

PewResearchCenter Publications

The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Families

November 18, 2010

Executive Summary

The transformative trends of the past 50 years that have led to a sharp decline in marriage and a rise of new family forms have been shaped by attitudes and behaviors that differ by class, age and race, according to a new Pew Research Center nationwide survey, conducted in association with *TIME magazine*, and complemented by an analysis of demographic and economic data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

A new "marriage gap" in the United States is increasingly aligned with a growing income gap.

Marriage, while declining among all groups, remains the norm for adults with a college education and good income but is now markedly less prevalent among those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder.

The survey finds that those in this less-advantaged group are as likely as others to want to marry, but they place a higher premium on economic security as a condition for marriage.

The survey also finds striking differences by generation. In 1960, two-thirds (68%) of all twenty-somethings were married. In 2008, just 26% were.

How many of today's youth will eventually marry is an open question. For now, the survey finds that the young are much more inclined than their elders to view

cohabitation without marriage and other new family forms -- such as same-sex marriage and interracial marriage -- in a positive light.

Even as marriage shrinks, family -- in all its emerging varieties -- remains resilient. The survey finds that Americans have an expansive definition of what constitutes a family. And the vast majority of adults consider their own family to be the most important, most satisfying element of their lives.

Here is a summary of the key findings of the report:

The Class-Based Decline in Marriage

About half (52%) of all adults in this country were married in 2008; back in 1960, seven-in-ten (72%) were.

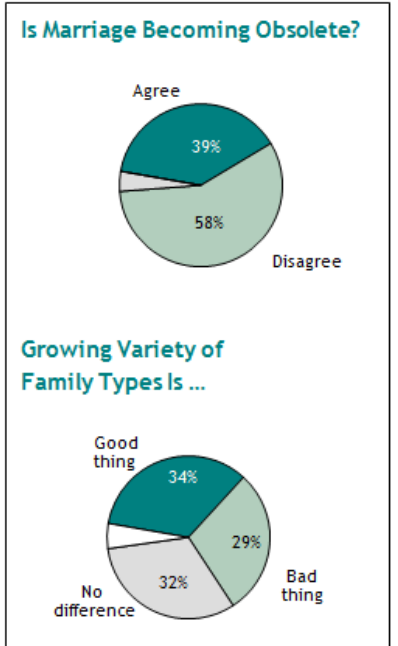
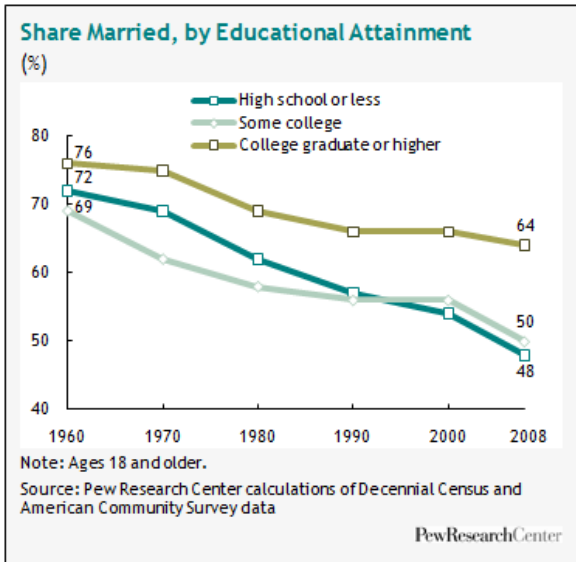
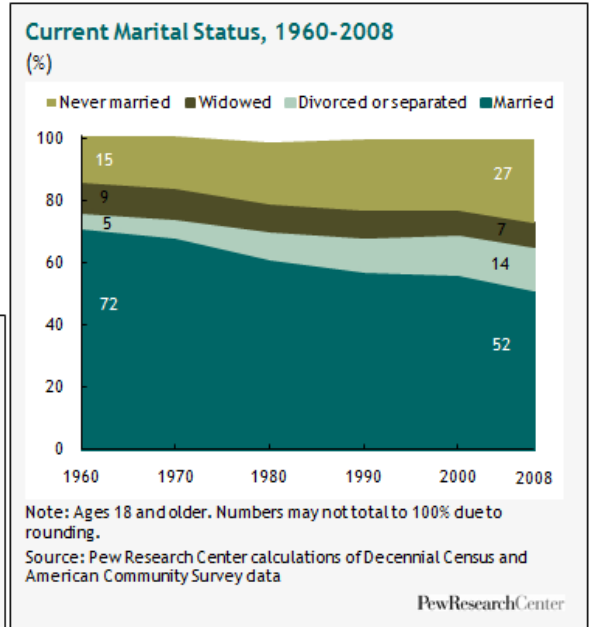
This decline has occurred along class lines. In 2008, a 16-percentage-point gap separated marriage rates of college graduates (64%) and of those with a high school diploma or less (48%). In 1960, this gap had been just four percentage points (76% vs. 72%).

The survey finds that those with a high school diploma or less are just as likely as those with a college degree to say they want to marry. But they place a higher premium than college graduates (38% vs. 21%) on financial stability as a very important reason to marry.

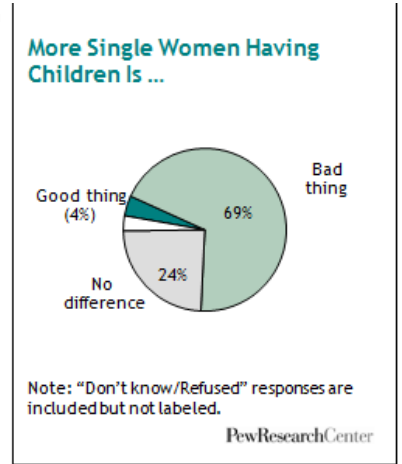
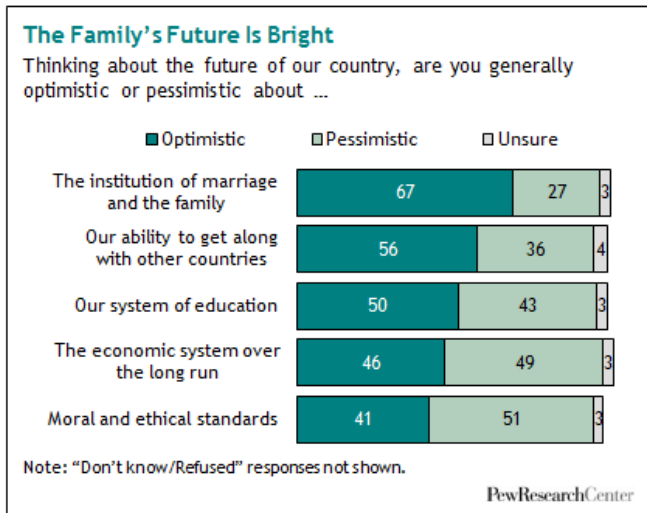
Is Marriage Becoming Obsolete?

Nearly four-in-ten survey respondents (39%) say that it is; in 1978 when *TIME magazine* posed this question to registered voters, just 28% agreed. Those most likely to agree include those who are a part of the phenomenon (62% of cohabiting parents) as well as those most likely to be troubled by it (42% of self-described conservatives).

Despite these growing uncertainties, Americans are more upbeat about the future of marriage and family (67% say

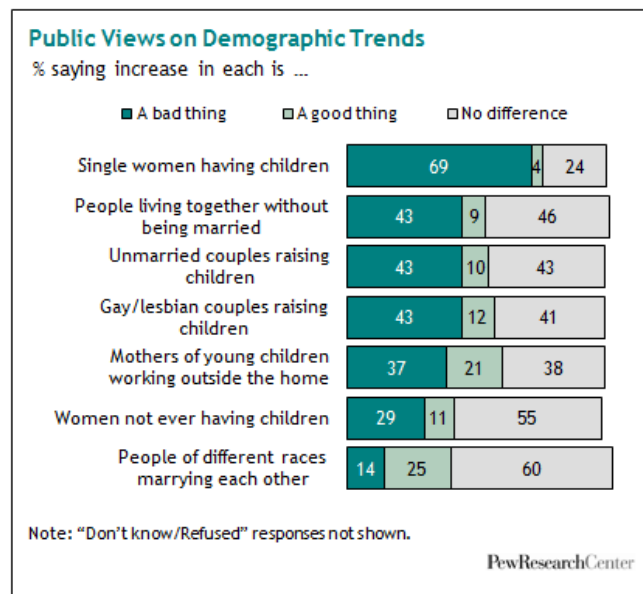


they are optimistic) than about the future of the country's educational system (50% optimistic), its economic system (46% optimistic) or its morals and ethics (41% optimistic).



An Ambivalent Public

The public's response to changing marital norms and family forms reflects a mix of acceptance and unease. On the troubled side of the ledger: Seven-in-ten (69%) say the trend toward more single women having children is bad for society, and 61% say that a child needs both a mother and father to grow up happily. On the more accepting side, only a minority say the trends toward more cohabitation without marriage (43%), more unmarried couples raising children (43%), more gay couples raising children (43%) and more people of different races marrying (14%) are bad for society. Relatively few say any of these trends are good for society, but many say they make little difference.



Group Differences

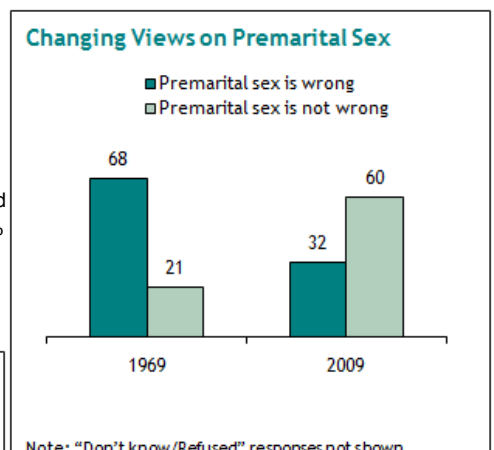
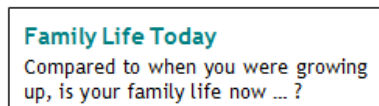
Where people stand on the various changes in marriage and family life depends to some degree on who they are and how they live.

The young are more accepting than the old of the emerging arrangements; the secular are more accepting than the religious; liberals are more accepting than conservatives; the unmarried are more accepting than the married; and, in most cases, blacks are more accepting than whites.

The net result of all these group differences is a nearly even three-way split among the full public. A third (34%) say the growing variety of family arrangements is a good thing, 29% say it is a bad thing and 32% say it makes little or no difference.

The Resilience of Families

The decline of marriage has not knocked family life off its pedestal.



Three-quarters of all adults (76%) say their family is the most important element of their life, 75% say they are "very satisfied" with their family life, and more than eight-in-ten say the family they live in now is as close as (45%) or closer than (40%) the family in which they grew up.

However, on all of these questions, married adults give more positive responses than do unmarried adults.

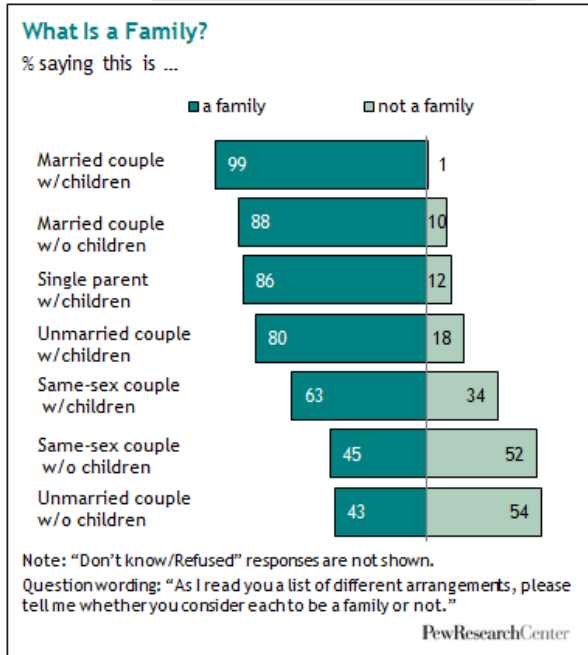
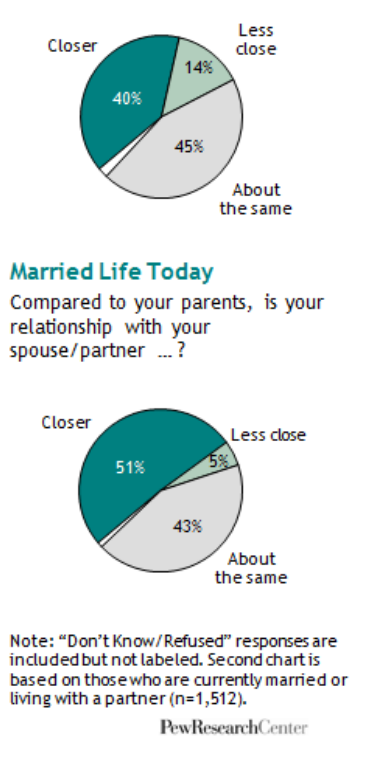
The Definition of Family

By emphatic margins, the public does not see marriage as the only path to family formation.

Fully 86% say a single parent and child constitute a family; nearly as many (80%) say an unmarried couple living together with a child is a family; and 63% say a gay or lesbian couple raising a child is a family.

The presence of children clearly matters in these definitions. If a cohabiting couple has no children, a majority of the public says they are not a family.

Marriage matters, too. If a childless couple is married, 88% consider them to be a family.

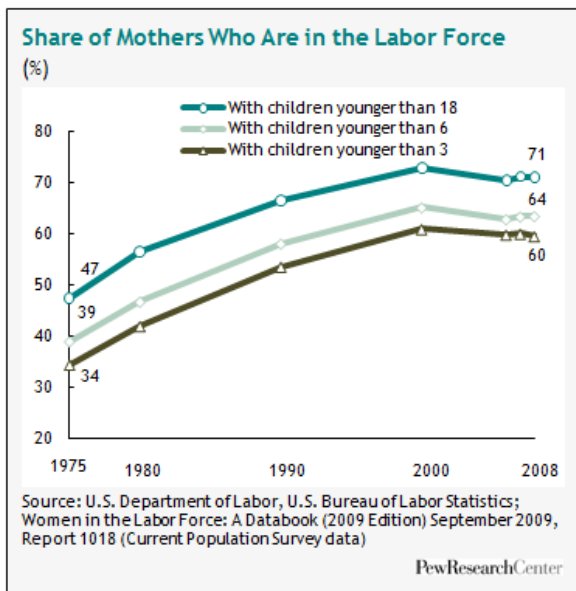


The Ties that Bind

In response to a question about whom they would assist with money or caregiving in a time of need, Americans express a greater sense of obligation toward relatives -- including relatives by way of fractured marriages -- than toward best friends. The ranking of relatives aligns in a predictable hierarchy. More survey respondents express an obligation to help out a parent (83% would feel very obligated) or grown child (77%) than say the same about a stepparent (55%) or a step or half sibling (43%). But when asked about one's best friend, just 39% say they would feel a similar sense of obligation.

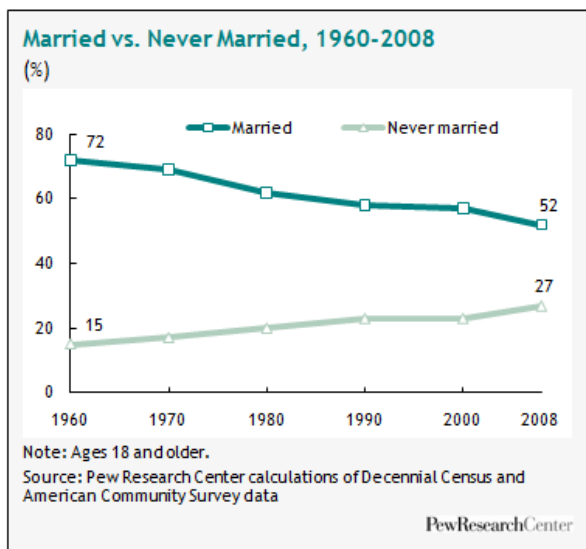
Changing Spousal Roles

In the past 50 years, women have reached near parity with men as a share of the workforce and have begun to outpace men in educational attainment. About six-in-ten wives work today, nearly double the share in 1960. There's an unresolved tension in the public's response to these changes. More than six-in-ten (62%) survey respondents endorse the modern marriage in which the husband and wife both work and both take care of the household and children; this is up from 48% in 1977. Even so, the public hasn't entirely discarded the traditional male breadwinner template for marriage. Some 67% of survey respondents say that in order to be ready for marriage, it's very important for a man to be able to support his family financially; just 33% say the same about a woman.



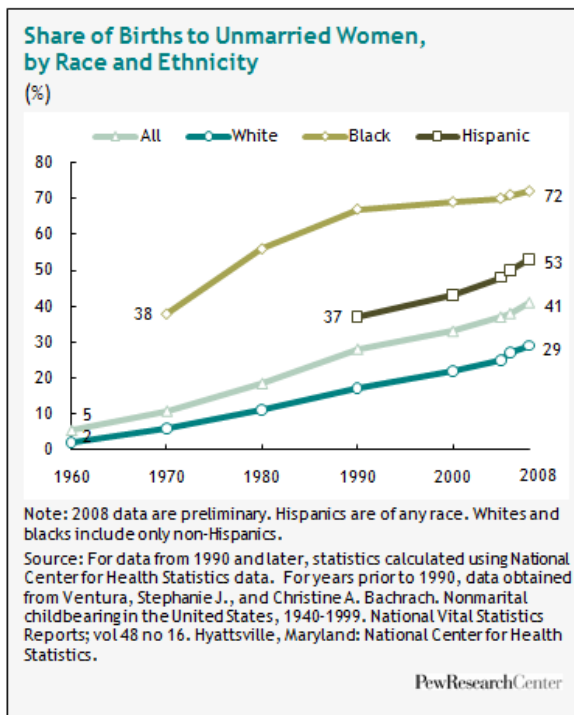
The Rise of Cohabitation

As marriage has declined, cohabitation (or living together as unmarried partners) has become more widespread, nearly doubling since 1990, according to the Census Bureau. In the Pew Research survey, 44% of all adults (and more than half of all adults ages 30 to 49) say they have cohabited at some point in their lives. Among those who have done so, about two-thirds (64%) say they thought of this living arrangement as a step toward marriage.



The Impact on Children

The share of births to unmarried women has risen dramatically over the past half century, from 5% in 1960 to 41% in 2008. There are notable differences by race: Among black women giving birth in 2008, 72% were unmarried. This compares with 53% of Hispanic women giving birth and 29% of white women. Overall, the share of children raised by a single parent is not as high as the share born to an unwed mother, but it too has risen sharply -- to 25% in 2008, up from 9% in 1960. The public believes children of single parents face more challenges than other children -- 38% say "a lot more" challenges and another 40% say "a few more" challenges. Survey respondents see even more challenges for children of gay and lesbian couples (51% say they face a lot more challenges) and children of divorce (42% say they face a lot more challenges).



In Marriage, Love Trumps Money

Far more married adults say that love (93%), making a lifelong commitment (87%) and companionship (81%) are very important reasons to get married than say the same about having children (59%) or financial stability (31%). Unmarried adults order these items the same way. However, when asked if they agree that there is "only one true love" for every person, fewer than three-in-ten (28%) survey respondents say, I do.

[Continue reading the full report at pewsocialtrends.org.](http://pewsocialtrends.org)

Also at pewsocialtrends.org, [explore a set of interactive charts](#) to see trends related to marriage, children and household composition.