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**Pathways to Adulthood  
and Marriage:  
Teenagers' Attitudes,  
Expectations, and  
Relationship Patterns**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**M**arriage patterns in the United States have changed substantially in recent decades. People are marrying later in life than they did 40 years ago and young adults today are spending more time unmarried than earlier generations did. Over this same period, cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing have become increasingly common. These shifts in marriage patterns have sparked considerable interest among researchers and policymakers, as well as some concern about their potential social impact—in particular, their possible adverse effects on the well-being of children.

In this report, we examine some of the potential precursors of these changes in adult marriage patterns. We use data from four large national surveys to examine the experiences and attitudes of teenagers, in order to gain a better understanding of factors that may influence their views of marriage and their relationship choices in adulthood. We focus on teenagers' initial exposure to and experiences with romantic relationships and marriage, as well as their general attitudes toward marriage. We also examine marriage and relationship patterns among a recent cohort of young adults and identify factors in adolescence associated with the likelihood of choosing various relationship pathways in early adulthood.

This information is useful for several reasons. First, trends in teenage attitudes toward marriage can provide an indication of whether current trends in adult marriage patterns are likely to continue. In addition, information on teen romantic relationships is an important indicator of adolescent health and well-being, making this information of interest to a range of policymakers and researchers concerned with the status of teens. Finally, the growing interest in marriage and relationship skills programs that serve adolescents has created a need for improved research evidence concerning teens' romantic relationships and attitudes toward marriage. This information can help program developers design relationship and marriage education programs that are age-appropriate and in tune with the experiences of today's youth. It can also help policymakers and program operators better assess the needs of teens in their communities and choose program models that are most appropriate for the teens they serve.

## RESEARCH METHODS

No single national data set includes all of the information needed to assess teens' early experiences with romantic relationships, their attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage, and their relationship outcomes in young adulthood. Therefore, for this report, we draw on data from four different sources:

- 1. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97).** With a large sample of youth and annual survey waves, the NLSY97 is well suited for an analysis of the experiences and attitudes of teens and young adults. For this analysis, we focus on two waves of the NLSY97. We use data from the 1999 wave to describe the family circumstances and early relationship experiences of a nationally representative cohort of teens who were 15 to 18 years old at the time of the survey. We also use the 2005 wave of the NLSY97 to examine the dating, cohabitation, and marriage patterns of this same cohort of young people when they were young adults between the ages of 21 and 24.
- 2. Monitoring the Future (MTF).** Unfortunately, no data set currently tracks marriage attitudes and expectations for a nationally representative sample of teenagers. However, the MTF study tracks these items for a nationally representative sample of high school seniors. Since the mid-1970s, the MTF study has conducted an annual survey of a nationally representative sample of high school seniors. The survey includes a broad range of questions concerning high school students' attitudes toward marriage, allowing us to track changes in these attitudes over time.
- 3. The 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).** Additional information on teens' attitudes toward marriage comes from the NSFG, a nationally representative survey of members of the non-institutionalized U.S. population between the ages of 15 and 44. For this report, we used data for the subsample of respondents ages 15 to 18.
- 4. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).** The YRBS is a large, ongoing survey of high school students designed to monitor adolescent health risk behaviors. For this report, we used information from the YRBS on trends in sexual activity among high school students.

This report is intended for a broad audience, including the developers and operators of teen relationship skills programs, policymakers, and those with a more general interest in the well-being of adolescents. Most of our analysis is descriptive, with results presented in illustrative tables and figures. In addition to presenting our original research findings, in a few cases, we review evidence from other recent studies of adolescent relationships and attitudes when that helps to complete the picture of what is currently known.

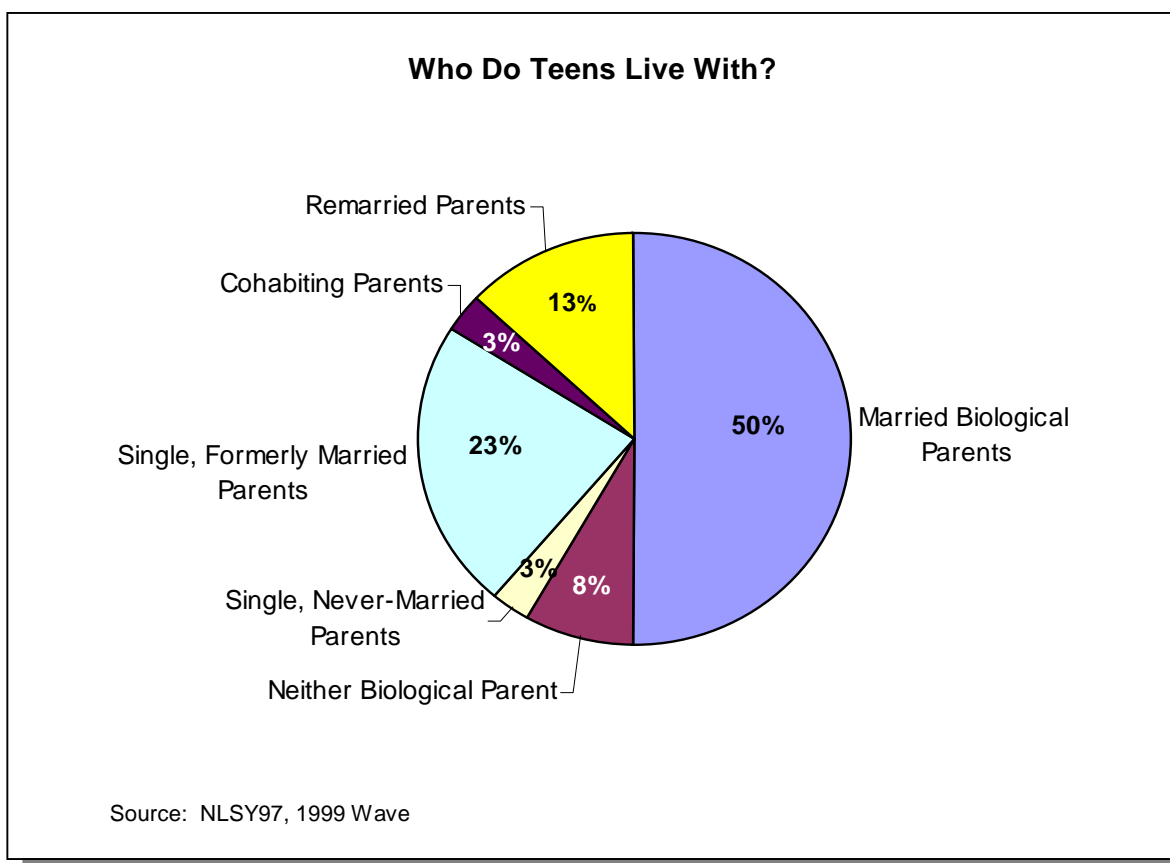
## KEY FINDINGS

### Teens' Experiences with Romantic Relationships and Marriage

- **Almost two-thirds of teens live with married parents and about half live with their married biological parents. Teens generally consider their parents' marriages to be of high quality.**

Teens' expectations of what a romantic relationship should be are undoubtedly influenced by the romantic relationships of their parents. Teens live in a mix of family structures, but most live with married parents. Among the 15- to 18-year olds in our sample, 63 percent lived with married parents—50 percent with both their biological parents and 13 percent with a parent who had remarried (Figure 1). About one in four lived with a single parent. Fewer than 1 in 10 lived with neither biological parent. African American teens are much less likely to live with two married biological parents than are teens from other racial and ethnic groups. Among the teens in our sample, 24 percent of African American teens lived with both their married biological parents, compared with 55 percent of white teens and 50 percent of Hispanic teens.

**Figure 1 Family Composition of Teens Ages 15 to 18**



Teens may be influenced not only by their parents' relationship status but also by the quality of their parents' relationship. Most teens view their parents' marriage positively. When asked about a range of behaviors, such as compromising, showing affection, and avoiding criticism, almost 60 percent of the teens in our sample rated their parents as usually or always showing these positive behaviors. Only 7 percent gave responses that suggested that they considered their parents to have a low quality or troubled marriage. These patterns were highly consistent across racial, ethnic, and income groups. However, girls tended to view their parents' relationship somewhat more negatively than boys did. In addition, teenagers living with a remarried parent reported that their parents had somewhat lower marital quality than those living with married biological parents.

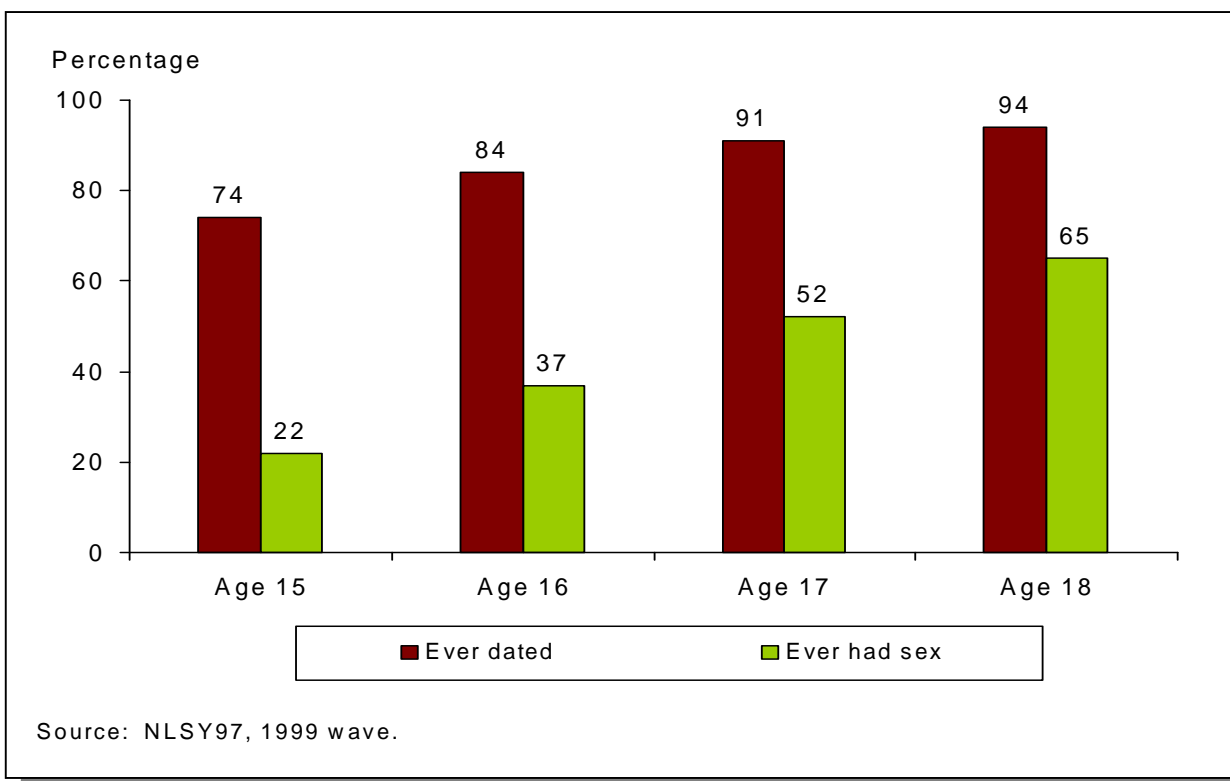
Teens with estranged parents hold less positive views of the quality of their parents' relationship than teens with married parents do. Most teens report that their estranged parents have mixed or unfriendly relations or have no contact with each other. However, these perceptions vary depending on whether the parents were ever married to each other. Teens with divorced parents report that their parents have more contact than teens with estranged, never-married parents do. However, divorced parents are seen as less friendly toward one another than never-married parents are.

- **Almost all teens date at some point; however, teenage dating has become less common in recent years. In addition, teens appear to be delaying sexual activity more than they did 15 years ago.**

Experiences with romantic relationships in adolescence may form important precursors to relationship outcomes in adulthood. Most teens date at some point. Among teens in our NLSY97 sample, 74 percent of 15 year olds reported they had dated (Figure 2). Among 18 year olds, almost all (94 percent) reported having dated. Sexual activity is much less common than dating, but is relatively common among older teens. Among 15 year olds, 22 percent reported having had sexual intercourse. Among 18 year olds, 65 percent reported that they had had sex.

Patterns of teen dating and sexual activity vary across racial and ethnic groups. White teens are somewhat more likely to date than other teens are, whereas African American teens are somewhat less likely. Sexual activity follows a different pattern. Among teens in our sample, 41 percent of whites and 45 percent of Hispanics reported having had sex, compared with 59 percent of African American teens.

The likelihood that high school students date regularly has declined in recent years. The percentage of high school seniors who said they date has dropped from 86 percent in 1990 to 73 percent in 2006. The likelihood of sexual activity also fell somewhat in recent years—although less dramatically than the likelihood of dating. In 1991, 67 percent of 12th graders reported they had ever had sex, compared with 63 percent in 2005. A clearer trend emerges for all teens in high school. In 1991, approximately 54 percent of high school teens reported having had sex, compared with 47 percent in 2005. This larger decline in sexual activity for

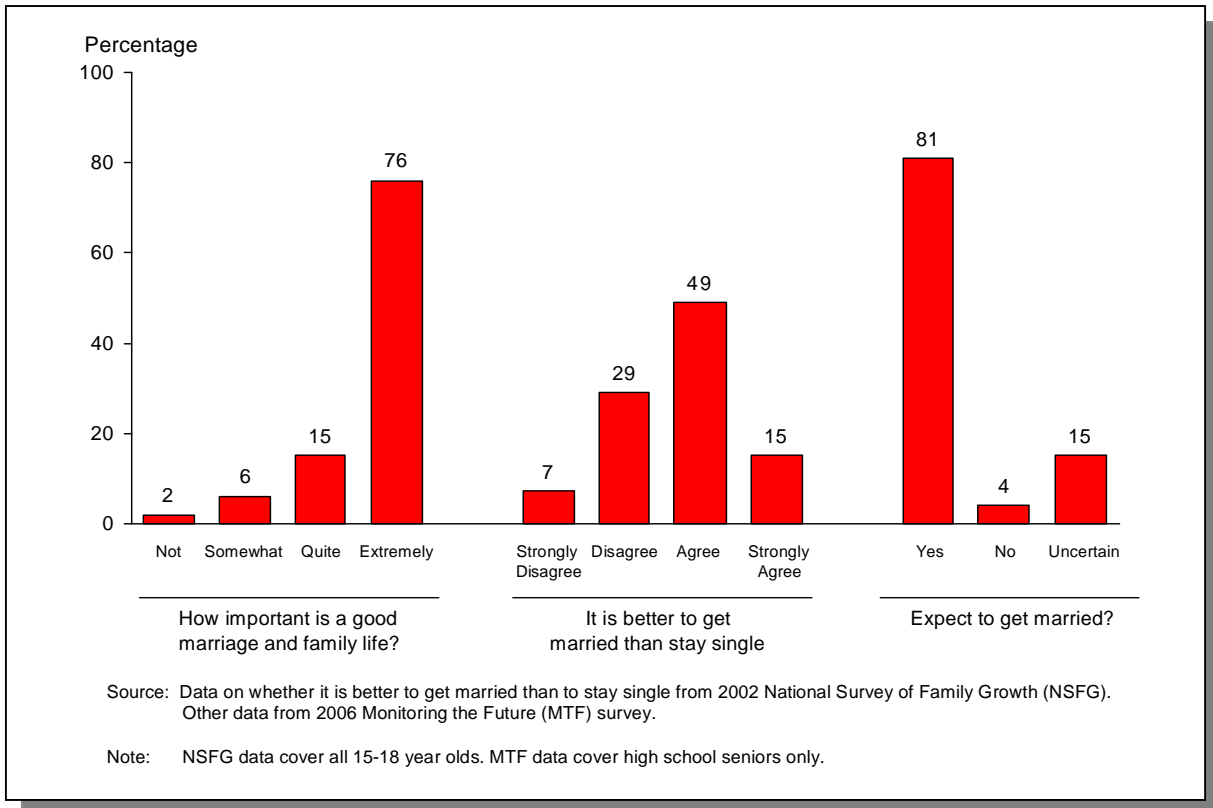
**Figure 2 Teen Dating and Sexual Activity, by Age**

all high school students relative to 12th graders alone suggests that some teens may be delaying sexual activity until later in high school.

### Teen Attitudes and Expectations Concerning Romantic Relationships and Marriage

- **Most teens have positive attitudes toward marriage and expect to get married. In addition, a growing proportion of teens approve of cohabitation before marriage and would prefer to marry later in life.**

High-school-aged teens hold complex and changing attitudes toward marriage. Most express strong general support for marriage (Figure 3). Among high school seniors, 91 percent indicate that having a good marriage and family life is either “quite important” or “extremely important” to them; 81 percent say they expect to marry some day and 72 percent indicate that they feel well prepared for marriage. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of high-school-aged teens agree with the statement, “It is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single.”

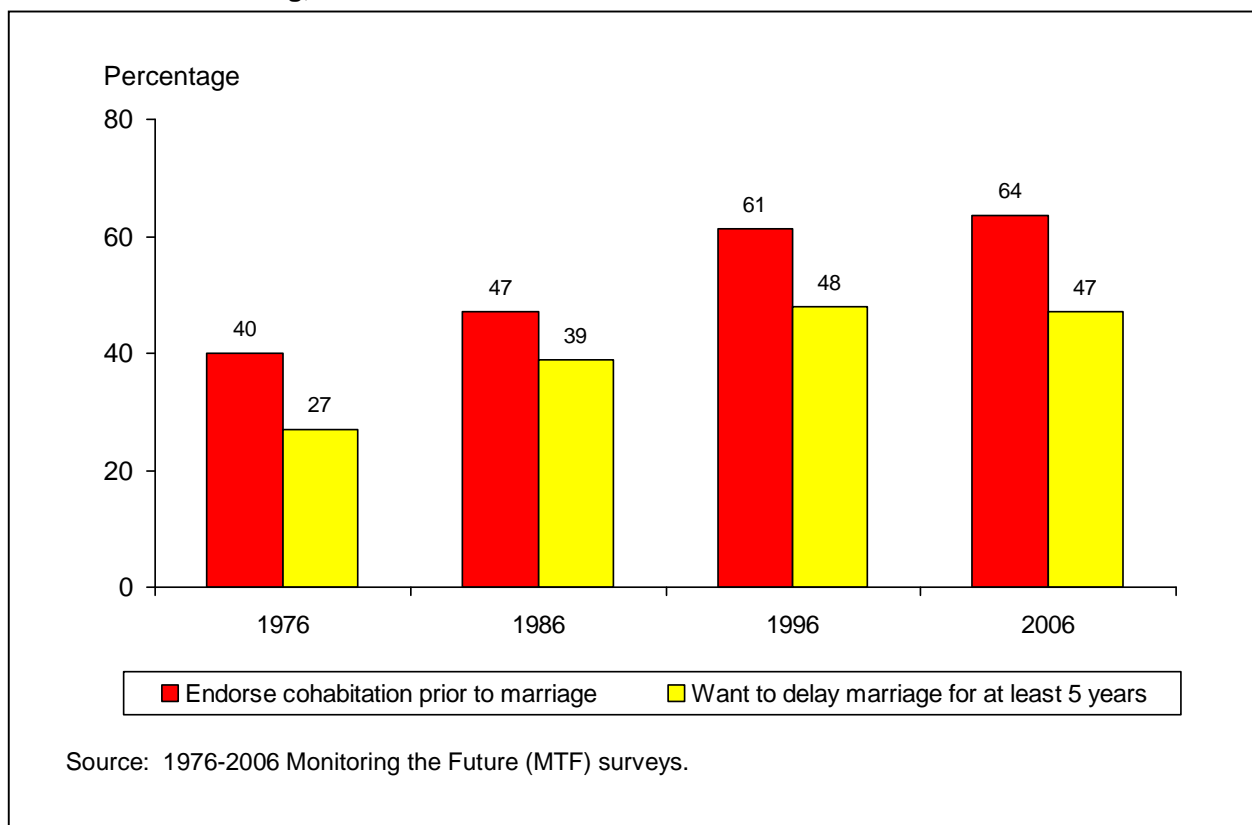
**Figure 3 Teens' Attitudes and Expectations Concerning Marriage**

While support for marriage remains strong among teens, a growing proportion of them approve of cohabitation before marriage. Among high school seniors, the proportion who think it is a good idea for couples to live together before marriage has climbed steadily in recent years, from 40 percent in the mid-1970s to 64 percent in 2006 (Figure 4). Over this same period, the proportion of seniors wanting to delay marriage for at least five years after high school also has increased, from 27 percent in the mid-1970s to 47 percent in 2006.

- **Teenage boys have more positive attitudes toward marriage than teenage girls do; however, they are more likely than girls to want to delay marriage. Teens who live with both biological parents express the strongest support for marriage.**

Across a broad range of measures, teenage boys are more likely than teenage girls to express support for marriage. For example, 69 percent of the teenage boys in our NSFG sample agreed that it is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single, compared with 56 percent of teenage girls. Similarly, more boys than girls disapproved of having children outside of marriage and agreed that people have fuller and happier lives when married. In spite of their more positive views of marriage, however, boys are somewhat more likely than girls to prefer waiting until later in life to marry. In 2006,

**Figure 4 Attitudes of High School Seniors Concerning Cohabitation and Marriage Timing, 1976 – 2006**



85 percent of 12th-grade boys said they wanted to delay marriage for at least four or five years after finishing high school, compared with 79 percent of 12th-grade girls. Although the gender gap in the proportion of teens wanting to delay marriage has persisted, it has narrowed substantially in recent years, as girls’ preferences concerning the timing of marriage have become more similar to those of boys.

Teens’ attitudes toward marriage are also closely linked with their family structure. Teens who are living with both of their biological parents express particularly strong support for marriage. Among these teens, 67 percent agree that it is better to get married than to go through life being single, compared with 59 percent of teens from other family types. Similarly, teens living with both biological parents express stronger disapproval of divorce and nonmarital childbearing than other teens do. By contrast, the level of support for marriage among teens is not strongly associated with their family income level or their racial or ethnic group.

**Typical Relationship Pathways in the Years After High School**

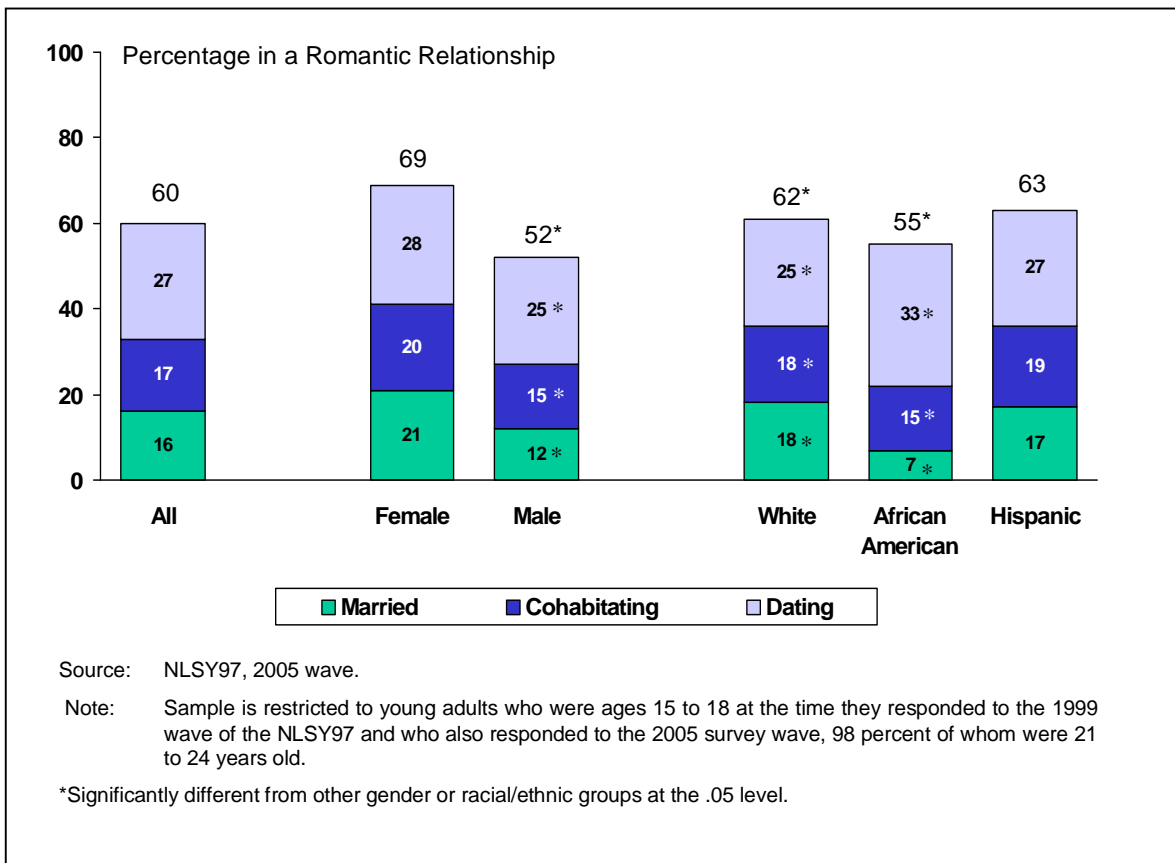
- **Most adults in their early 20s are in a romantic relationship, but relatively few are married. Cohabitation is more common than marriage for this age group.**

By the time they are in their early 20s, most young adults are in a romantic relationship. Among the 21 to 24 year olds in our NLSY97 sample, 60 percent had a romantic partner at the time of the 2005 survey (Figure 5). Marriage is relatively uncommon among these young adults, however. Among this sample, 16 percent were married at the time of the survey, whereas 17 percent were cohabiting and 27 percent were dating. If these young adults follow the patterns of older cohorts, however, it is likely that many will marry in the next few years and their rates of marriage will increase substantially.

Young adults in their early 20s are much more likely to have experienced cohabitation than marriage. Among the young adults in our NLSY97 sample, 39 percent had ever cohabited, while only 18 percent had ever married. Data from other studies suggest that the phenomenon of young adults being more likely to cohabit than to marry may be a fairly recent one, since marriage rates for young adults have declined substantially in recent decades while cohabitation rates have increased.

Young adults in cohabiting relationships tend to rate their relationship quality as high and report relationship quality levels similar to those of young adults who are married. Even so, transitions out of cohabiting relationships are substantially more common than

**Figure 5 Relationship Status of Young Adults Ages 21 to 24**





transitions out of marriage for adults in this age group. About a third of sample members who had ever cohabited were neither cohabiting nor married at the time of the 2005 interview. In contrast, only about 1 in 10 of those who had ever married were no longer married at this point.

- **Women are much more likely than men to marry and cohabit in early adulthood. The likelihood of early marriage and cohabitation is also associated with race/ethnicity and family structure growing up.**

As part of our analysis, we examined the association of various characteristics and behaviors in adolescence with the likelihood of marriage and cohabitation in early adulthood. We used multivariate statistical techniques to determine which of these adolescent characteristics are most strongly associated with the relationship outcomes of young adults. Based on this analysis, we find that gender is one of the strongest predictors. In particular, women are substantially more likely than men to marry and cohabit as young adults, even after adjusting for background differences. Among those in our NLSY97 sample, 20 percent of women had married by the time they were in their early 20s, compared with 12 percent of men (Table 1). Similarly, 45 percent of women had cohabited by their early 20s, compared with 31 percent of young men. This gap reflects the pattern that women typically marry at younger ages than men do and often form romantic relationships with men who are somewhat older than they are.

The likelihood of early marriage and cohabitation is also closely associated with race/ethnicity. Among our NLSY97 sample members, African Americans are less likely than those in other racial and ethnic groups to marry or cohabit in early adulthood, even after adjusting for background differences across these groups. For example, 7 percent of African Americans had married by their early 20s, compared with 21 percent of whites and 19 percent of Hispanics (Table 1). Similarly, 30 percent of African Americans had cohabited by their early 20s, compared with 43 percent of whites and 39 percent of Hispanics.

Family structure growing up is also associated with the likelihood of early marriage and cohabitation. Those who grew up with a single, never-married parent are particularly unlikely to marry as young adults. Among sample members in this group, 9 percent had married by their early 20s, compared with 18 percent for the full sample (Table 1). In contrast, young adults who lived with neither biological parent as teenagers are particularly likely to marry and cohabit. Among sample members in this group, 22 percent had married by their early 20s (compared with 18 percent for all sample members) and 52 percent had cohabited (compared with 39 percent for all sample members).

For other family types, the structure of the family of origin is not strongly linked with the likelihood of marriage in early adulthood. Once we adjust for differences in background characteristics, the likelihood of an early marriage is similar for those who grew up with married biological parents, remarried parents, and divorced or widowed parents who did not remarry. However, growing up with married biological parents is associated with a reduced likelihood of cohabitation in young adulthood. Among those in our sample who lived with

**Table 1 Probability of Marrying or Cohabiting Among Young Adults Ages 21 to 24**

	Percentage with Characteristic	Predicted Probability of:	
		Marrying	Cohabiting
<b>Overall</b>	100	18	39
<b>Demographics</b>			
Gender			
Female	49	20*	45*
<i>Male</i>	51	12	31
Race and Ethnicity			
<i>White</i>	68	21	43
African American	15	7*	30*
Hispanic	13	19	39
<b>Family Background</b>			
Household Composition as a Teen, Lived with:			
<i>Married biological parents</i>	51	16	32
Remarried parents	13	19	46*
Formerly married parent	22	16	41*
Never-married parent	3	9*	34
Neither biological parent	8	22*	52*
Household Income as a Teen			
Below 200% of poverty level	40	19*	40*
<i>At or above 200% of poverty level</i>	60	14	36
<b>Adolescent Behaviors and Expectations</b>			
Dropped Out of High School			
Yes	18	18	50*
<i>No</i>	82	16	35
Dated by Age 16			
Yes	90	17	39*
<i>No</i>	10	16	28
Had Sex by Age 16			
Yes	50	18	47*
<i>No</i>	50	15	32
Perceived Likelihood as a Teen of Marriage Within Five Years			
<i>&lt; 50 percent chance</i>	46	13	33
50 percent chance	26	12	39*
>50 percent chance	28	25*	45*
<b>Sample Size = 5,252</b>			

Source: NLSY97, 1999 and 2005 waves.

Note: The predicted probabilities presented here are based on the results from estimating a set of logit regression models. They represent the likelihood of the outcome in question for a person who has the particular characteristic in the table but who otherwise has the average characteristics of all adults in the sample.

Tests of statistical significance reported here refer to the difference between the predicted probability of adults with the particular characteristic and the predicted probability for those in the reference category in each group. For each characteristic, the reference category is indicated by italics.

\*Differences between the predicted probability for sample members with this characteristic and for those in the italicized reference category statistically significant at the .05 level.

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married biological parents as teenagers, 32 percent had ever cohabited by their early 20s, compared with 46 percent among those who lived with remarried parents as teens and 41 percent of those who lived with a divorced or widowed parent who had not remarried.

- **The likelihood of cohabitation among young adults is associated with certain adolescent risk behaviors; however, the likelihood of early marriage is not.**

The likelihood that young adults cohabit is strongly associated with certain teenage risk behaviors—in particular, dropping out of school and early sexual activity. Among our NLSY97 sample members, 50 percent of those who had dropped out of high school had cohabited by the time they were in their early 20s, compared with only 35 percent of high school graduates (Table 1). Similarly, among those in our sample who had had sex by age 16, 47 percent cohabited as young adults, compared with 32 percent of those who initiated sexual activity at a later point. However, neither dropping out nor early sexual activity is associated with the likelihood of marriage in young adulthood. This likelihood is about the same for dropouts and graduates (18 versus 16 percent). Similarly, the likelihood of early marriage is not significantly different for early and later initiators of sexual activity (18 versus 15 percent).

## CONCLUSION

We find that most teens have positive views of marriage and most expect to marry some day. In addition, a growing proportion of teens indicate that they approve of cohabitation before marriage and would prefer to marry later in life. Consistent with these trends, when we track a recent cohort of teens into early adulthood, we find that relatively few of them are married in their early 20s and that cohabitation is more common than marriage for this age group. These patterns will undoubtedly change as this cohort progresses through adulthood and more of them enter serious romantic relationships and marriage. Future research could examine how the long-term marriage and relationship patterns of today's young adults will differ from previous generations, as well as how attitudes, expectations, and circumstances during adolescence influence relationship patterns in adulthood.



# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

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**M**arriage patterns in the United States have changed substantially in recent decades. People are marrying later in life than they did 40 years ago and young adults today are spending more time unmarried than earlier generations did (Schoen and Standish 2001; Fields 2004). Over this same period, cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing have become increasingly common (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Chandra et al. 2005; Martin et al. 2007). These shifts in marriage patterns have sparked considerable interest among researchers and policymakers, as well as some concern about their potential social impact—in particular, their possible adverse effects on the well-being of children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Amato 2001).

In this report, we examine some of the potential precursors of these changes in adult marriage patterns. In particular, we examine the experiences and attitudes of teenagers, in order to gain a better understanding of factors that may influence their views of marriage and their relationship choices in adulthood. We focus on teenagers' initial exposure to and experiences with romantic relationships and marriage, as well as their general attitudes toward marriage. We also examine marriage and relationship patterns among a recent cohort of young adults and identify factors in adolescence associated with the likelihood of choosing various relationship pathways in early adulthood. Previous research has examined the factors that put teens at risk for early involvement in sexual activity (Kirby 2007). However, there is less evidence concerning teens' attitudes toward marriage and their more general experience with romantic relationships and dating (Crouter and Booth 2006; Florsheim 2003; Karney et al. 2007; Giordano 2003).

The information provided in this report is useful for several reasons. First, trends in teenage attitudes toward marriage can provide an indication of whether current trends in adult marriage patterns are likely to continue. In addition, information on teen romantic relationships is an important indicator of adolescent health and well-being, as national surveys of teens consistently show that issues surrounding romantic relationships and sexual activity are among adolescents' biggest concerns (Kaiser Family Foundation 2003). Finally, the growing interest in marriage and relationship skills programs that serve adolescents has created a need for improved research evidence concerning teens' romantic relationships and attitudes toward marriage (Karney et al. 2007). This information can help program

developers design relationship and marriage education programs that are age-appropriate and in tune with the experiences of today's youth. It can also help policymakers and program operators better assess the needs of teens in their communities and choose program models that are most appropriate for the teens they serve.

This report adds to the research evidence on teens' romantic relationships and attitudes toward marriage. Drawing on data from four large national surveys, the report provides new research evidence on teens' experience with romantic relationships, their attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage, and their relationship outcomes during the transition to young adulthood. The specific questions addressed in the report fall into three broad categories:

- 1. What experiences do teens bring to the issues of romantic relationships and marriage?** What kinds of families do they come from? What is their parents' marital status? How do the teens perceive the quality of their parents' relationships? How common is it for teens to date and how has their dating behavior changed over time? What is the quality of their dating relationships? How does this vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status?
- 2. What are teens' attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage?** What are their attitudes toward marriage, cohabiting, divorce, and single parenthood? How likely do teens think it is that they will marry in the next five to six years? How have these attitudes and expectations changed over time? How do these attitudes and expectations vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status?
- 3. What are the typical relationship pathways of young adults in the years after high school?** What percentage of young adults marry or cohabit by the time they are in their early to mid-20s? How many enter serious, committed relationships by this point? How do the relationship pathways of young adults vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status?

The report is intended for a broad audience, including the developers and operators of teen relationship skills programs, policymakers, and academic researchers. Most of our analysis is descriptive, with results presented in illustrative tables and figures that highlight the main patterns and trends. In addition to presenting new research findings, the report reviews and discusses evidence from other recent studies of adolescent relationships and attitudes.

In the remainder of this chapter, we briefly review prior research evidence concerning adolescent romantic relationships and describe the data sources and methods we use in our analyses. We end the chapter by outlining the remainder of the report.

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## PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TEENS AND MARRIAGE

Previous studies of adolescent development have established that romantic relationships and dating are very common among teens. For example, data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) Children and Young Adult Surveys indicate that more than half of all teens have had some dating experience by the time they are 16 years old and more than 40 percent of those who have ever dated said they were currently “going steady” with someone (Cooksey et al. 2002). Consistent with these statistics, data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) indicate that more than 80 percent of teens experience their first romantic relationship before they turn 18 (Carver et al. 2003). Although many of these relationships end soon after they begin, it is not uncommon for a teen’s closest or most important relationship to last a year or more (Carver et al. 2003).

Mounting evidence suggests that these early experiences with romantic relationships can have long-standing impacts on teens’ relationship behaviors that stretch into adulthood. For example, drawing on data from the Add Health survey, a recent study by Raley et al. (2007) found that the odds of getting married or cohabiting before age 25 are at least 50 percent greater for men and women who were involved in a romantic relationship in their junior or senior year of high school than for those who were not in a high-school relationship, controlling for family background and other personal characteristics. Teens’ relationship experiences have also been tied to a range of other outcomes, including mental health, delinquency, and marital expectations (Crissey 2005; Haynie et al. 2005; Joyner and Udry 2000).

Although most teens have romantic and dating relationships, studies suggest there are substantial differences in teens’ experiences, attitudes, and interests. Next, we summarize the research on differences in romantic relationships across various groups of youth, in particular those defined by gender, race/ethnicity, and income level.

Research on gender differences in teens’ romantic relationships, for example, suggests that boys and girls express similar levels of love and emotional engagement in their romantic relationships but that boys have more trouble navigating relationship issues, such as breaking a date or communicating how they want to be treated (Giordano et al. 2006). There are also gender differences in teens’ attitudes and expectations concerning marriage, with girls somewhat more likely than boys to say they expect to get and stay married (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001).

In terms of racial/ethnic differences, research shows that African American teens are less likely to date or participate in serious romantic relationships than teens from other racial/ethnic groups (Cooksey et al. 2002; Crissey 2005). African American teens are also less likely to say they expect to get married, even controlling for their more limited dating experience (Crissey 2005). Operators of adolescent relationship and marriage education programs have expressed concern that existing relationship skills programs are not always age-appropriate or culturally sensitive for diverse populations (Karney et al. 2007).

Therefore, information on such racial/ethnic differences in teens' experiences and attitudes is especially important for the development of new program models.

There is less evidence concerning possible socio-economic differences in teens' relationships and attitudes. Many studies have documented the unique challenges low-income couples face in forming and sustaining healthy adult marriages, and have noted that rates of marital distress, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing are higher for low-income couples than for similar couples with higher income levels (Amato et al. 2003; Fein 2004; McLanahan 2004). However, few studies have examined whether such socio-economic differences are reflected in teens' attitudes and experiences (Karney et al. 2007). This omission is important, given the recent emphasis on low-income couples in a growing number of relationship skills programs (Dion 2005).

Finally, there is also relatively little evidence on how teens' attitudes and relationship experiences have changed in the last decade. Studies by Schulenberg et al. (1995) and Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) used nationwide data from the Monitoring the Future study to examine changes in teens' attitudes toward marriage and family from the 1970s through the mid-1990s. Both studies found that although teens remain generally supportive of marriage, a growing number want to delay getting married until later in life and most now support the idea of couples living together before marriage. Studies have not examined whether additional changes have occurred since the mid-1990s. Information on changes in teens' attitudes and expectations concerning marriage is important to ensure that adolescent relationship and marriage education programs take account of the common views of today's teen population.

## **DATA, SAMPLES, AND METHODS**

The limited research evidence on adolescent romantic relationships is due in part to a lack of nationally representative data. No single national data set includes all of the information needed to assess teens' early experiences with romantic relationships, their attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage, and their relationship outcomes in young adulthood. Therefore, for this report, we draw on data from four different sources: (1) the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), (2) Monitoring the Future (MTF), (3) the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), and (4) the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). We describe our use of these four data sets below.

**National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997.** With a large sample of young people, the NLSY97 is well suited for an analysis of high-school-aged youth. This survey, which began in 1997 and is conducted every year, follows respondents from their early teenage years into early adulthood. It was designed to be nationally representative of youth born from 1980 to 1984 (ages 12 to 16 in 1996). Further, the sample includes a large number of African American and Hispanic youth, which allows us to examine differences by race and ethnicity.



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For this analysis, we focus on two waves of the NLSY97, one conducted when the respondents were in their teens and another that tracks them into their early 20s. The 1999 survey wave includes a sample of more than 6,600 teens between the ages of 15 and 18<sup>1</sup> and was conducted during the last year in which a large portion of the NLSY97 sample was still high school-aged. In Chapter II, we use the 1999 data to describe the youths' families and their early relationship experiences. In Chapter IV, we use the 2005 wave of the NLSY97 to examine the relationship outcomes of this same cohort of young people when they were young adults between the ages of 20 and 25. In particular, we describe their patterns of dating, cohabitation, and marriage. All of the analyses are weighted to account for the survey sampling design and to reflect the national population in the appropriate year.

**Monitoring the Future.** Unfortunately, no data set currently tracks marriage attitudes and expectations for a nationally representative sample of teenagers. However, the MTF study tracks these items for a nationally representative sample of high school seniors. Since the mid-1970s, the MTF study has conducted an annual survey of 12th graders. Because the survey is conducted annually, the data can be used to track changes in the marriage attitudes and expectations of high school students over the past 30 years. Of course, trends in marriage attitudes among high school students may be different from trends among all teens. This potential difference should be kept in mind when interpreting results that are based on MTF data.<sup>2</sup>

The MTF study is best known for collecting and reporting information on youth substance use and risk behaviors (Bachman et al. 2002). However, the survey also includes a broad range of questions concerning attitudes toward marriage. For example, students are asked whether and when they expect to get married, whether they expect to stay married to the same person for life, whether they support the idea of couples living together before marriage, and whether they view marriage and family as important parts of their lives. We describe these measures in greater detail in Chapter III. The survey also collects data on demographic characteristics, information that can be used to examine how the attitudes and expectations of high school students differ by gender and racial and ethnic background.

Although the MTF study collects data for a large sample of more than 10,000 students per year, only a randomly selected subgroup of students are asked the survey questions concerning their attitudes toward marriage. Therefore, the analyses of MTF data presented in this report are based on smaller samples of about 2,500 students per year. When reporting results separately for different racial/ethnic groups, we pool data for two

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<sup>1</sup> We excluded the small number of sample members younger than age 15 in 1999, so the sample is comparable to data from the National Survey of Family Growth, which does not survey people younger than 15.

<sup>2</sup> Our analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth suggests that dropouts have somewhat less positive views of marriage than do teens who have remained in school. Therefore, the attitudes toward marriage of all teens (including dropouts) are somewhat less positive than the attitudes toward marriage of high school students (the population that can be tracked with MTF data). However, it is unclear how these differences in attitudes between dropouts and enrolled teens would affect trends in attitudes observed in MTF data.

consecutive years to ensure that the sample sizes are large enough to generate precise estimates for each group. All of our analyses are weighted to account for the survey's multistage sampling design.

**National Survey of Family Growth.** Additional information on teens' attitudes toward marriage comes from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, a nationally representative survey of the non-institutionalized U.S. population ages 15 to 44 conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). For this report, we focus on data for the subsample of respondents ages 15 to 18, which includes 900 teenage boys and 909 teenage girls. Data from the NSFG can be used to examine how teens' attitudes toward marriage differ by family background characteristics (such as income status and whether the teen lives with both biological parents), information that is not available in either the NLSY97 or the MTF. The NSFG also uses different measures of attitudes than the MTF, including measures of teens' attitudes toward divorce and nonmarital childbearing. We describe these measures in greater detail in Chapter III. The NSFG oversamples African Americans and Hispanics, which allows us to conduct some of our analyses separately by racial and ethnic subgroups.<sup>3</sup> All of our analyses of the NSFG are weighted to account for the survey's multistage sampling design. We also account for the sampling design when calculating statistical significance tests.

**The Youth Risk Behavior Survey.** The YRBS is a large, long-standing survey of high school students that was designed to monitor adolescent health risk behaviors, such as smoking, alcohol use, and sexual activity. The survey began in 1991 and is conducted every other year on a nationally representative sample of 10,000 to 16,000 9th through 12th grade students enrolled in public and private schools. For our purposes, the YRBS provides information on trends in sexual activity from 1991 to 2005, which we present in Chapter II.<sup>4</sup> As with the MTF study, the YRBS has the limitation of including only teens who are enrolled in high school. It, therefore, does not provide information on trends in sexual activity for all teens, including those who have dropped out of school.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Our NSFG analysis sample includes 356 African Americans and 369 Hispanics. Other subgroups used in our analysis of NSFG data are substantially larger than these subgroups, with the exception of our subgroups based on family income. The sample sizes for these subgroups are 843 for those with family income below 200 percent of poverty, 622 for those with family incomes from 200 percent to 400 percent of poverty, and 344 for those with family incomes more than 400 percent of poverty.

<sup>4</sup> YRBS data from 2007 were not yet available at the time we conducted our analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Teens who have dropped out of school are more likely to be sexually active than are teens who have remained in school. Therefore, the levels of sexual activity based on YRBS data reported in Chapter II would be somewhat higher if high school dropouts could be included. It is unclear, however, how the exclusion of dropouts affects the recent trends in teenage sexual activity observed in YRBS data.

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## OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Chapters II through IV of this report address the three research questions outlined above. Chapter V provides a summary of our main results and discusses possible directions for future research. Chapters II through IV are described in more detail below.

Chapter II examines the family environments in which teens are raised and their early experiences with romantic relationships. We examine the family structure in which teens are living and their perceptions of their parents' relationship. We also describe teens' early forays into romantic and intimate relationships, through dating and sexual activity. The data for this chapter come primarily from the NLSY97.

Chapter III examines teens' attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage, drawing primarily on data from the MTF study and the NSFG. We examine teens' general attitudes toward marriage and cohabitation, and whether these attitudes have changed over time. We also analyze teens' personal expectations of marriage to explore how teens think marriage fits into their own future.

In Chapter IV, we take advantage of the longitudinal component of the NLSY97 to examine teens' relationship outcomes in young adulthood. We follow the sample members into their early 20s, when many have begun to form serious romantic relationships. We analyze various relationship pathways, including marriage, cohabiting, and dating, and the quality of the relationships these young adults form.



## CHAPTER II

# ADOLESCENT EXPERIENCES WITH ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Adolescence is a crucial time for physical and emotional development and may be a pivotal stage in the formation of ideas about intimacy and marriage. Some research suggests that the foundation for healthy, high quality marriage is shaped during adolescence (Karney et al. 2007). Teens' expectations of what a romantic relationship should be are undoubtedly influenced by the romantic relationships of their parents or guardians. Many also begin to explore their own romantic or intimate unions through dating and sexual activity. These experiences, both positive and negative, may form the basis for later attitudes and behaviors.

In this chapter, we examine teens' initial exposure to and experiences with romantic relationships and marriage. We focus first on teens' family characteristics. We examine the family structure in which teens are being raised, which past research has consistently linked with later outcomes, such as marriage, divorce, and nonmarital births (Teachman 2002; Thornton 1991; Wu and Martinson 1993). Teens' attitudes and expectations may be influenced not only by the structure of their families, but also by the quality of their parents' relationship (compare Buehler et al. 2007). For this reason, we also examine teens' perceptions of the quality of their parents' relationship with each other.

Next, we discuss teens' early romantic relationships. These relationships may lay the groundwork for later unions, as teens develop their identities as romantic partners and decide what they want from these and future relationships. Past work has typically focused relatively little on youths' relationships and has instead primarily focused on their sexual activity (Karney et al. 2007). We examine both, since research has shown both are related to short- and long-term outcomes including academic achievement, mental health, and marriage (Giordano et al. 2008; Joyner and Udry 2000; Raley et al. 2007). We analyze teens' reports of whether they have dated or had sexual intercourse and how the prevalence of these behaviors have changed over the past few decades. In all analyses, we highlight any substantial differences between groups based on race/ethnicity, gender, income, and geographic location.

For these analyses, we rely primarily on data from the NLSY97, which provides detailed information on family composition and some aspects of teens' romantic relationships. In

Chapter IV, we also will use data from the NLSY97 to track youth over time, examining how these early experiences relate to later relationships. In this chapter, we supplement the NLSY97 analyses with results from other data sources that offer complementary information on teens' relationships. The use of sources other than the NLSY97 is noted in text and tables.

### **WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL FAMILY STRUCTURES OF TEENS?**

The family is the first environment in which youth experience adult relationships. Family composition and adult behaviors—such as the presence of one or both parents and the quality and stability of their relationships—have long-lasting consequences for youth. Past research has consistently shown, for example, that children whose parents divorce are more likely to divorce themselves (Amato 1996; Teachman 2002). Similarly, women born to unmarried mothers are more likely to have a nonmarital birth (Maynard 1996). Many factors related to family composition, such as income, parenting practices, and stress, could increase the likelihood that teens will have some of the same outcomes as their parents. In addition, the family structure in which children are raised is most familiar, and thus may seem a natural or normal choice when they later form their own families. In this section, we describe the family composition of teens, highlighting relevant differences by gender, race, ethnicity, and income group.

- **Overall, half of teens live with their married, biological parents. African Americans, low-income youth, and girls are less likely to live with both biological parents; Midwestern and rural teens are more likely.**

Teenagers live in a mix of family structures. Among the 15- to 18-year-olds in our sample, 63 percent lived with two married parents—50 percent with married biological parents and 13 percent with remarried parents (Table II.1). About one in four lived with a single parent. According to the teens, most of these single-parent families were headed by divorced, separated, or widowed parents who had not remarried. Less than 10 percent of teens lived with neither biological parent.

African American teens are much less likely to live with two married biological parents than teens from other racial and ethnic groups. For example, among the teens in our sample, 24 percent of African American teens lived with married biological parents, compared with 55 percent of white teens and 50 percent of Hispanic teens. For African American youth, the most common family arrangement was living with a single parent, with 43 percent reporting this family structure.

The likelihood of living with married biological parents is linked not only with race and ethnicity, but also with income. Among teens who reported family incomes more than two

**Table II.1 Family Composition of Teens Ages 15 to 18 (Percentages)**

	All Teens	White	African American	Hispanic
Two parents				
Married biological parents	50	55*	24*	50
Remarried	13	14*	12	10*
Cohabiting (biological or step)	3	2*	4*	4*
Single parent				
Ever married	23	21*	28*	23
Never married	3	1*	15*	3
No biological parent	8	7*	16*	9

Source: NLSY97, 1999 wave. Results are weighted to be representative of the 1999 United States population ages 15 to 18.

\*Difference between the mean of the specified race/ethnicity and other races/ethnicities significant at the .05 level.

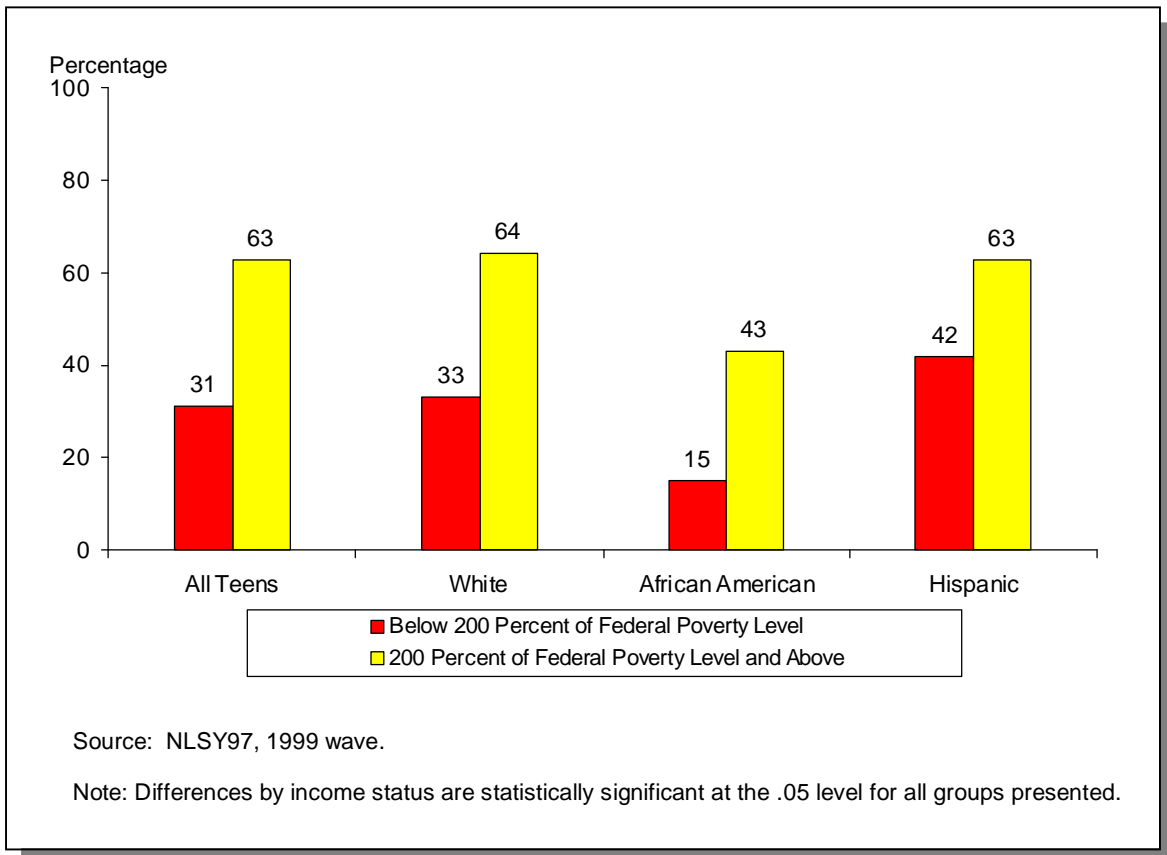
times the federal poverty level, 63 percent lived with their married biological parents (Figure II.1).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the same was true for only 31 percent of lower-income teens. Racial differences remained pronounced even within income groups. For example, 33 percent of low-income white youth lived with married biological parents, compared to 15 percent of African American teens.

The distribution of family structures for teens also varies by geographic location, with those living in the Midwest and in non-urban areas the most likely to live with two married biological parents. Among Midwestern teens, 55 percent lived with their married biological parents, compared with 52 percent of those in the Northeast, 50 percent of those in the West, and 45 percent of those in the South (not shown). Similarly, 55 percent of teens living in rural areas lived with two married biological parents, compared with 48 percent of teens living in more urban areas. These geographic differences are related to racial and ethnic differences in family structure. However, the higher proportion living with married biological parents in the Midwest and in rural areas persists even when we adjust for the racial and ethnic distribution of teens across geographic areas.

Girls are less likely than boys to live with married biological parents. The differences were relatively small (48 percent of girls compared to 52 percent of boys), but statistically

<sup>1</sup> For teens missing information for their household in 1999, we used data from earlier waves. A small number of teens (approximately 200 out of a sample of 6,646) did not have information on household income in waves 1997 through 1999. For these teens, we imputed income status based on race and family structure.

**Figure II.1 Percentage of Teens Ages 15-18 Living with Married Biological Parents, by Low-Income Status and Race/Ethnicity**



significant. Other work corroborates this somewhat unexpected finding. In particular, one recent study found that parents with girls are more likely to be divorced and women with daughters only are more likely to have never married (Dahl and Moretti 2004). The authors asserted that this result reflected a preference for sons among fathers, who reported by more than a two-to-one margin that they would rather have a boy than a girl (Dahl and Moretti 2004). It may also suggest that mothers of boys may be more willing to marry and stay married to the fathers of their children than mothers of girls are, since they may consider the presence of a male role model particularly important for boys.

### **WHAT DO TEENS THINK OF THEIR PARENTS' RELATIONSHIPS?**

The quality of their parents' relationship has important implications for youth. Past work has shown that parents' marital hostility is associated with behavioral and emotional problems in their children (Buehler et al. 2007; Sturge-Apple et al. 2006). Some work suggests that it is worse for children for their parents to remain in a conflict-ridden marriage than for their parents to divorce (Amato et al. 1995; Morrison and Coiro 1999).



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The parents' relationship may also affect teens' views on marriage and relationships and the quality of their later relationships. For example, a recent study found that adolescent girls with more negative perceptions of the level of conflict in their parents' relationship had greater expectations of unhappiness and divorce in their own future marriages (Steinberg et al. 2006). Similarly, parental conflict after a divorce has been linked with less positive attitudes about marriage among adolescents (Peltz and Koerner 2006). In this section, we examine teens' perceptions of their parents' relationship.

- **Most teens with married parents think their parents have a high quality marriage. Girls and those with remarried parents are somewhat less positive about the relationship.**

The 1999 wave of the NLSY97 asked its young respondents to rate their parents' marital relationships with their partners, either the teen's other biological parent or a step-parent.<sup>2</sup> These questions cover several aspects of relationship quality, such as how often the teen's parents or stepparents scream at each other when angry, compromise, and are affectionate with each other. Responses are recorded on a five-point scale, indicating whether these events occur: never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or always. In our analysis, these questions were combined into a single measure of marital quality.<sup>3</sup> We use this composite score to divide relationships into those of low, medium, and high quality. We categorize a relationship as "low quality" if teens' average responses to these questions are consistent with having reported that positive behaviors occur "never" or "rarely." We categorize a relationship as "medium quality" if teens' average responses correspond to reporting that positive behaviors occur "sometimes" and categorize relationships as "high quality" if the teens' average responses correspond to positive behaviors occurring "usually" or "always."

Teens' perceptions of the parental relationship may not be the same as what the parents would say about their own relationship. The teens' perspective, however, is important because it indicates how they are experiencing that relationship. If teens think their parents are always fighting, for example, they are likely to feel stress and turmoil, regardless of whether the parents believe their fighting is frequent. For our analysis, we were particularly interested in the teens' perceptions of their parents' relationship, since these perceptions may shape their attitudes about marriage and influence future choices about forming romantic relationships.

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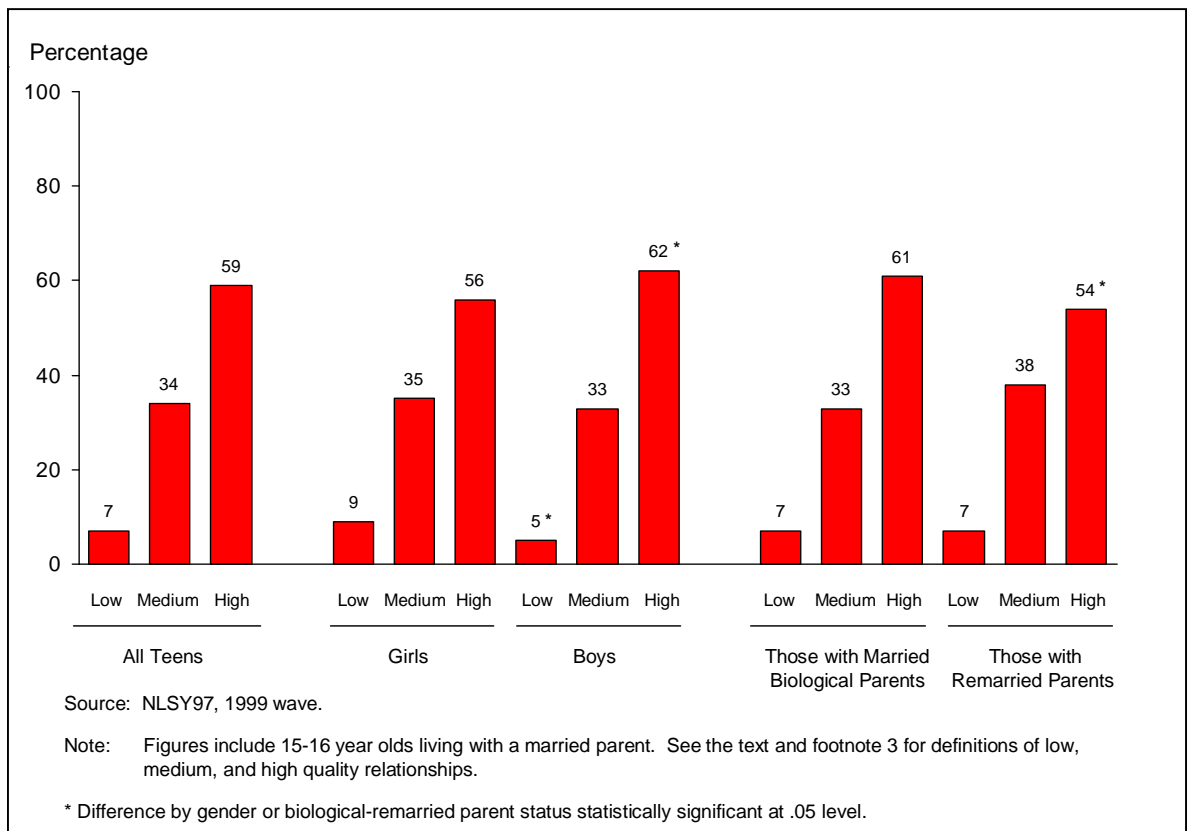
<sup>2</sup> These questions are only available for teens who were 15 or 16 years old at the time of the 1999 survey wave. Therefore, these analyses are restricted to 15 and 16 year olds. To keep the analysis focused on marital relationships, we exclude the small number of teens (3 percent of our sample) living with cohabiting parents.

<sup>3</sup> The NLSY97 included six questions about the mother's behavior toward the father and six questions about the father's behavior toward the mother. The wording of the questions was the same, with the exception of the pronouns (for example, she, he). To create a single measure of parents' behavior towards one another, the responses to these questions were summed and divided by 12. Questions on negative behaviors were reverse-coded before being summed (see NLSY97 Appendix 9 documentation for additional details).

Most teens view their parents' marriage positively. When asked about a range of behaviors, such as compromise, showing affection, and criticism, almost 60 percent of the teens in our sample rated their parents as usually or always showing these positive behaviors and never or rarely showing negative ones (Figure II.2). Another third indicated their parents sometimes showed these behaviors. Only 7 percent gave responses that suggested that they considered their parents to have a low quality or troubled marriage. These patterns were highly consistent across racial, ethnic, and income groups.

Girls, however, tend to view their parents' relationship more negatively than boys. Girls were more likely to view their parents' marriage as low quality (9 percent, compared to 5 percent) and less likely to perceive the relationship as high quality (56 versus 62 percent).<sup>4</sup> These differences may relate to the patterns discussed in the work of Dahl and Moretti (2004), who find that couples who have boys are more likely to get and stay married. Parents of girls may have poorer marital quality or be less committed to their relationship. Alternatively, girls may judge their parents' relationships more harshly than do boys.

**Figure II.2 Teens' Assessment of Their Parents' Marital Quality**



<sup>4</sup> These differences between boys and girls were statistically significant.

Teenagers living with a remarried parent report that their parents have lower marital quality than those living with married biological parents. Among our sample members, teens living with a remarried parent were less likely to rate the marriage as high quality, a difference that was statistically significant. They were not, however, more likely to report that their parents had a low quality marriage. In other words, teens living with a remarried parent did not appear to be more likely to view the marriage as very conflicted or unhealthy. Instead, relative to teens living with both biological parents, teens with remarried parents may be more likely to see their parents as having moderately healthy rather than very healthy relationships.

Why might teenagers with remarried parents report lower marital quality for their parents? As described earlier, the measure of relationship quality analyzed here is based on the teens' report. We might expect teens to judge a stepparent's behavior more harshly than that of a biological parent, and report more negative behaviors or fewer positive ones. It is well established, however, that a remarriage is more likely to end in divorce than a first marriage (Bramlett and Mosher 2002), so the teens' reports also may be capturing real differences in the way the adults interact with each other.

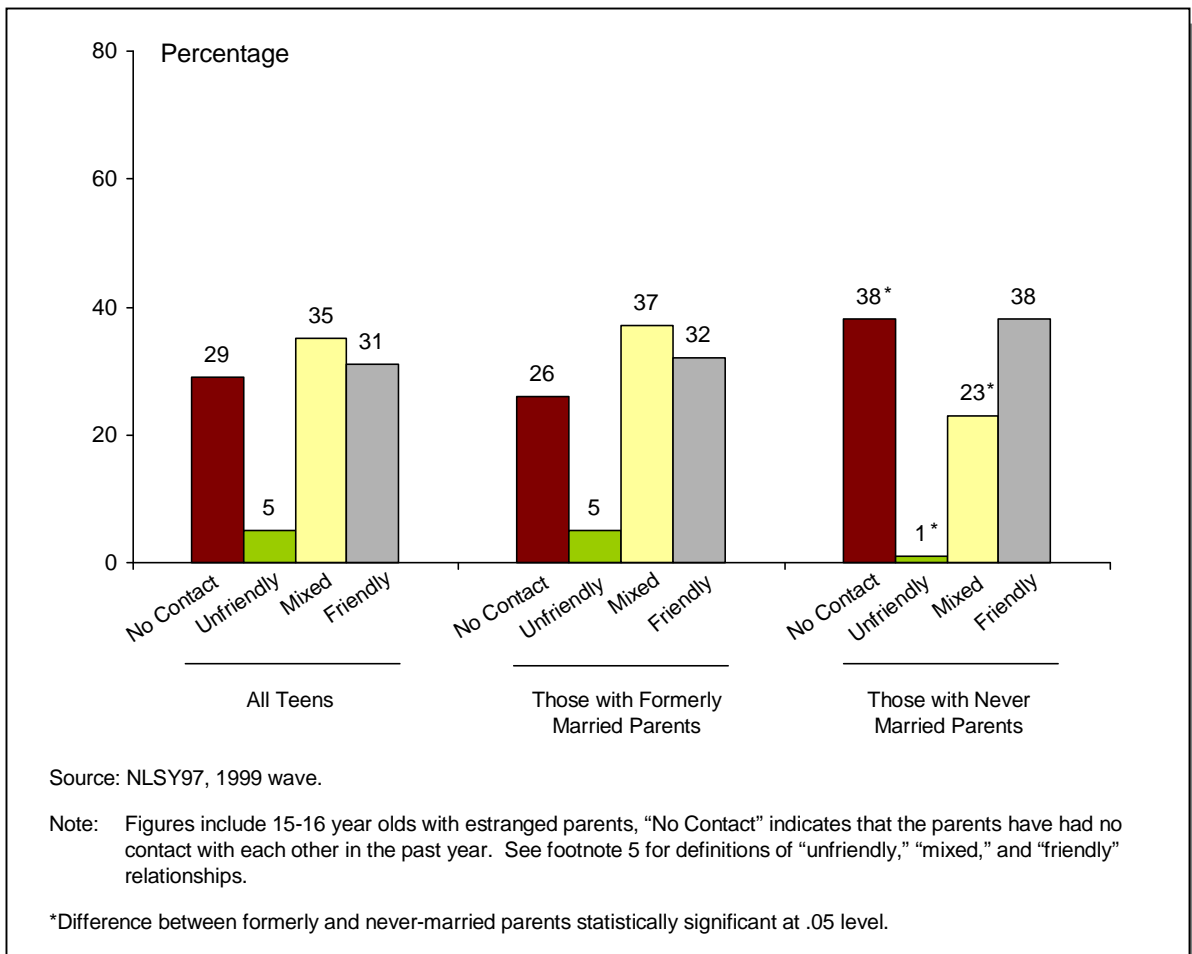
- **Teens with divorced parents report that their parents have more contact than teens with never-married parents do. However, divorced parents are seen as less friendly toward one another than never-married parents are.**

About half the teens in our sample reported that their parents were no longer together. Teens with estranged parents hold a mix of views of their parents' relationship. About 3 in 10 characterized this relationship as friendly, while a similar proportion indicated that their estranged parents had no contact with each other at all (Figure II.3).<sup>5</sup> More than a third described the relationship as being of "mixed" quality, with either neutral or both friendly and unfriendly aspects. Only a small proportion of teens (5 percent) characterized their estranged parents' relationship as unfriendly or hostile (Figure II.3).

Teens with divorced parents and teens with never-married parents who were no longer together viewed their parents' relationship differently. Divorced parents were more likely to be in contact than never-married parents were—with 74 percent of divorced parents having had some contact with each other in the past year, compared with 62 percent of parents who

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<sup>5</sup> This information is only available for sample members who were 15 or 16 years old at the time of the survey. If the teens' biological parents had spoken with each other at least once in the past year, the teens were asked to rate the behaviors of their biological parents on a seven-point scale (from 0='as hostile as you can imagine' to 7='very friendly'). The question was asked separately for their mother's behavior towards their father and their father's behavior towards their mother. For this measure, we analyzed the teens' average response to the two questions (behavior of mother towards father and father towards mother). Teens who said the behavior was hostile to unfriendly were categorized as 'unfriendly'; 'mixed' includes teens who reported mixed or neutral responses; and 'friendly' refers to teens who said their parents were friendly or very friendly to one another.

**Figure II.3 Teens' Assessment of Their Estranged Parents' Relationship Quality**

had never been married.<sup>6</sup> However, teens with divorced parents viewed the quality of their parents' relationship more negatively than those with never-married parents did. Among teens with divorced parents, 42 percent characterized the quality of their parents' relationship as "mixed" or "unfriendly," while 24 percent of teens with never-married parents described their parents' relationship in this way (Figure II.3).

Why would teens view the relationship of their estranged parents more negatively if their parents had been married to each other in the past? Experiencing a divorce may sour the parents' relationship, even years later. Divorce has more legal repercussions and may be a longer and more drawn-out process than breaking a less formal bond, which could increase

<sup>6</sup> The "divorced parent" group represents all formerly married parents with whom sample members reside. We are unable to determine whether divorced parents were ever married to the teen's other biological parent. Therefore, there may be a small proportion in the formerly married category who were not married to the teen's other parent, but instead married and divorced another person.

the animosity between partners. In addition, given the transience of many nonmarital relationships, never-married parents are more likely to have separated from each other early in the teen's life. Therefore, the breakup may be a more distant memory for these teens than for those with divorced parents and thus less of an influence on their current perceptions of their parents' relationship.

In addition, divorced parents may be more likely than never-married parents to remain in contact when their relationship is less friendly. The contact between divorced parents may depend less on how they currently feel toward each other and have more to do with other factors, such as child custody arrangements and other legal ties associated with marriage and divorce, as well as a greater earlier commitment between the parents. Whatever the explanation, teens with divorced parents are more likely than those with never-married ones to have parents who remain in contact with each other, although in many cases on less than friendly terms.

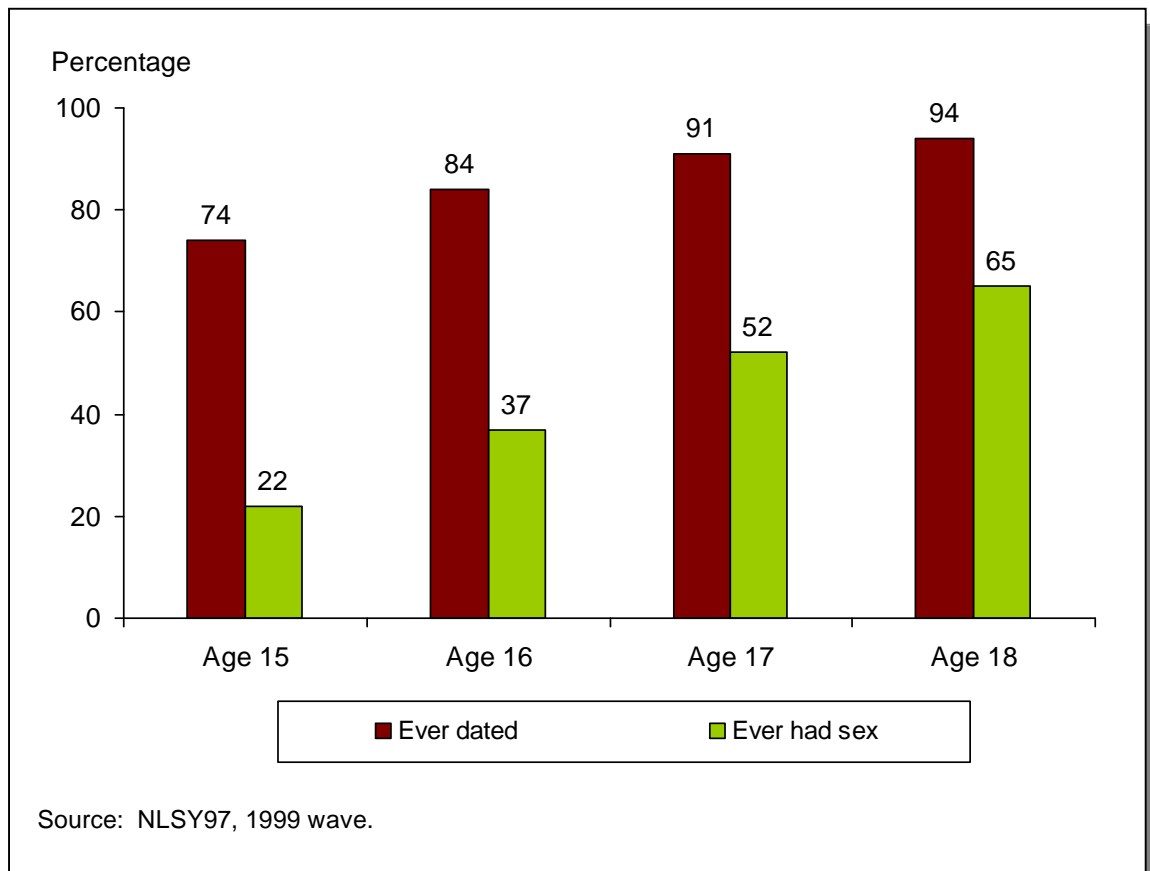
Teens' perceptions of the quality of their estranged parents' relationship are also tied to gender, race/ethnicity, and income. In particular, among teens with estranged parents, African-American, Hispanic, and low-income teens were more likely to report that their parents were no longer in contact. In addition, boys and African American teens were more likely to describe their estranged parents' relationship in positive terms. The finding that teenage boys with estranged parents describe their parent' relationship more positively than teenage girls do is similar to the results reported earlier, in which boys rated their parents' marital relationship more highly than girls did.

## **TEENS' EXPERIENCES WITH INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

Teens' initial experiences with romantic relationships are an important potential influence on their later relationships in adulthood. During adolescence, many will develop a newfound interest in romantic and sexual relationships. More than 80 percent of first romantic relationships are formed by the age of 18 (Carver et al. 2003). These early experiences may set the stage for later relationships. Early relationships may build confidence about interacting with the opposite sex and reinforce interest in coupling. Recent work, for example, suggests that youth who form romantic relationships in high school are more likely to cohabit and marry in early adulthood (Raley et al. 2007). In this section, we examine teens' reports of dating and sexual activity.

- **Almost all teenagers date at some point. More than half of older teens report being sexually active. Most sexually active teens are dating their sexual partners.**

Most teens date at some point during adolescence. Among teens in our sample, roughly three-quarters of 15 year olds reported they had dated (Figure II.4). Among 18 year olds, almost all (95 percent) reported having dated. Girls were less likely than boys to report having dated at younger ages, but reported similar levels of dating at ages 17 and 18. For example, 71 percent of 15-year-old girls reported having dated, compared to 78 percent of

**Figure II.4 Teen Dating and Sexual Activity, by Age**

15-year-old boys. By age 18, 94 percent of girls and 95 percent of boys reported having dated. The proportion of sexually active teens is much smaller than the proportion of teens who have dated. Among 15 year olds in our sample, for example, 74 percent reported having dated, but only 22 percent reported having had sexual intercourse (Figure II.4). Most older teens reported having had sexual intercourse, although the proportion still lagged behind those who had dated. Among 18 year olds, 94 percent had dated and 65 percent had had sex. Unlike dating, girls and boys reported similar levels of having had sex at every age examined.

Of course, teen sexual activity does not always occur within a dating relationship. NSFG data provide some evidence for how often sexual activity coincides with dating for teens. Male and female NSFG respondents were asked somewhat different questions about this issue. Among 15-to-18-year-old sexually active girls who responded to that survey, 78 percent indicated that they were going out or going steady with their *first* sexual partner. Among sexually active male respondents of that same age, 64 percent indicated that they were going out with or going steady with their *most recent* sexual partner. These figures suggest that, although teen sexual activity outside of dating relationships is relatively common, in most cases, teen sexual activity occurs within a dating relationship.

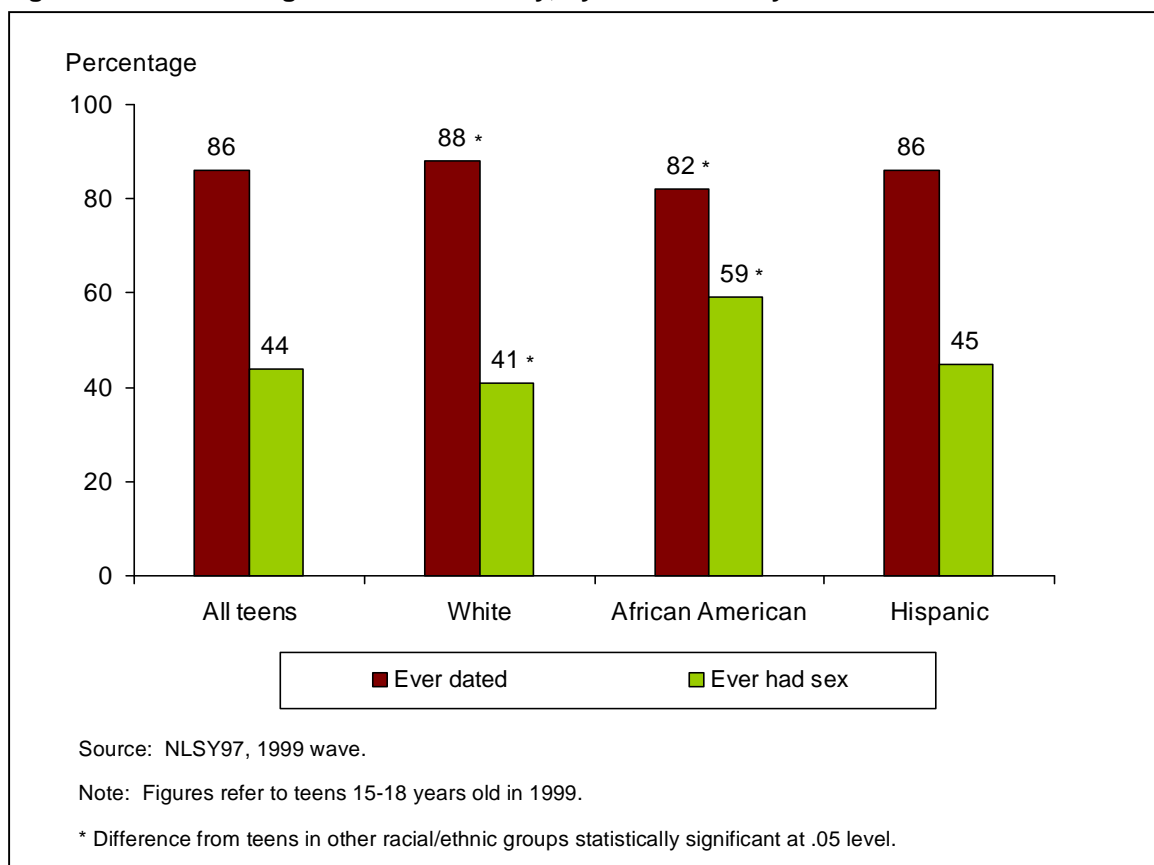
- **White teens are more likely to date than teens in other racial and ethnic groups. African Americans and those with low incomes are more likely than other teens to report being sexually active.**

Most teens—regardless of race or ethnicity—report dating. Among the teens in our sample, more than 80 percent of whites, African Americans, and Hispanics reported having ever dated (Figure II.5). White teens, however, were more likely than teens of other races and ethnicities to report having dated, whereas African American teens were less likely. Differences between income groups were small and not statistically significant.

Sexual activity follows a different pattern. Among teens in our sample, 41 percent of whites and 45 percent of Hispanics reported having had sex, compared to 59 percent of African American teens. These racial and ethnic differences are consistent with data from other national surveys (compare Mosher et al. 2005; CDC 2006).

Rates of sexual activity among teens also vary by their socio-economic status. Among our sample members, 51 percent of those living in low-income households (below 200 percent of the poverty level) reported having had sex, compared with 39 percent of teens who lived in higher-income households. Similarly, among teens whose mothers had a high

**Figure II.5 Teen Dating and Sexual Activity, by Race/Ethnicity**



school education or less, 49 percent reported having had sex, compared with 38 percent of those with more-educated mothers.

Teenage sexual activity rates also vary by geographic region. Teens in the South are the most likely to report being sexually active, with 48 percent indicating on follow-up surveys that they have had sex. In contrast, 44 percent of Northeastern teens, 42 percent of Midwestern teens, and 39 percent of Western teens reported having had sex.

- **High school students have become less likely to date in recent years. They also appear to be delaying sexual activity more than they did 15 years ago.**

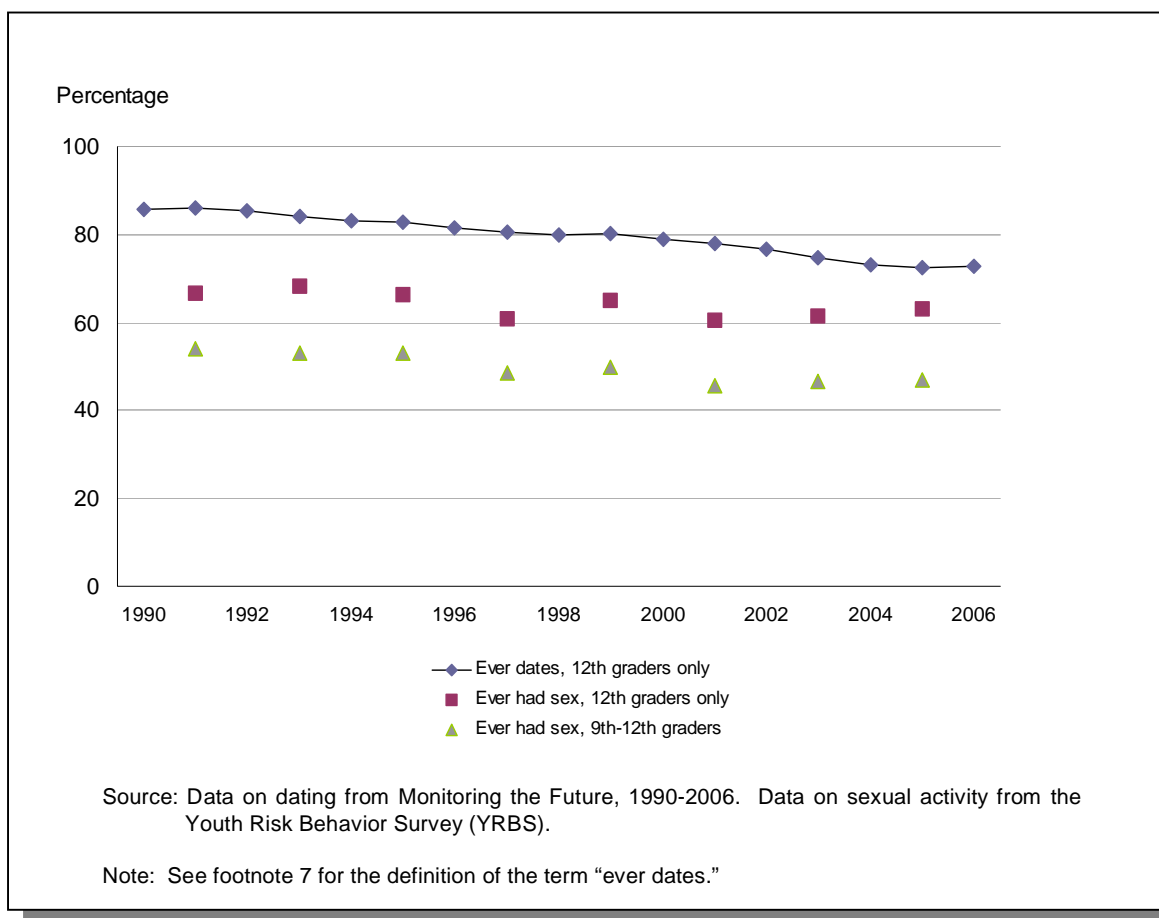
Has the likelihood that teens date or have sex changed in recent years? Data from two studies, Monitoring the Future (MTF) and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), enable us to examine this question for teens who are enrolled in high school. MTF is an annual survey of approximately 50,000 adolescents in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades. Each year, the survey includes the question, “On average, how often do you go out with a date?” The YRBS is administered every other year and includes 10,000 to 16,000 adolescents in each survey round. The sample is nationally representative of teens in 9th to 12th grades. In each survey round, the YRBS asks respondents whether they have ever had sexual intercourse. To improve comparability of the results across the two data sets, we focus primarily on 12th graders. It is important to note that the patterns presented below refer only to teens enrolled in high school. Trends in dating and sexual activity for all teenagers, including high school dropouts, may be somewhat different.

The likelihood that high school students date regularly has declined in recent years. Over the past 15 years, there has been a steady decrease in the proportion of 12th graders who report dating (Figure II.6). The percentage of high school seniors who said they date has dropped from 86 percent in 1990 to 73 percent in 2006.<sup>7</sup> This trend, however, could reflect changes in terminology. Teens often develop their own jargon, which changes with different cohorts. Dating may not mean the same thing to teens in 2006 that it did in 1990. Some suggest that the term “dating” has been replaced by “hanging out” or “going with someone” in the vernacular (Miller and Benson 1999). Consequently, the decline presented in Figure II.6 may represent, at least in part, a change in terminology rather than a change in behavior.

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<sup>7</sup> In MTF, teens were asked, “On average, how often do you go out with a date?” The response categories were: never, once a month or less, two to three times a month, once a week, two to three times a week, or more than three times a week. In the figures presented here, respondents were coded as dating if they gave any response to this question other than “never.” These rates of dating are somewhat lower than those presented in earlier sections, which are based on the NLSY97. There are two likely reasons. First, in the NLSY97, teens were asked directly whether they had ever dated, a somewhat different question from what is asked on the MTF survey. Second, the NLSY97 results on dating included all teens, whereas the time trends presented here are restricted to those enrolled in 12th grade. It is likely that teens who have dropped out of school are more likely to date and have sexual intercourse than those who remain in school.



**Figure II.6 Dating and Sexual Activity Trends Among High School Students, 1990-2006**

The likelihood of sexual activity among high school students also fell in recent years—although less dramatically than the likelihood of dating. In 1991, 67 percent of 12th graders reported they had ever had sex, compared to 63 percent in 2005 (Figure II.6). This decline is not statistically significant. A clearer trend emerges, however, for all teens in high school. In 1991, approximately 54 percent of high school teens reported having had sex, compared to 47 percent in 2005, a decline that is statistically significant. This larger decline in sexual activity for all high school students relative to 12th graders alone suggests teens may be delaying sexual activity until later in high school. Other research suggests this may be the case. For example, one recent study found that the decline of sexual activity for teens in the 1990s was largely driven by a delay in sexual initiation, particularly for girls (Abma et al. 2004).

## SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS

In this chapter, we examined teenagers’ exposure to and initial experiences with romantic relationships and marriage. We find that teens live in a mix of family structures, but most live with married parents—50 percent with both biological parents and 13 percent with a parent who has remarried. The likelihood of living with two married biological

parents varies substantially across various subgroups of teens, with African-American and low-income teens particularly unlikely to live with married biological parents. We also find that most teens view their parents' marriages positively, particularly those living with both their biological parents. Teens with estranged parents hold less positive views of the quality of their parents' relationship. Most teens report that their estranged parents have mixed or unfriendly relations or have no contact with each other.

We find that most teens date at some point. Among our NLSY97 sample members, 74 percent of 15 year olds and 94 percent of 18 year olds report having dated. Sexual activity is less common than dating, but is relatively common among older teens. Among 15 year olds, 22 percent report having had sexual intercourse, compared with 65 percent of 18 year olds. We also find that high school students are dating less than they did 15 to 20 years ago and that recent trends suggest that they are delaying sexual activity until later in high school.

## CHAPTER III

# TEENS' ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

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The diverse family structures in which teens are raised, as well as their early experiences with romantic relationships and dating, may have important implications for their attitudes and expectations concerning adult relationships and marriage. For example, teens who grow up living with both of their biological parents are more likely than other teens to disapprove of divorce or premarital cohabitation (Flanigan et al. 2005). Similarly, teens who have serious romantic relationships in high school are more likely than other teens to expect to get married (Crissey 2005). In addition, attitudes toward marriage are a strong predictor of later relationship outcomes in adulthood (Fein et al. 2003). For this reason, encouraging healthy, positive attitudes toward marriage has been a common goal of recent adolescent relationship and marriage education programs (Karney et al. 2007).

In this chapter, we first describe teens' general attitudes toward marriage and how they have changed in the past 30 years. We then describe how these attitudes vary by gender, race/ethnicity, family structure, and income level. We also examine the association between teens' attitudes toward marriage and their early experiences with romantic relationships and sexual activity. For these analyses, we rely primarily on the Monitoring the Future (MTF) and National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) surveys. Analyses based on MTF data include high school seniors only. Analyses based on NSFG data include all teens ages 15 to 18.

### **WHAT ARE TEENS' ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE?**

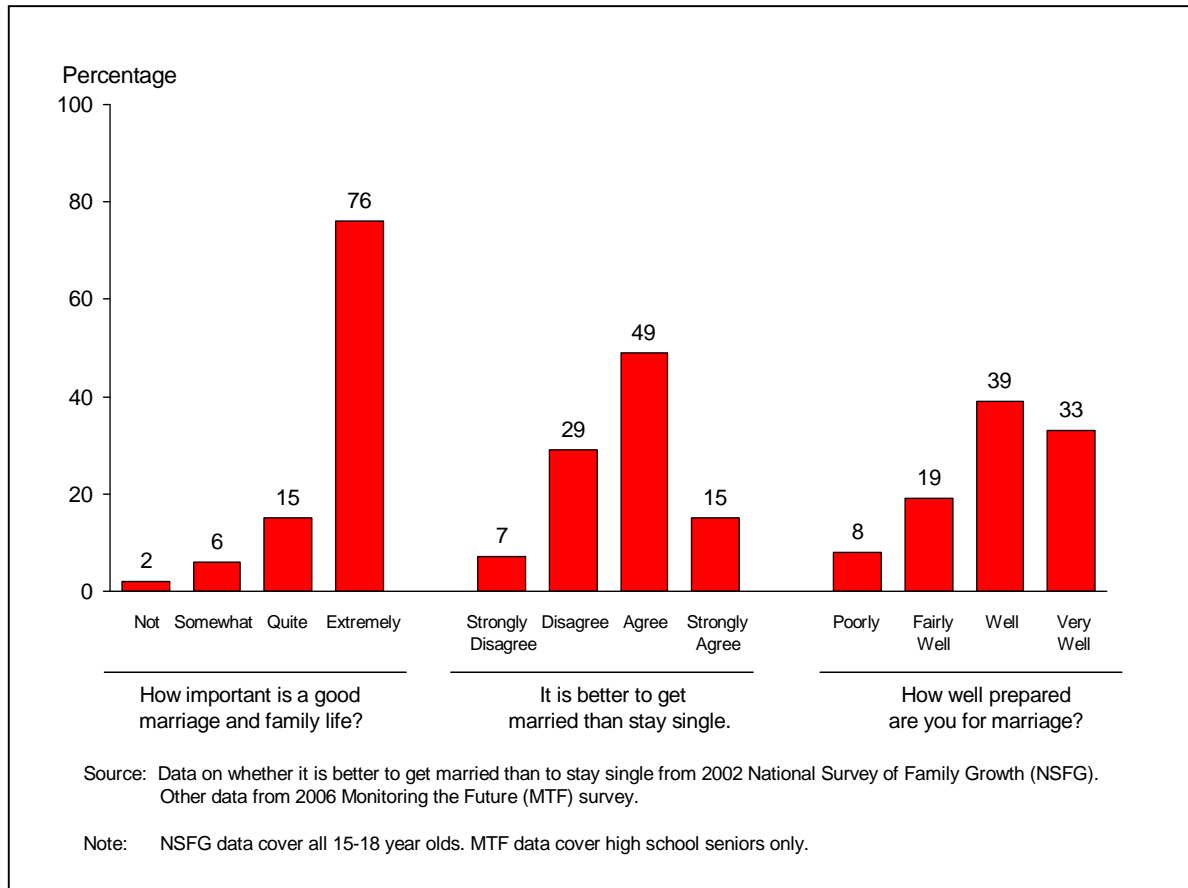
High-school-aged teens hold complex and changing attitudes toward marriage. Most teens express strong support for marriage and expect to get married one day. At the same time, most teens also believe they can live happily without getting married and that it is a good idea for couples to live together before marriage. A growing number of teens want to delay marriage until they finish college or have worked for several years. In this section, we describe teens' general attitudes toward marriage and how they have changed in the past 30 years.

- **Most high-school-aged teens have positive attitudes toward marriage and feel well prepared for it.**

When asked about their general attitudes toward marriage, most high-school-aged teens express strong support. For example, in the 2006 wave of the MTF study, 91 percent of high school seniors responded that having a good marriage and family life was either “quite important” or “extremely important” to them (Figure III.1). Only 2 percent said that a good marriage and family life was “not important.” Similarly, data from the 2002 NSFG show that a majority (64 percent) of high-school-aged teens either agree or strongly agree with the statement, “It is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single” (Figure III.1).

Most high school students also feel well prepared for marriage. In the 2006 MTF study, students were asked the question, “How well do you think your experiences and training (at home, school, work, etc.) have prepared you to be a good husband or wife?” Over 70 percent of high school seniors said they felt either “well” or “very well” prepared for marriage (Figure III.1). Less than 10 percent said they felt “poorly” prepared.

**Figure III.1 Teens’ Attitudes Toward Marriage**

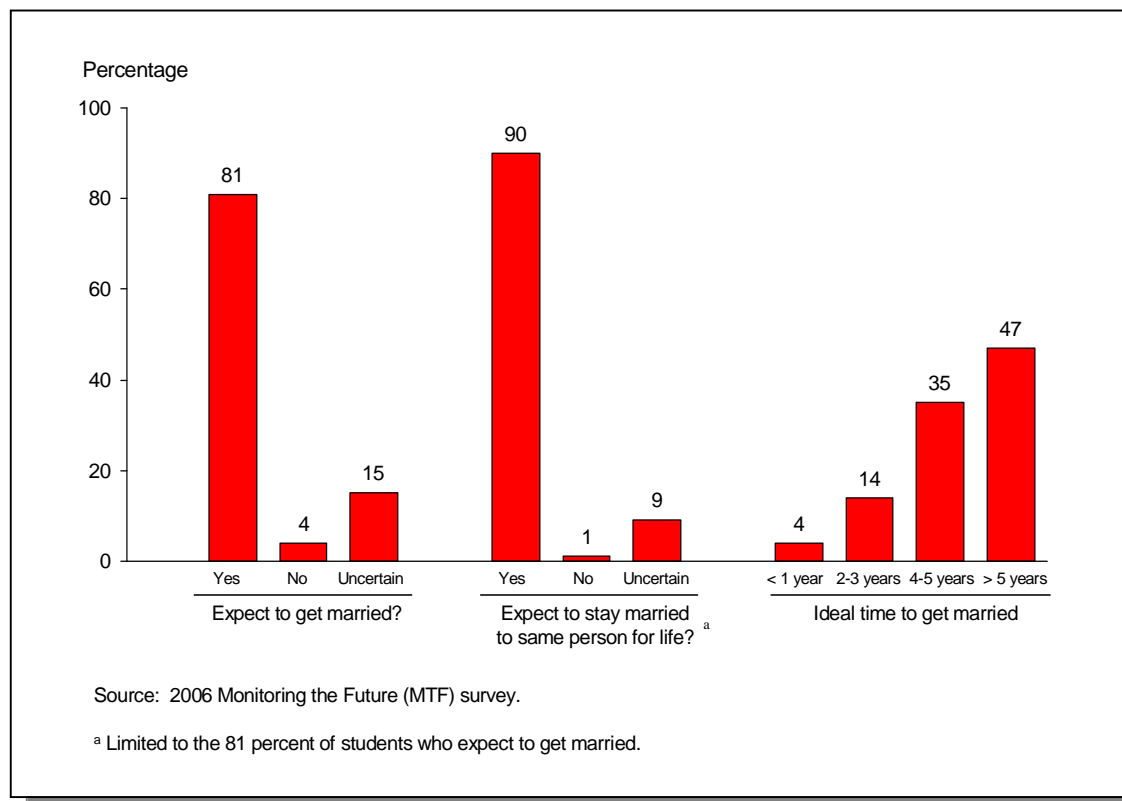


Although most teens have positive attitudes toward marriage, many do not equate marriage with happiness. In the 2006 MTF study, only 36 percent of high school seniors agreed with the statement, “Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single, or just living with someone else” (not shown). By contrast, 30 percent of students disagreed with the idea that people are happier when married, and 34 percent said they neither agreed nor disagreed. These findings suggest that, although most high school students are supportive of marriage, they also believe that adults can be happy without getting married, and they may see no clear causal link between marriage and happiness.

- **Most high-school-aged teens expect to get married, and a growing number want to delay marriage until later in life.**

In addition to holding positive general views about marriage, most high-school-aged teens say they expect to get married. In the 2006 wave of the MTF study, students were asked which relationship outcome they are most likely to choose in the long run—getting married or staying single. More than 80 percent of high school seniors said they expect to get married (Figure III.2). Another 15 percent said they are unsure which relationship outcome they are most likely to choose, while only 4 percent said they are most likely to stay single. Among the 81 percent of students who said they expect to get married, 90 percent expect to stay married to the same person for life. Among the 81 percent of students who said they expect to get married, 4 percent expect to get married in less than a year, 14 percent expect to get married in 2-3 years, 35 percent expect to get married in 4-5 years, and 47 percent expect to get married in more than 5 years.

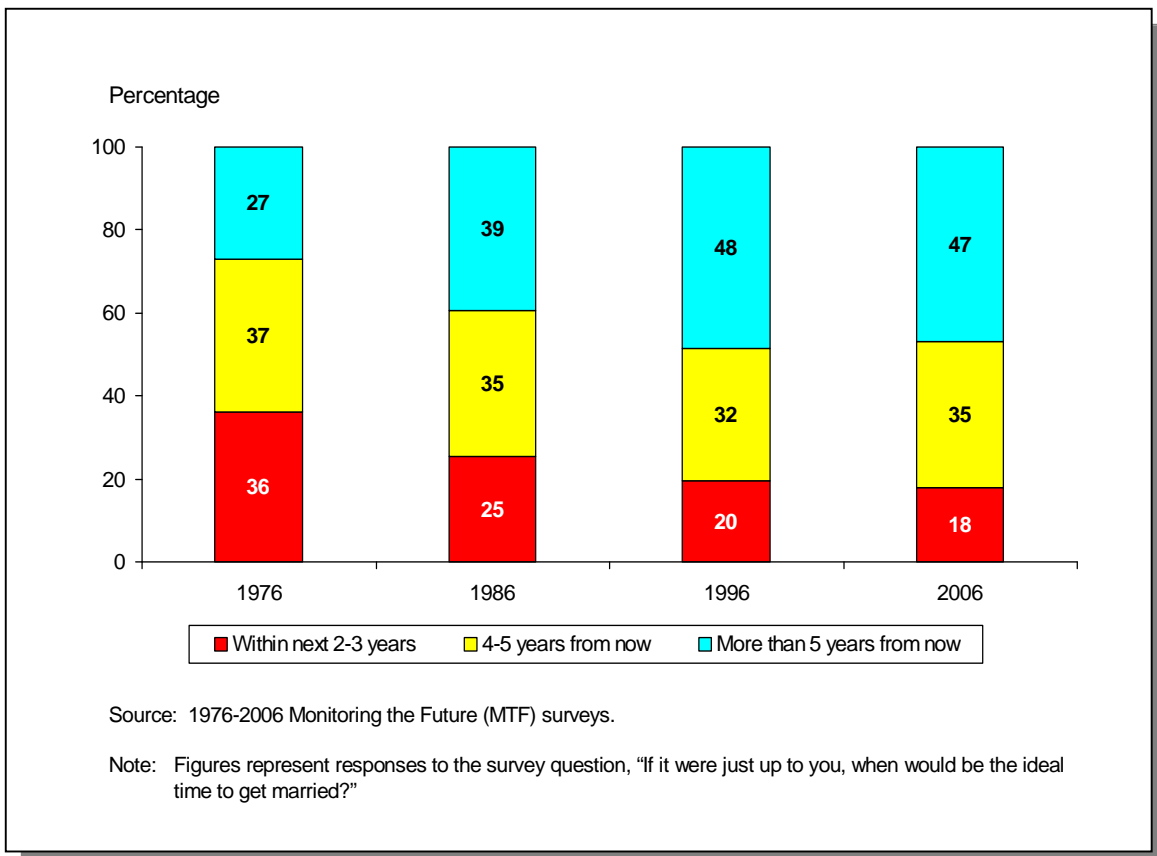
**Figure III.2 High School Seniors' Expectations for Marriage**



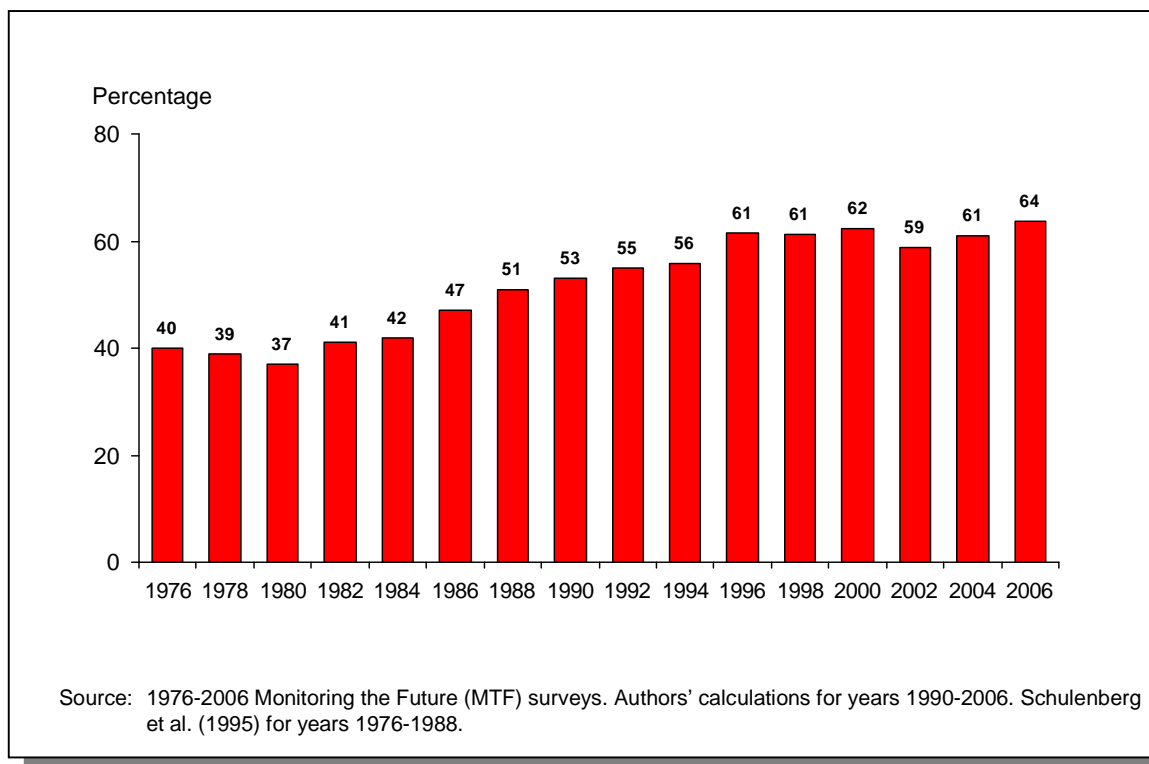
90 percent said they expect to stay married to the same person for life. The high percentage of students who expect to get married is consistent with evidence that a large majority of U.S. adults eventually get married at least once in their lives (Kreider and Fields 2002). However, teens may overstate their chances of staying married to the same person for life, as about half of all first marriages now end in divorce (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

In the 2006 MTF study, when asked about the ideal time to get married, nearly half (47 percent) of all high school seniors said they want to delay marriage for more than five years (Figure III.2). The number of high school students wanting to delay marriage has also grown in recent years. From 1976 to 2006, the percentage of high school seniors wanting to delay marriage for at least five years jumped from 27 to 47 percent (Figure III.3). At the same time, the percentage who want to get married within two or three years after high school dropped from 36 to 18 percent. Thus, the percentage of high school seniors who want to wait at least five years before getting married (47 percent) is now more than twice as high as the percentage who want to get married within the next two or three years (18 percent). The sharp rise in the number of 12th graders wanting to delay marriage is tied closely to changes in girls' expectations for marriage, as we describe later in this chapter.

**Figure III.3 Ideal Time to Get Married According to High School Seniors, 1976-2006**



**Figure III.4 Percentage of High School Seniors Endorsing Cohabitation Before Marriage, 1976–2006**



- **High school students have become more accepting of cohabitation in recent years.**

The recent increase in the number of high school students wanting to delay marriage has coincided with a growing acceptance of cohabitation. In the mid-1970s, 40 percent of all high school seniors said they agreed or mostly agreed with the statement, “It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along” (Figure III.4). However, the proportion of 12th graders who approve of cohabitation jumped to more than 50 percent by the late 1980s and more than 60 percent by the late 1990s. In 2006, nearly two-thirds of all high school seniors (64 percent) agreed with the statement that it is a good idea for couples to live together before marriage. Teens’ growing acceptance of cohabitation mirrors the rise in cohabitation rates among U.S. couples, as more than half of all first marriages are now preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

#### **HOW DO TEENS’ ATTITUDES DIFFER BY GENDER?**

Gender differences in teens’ attitudes toward marriage have changed substantially in recent years. In the mid-1970s, teenage boys and girls expressed equal levels of support for marriage, but boys were more likely than girls to want to delay getting married until after finishing college or working for several years (Schulenberg et al. 1995). Currently, boys are

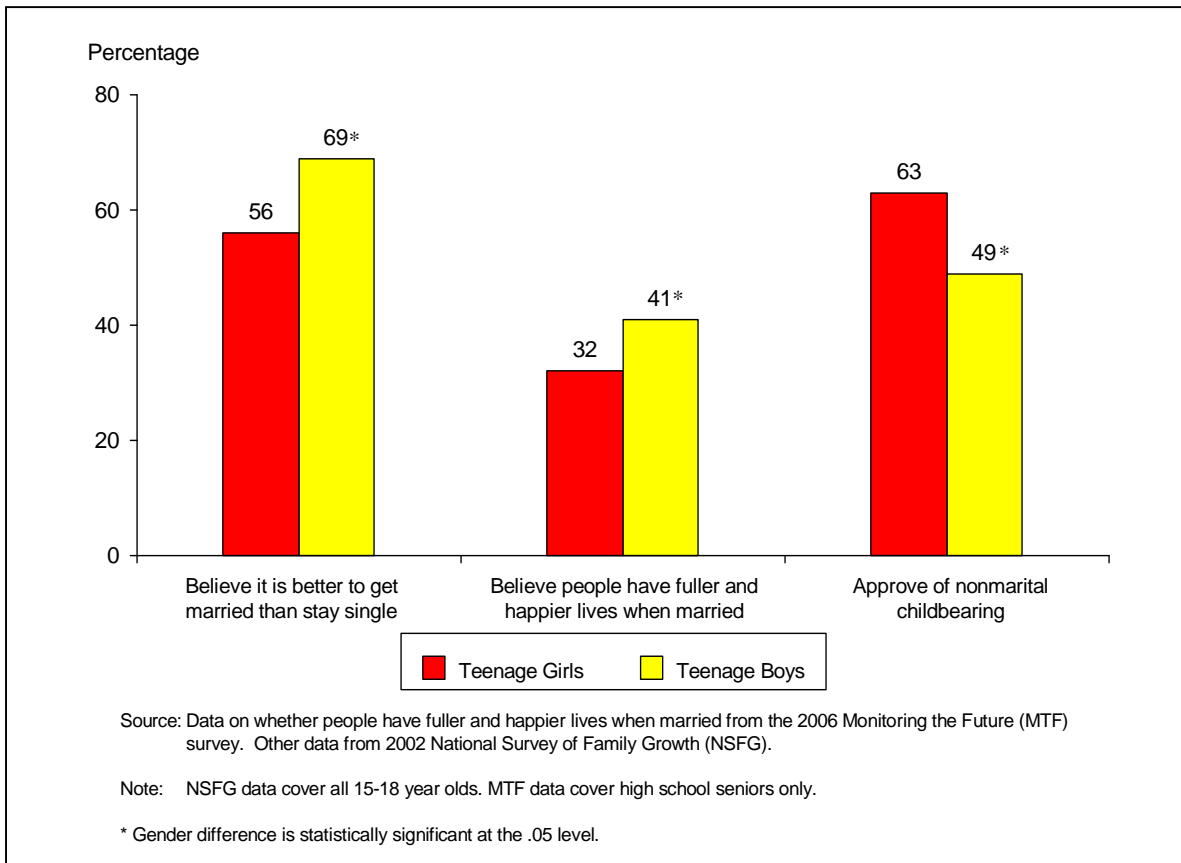
more likely than girls to have positive attitudes toward marriage (Flanigan et al. 2005) and a growing number of girls have followed boys in wanting to delay marriage. In this section, we describe the current gender differences in teens' attitudes toward marriage, as well as the growing similarity in boys' and girls' expectations for marriage.

- **On average, teenage boys have more positive attitudes toward marriage than teenage girls do.**

Across a broad range of measures, teenage boys are more likely than teenage girls to express support for marriage. For example, in the 2002 NSFG, 69 percent of teenage boys either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that it is better for a person to get married, compared with 56 percent of teenage girls (Figure III.5). Similarly, in the 2006 wave of the MTF study, more boys (41 percent) than girls (32 percent) agreed with the statement, “Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single, or just living with someone else” (Figure III.5).

Teenage boys are also less likely than teenage girls to approve of having children outside of marriage. In the 2002 NSFG, teens were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “It is okay for an unmarried female to have a child.” Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of

**Figure III.5 Teens' Attitudes Toward Marriage, by Gender**





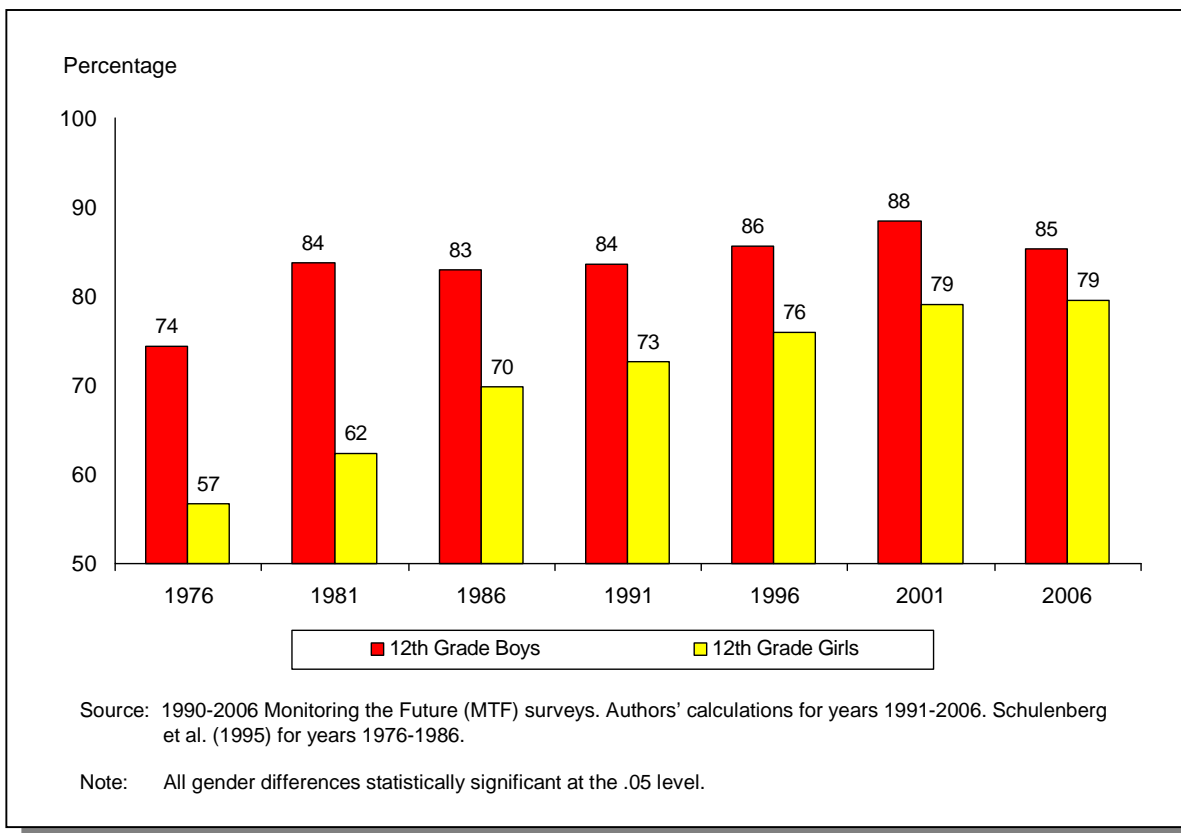
teenage girls said they approved of nonmarital childbearing, compared to less than half (49 percent) of all teenage boys (Figure III.5). These gender differences in attitudes are all statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

- **More boys than girls want to delay marriage, although the gender gap has narrowed in recent years.**

Although boys are more likely than girls to have positive attitudes toward marriage, they are also more likely to want to delay marriage until later in life. For example, in the 1999 wave of the NLSY97, 24 percent of boys ages 15 to 18 said they were more likely than not to get married in the next five years, compared to 31 percent of girls in that age range (not shown). Nearly 20 percent of boys in this age group said they had no chance of getting married in the next five years, compared to 16 percent of girls. These differences are statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

Data from the MTF study indicate that the gender difference in teens' expectations for marriage has narrowed in recent years (Figure III.6). From 1976 to 2006, the percentage of 12th grade boys wanting to delay marriage for at least four or five years increased from 74 to 85 percent. However, the percentage of girls wanting to delay marriage increased at an even

**Figure III.6 Percentage of High School Seniors Wanting to Delay Marriage for at Least 4 or 5 Years, by Gender, 1976-2006**



faster rate, from 57 to nearly 80 percent. As a result, the gender gap in the percentage of high school students wanting to delay marriage dropped steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Boys are still more likely than girls to want to delay marriage, but the difference is much smaller today than it was 30 years ago.<sup>1</sup> The recent increase in the percentage of girls who want to delay marriage likely reflects new educational and occupational opportunities open to women (Bae et al. 2000), as well as broader social norms that emphasize gender equality and the empowerment of women (Brewster and Padavic 2000).

### **HOW DO TEENS' ATTITUDES VARY BY RACE AND ETHNICITY?**

Racial and ethnic differences in teens' attitudes toward marriage are generally smaller than gender differences. They are also smaller than one might expect from the large racial/ethnic differences in family structure described earlier in Chapter II. In this section, we use data from both the 2002 NSFG and the MTF study to compare teens' attitudes toward marriage among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.

- **Most high-school-aged teens express positive attitudes toward marriage, regardless of their racial and ethnic background.**

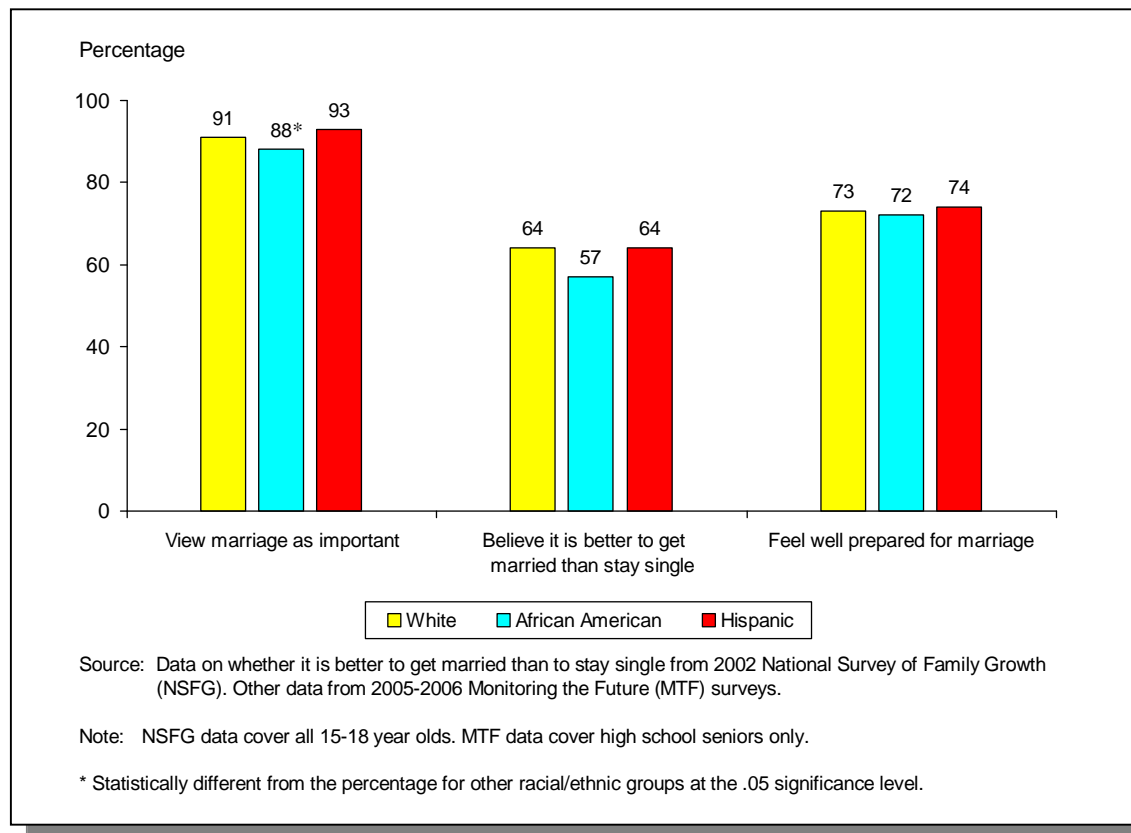
In general, teens' attitudes toward marriage do not vary much by race/ethnicity. For example, in the 2005 and 2006 waves of the MTF study, the percentage of high school seniors who said that having a good marriage and family life was either "quite important" or "extremely important" to them was only slightly lower for African Americans than for Hispanics, and it was similar for both whites and Hispanics (Figure III.7). Similarly, data from the 2002 NSFG indicate that a majority of teens from all three racial and ethnic groups agree that it is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single. The percentage of students who feel well prepared for marriage is also similar for all racial and ethnic groups. In the 2005 and 2006 waves of the MTF study, 74 percent of Hispanic students said they felt well or very well prepared for marriage, compared with 73 percent for whites and 72 percent for African Americans.

- **Hispanic and African American teens are less likely than white teens to expect to get and stay married.**

Although teens from different racial/ethnic groups share similar attitudes toward marriage, they have different expectations of their likelihood of marriage. In particular, among high school students, Hispanic and African American teens are less likely than teenage whites to expect to get married. In the 2005 and 2006 waves of the MTF study, 86 percent of white high school seniors said they expect to get married one day, compared with 76 percent for Hispanics and 75 percent for African Americans (Figure III.8). Among those students who expect to get married, Hispanics and African Americans were also less likely

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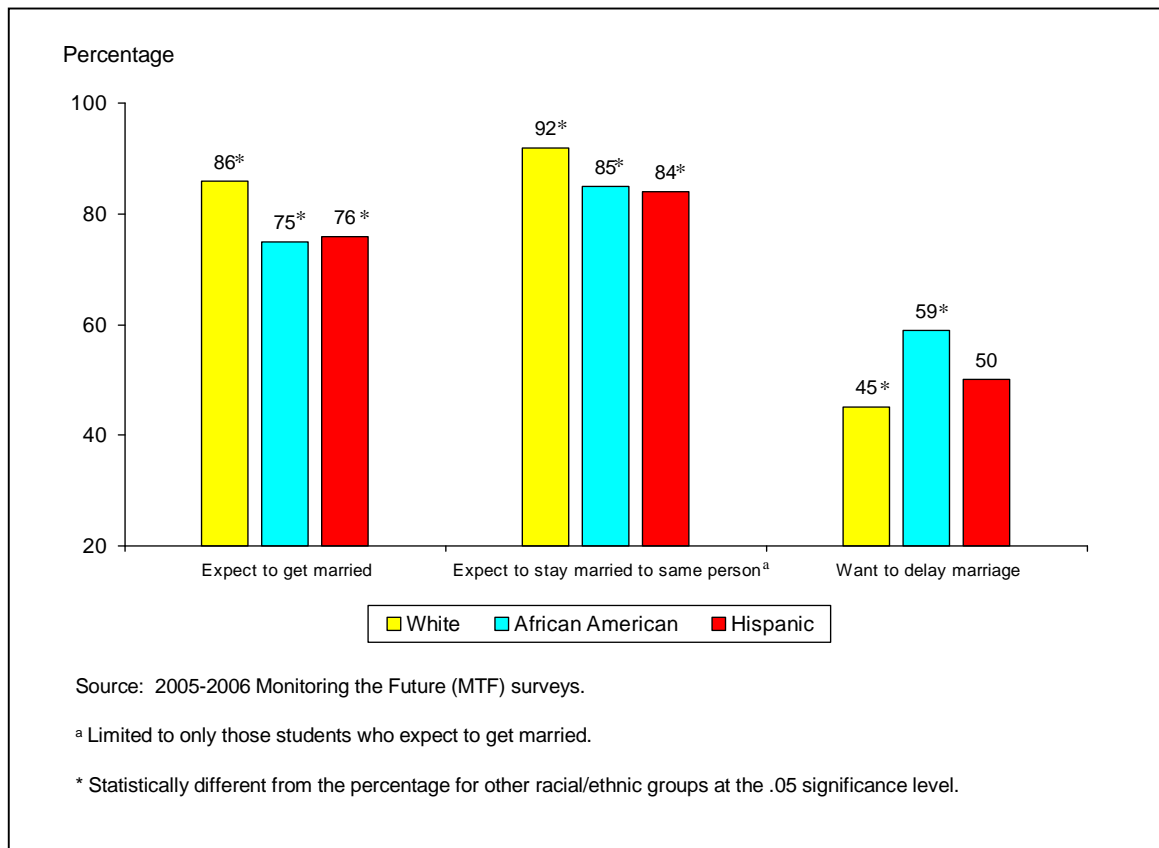
<sup>1</sup> The gender gap in the percentage of high school seniors wanting to delay marriage for at least four or five years was 6 percentage points in 2006, compared with nearly 18 percentage points in 1976. This represents a statistically significant decline (at the .05 level) in the gender gap for this measure over this 30-year period.

**Figure III.7 Teens' Attitudes Toward Marriage, by Race/Ethnicity**

than whites to say they expect to stay married to the same person for life (92 percent for whites, versus 84 percent for Hispanics and 85 percent for African Americans). These estimates of marital expectations by race/ethnicity are consistent with those reported in other national data sets (Crissey 2005).

Furthermore, among high school seniors, both Hispanics and African Americans are more likely than whites to want to delay marriage until later in life. In the 2005 and 2006 waves of the MTF study, 50 percent of Hispanic 12th graders and 59 percent of African American 12th graders said they wanted to delay marriage for at least five years after high school, compared with 45 percent for whites (Figure III.8).

These racial and ethnic differences in teens' expectations for marriage are very similar to prevailing racial and ethnic differences in adult marriage rates. For example, recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that, among adults ages 35 to 39, the percentage of women who have ever been married is higher for whites (88 percent) than for African

**Figure III.8 High School Seniors' Expectations for Marriage, by Race/Ethnicity**

Americans (61 percent) or Hispanics (85 percent).<sup>2</sup> The percentage of men in their late 30s who have ever been married is also highest for whites (82 percent, versus 68 percent for African Americans and 77 percent for Hispanics). Whites tend to marry for the first time at a younger age and are less likely than African Americans to get divorced (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). Divorce rates are similar for whites and Hispanics. These findings suggest that teens' expectations for marriage may be influenced in part by marriage patterns they observe among adults.

### DO TEENS' ATTITUDES DIFFER BY BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS?

As discussed in Chapter I, many of the recent policy efforts aimed at supporting healthy marriages have been targeted to low-income families with children. However, in this section we show that it is family structure—and not family income level—that is most closely associated with teens' attitudes toward marriage. There are also differences in attitudes

<sup>2</sup> "Number, Timing and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2004". Available at: [[http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/marr-div/2004detailed\\_tables.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/marr-div/2004detailed_tables.html)]. Accessed May 16, 2008.

between teens living in rural and urban areas. Because family structure, family income, and race/ethnicity are all closely related, in the analysis presented below, we use multivariate techniques to identify the separate influences of these factors on attitudes toward marriage.

- **Teens who live with both of their biological parents express the strongest support for marriage.**

Data from the 2002 NSFG indicate that teens are more likely to have supportive attitudes toward marriage when they live with both their biological parents. For example, when asked whether it is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single, 66 percent of teens from intact families endorsed marriage, compared with 58 percent of similar teens from other family types (Table III.1). In addition, teens living with both their biological parents were less likely than other teens to approve of divorce (42 percent versus 49 percent) or having children outside of marriage (50 percent versus 61 percent). These differences in teens' attitudes are statistically significant at the 5 percent level and are adjusted for differences across family structure groups in both family poverty status and racial/ethnic background.

**Table III.1 Teens' Attitudes Toward Marriage, by Family Structure and Income Status**

Family Characteristics	Percentage of Teens Who Agree That:		
	It is better to get married than to go through life being single	Divorce is best solution when couples can't work out marriage problems	It is okay for an unmarried female to have a child
Lives with Both Biological Parents			
Yes	66	42	50
No	58*	49*	61*
Income Relative to Poverty			
Below 200%	61	48	60
Between 200% and 400%	60	51	58
At or above 400%	56	43	62
Total	59	48	60

Source: 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).

Notes: Figures are nationally representative of teens ages 15-18 in 2002. Estimates are based on a multivariate analysis that adjusts these percentages for differences across categories in family structure, poverty status, and racial/ethnic background.

\*Statistically different from percentage for intact families at the .05 significance level.

- **Teens from low-income and higher-income families have similar attitudes toward marriage.**

Although teens' attitudes toward marriage vary by family structure, they do not differ substantially by family income level. In the 2002 NSFG, 61 percent of teens living in families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level agreed that it is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single (Table III.1). There was somewhat less support for marriage among teens from higher-income groups, but the differences across income groups were not statistically significant. Similarly, there were no statistically significant differences across income groups in teens' attitudes toward divorce or nonmarital childbearing. These estimates are adjusted for differences across income groups in both family structure and racial/ethnic background. However, the attitudes of low-income and higher-income teens are also similar when the estimates are not adjusted in this way. Attitudes toward marriage are also similar across subgroups when dividing teens on other measures of socioeconomic status, such as mother's education level (not shown).

- **High school students in rural areas have more traditional attitudes toward marriage. However, high school students have similar expectations of the likelihood of marriage regardless of where they live.**

Teens' attitudes toward marriage vary substantially between rural and more urban areas. In the 2006 MTF survey, when asked whether people live "fuller and happier lives" if they marry, 41 percent of rural high school seniors agreed that people are happier when married, compared with 33 percent of students from more urban areas (not shown). Similarly, students from rural areas were somewhat less likely than students from more urban areas to endorse cohabitation before marriage (59 versus 65 percent).<sup>3</sup> These differences were statistically significant.

Although high school students living in more urban areas have somewhat less positive views of marriage than rural high school students, they are equally likely to expect to marry some day. In the 2006 MTF survey, 82 percent of high school seniors from both rural and urban areas said they expect to get married at some point. Among those students who expect to get married, 89 percent of those from rural areas and 91 percent of those from urban areas said they expect to stay married to the same person for life.

### **MARRIAGE ATTITUDES AND EARLY ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

As described in the previous chapter, most teens have some experience with romantic relationships and dating by the time they reach late adolescence. In the 2006 MTF study, nearly three-quarters of high school seniors reported having ever dated, and 65 percent of

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<sup>3</sup> These estimates are adjusted for differences in the racial/ethnic composition of rural and urban areas. However, the findings are similar when the estimates are not adjusted in this way. Rural areas are defined as areas outside of regions defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). Conversely, more urban areas are defined as regions within MSAs.

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18-year-olds in the NLSY97 reported having had sexual intercourse. In this section, we examine how these early experiences with dating and sexual activity relate to teens' attitudes and expectations concerning marriage.

The data for this section come from two different sources. The MTF study collects information on high school students' dating experience but not on their experience with sexual activity. By contrast, the NSFG collects information on sexual activity but not on dating experience. Therefore, we use the MTF study to examine the association between dating experience and high school students' attitudes toward marriage and the NSFG to examine the association between teenage sexual activity and attitudes.

- **High school students who date regularly have more positive attitudes toward marriage; they are also more accepting of cohabitation.**

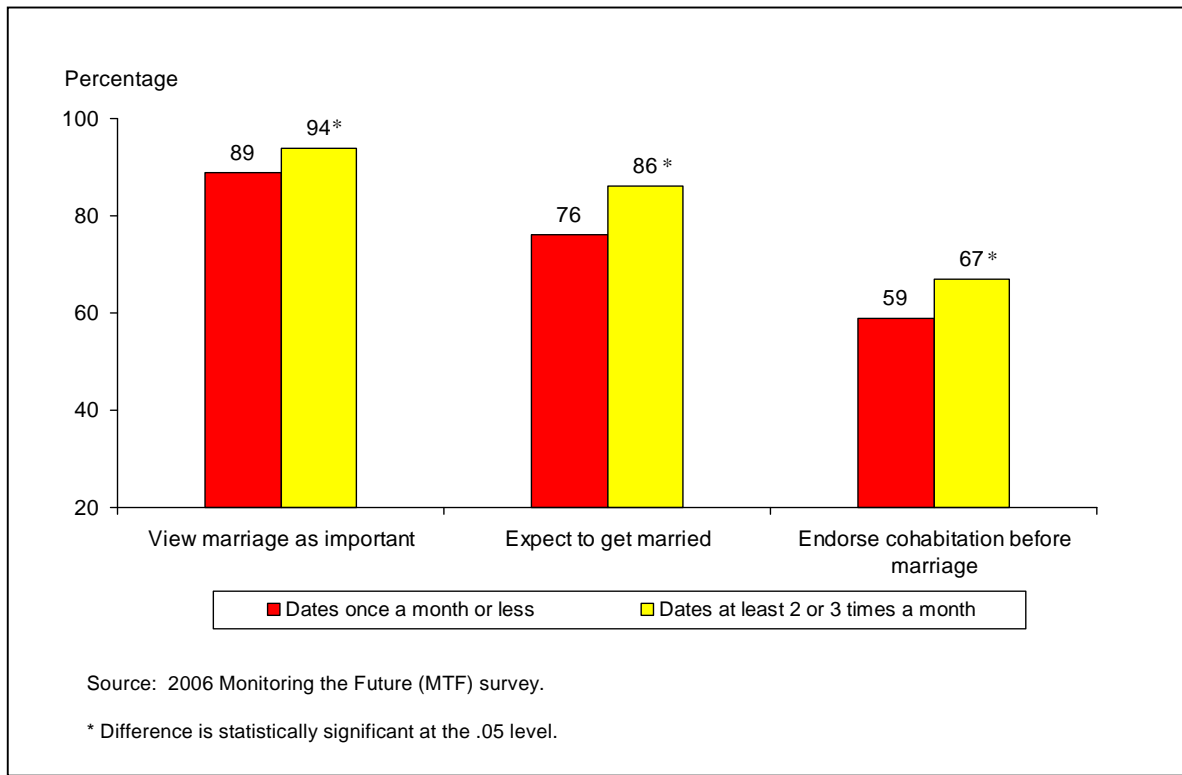
Data from the 2006 MTF study suggest that high school students who are dating regularly have more positive views of marriage. For example, the percentage of students who said that having a good marriage and family life was either "quite important" or "extremely important" to them was higher for those who reported dating at least two or three times a month (94 percent) than for those who reported dating once a month or less (89 percent; Figure III.9). Students who reported dating regularly were also more likely than other students to say they expect to get married at some point (86 versus 76 percent). Dating experience was also associated with greater support for cohabitation. When asked whether it is usually a good idea for couples to live together before marriage, the percentage of students who expressed support for cohabitation was higher for those who reported dating at least two or three times a month (67 percent) than for those who reported dating once a month or less (59 percent).

This correlation between dating and attitudes is generally consistent with the findings of prior research (Crissey 2005). However, it does not necessarily imply that teens' attitudes toward marriage are fully determined by their early dating experiences. For example, another possibility is that teens with little interest in marriage do not make as much effort to date. The correlation between dating and attitudes may also reflect personality differences among teens. For example, teens with more outgoing, confident personalities may be more likely to date than other teens and also be more likely to expect to get married.

- **Teens' attitudes toward marriage are similar regardless of their experience with sexual activity. However, support for both cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing is higher among sexually active teens.**

Data from the 2002 NSFG show that teens' general attitudes toward marriage are not related to their early experience with sexual activity. As described earlier in this chapter, when asked whether it is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single, 64 percent of all teens in the NSFG agreed that it is better to get married (Figure III.1, above). This level of support for marriage was similar for teens who had previously had sexual intercourse and those who had never had sex (not shown).

**Figure III.9 High School Seniors' Attitudes and Expectations Concerning Marriage, by Dating Experience**



However, when asked about their attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing, 66 percent of sexually active teens agreed that it is acceptable for an unmarried female to have a child, compared with 48 percent of teens who had never had sex (not shown). This difference was statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Teens who had previously had sexual intercourse were also more likely than other teens to approve of cohabitation before marriage (not shown). These findings suggest that, although sexually active teens are just as likely as other teens to express support for marriage, they are less likely to see marriage as a necessary first step before having a child or living with someone.

### SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS

In this chapter, we examined teenagers' attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage. We find that most teens express strong general support for marriage and believe it is better to get married than to go through life being single. Among high school seniors, most also say they feel well prepared for marriage and expect to get married one day. However, while support for marriage remains strong among teens, a growing proportion of them approve of cohabitation before marriage and want to delay getting married until later in life.

We also find that teens' attitudes toward marriage differ by gender and family background characteristics. In general, teenage boys have more positive attitudes toward



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marriage than teenage girls do; however, boys are more likely than girls to want to delay marriage. Teens' attitudes toward marriage are also closely linked with their family structure, with support for marriage strongest among teens who are living with both of their biological parents. Support for marriage is stronger among teens living in rural areas than it is for those living in more urban area. Even so, most teens expect to get married regardless of where they live.



## CHAPTER IV

### ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

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Young adulthood is a time of transition and change, during which romantic relationships often play an important role. Relationships are formed and dissolved. Some young adults begin living together; some marry. Earlier experiences in childhood and adolescence may set the stage for these developments, by shaping attitudes, reinforcing certain behaviors, and setting youth on particular pathways into adulthood. Characteristics and experiences in adolescence, such as family structure or expectations of marriage, may influence whether young adults marry or cohabit and whether these relationships are high quality and satisfying.

In previous chapters, we explored adolescent precursors to adult relationships, such as family composition, early relationships, and attitudes. In this chapter, we extend our analysis beyond adolescence to examine romantic relationships in young adulthood. Using the 2005 wave of the NLSY97, we follow the cohort of teens examined in Chapter II into their early 20s. We examine their rates of dating, cohabitation, and marriage as young adults, as well as the quality of these relationships.<sup>1</sup> We also examine which groups are most likely to form romantic relationships and how relationship quality varies by race/ethnicity and gender. We analyze the link between these adult relationships and the individual's characteristics in adolescence to determine whether young adults' relationship outcomes vary by their family structure or marital expectations as teenagers.

There are two cautions concerning this analysis. First, it is based on data collected when the sample members were 21 to 24 years old.<sup>2</sup> Most of the sample members had not yet

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<sup>1</sup> Among the 6,646 respondents to the NLSY97 1999 wave discussed in Chapter II, 976 did not respond to the 2005 wave. The analysis sample for this chapter is limited to the 5,670 original sample members who also responded to the 2005 wave.

<sup>2</sup> The sample is restricted to those who were ages 15 to 18 at the time they responded to the 1999 wave of the NLSY97 and who also responded to the 2005 survey wave, 98 percent of whom were 21 to 24 years old. Because of slight differences in timing across these survey waves, 2 percent were either 20 or 25 years old at the time of the 2005 survey wave.

married or cohabited and many more of them will in the coming years. Therefore, we are examining the likelihood that this cohort will marry or cohabit early in adulthood and not the likelihood that they will ever marry or cohabit. Second, although there may be links between adolescent characteristics and outcomes as young adults, this does not necessarily mean that one causes the other. Other factors may cause what we observe in both adolescence and adulthood. Nevertheless, these associations may be useful for developing and refining healthy marriage programs for high-school-aged teens. In particular, this analysis can help identify which teens are most likely to form relationships in young adulthood and, thus, may particularly benefit from participation in a healthy relationship skills program.

### **HOW COMMON ARE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE FOR YOUNG ADULTS?**

Although most Americans eventually marry, young adults are increasingly delaying marriage. National trends show that the age at first marriage has been rising steadily for several decades. In 1970, the median age at first marriage was approximately 21 for women and 23 for men. By 2005, the median age had increased to 25 for women and 27 for men ([www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ms2.pdf](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ms2.pdf)).

As marriage is postponed, more informal relationships, such as dating or living together, have become increasingly common. Most research has focused on the increase in cohabitation. Today, most young adults will cohabit at some point in their lives and most marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Dating and cohabitation are more fluid than marriage, and young adults may cycle in and out of multiple relationships before marrying. In this section, we explore the romantic relationships young adults form in their early 20s.

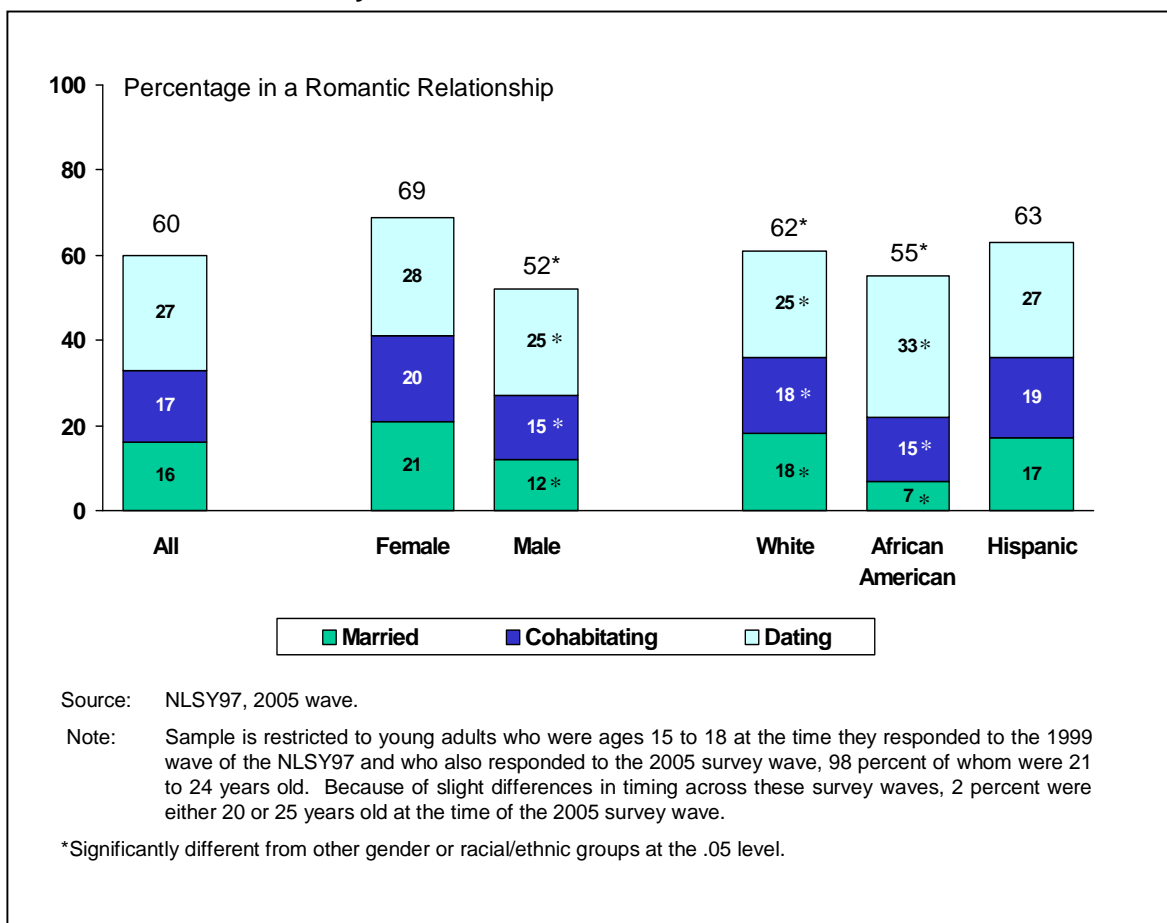
- **Most young adults in their early 20s are in a romantic relationship, but relatively few are married.**

Among the young adults in our sample, 60 percent were in some type of romantic relationship in their early 20s, with 16 percent married, 17 percent cohabiting, and 27 percent dating (Figure IV.1).<sup>3</sup> If these young adults follow the patterns of older cohorts, it is likely that many will marry in the next few years and their rates of marriage will increase substantially. For example, census data indicate that, in 2004, 22 percent of 20 to 24 year olds had ever married, compared to 53 percent of 25 to 29 year olds ([www.census.gov/population/socdemo/marital-hist/2004/Table3.2004.xls](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/marital-hist/2004/Table3.2004.xls)).

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents are identified as dating if they report they are in “a dating relationship in which you thought of yourself as part of a couple.” A small number of individuals with same sex partners are excluded for this analysis.

**Figure IV.1 Relationship Status of Young Adults Ages 21 to 24, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity**



- **Women are more likely than men to marry or cohabit in their early 20s. African Americans are less likely than members of other racial and ethnic groups to marry as young adults.**

Women are more likely than men to form romantic relationships as young adults. For example, 69 percent of women in our sample reported they were married, cohabiting, or dating at the end of the follow-up period, compared with 52 percent of men (Figure IV.1). The gender difference was particularly pronounced for marriage; 21 percent of women were married compared to 12 percent of men. This gap reflects the pattern that women typically marry at younger ages than men do and often form romantic relationships with men who are somewhat older than they are.

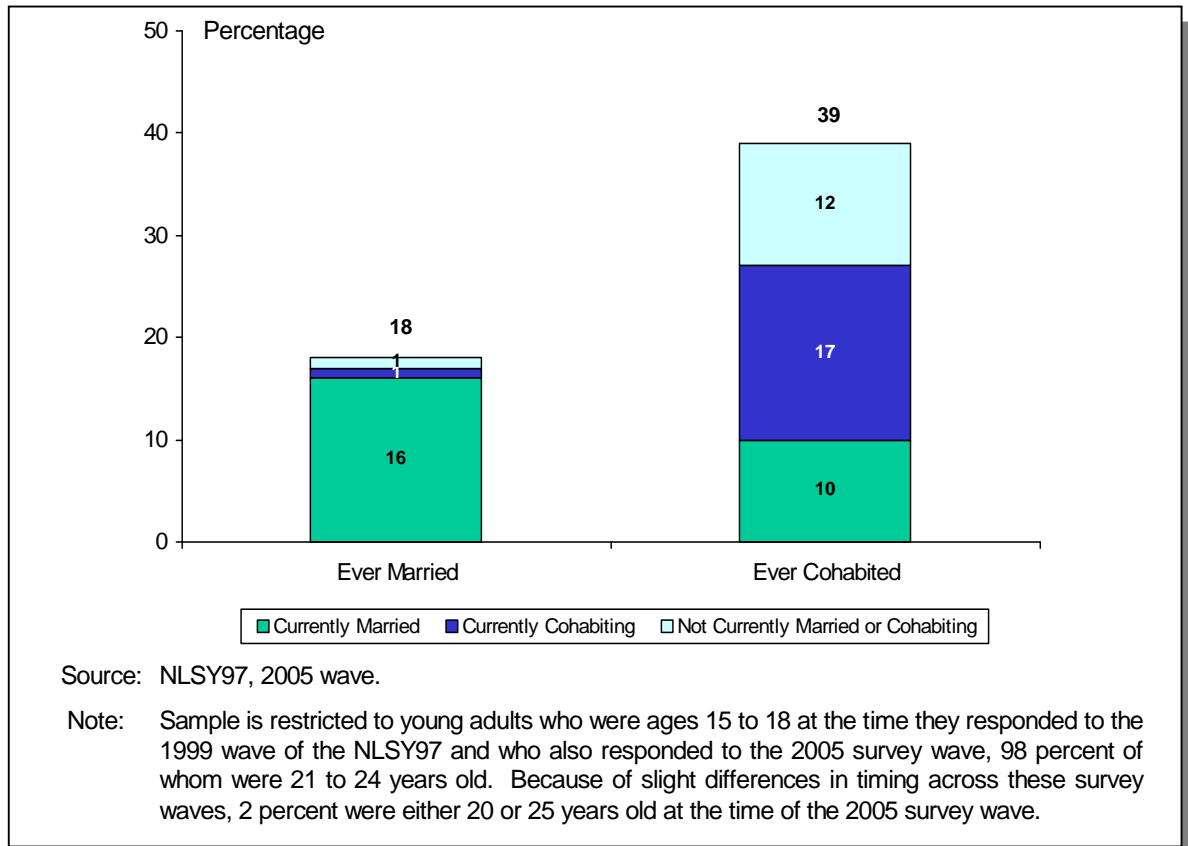
African Americans are somewhat less likely than those in other racial and ethnic groups to be in a romantic relationship as young adults. Among our sample of 21-to-24 year olds, 55 percent of African Americans reported being in a romantic relationship, compared with 62 percent of whites and 63 percent of Hispanics (Figure IV.1). African Americans are

particularly unlikely to be married as young adults. Among our sample, 7 percent of African Americans were married in their early 20s, compared with 18 percent of whites and 17 percent of Hispanics.

- **Cohabitation is relatively common among those in their early 20s and much more common than marriage. Unlike marriage, cohabiting relationships are fairly fluid.**

Cohabitation is much more common than marriage among young adults. Among those in our sample, 39 percent had ever cohabited by the time they were in their early 20s, while 18 percent had ever married (Figure IV.2). Data from other studies suggest that the phenomenon of young adults being more likely to cohabit than to marry may be a fairly recent one, since marriage rates for young adults have declined substantially in recent decades while cohabitation rates have increased. The proportion of 20 to 24 year-olds who had ever married declined from over 50 percent in the early 1970s to just under 20 percent by 2003 (Fields 2004). In contrast, the proportion of women in their early 20s who have ever cohabited increased from less than 30 percent in the late 1980s to just over 43 percent in 2002 (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Chandra et al. 2005).

**Figure IV.2 Marriage and Cohabitation Status of Young Adults Ages 21 to 24**



Transitions out of cohabiting relationships are common among young adults. For example, 17 percent of the young adults in our sample reported currently living with a romantic partner at the time of the 2005 interview, whereas 39 percent reported that they had ever lived with a romantic partner (Figure IV.2). In other words, 22 percent (39 percent minus 17 percent) had been in a cohabiting relationship that had ended—either through marriage or through the relationship breaking up—and had not entered a new cohabiting relationship. In many cases, these transitions out of cohabitation are transitions into marriage. Among the 22 percent of sample members who had cohabited in the past but were no longer doing so, just under half (10 percent of the full sample) were married at the time of the interview (Figure IV.2). Other work has also found that cohabitation is a fairly fluid arrangement. One study, for example, found that half of cohabiting relationships end in one year or less, either through marriage or relationship breakup (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

In contrast, transitions out of marriage are relatively uncommon among young adults. Only about 2 percent of all sample members—and about 1 in 10 of those who had ever married—had separated or divorced at the time of the 2005 interview. In contrast, about a third of sample members who had ever cohabited were no longer cohabiting and had not married at the time of the interview, suggesting that cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages.

We find that, among our sample members, most marriages were preceded by cohabitation. Among those who reported they were currently married, about 60 percent indicated that they had cohabited at some point.<sup>4</sup> However, most sample members who had cohabited were not currently married. Among those who had ever cohabited, 25 percent were married at the time of the 2005 interview. Of course, this does not imply that only 25 percent of cohabiting relationships will result in marriage. An additional 45 percent were still cohabiting at the time of the 2005 survey, and some of those relationships could lead to marriage in time.

#### **HOW DO YOUNG ADULTS RATE THE QUALITY OF THEIR ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS?**

It is not only the type of romantic relationship, but also the quality of those relationships, that has important implications for young adults. Those in troubled or conflicted relationships may experience negative repercussions, such as compromised psychological and even physical health. Marital quality, typically the focus of past research, has been linked with mental health, cardiovascular health, and immune functioning (Choi and Marks 2008; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001; Proulx, Helms, and Buehler 2007).

In this section, we examine the way in which the young adults in our sample rated the quality of their romantic relationships. We examine how those who are married, cohabiting, and dating rated their relationships and how these perceptions of relationship quality vary by gender and by racial and ethnic groups. In the 2005 wave of the NLSY97, respondents who

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<sup>4</sup> We do not distinguish here whether individuals were cohabiting with their spouse-to-be or with another partner.

were married, cohabiting, or dating were asked to rate their relationship on a 0-to-10 scale in terms of closeness, commitment, caring, and conflict.<sup>5</sup> To create a single measure of relationship quality, we averaged these four responses to create a relationship quality index that ranged from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating the highest quality relationships.

- **Young adults typically rate their relationship quality as high.**  
**Relationship quality is similar for cohabitators and those who are married.**

Married and cohabiting young adults generally consider their relationships to be of high quality. For both those who were married and those who were cohabiting, the average reported quality rating was 8.8 out of 10 (Table IV.1). The ratings of those who were cohabiting and those who were married were also very similar when we examined responses to each of the four questions that make up the relationship quality scale separately. This result is somewhat at odds with past research, which has found that cohabitators tend to have poorer relationship quality than couples who are married (Nock 1995).

**Table IV.1 Average Relationship Quality Rating Among Young Adults Ages 21 to 24, by Relationship Type and Race/Ethnicity**

	All	White	African American	Hispanic
Daters	8.1	8.2*	7.9*	8.1
Cohabitators	8.8	8.8*	8.6	8.6*
Married	8.8	8.9*	8.5*	8.6*

Source: NLSY97, 2005 wave.

Note: Figures represent the average response to four questions in which respondents were asked to rate four aspects of relationship quality on a 0-to-10 scale. Higher scores represent higher quality relationships. See text for more details.

For all racial/ethnic groups presented, the differences in the average quality rating between those who are married and those who are cohabiting is not statistically significant. For all racial/ethnic groups presented, the differences in the average quality rating between daters and cohabitators and between daters and those who are married is statistically significant.

\*Difference between this group and other racial/ethnic groups statistically significant at the .05 level.

<sup>5</sup> Married and cohabiting respondents were asked the following four questions: (1) How close do you feel towards [your partner]? (2) How much do you feel that [your partner] cares about you? (3) How committed would you say you are towards [your partner]? (4) On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no conflict and 10 is a lot of conflict, how would you rate your relationship? Conflict was reverse-coded in the summary measure. Similar relationship quality questions also were asked of respondents who identified a dating partner. The questions on closeness, caring, and conflict were identical to those asked of married and cohabiting people. For the commitment question, daters were asked, on a scale of 0 to 10, how likely it was they would be with their dating partner in six months.



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We offer two possible explanations for the similarity in reported relationship quality between couples who are married and those who are cohabiting, even though earlier research has found substantial differences in relationship quality between these two groups. First, given the youth of the sample, many of these young adults may be cohabiting to “try out” their relationship with someone they are considering marrying. Past work has found that cohabitators with plans to marry have similar relationship quality to those who are already married (Brown and Booth 1996). The NLSY97 does not ask the marital intentions of all cohabitators, so we were not able to test this possibility with our sample. Second, these results may indicate a generational shift. As cohabitation becomes more common and accepted, it is possible that those who cohabit may have higher relationship quality than past cohabitators. Recent work, however, suggests that cohabitation is far more likely to end than marriage, even among younger people (for example, Osborne et al. 2007) and may be becoming less stable over time (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Thus, even if relationship quality is converging for cohabiting and married young adults, this may not translate into greater stability for cohabitators.

- **Young adults who are dating report lower relationship quality than those who are married or cohabiting.**

Young adults who are dating rate their relationship quality somewhat lower than married and cohabiting young adults do. Their relationship quality responses averaged 8.1 out of 10, compared to 8.8 for married and cohabiting adults (Table IV.1). We also examined relationship quality, omitting the question on commitment, because this question was asked somewhat differently for those who were dating.<sup>6</sup> The gap between married and cohabiting young adults and daters narrowed somewhat but remained statistically significant, with an average rating of 8.0 for daters and 8.5 for the married and cohabiting (not shown). Thus, it is not just the level of commitment that distinguishes the relationship quality of daters from that of married and cohabiting young adults. Given the more casual nature of dating, it is not surprising that the reported quality is somewhat lower than for married or cohabiting adults.

Across all relationship types, relationship quality ratings were very similar for men and women (not shown). They differed somewhat by racial and ethnic groups, however. In particular, white young adults rated their relationship quality more highly than young adults in other racial and ethnic groups did (Table IV.1).

### **WHICH YOUNG ADULTS ARE MOST LIKELY TO MARRY AND COHABIT?**

Until this point, we have examined whether various factors, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and income, are related to relationship behaviors and outcomes. Certain of these characteristics, however, may be linked with each other. For example, what if

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<sup>6</sup> See footnote 5 for an explanation of the difference in the wording of this question across relationship types.

adolescents who grew up with single parents and those who grew up in low-income households are less likely to marry? Living with a single parent makes growing up in a low-income household more likely. Thus, to determine which has a stronger association with marriage, we need to disentangle the link between family composition and income level. Statistical techniques can be used to separate the influence of one factor from another and to predict the likelihood of the outcome in question for a person who has a particular characteristic, but who otherwise has the average characteristics of all adults in the sample.

In this section, we analyze how various characteristics in adolescence relate to the likelihood that individuals will marry or cohabit as young adults controlling for other background characteristics. We consider the predictive power of the adolescent characteristics discussed in chapters II and III, since these may be important precursors to later behaviors. Using statistical methods to control for various demographic and background characteristics, we examine whether these young adults had ever cohabited or married by 2005.

- **Women are more likely than men to marry and cohabit in their early 20s.**

Even with other factors controlled, women are more likely to marry and cohabit than men as young adults. For example, 20 percent of women married, compared to 12 percent of men (Table IV.2). Further, 45 percent of women had cohabited by their early 20s, compared with 31 percent of young men. As with the earlier results that did not adjust for background characteristics, this difference reflects the pattern that young women often marry or cohabit with somewhat older men.

- **African Americans are less likely than those in other racial and ethnic groups to marry or cohabit in young adulthood. White young adults are more likely than others to cohabit before marriage.**

African Americans are less likely to marry in early adulthood than those in other racial and ethnic groups, a difference that is statistically significant even after adjusting for background differences across these groups. For example, 7 percent of African Americans had married by their early 20s, compared with 21 percent of whites and 19 percent of Hispanics (Table IV.2).

Although whites and Hispanics have similar rates of marriage in early adulthood, their paths to marriage are somewhat different. Among our sample members, whites were more likely than Hispanics to have cohabited before marriage—15 percent of whites had both married and cohabited, compared with 10 percent of Hispanics (Table IV.2). African Americans were particularly unlikely to have both married and cohabited, with 3 percent in this group. However, their likelihood of cohabiting without marriage is similar to those in other racial and ethnic groups, 27 percent compared with 29 percent for whites and Hispanics.

**Table IV.2 Probability of Marrying or Cohabiting Among Young Adults Ages 21 to 24**

	Percentage with Characteristic	Predicted Probability of:				
		Marrying	Cohabiting	Marrying without Cohabiting	Marrying and Cohabiting	Cohabiting without Marrying
<b>Overall</b>	100	18	39	7	10	28
<b>Demographics</b>						
Gender						
Female	49	20*	45*	8*	13*	32*
Male	51	12	31	5	7	24
Race and Ethnicity						
White	68	21	43	7	15	29
African American	15	7*	30*	4*	3*	27
Hispanic	13	19	39	10*	10*	29
<b>Geographic Location</b>						
Lived in Rural Area as a Teen						
Yes	23	21*	36	9*	12*	24*
No	77	15	39	6	9	29
Census Region as a Teen						
Northeast	17	9	35	4	5	30
Midwest	26	17*	41*	7*	10*	31
South	36	19*	36	8*	12*	25*
West	22	17*	40*	6	10*	30
<b>Family Background</b>						
Household Composition as a Teen, Lived with:						
Married biological parents	51	16	32	8	8	24
Remarried parents	13	19	46*	6	13*	33*
Formerly married parent	22	16	41*	7	10	32*
Never-married parent	3	9*	34	4*	5	29
Neither biological parent	8	22*	52*	5*	17*	35*
Household Income as a Teen						
Below 200% of poverty	40	19*	40*	7	12*	28
200% of poverty or above	60	14	36	6	8	28
<b>Adolescent Behaviors and Expectations</b>						
Dropped Out of High School						
Yes	18	18	50*	4*	13*	37*
No	82	16	35	7	9	26
Dated by Age 16						
Yes	90	17	39*	6	10	29*
No	10	16	28	8	8	20
Had Sex by Age 16						
Yes	50	18	47*	5*	12*	35*
No	50	15	32	7	8	24
Perceived Likelihood of Marriage in Next Five Years						
< 50 percent chance	46	13	33	5	8	24
50 percent chance	26	12	39*	5	7	32*
>50 percent chance	28	25*	45*	11*	14*	31*

**Sample Size = 5,252**

**Table IV.2 (continued)**

Source: NLSY97, 1999 and 2005 waves.

Note: The predicted probabilities presented here are based on the results from estimating a set of logit regression models. They represent the likelihood of the outcome in question for a person who has the particular characteristic in the table but who otherwise has the average characteristics of all adults in the sample. In addition to the characteristics included in the table, the model included and controlled for "other" race/ethnicity, whether the respondent lived with cohabiting parents in 1999, age in 2005, and whether the respondent had never had sex by 2005.

Tests of statistical significance reported here refer to the difference between the predicted probability of adults with the particular characteristic and the predicted probability for those in the reference category in each group. For each characteristic, the reference category is indicated by italics.

\*Differences between the predicted probability for sample members with this characteristic and for those in the italicized reference category statistically significant at the .05 level.

These findings suggest that cohabitation may play a different role in the lives of whites, Hispanics, and African Americans. Although the likelihood of cohabitation without marriage is similar across race and ethnicity, whites appear to be more likely to use cohabitation as a step toward marriage. Other work also suggests that cohabitation is more likely to be a precursor to marriage for whites (Phillips and Sweeney 2005). Among cohabitators, whites are more likely to marry their partners than African Americans (Brown 2000). Hispanics are more likely than whites to have a child while cohabiting, and to indicate the birth was intended (Manning 2001, Musick 2002).

- **Those who grew up in rural areas and outside the Northeast are more likely to marry as young adults.**

Young adults who grew up in rural areas are more likely to marry than those who grew up in more urban areas. Among sample members who grew up in a rural area, 21 percent had married by their early 20s, compared with 15 percent for those who did not grow up in a rural area (Table IV.2). The likelihood of marrying as a young adult also varies by region of the country, with those who grew up in the Northeast particularly unlikely to marry as young adults. Among young adults who grew up in the Northeast, 9 percent were married by their early 20s, compared with 17 to 19 percent for those who grew up in other regions of the country. Southerners are the most likely to marry as young adults, with 19 percent having married by their early 20s. They are also somewhat less likely than those in other regions of the country to cohabit without marrying (25 percent versus 30 to 31 percent).

- **Young adults who grew up with married biological parents are less likely to cohabit. Those who grew up with neither biological parent have high rates of marriage and cohabitation as young adults.**

Growing up with married biological parents is associated with a reduced likelihood of cohabitation in young adulthood. Among those who lived with married biological parents as teenagers, 32 percent had ever cohabited by their early 20s, compared with 46 percent among those who lived with remarried parents as teens and 41 percent of those who lived

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with a divorced or widowed parent who had not remarried (Table IV.2). Cohabitation may seem more familiar to young adults with divorced parents if they experienced their parents' subsequent cohabitation. Research suggests that about 20 percent of children whose parents were married at the time of their birth will live in a cohabiting family before age 16 (Bumpass and Lu 2000). These early experiences may increase the likelihood that children from divorced families will grow up to form their own cohabiting relationships.

Those who grew up with a single, never-married parent are particularly unlikely to marry as young adults. Among sample members in this group, 9 percent had married by their early 20s, compared with 18 percent for the full sample (Table IV.2). For other family types, the structure of the family of origin is not strongly linked with the likelihood of marriage in early adulthood. The likelihood of an early marriage is similar for those who grew up with married biological parents, remarried parents, and divorced or widowed parents who did not remarry. We may find the association between family structure and marriage changes as young adults age. It is possible that those who lived with married biological parents will marry in later years at a rate higher than those from other family structures. Alternatively, the family structure in which young adults lived in their adolescence may be more strongly linked in their later years with divorce than with the likelihood of marriage. Young adults from different types of families may be equally likely to marry over time, but research has shown that those with divorced parents are less likely to stay married (Amato 1996; Teachman 2002).

Young adults who lived with neither biological parent as teenagers are particularly likely to marry and cohabit. Among sample members in this group, 22 percent had married by their early 20s (compared with 18 percent for all sample members) and 52 percent had cohabited (compared with 39 percent for all sample members, Table IV.2). This result suggests that those who grow up with neither biological parent may have a stronger interest than other young adults in forming their own family and thus be particularly likely to form serious romantic relationships in early adulthood. It may also be that, in some cases, those who were not living with either parent as teens were already cohabiting or married and those relationships have persisted into early adulthood.<sup>7</sup>

- **Those who grew up in low-income households are more likely to marry as young adults.**

Young adults who lived in low-income households as teenagers are more likely to marry than those who lived in higher-income households. Among young adults who grew up in low-income households, 19 percent had married by their early 20s, compared with 14

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<sup>7</sup> Among sample members who were living with neither biological parent in 1999, 6 percent were married and 16 percent were cohabiting at that time. In contrast, among sample members living in other family structures in 1999, only one percent were either married or cohabiting at that time.

percent for those who lived in higher-income households (Table IV.2).<sup>8</sup> Those who grew up in low-income households were particularly likely to have both cohabited and married by the time they were young adults (12 percent compared with 8 percent for those from higher-income households).

- **High school dropouts are more likely to cohabit as young adults than are those who finished high school; however, they are equally likely to marry.**

Young adults who have dropped out of high school are substantially more likely to cohabit as young adults than are those who finished high school.<sup>9</sup> Among our sample members, 50 percent of dropouts had cohabited by the time they were in their early 20s, compared with 35 percent of high school graduates (Table IV.2). In contrast, the likelihood of marriage in early adulthood is about the same for dropouts and graduates, with 18 percent of dropouts and 16 percent of graduates having married by this point.

Other work has found a strong link between education and cohabitation. Some have argued that the increase in cohabitation over the past few decades has been driven by increases in cohabitation among the less educated (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Cohabitation may be a particularly attractive option for those with less education, since it provides a means of pooling economic resources for those with less income. High school dropouts may be hesitant to take the step from cohabitation to marriage however, because of their tenuous economic circumstances. Past research has consistently found that the likelihood of marriage is positively related to economic well-being (Clarkberg 1999; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Xie et al. 2003). Similarly, cohabiting men with higher earnings are more likely to marry and less likely to break up with their partners than their lower-earning peers (Smock and Manning 1997).

- **Romantic and sexual relationships in adolescence are positively linked with cohabitation in early adulthood. They are not associated with the likelihood of marriage, however.**

Early initiation of romantic and sexual relationships is related to the likelihood of cohabitation in early adulthood, but not to the likelihood of marriage. For example, 39 percent of young adults in our sample who had dated by age 16 cohabited in their early 20s, compared with 28 percent of those who started dating later (Table IV.2). In contrast, similar percentages of both groups were married by their early 20s. Engaging in sexual activity early in adolescence is even more strongly associated with the likelihood of cohabitation than early dating is. Among those who had had sex by age 16, 47 percent cohabited as young adults, compared with 32 percent of those who initiated sexual activity at a later point. As with

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<sup>8</sup> We use the income status of the household in 1999, when our sample was between the ages of 15 and 18 (Chapter II). Because economic circumstances can change, this measure may not capture all sample members who lived in a low-income household at other points during adolescence.

<sup>9</sup> Dropouts are defined as those who have not earned a high school diploma, even if they have earned a GED certificate.

early dating, early sexual activity was not associated with the likelihood of marriage in young adulthood. However, those who postponed initial sexual activity were somewhat more likely than other young adults to have married without initially cohabiting (7 versus 5 percent).

Why might early dating and sexual activity be associated with the likelihood of cohabitation in early adulthood? Those who postpone dating and sexual activity may have more traditional views concerning romantic relationships, which in turn may make them less likely to cohabit as young adults. Alternatively, those who postpone dating and sexual activity may have less interest in romantic relationships, making cohabitation less likely.

- **Those with high expectations of marriage as teenagers are more likely to marry and cohabit as young adults.**

In the 2000 wave of the NLSY97, adolescents were asked to rate the likelihood that they would marry in the next five years. By examining their marital and cohabitation status in the 2005 wave of the NLSY97, we are able to examine how closely their expectations aligned with their actual relationship outcomes.

Teenagers who reported a greater than 50 percent chance of marriage in the next five years were more likely than other teens to marry over the subsequent five-year period; however, most did not marry during this interval. Among this group, 25 percent married over the next five years, compared with 12 to 13 percent among those who had lower expectations of the likelihood of marriage (Table IV.2). Teens who had expressed a high chance of marriage were also more likely than other teens to cohabit over the next five years (45 percent, compared with 33 to 39 percent among those with lower expectations of the likelihood of marriage). This latter result suggests that adolescent marriage expectations may reflect a more general desire to form a committed or serious relationship, rather than a specific desire for marriage at an early age.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS**

In this chapter, we have used data from the 2005 wave of the NLSY97 to examine the romantic relationships of our NLSY97 sample members in early adulthood, when they were 21 to 24 years old. We find that most of these young adults were in a romantic relationship in their early 20s, but relatively few were married. Cohabitation was much more common than marriage for these young adults, with 39 percent having cohabited at some point, compared with 18 percent who had ever married. Young adults in cohabiting relationships tended to rate their relationship quality as high and reported relationship quality levels similar to those of young adults who were married. Even so, transitions out of cohabiting relationships were more common than transitions out of marriage. About a third of sample members who had ever cohabited were neither cohabiting nor married at the time of the 2005 interview. In contrast, only about 1 in 10 of those who had ever married was no longer married at this point.

We find that the likelihood of marriage and cohabitation varies substantially across different groups of young adults. In particular, women are much more likely than men to

marry and cohabit in early adulthood, reflecting the pattern that women often marry at younger ages than men do and often form romantic relationships with men who are somewhat older than they are. We also find that African Americans are less likely than other racial and ethnic groups to marry or cohabit in young adulthood. The likelihood of marriage and cohabitation for young adults also varies by their family structure growing up. For example, those who grew up with a single never-married parent are particularly unlikely to marry as young adults. We also find that those who lived with two married biological parents as teens are less likely than other teens to cohabit as young adults. Finally, we find that the likelihood of cohabitation among young adults is associated with certain adolescent risk behaviors (in particular, early sexual activity and dropping out of school); however, the likelihood of marriage is not.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

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This report has examined teenagers' attitudes and experiences related to romantic relationships and marriage. It has examined these attitudes and experiences using data from four large national surveys: (1) the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), (2) Monitoring the Future (MTF), (3) the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), and (4) the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Using these four data sets, we have focused on teenagers' initial exposure to and experiences with romantic relationships, as well as their general attitudes toward marriage. Using data from the 2005 wave of the NLSY97, we also analyzed marriage and relationship patterns among a recent cohort of young adults and identified factors in adolescence associated with the likelihood of choosing various relationship pathways in early adulthood. We summarize these findings briefly below. We end the report with some recommendations for future research.

#### OVERVIEW OF MAIN RESULTS

Teens live in a mix of family structures, but most live with married parents—50 percent with both biological parents and 13 percent with a parent who has remarried. The likelihood of living with two married biological parents varies substantially across various subgroups of teens, with African-American and low-income teens particularly unlikely to live with married biological parents. We also find that most teens view their parents' marriages positively, particularly those living with both their biological parents. Teens with estranged parents hold less positive views of the quality of their parents' relationship.

Most teens date at some point. Among our NLSY97 sample members, 74 percent of 15 year olds and 94 percent of 18 year olds report having dated. Sexual activity is less common than dating, but is relatively common among older teens. Among 18 year olds, 65 percent report having had sexual intercourse. We also find that high school students are dating less than they did 15 to 20 years ago and that recent trends suggest that they are delaying sexual activity until later in high school.

We also examined teenagers' attitudes and expectations concerning romantic relationships and marriage. We find that most teens express strong general support for marriage and believe it is better to get married than stay single. Among high school seniors, most say they feel well prepared for marriage and expect to get married one day. However,

while support for marriage remains strong among teens, a growing proportion approves of cohabitation before marriage and wants to delay getting married until later in life.

Teens' attitudes toward marriage differ by gender and family background characteristics. In general, teenage boys have more positive attitudes toward marriage than teenage girls do; however, boys are more likely than girls to want to delay marriage. Teens' attitudes toward marriage are also closely linked with their family structure, with support for marriage strongest among teens who are living with both of their biological parents. Support for marriage is also stronger among teens living in rural areas.

Finally, we used data from the 2005 wave of the NLSY97 to examine the romantic relationships of our NLSY97 sample members in early adulthood, when they were 21 to 24 years old. We find that most of these young adults were in a romantic relationship in their early 20s, but relatively few were married. Cohabitation was much more common than marriage for these young adults, with 39 percent having cohabited at some point, compared with 18 percent who had ever married. Young adults in cohabiting relationships tended to rate their relationship quality as high and reported relationship quality levels similar to those of young adults who were married. Even so, transitions out of cohabiting relationships were more common than transitions out of marriage.

The likelihood of marriage and cohabitation varies substantially across different groups of young adults. In particular, women are much more likely than men to marry and cohabit in early adulthood, reflecting the pattern that women often marry at younger ages than men do and often form romantic relationships with men who are somewhat older than they are. We also find that African Americans are less likely than other racial and ethnic groups to marry or cohabit in young adulthood. The likelihood of marriage and cohabitation for young adults also varies by their family structure growing up. For example, those who grew up with a single never-married parent are particularly unlikely to marry as young adults. We also find that those who lived with two married biological parents as teens are less likely than other teens to cohabit as young adults. Finally, we find that the likelihood of cohabitation among young adults is positively associated with certain adolescent risk behaviors (in particular, early sexual activity and dropping out of school). However, these behaviors are not associated with the likelihood of marriage during early adulthood.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

We end this report with a few thoughts on promising directions for future research. As reported in Chapter II, our analysis of MTF data indicates that the likelihood of dating among high school students has declined substantially in recent years. As noted in that chapter, it is possible that this decline represents a change in adolescent vocabulary rather than a change in adolescent behavior. In particular, what the term "dating" means to teens may have changed over time, which may have contributed to the decline in the proportion who report that they date. Future research using more qualitative methods could examine whether this is indeed the case. In addition, if teenage dating is in fact declining, additional research could further an understanding of the reasons for this decline and what its implications may be for the likelihood that today's adolescents will go on to form serious

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romantic relationships and marry as adults. Our examination of MTF data also reveals evidence that high school students may be delaying sexual activity until later in high school. It would be helpful to examine whether other national data sets, preferably those that include all teenagers (not just those enrolled in school), confirm this pattern. If this pattern is confirmed, future research could explore more fully how and why patterns of teenage sexual activity have changed in recent years.

As noted in Chapter III, the best data on teenage attitudes toward marriage come from the MTF study. However, these data refer only to high school students and do not include the substantial fraction of teens that have dropped out of school. Better information on general attitudes toward marriage that includes all teens, including high school dropouts, would be useful. In addition, future studies could examine how teens' general attitudes toward marriage relate to their later relationship outcomes in adulthood. In particular, future research could explore how changing adolescent attitudes toward cohabitation may be influencing cohabitation and marriage trends among young adults. Recent studies have found that teens' early experiences with romantic relationships can have long-term consequences for their chances of forming and sustaining healthy adult marriage (Raley et al. 2007). However, there is less evidence linking teens' general attitudes toward cohabitation and marriage with their adult relationship outcomes. Research in this area is important for determining whether adolescent relationship skills programs can influence adult relationship outcomes by focusing on teens' attitudes toward marriage.

In Chapter IV, we report findings based on data from the 2005 wave of the NLSY97 that indicate that cohabiting and married young adults report very similar levels of relationship quality. As noted in that chapter, this result differs from the findings of previous research, which has found that cohabitators tend to have poorer relationship quality than couples who are married (Nock 1995). It would be helpful to use other data, including future waves of the NLSY97, to explore this result further and determine whether there has been a generational shift in this pattern.

Finally, future research in this area could explore more rigorously how teens' attitudes, expectations, and circumstances influence their later relationship outcomes as adults. The evidence presented in this report is based primarily on descriptive analysis that examines how adolescents' attitudes and relationship experiences differ across groups defined by various demographic and personal characteristics. These methods provide a useful description of the attitudes and relationship experiences of U.S. adolescents; however, additional research using more rigorous research methods would help to determine whether there are causal links between teens' early relationship experiences and attitudes and their relationship pathways as adults. As additional waves of the NLSY97 become available that follow this cohort further into adulthood, this more detailed analysis of the link between teenage attitudes and experiences and adult relationship outcomes will become more fruitful.



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