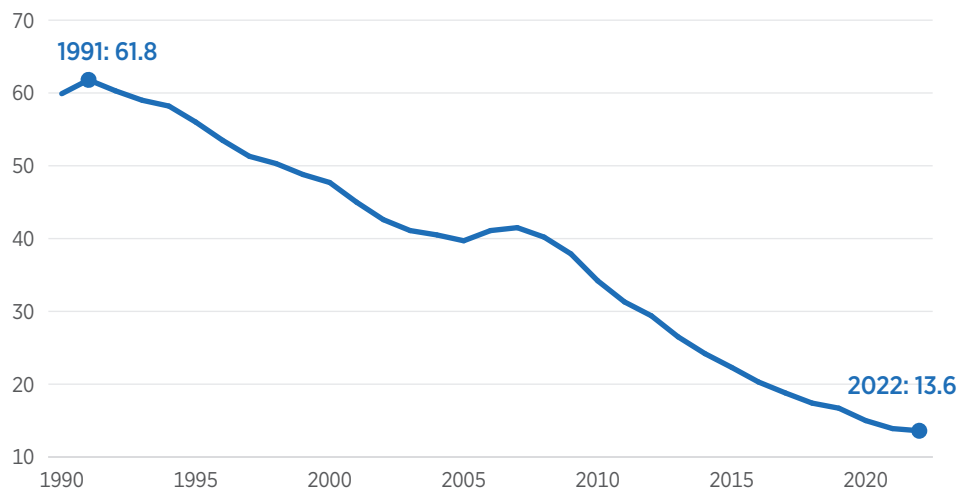
Teen births dropped from 60 births per 1,000 young women in 1990 to 14 births per 1,000 young women in 2022 (Chart 16), a substantial decline. While teen births dropped during that time, unwed childbearing continued to increase and then peaked in the early 2000s. Rather than the increase in unwed childbearing being due to an increase in teen pregnancy, it is due to a decline in marriage among adults.<sup>64</sup>

**Decline in “Shotgun Marriage.”** One trend that has contributed to the increase in nonmarital births over the past 60 years is the drop in post-conception marriages, or “shotgun marriages,” that occur after a couple becomes pregnant but before the child’s birth.

Nonmarital sexual activity was far less culturally acceptable in previous generations. If an unmarried woman became pregnant, there was a strong social expectation that the father would marry the mother of his child. According to research from the U.S. Joint Economic Committee, the shotgun marriage rate was 43 percent in the early 1960s, meaning that 43 percent of births that began from non-marital pregnancies occurred to women who married shortly before the birth took place. By the early 2000s, the shotgun marriage rate had dropped all the way to 9 percent.<sup>65</sup> The shotgun marriage rate was even higher among young, first-time mothers. In the early 1960s, the shotgun marriage rate was 60 percent among women younger than 30 who were giving birth for the first time, and it had fallen to 11 percent by the early 2000s.<sup>66</sup>

CHART 16

## Births per 1,000 Women Ages 15–19, 1990–2022



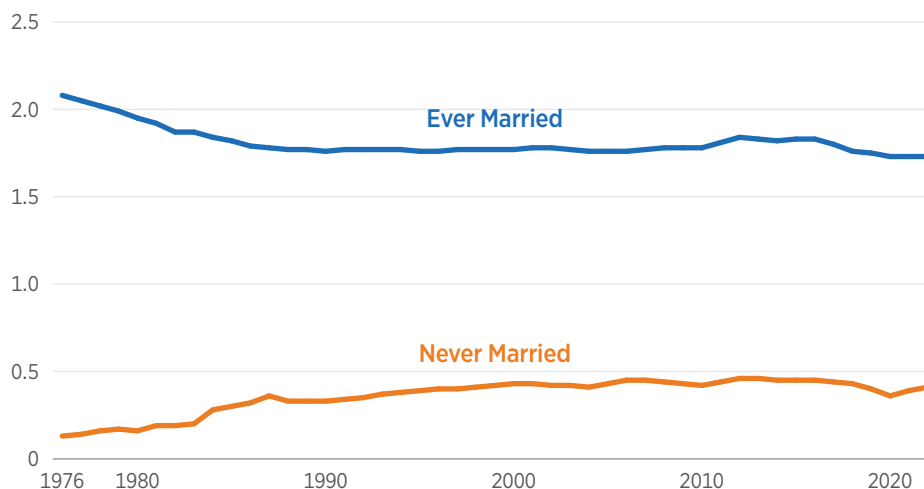
**SOURCE:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. For more information, see the appendix.

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According to this same report, if the rate of shotgun marriage had remained the same today as it was in the early 1960s, the share of children born outside marriage would be 27 percent, rather than approximately 40 percent. Instead of the unwed birth rate among first-time mothers under age 30 being nearly 60 percent, it would be around 25 percent.<sup>67</sup> Researchers find that post-conception marriages (shotgun marriages) are associated with better parenting quality, as well as with better educational outcomes for some children than had the mother remained unmarried.<sup>68</sup>


**Multiple Partner Fertility.** The increase in nonmarital births, coupled with a decrease in marriage and the growth in cohabitation, has led to more people having children with multiple partners, referred to as “multi-partner fertility.” According to a 2021 U.S. Census Bureau report, 18 percent of American parents have a child with more than one partner.<sup>69</sup> About one in four parents that have more than two children have multi-partner fertility.<sup>70</sup> The prevalence of multi-partner fertility is significantly higher in cohabitating relationships where couples share children. Forty-six percent of cohabiting couples in childbearing unions include at least one partner with multi-partner fertility, compared to 23 percent of married couples.<sup>71</sup>

CHART 17

**Mean Number of Births by Marital Status,  
Women Ages 15–44, 1976–2022**

**NOTE:** Some figures have been interpolated.

**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, Fertility Supplement, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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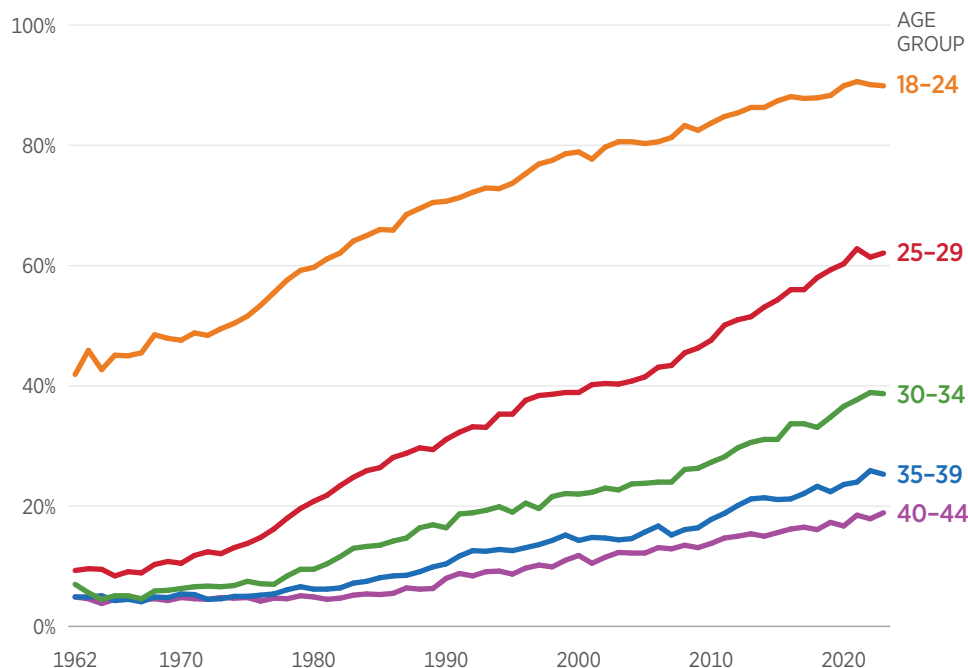
Researchers find that children whose parents have multi-partner fertility are at greater risk for negative outcomes, such as delinquency and behavioral problems.<sup>72</sup> Mothers with multi-partner fertility are also more likely to experience parenting stress and depression than women whose children come from the same father.<sup>73</sup>

## Birth Rates

Another implication of declining marriage is that total fertility has declined. Married women are much more likely to have children compared to women who have never married. (See Chart 17.) The average number of births to married women has remained relatively stable at about 1.8 since 1986, although as of 2022, it is at 1.7. (See Chart 17.)

While the average number of children born to married (and unmarried) women has stayed roughly flat since the mid-1980s, the share of women in their prime childbearing years who have never married has steadily increased. (See Chart 18.)

CHART 18

**Percent of Women Never Married by Age Group, 1962–2023**

**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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The share of ever-married women who have ever given birth has also remained flat since at least the mid-1970s, at about 80 percent, and is far higher than the share of never-married women who have children. Only about 20 percent of never-married women have ever given birth. (See Chart 19.)

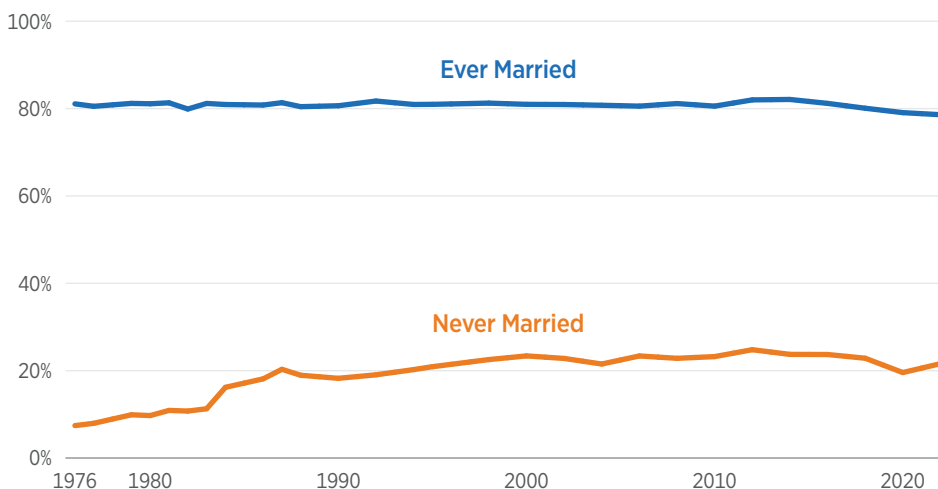
**Births by Age Group.** The largest declines in childbearing have been among younger cohorts. (See Chart 20.) The average number of births to women in their 40s has been relatively flat for roughly the last three decades, with some increase between 2010 and 2018.

**Education and Birth Rates.** Women with high levels of education have a lower average number of children compared to women with lower educational attainment. As of 2022, women at the end of their childbearing years with high education levels had an average of 1.7 children, compared to women with a moderate level of education who had an average of 2.0 children. Women with low education levels had an average of 2.7 children. (See Chart 21.)



CHART 19

### Percent of Women with Any Births by Marital Status, Ages 15–44, 1976–2022

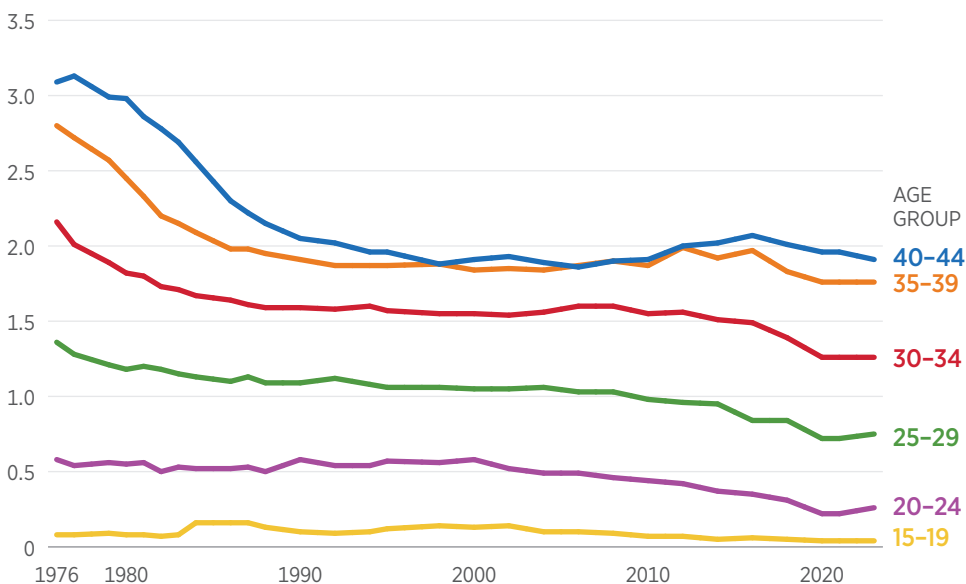


**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, Fertility Supplement, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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CHART 20

### Average Number of Births by Age Group, Both Married and Unmarried Women, 1976–2022

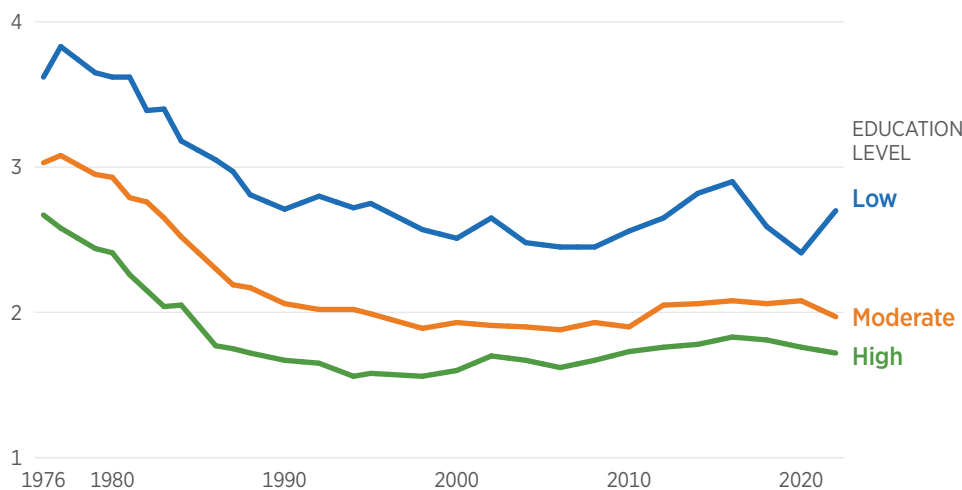


**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, Fertility Supplement, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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CHART 21

## Average Number of Births by Education, Women Ages 40–44, 1976–2022



**NOTES:** Some figures have been interpolated. Highly educated refers to approximately the highest quintile of educational attainment in each year for women ages 40 to 44, based on Current Population Survey data; low education refers to roughly the lowest quintile of educational attainment in that year, with moderate education referring to those in the remaining quintiles. Using these designations allows better comparison across years.

**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, Fertility Supplement, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

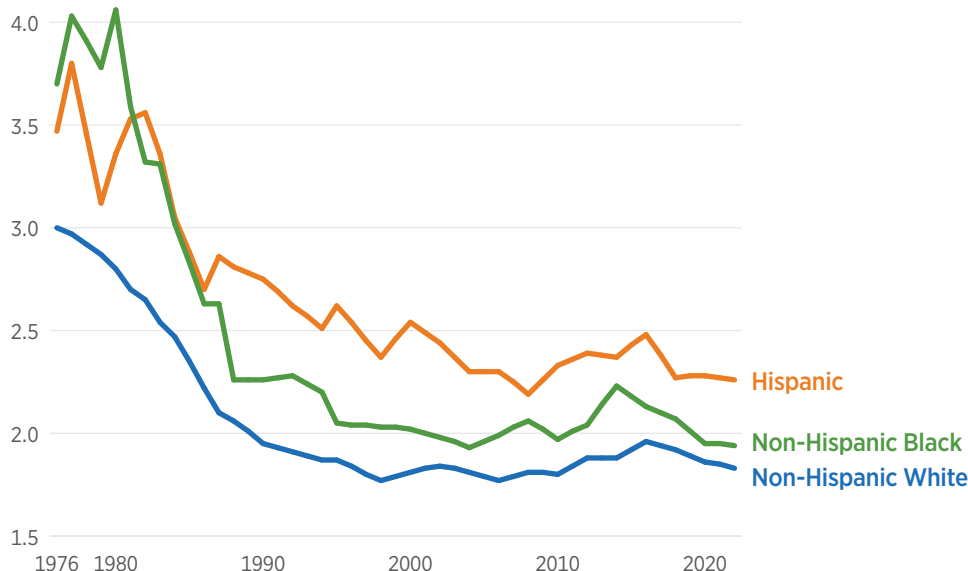
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**Births by Race.** Although births have declined across racial groups, Hispanic women have the highest average number of births, with 2.3 births in 2022 among women between 40 and 44 years of age. Among black women, the average number of births was 1.9 in 2022, and among white women the average number of births was 1.8. (See Chart 22.)


**Total Fertility Rate.** The total fertility rate—the projected number of births a woman is expected to have during her childbearing years—has declined since the 1960s and has nearly always been below the replacement rate since the early 1970s. (See Chart 23.) Beginning in 2008, the fertility rate began taking a particularly noticeable decline. While it was not surprising that the fertility rate would dip during the Great Recession, researchers expected birth rates to recover when the economy improved. Instead, the fertility rate continued to fall and hit its lowest level in 2023.

CHART 22

### Average Number of Births by Race, Women Ages 40–44, 1976–2022



**SOURCE:** Current Population Survey, Fertility Supplement, IPUMS. For more information, see the appendix.

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## Abortion

The expansion of legalized abortion after the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 is another factor that has contributed to changes in family life, including lower birth rates.<sup>74</sup> The rate of abortion increased from 16.3 in 1973 to a peak of 29.3 by 1980. Phillip Levine and fellow researchers estimate that *Roe* led to a 5 percent to 6 percent decline in births among states that had not already legalized abortion prior to *Roe*.<sup>75</sup>

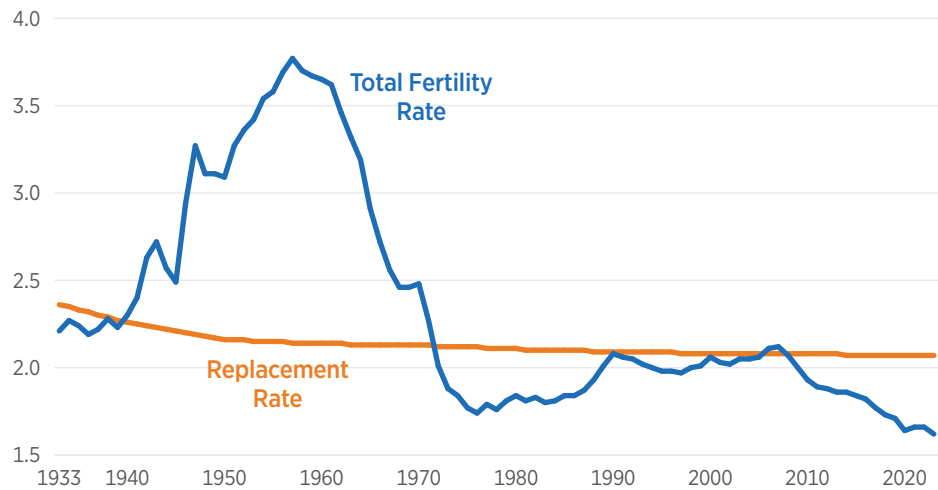
After 1981, the abortion rate began steadily declining and was at 14.4 per 1,000 women in 2020. As for the number of abortions, nearly 745,000 abortions took place in 1973. That number quickly climbed and peaked at 1.6 million in 1990. (See Chart 24.) In 2020, there were more than 930,000 abortions in the United States.<sup>76</sup> Reasons for declining abortion after 1980 vary, but contributing factors likely include the steep decline in teen pregnancies and increased social acceptance of unwed childbearing.<sup>77</sup>

However, analyzing abortion data is challenging for several reasons. The data reported in Chart 24 from the Guttmacher Institute (formerly the

CHART 23

Total Fertility Rate, 1933–2023

PROJECTED BIRTHS PER WOMAN OVER LIFETIME

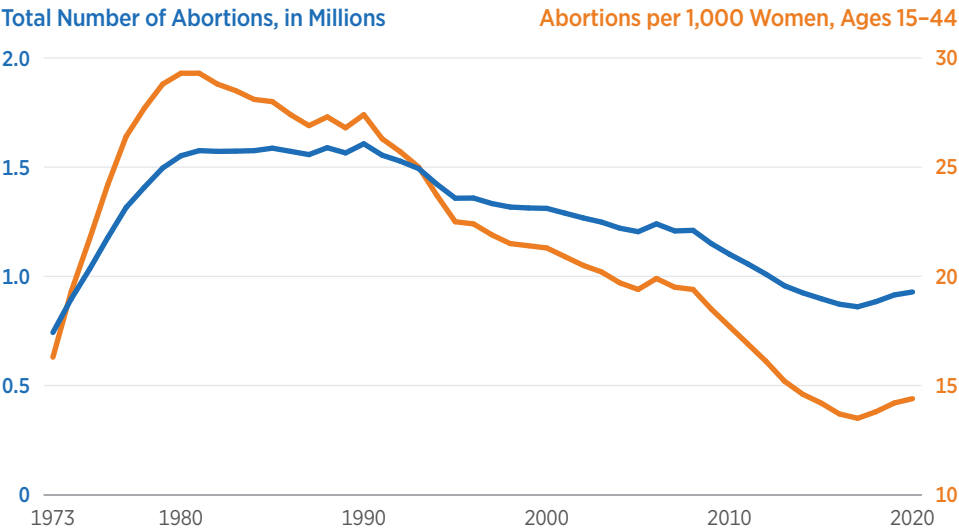


SOURCES: National Bureau of Economic Research, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. For more information, see the appendix.

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CHART 24

Abortions per 1,000 Women and Total Abortions, 1973-2020



SOURCE: Guttmacher Institute. For more information, see the appendix.

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research arm of Planned Parenthood) is collected from abortion providers and clinics and is voluntarily provided. The Centers for Disease Control also collects abortion data from states, but not all states provide data. There are also a rising number of chemical abortions involving pills taken at home that are not counted in survey data.<sup>78</sup>

As a result of the Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022 (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*), states are no longer constrained by the restrictions of *Roe* and its companion case *Doe v. Bolton*, which for nearly five decades prohibited states from placing restrictions on abortion at any stage of pregnancy. More than a dozen states have enacted robust protections for unborn children since June 2022, and states that have done so have seen substantially fewer abortions on average each month since then, according to data from the Society of Family Planning.<sup>79</sup> However, states that did not place restrictions on abortion saw large increases in monthly average abortion numbers in the year following *Dobbs*.<sup>80</sup> Overall, in the year after *Dobbs* (July 2022 through June 2023), the average monthly number of abortions went up by 183 abortions (from an average of 82,115 abortions in April and May of 2022, to a monthly average of 82,298 for the months of July 2022 through June 2023).<sup>81</sup>

The increase in abortions may be due to some states ramping up their abortion services after *Dobbs*, as well as due to abortion proponents in both government and the private sector putting more funding and resources towards abortion access (such as governors declaring their state a sanctuary state for abortion seekers and companies providing funding and paid leave for abortions). Online requests for abortion pills have also jumped since the Supreme Court decision.<sup>82</sup>

One of the most likely characteristics of a woman who gets an abortion is that she is unmarried. In fact, 86 percent of women who receive abortions are unwed.<sup>83</sup> This is an increase from 72 percent in 1974.<sup>84</sup> While unmarried women have always made up the majority of those who receive an abortion, as marriage rates have declined, unmarried women have comprised an increasing share of women receiving abortions.

Younger women are also more likely to receive abortions compared to women in their 30s and 40s, with roughly three-fourths of abortions occurring to women under the age of 30. Women who receive abortions are also more likely to have low income, and most women who get an abortion already have at least one child.<sup>85</sup>

**Reasons for Abortion.** There is limited research on why women receive abortions, but what does exist indicates that abortions are nearly always for reasons that do not involve health problems of either the mother or child

nor are they sought because the pregnancy was a result of rape or incest. In a 2004 study by the Guttmacher Institute, researchers asked women who had received abortions to select or write in the reasons they chose to get an abortion. Respondents were permitted to provide multiple responses.

The most common reasons participants gave were: “having a baby would dramatically change my life” (74 percent of women); “can’t afford a baby now” (73 percent); “don’t want to be a single mother or having relationship problems” (48 percent); “have completed my childbearing” (38 percent); and “not ready for a/another child” (32 percent). Thirteen percent reported “possible problems affecting the health of the fetus”; 12 percent reported “physical problem with my health”; and fewer than 1.5 percent said it was a pregnancy that resulted from rape or incest.<sup>86</sup>

In the same study participants were also asked what their most important reason for receiving an abortion was. The most likely answer was “not ready for a(nother) child/timing is wrong” (25 percent); followed by “can’t afford a baby now” (23 percent); and “have completed my childbearing/have other people depending on me/children are grown” (19 percent). Fewer than 10 percent of survey respondents said the most important reason for the abortion was either: their own physical health problems (4 percent), possible problems affecting the health of the fetus (3 percent), or because they were a victim of rape (less than 0.5 percent).<sup>87</sup>

More recent state data from Florida similarly shows that reasons for abortion are usually not due to serious health problems or due to rape or incest. In 2024, of all elective abortions in Florida, just 1 percent were among pregnancies that resulted from rape or incest, in which the mother had a life-endangering physical condition, or the baby had a fatal fetal abnormality.<sup>88</sup>

That it is often young, single women with few resources who receive abortions indicates once again the importance of marriage for family life and child flourishing. If women in lower-income communities were marrying at higher rates, it is likely that fewer would opt for abortion. A healthy, stable marriage provides women with support to bring a child into the world. Marriage also protects households against poverty by connecting the father and his resources to the mother and child.

## **Observations, Analysis, and Policy Considerations**

There is no longer one common family prototype in the United States. The decades-long social experiment of decoupling marriage from parenting has resulted in a complex web of relationships and family formation patterns

that include long periods of cohabitation, high rates of nonmarital births, and multi-partner fertility in many communities. Americans are waiting longer to get married or not marrying at all and are having fewer children.

Some cheer the changes in family life, claiming that these shifts provide greater freedom to adults and thus increase the opportunity for people to find personal fulfillment and happiness. However, changes in family life do not seem to have increased adult happiness, to say nothing of the impact that family instability has had on children. Overall marital satisfaction has declined during the past five decades among both men and women.<sup>89</sup> And single adults report high levels of dissatisfaction with dating. Half of single Americans say it is harder to meet someone today than it was 10 years ago.<sup>90</sup> One Pew survey found that 67 percent of respondents said their dating lives are not going well, and 75 percent said it was hard to find people to date within the past year.<sup>91</sup> This “connection conundrum” exists despite the ubiquity of technology and the widespread use of dating apps, which would presumably expand the pool of potential dating opportunities.<sup>92</sup>

Americans today are more often spending time in less committed relationships like cohabitation, which sets a weak foundation for marital success. The share of American adults ages 18 to 44 who have ever cohabited (59 percent) is higher than the percentage who have ever married (46 percent).<sup>93</sup> Cohabitation has proven to be a fraught relationship arrangement, yet most Americans seem to be unaware of its pitfalls. The weakening of marriage has created a far more unstable society for children, where 40 percent are born outside marriage and the majority spend some portion of their lives in a non-intact family.

**Economic Divide.** It is also most commonly the least advantaged Americans who experience family instability in the United States. While family life has changed for all Americans, it is among those with less than a college education that family breakdown has been most prevalent. Family breakdown is a substantial driver of poverty in the United States and reduces the likelihood of upward mobility.<sup>94</sup>

While college-educated Americans often cohabit before marriage, their relationships more often transition to marriage.<sup>95</sup> They rarely have children before marrying, and if a child is conceived outside wedlock, they are much more likely to wed before the child’s birth than their peers with less education. College-educated Americans are also less likely to divorce. While the shifts in ideology surrounding the family have been spearheaded by those with high levels of education, it is the highly educated who are least likely to follow a non-traditional family path. Instead, those with access to fewer resources are experiencing most of the fallout from the breakdown of marriage.<sup>96</sup>

The large divide in family instability by education level puts children from vulnerable families at a greater disadvantage than they would otherwise be. Given the strong link between marriage and child well-being, the breakdown of the family should be of great concern to policymakers and others who care about upward mobility.

**Declining Family Size.** The breakdown of marriage is also an important part of the story of declining birth rates. Despite the great increase in unwed childbearing, marriage is still the most likely condition for childbearing to occur. There are many implications of declining birth rates, not the least of which is the thinning of family networks. Declining birth rates mean less of the valuable social capital that family relationships provide.

Fewer people with children means that more elderly adults will be without adult children to provide physical and emotional support as they age.<sup>97</sup> Smaller families also mean fewer siblings and extended family members to provide a source of connection and support to one another throughout life. The sibling relationship is often the longest relationship people have and can be a significant source of support.<sup>98</sup>

While it is not completely clear why birth rates have declined so much in recent years, it seems likely due to further cultural shifts among more recent cohorts of adults in which they are placing higher priority on personal autonomy and less emphasis on marriage and children. As the culture has shifted further toward child-free adult priorities, the surrounding community caters decreasingly to parents and children, reducing support for parents and further reinforcing the norm of small families. Increased costs and financial concerns are a common hypothesis for why birth rates have declined, but declining births may be less about actual increases in the costs of raising children and more about higher opportunity costs and ever-increasing expectations for parenting.<sup>99</sup>

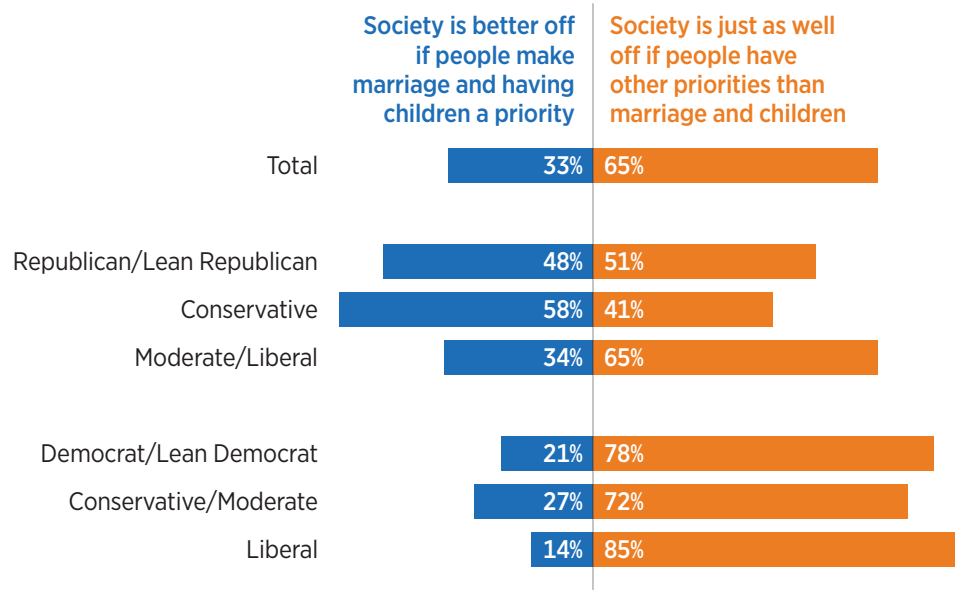
**Perceptions About the Value of Marriage and Family.** While many Americans still desire to be married, and the majority of Americans have married or will marry, fewer are doing so, and many Americans fail to see the importance of marriage and the family for the well-being of society. Marriage and family are commonly considered to be just one lifestyle choice among many, merely a personal relationship rather than part of the social contract.

In a Pew Research Center survey from 2019, 65 percent of respondents said society is just as well off if people have other priorities than marriage and children.<sup>100</sup> This was up from 60 percent just three years prior.<sup>101</sup> Although there were some differences on the survey by political party and ideology, with Republicans and conservatives more likely to believe that



CHART 25

## Perceptions on Importance of Marriage and Children by Political Ideology



**NOTE:** Figures have been rounded.

**SOURCE:** Pew Research Center. For more information, see the appendix.

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marriage and family life are superior priorities to other life goals, most Americans agreed that “society is just as well off if people have other priorities than marriage and children.” A majority of both men and women agreed with this statement as well, with a slightly higher share of women (70 percent) agreeing than men (63 percent).<sup>102</sup>

**Gender Roles.** Families have also experienced changes in norms surrounding gender roles in paid work and family life. Changes over the years in work and family life reflect some positive shifts, such as increased educational and career opportunities for women, as well as increased engagement of fathers with their children. However, these changes have also presented significant challenges. Family life has had to compete more with work outside the home, creating greater complexity in managing the demands of home life with the demands of the workplace.

Overall, in 1967, only 33 percent of two-parent families were dual-earner families, with the father typically being the breadwinner. As of 2022, 65 percent of two-parent families were dual earners.<sup>103</sup> Close to 30 percent of couples make roughly the same earnings today, nearly triple the share of

couples from 50 years ago.<sup>104</sup> And the share of women who are the primary or sole breadwinner today is 16 percent, up from 5 percent in 1972.<sup>105</sup>

Much of the increase in dual-earner families reflects the preferences of women wanting to engage in the paid labor force. However, many mothers are working more hours than they would like, and mothers consistently prefer part-time employment or no employment over full-time employment.<sup>106</sup> Men and women still both agree that men feel the stronger obligation to be the breadwinners for their families.<sup>107</sup>

Men today play a larger role in childrearing and domestic life than men in previous generations. Between 2016 and 2019, two-thirds of fathers used leave in the 12 weeks after the birth of their first child.<sup>108</sup> This was a dramatic increase from the late 1990s, when only 33 percent of men took leave, or the late 1970s when only 14 percent of new fathers did so.<sup>109</sup> Men have also increased the amount of time they spend caring for their children.<sup>110</sup>

Still, women continue to spend more hours on housework and childcare today than men. This is partly because women are less likely to be the primary breadwinner and thus spend more time in the home. In households where both parents work full time, household responsibilities are shared more equally, although in some cases mothers are still more likely to take on a larger share of household responsibilities.<sup>111</sup>

Juggling all the demands of work and family presents challenges. Working mothers say it is harder to find work-family balance than mothers who are not employed outside the home, and employed parents are more likely to feel like they are more rushed than stay-at-home parents. Overall, both men and women are spending more time on employment and on housework than in generations past.<sup>112</sup>

## The Future of Marriage and the Family Hangs in the Balance

Policymakers who want to create a pro-marriage, pro-family, and pro-life culture in America are dealing with changes in social norms and redefinitions of marriage and family that have developed over several decades.

For decades the American family has been undergoing a transformation through an increasing acceptance of the disconnection of sex from marriage and marriage from childbearing. With the loss of norms surrounding sexual relationships and family formation, much of the U.S. population is now ambivalent about marriage's importance. Even those who practice and benefit from a traditional family life are often hesitant to hold it up as the ideal.<sup>113</sup> These realities present a challenge to policymakers who believe that pro-family policy must rest on the foundation of marriage.

One of the most recent changes in how Americans define marriage came with the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision that legalized same-sex unions across the United States. The Respect for Marriage Act of 2022 repealed the Defense of Marriage Act and requires the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage. The redefinition of marriage has broad national support. One Gallup survey found that 71 percent of Americans believe same-sex couples should have the same legal rights as couples in traditional marriages.<sup>114</sup>

Given the evolution of social norms, there is little reason to believe that the federal government's current acknowledgement that a marriage is exclusive to two people is set in stone. The advocates of more "progressive" marriage laws will have a difficult time making a legal or moral basis for future restrictions.

Foreseeing a future where polyamorous marriages are recognized, affirmed, and celebrated does not require a particularly active imagination. Some U.S. cities, such as Sommerville, Massachusetts, have already passed domestic partnership laws that recognize more than two people, extending to those in the group partnership "all the same rights and privileges afforded to those who are married."<sup>115</sup> Polyamorous relationships are also receiving increasing attention in the media. Even the conservative *New York Post* published an article earlier this year titled "Is your relationship ready for polyamory? 6 signs that point to yes." In the same month, liberal magazines published several of their own stories that normalize the practice.<sup>116</sup>

The definition of marriage is inextricably linked to what society believes about families. A jurisdiction that allows three individuals to marry will inevitably have to decide whether polyamorous partners have the right to adopt children. Any change in marriage law moving forward will affect further changes in family law as well.

Changes in marriage and family life extend beyond the legal definition of marriage, of course. There are couples today who are willing to have children or purchase a home together but are unwilling to get married. They want the accoutrements of family life but are uncertain about its importance. For example, close to 70 percent of Americans believe that cohabitation is acceptable even if couples do not have plans to get married, and 59 percent say that cohabiting couples can raise children just as well as married couples.<sup>117</sup>

Some people may assume that cohabitation will become widespread and more stable, like it has in certain parts of Europe. But there is no widespread culture in the U.S. of couples remaining together for a lifetime and raising children together outside a marital union, even after decades of

cohabitation's prevalence here. What is far more likely in America is that cohabiting parents will continue to have unsteady relationships, break up, and start new relationships that also produce children, creating family complexity and upheaval.

And fewer people will be creating families of their own at all. Many adults who are currently childless do not want to or expect they will ever become parents. A 2021 Pew Research Center survey found that 44 percent of childless adults ages 18 to 49 say they are unlikely to ever have children.<sup>118</sup> Close to 60 percent of these respondents said their reason was that they “just don’t want to have children.” Other reasons included medical issues (19 percent), finances (17 percent), no partner (15 percent), and age (10 percent). Some young adults expressed more existential concerns, including “the state of the world” (9 percent) and climate change (5 percent).

In an age where many Americans have given up on the idea of getting married and having children, efforts to create and sustain a family culture in the U.S. will need to include compelling arguments related to the value, desirability, and necessity of marriage. The positive news is that many Americans still want to get married and have children, and the evidence is on the side of marriage and family as the best way to find happiness and fulfillment in life. Helping people to recognize the value and beauty of marriage and family life, as well as helping people to understand how to form and maintain a healthy marriage, will require the creativity and dedication of leaders at many levels.

## Conclusion

For most of human history, marriage was accepted as the lifelong union of one man and one woman, as well as the optimal social arrangement for procreation and the rearing of children. Parenthood was considered the natural and desirable course of life for most everyone. For most of the 20th century, Americans married during young adulthood and most children were born to married parents. This approach to family formation is far less common today.

Men and women are marrying less often and later in life, and fewer become parents. More adults cohabit. More children are born to unmarried parents. More parents have children with multiple partners. The legal definition of marriage has changed. Media outlets frequently describe non-traditional relationships in glowing terms but treat pro-marriage advocates with suspicion.

Embracing every new cultural norm related to individual preferences for sexual relationships may seem like a sign of progress to some, but there is little evidence to suggest this has overall been a positive development for adults or children. There is also little reason to believe that the transformation of family life is complete.

American family life is at a crossroads. One path is marked by delayed marriage, unwed childbearing, low fertility, casual divorce, and abortion, as well as the rejection of biological sex. Boundaries on adult human behavior are seen as oppressive, which means that family formation is primarily about adult desires rather than the needs of children. The other path believes in the importance of marriage to join one man and one woman for one lifetime, treats all life with dignity, and sees the family as a source of personal fulfillment for adults, while simultaneously acknowledging that children do best when raised by their married biological parents.

This is the decision that Americans are faced with as a country. The stakes could not be higher. Americans can continue down the path of deconstruction or choose to build strong families and stable communities. Their choice will determine the future of the nation.

## Endnotes

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5. Juliana Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, November 2019, p. 4, [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/11/PSDT\\_11.06.19\\_marriage\\_cohabitation\\_FULL.final\\_.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/11/PSDT_11.06.19_marriage_cohabitation_FULL.final_.pdf) (accessed July 22, 2024).
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7. Wilcox, *Get Married*, pp. 57–77.
8. Given that the share of adults living with their parents has increased over time, married households in recent years likely include more unmarried adult children than in the past. See Rachel Minkin et al., “Parents, Young Adult Children and the Transition to Adulthood,” Pew Research Center, January 25, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/01/25/key-milestones-for-young-adults-today-versus-30-years-ago/> (accessed January 28, 2025).
9. Note: Other family households include households headed by single fathers, single mothers, as well as households that include people who are related but are not married to one another (such as an adult child living with a parent or siblings living together).
10. U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Households Tables, Table HH-1, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/households.html> (accessed March 27, 2024).
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