

**i**ndependentWomen®

# THE DATING DECADE

*Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Swiping Right*

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with Carrie Sheffield and Neeraja Deshpande



**Independent Women** is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization advancing policies that actually enhance opportunity and well-being.

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## FOREWORD

*Like the proverbial frog in a boiling pot, Western women spent the last century welcoming developments billed as “progress” into their homes. For a long time, it was difficult to see how the fragile ecosystem of sexual relationships could be anything but better with each new invention, from hormonal birth control to baby formula to “Morning After” pills. The pandemic seemed to stop this momentum in its tracks. Already cratering institutional trust dove off a cliff. With it went years of reflexive acquiescence to shifting sexual mores—just as dating apps, virtual reality, and generative artificial intelligence promised even more dramatic change.*

*With “The Dating Decade: Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Swiping Right,” Independent Women looks under the hood of our broken sexual culture. With deep research and frank assessments, “Dating Decade” is your tour through the whirlwind ten years that the average American spends looking for love. Independent Women helps explain why we all sensed this unease and how it could get better. The collection is as practical as it is persuasive.*

*The best part of “Dating Decade” is how often it will surprise and challenge you, raising questions that too frequently go unasked, and staring down some of the most uncomfortable truths about products and ideas many of us embraced with little hesitation. These trends have radically upended our lives in a relatively short period of time, especially in the full scope of human life, and with startling consequences. From declining rates of marriage and childbearing to climbing rates of unhappiness and mental illness, the picture of womanhood in America in 2026 is needlessly bleak given all the wonderful freedoms we enjoy.*

*Honest solutions to these problems are scarce in legacy media, Hollywood, and academia. But not so in “Dating Decade,” where both the diagnostics and prescriptions are fresh and innovative. Independent Women are ahead of the curve, and will be vindicated as more and more women seek answers to the questions that weigh on their hearts and minds. Read “Dating Decade” and emerge with a sharp understanding of what went wrong, supported with reliable facts and a much-needed moral clarity in these relentlessly muddled times.*

**Emily Jashinsky**

**Host of After Party  
Senior Fellow, Independent Women**



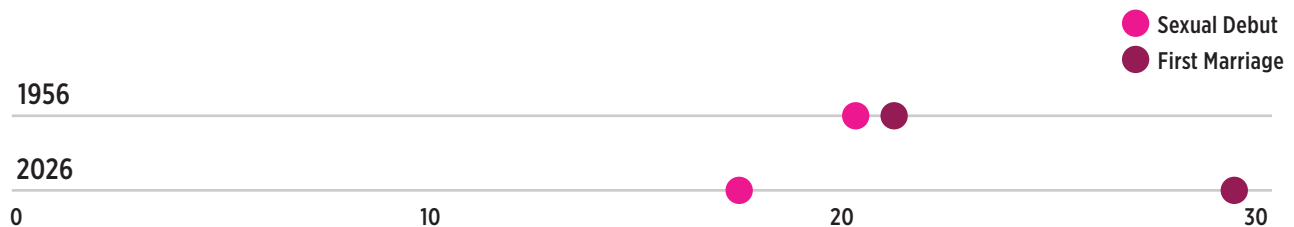
# INTRODUCTION

Most kids are born into families who love them, and early in life, our most important social connections are to our parents, siblings, and extended family. In early adulthood, making the leap from one's family of origin to one's chosen social network and ultimately one's own family is a critical change. Our attachments to our parents set the stage for our next set of social connections that will become our source of support and community in adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

This has always been part of the human experience, but in various cultures and eras of history, there has been some variance in how much freedom or decision-making power young people have in their own destinies. In ancient cultures, sons and daughters were often betrothed to partners early in life; parents made these arrangements. But today, most Americans have the freedom to pick a mate for themselves.

And the timeline is different. Due to a host of social, technological, and cultural changes, the "leap" from one's childhood family to one's marriage can become an odyssey filled with multiple serious relationships, casual encounters, or even a cohabitation or two. More and more, young Americans aren't reaching the destination for which they set out: a secure marriage of their own, with their own kids.<sup>2</sup>

## Average Age of Sexual Debut vs First Marriage



Sources: "2022-2023 NSFG: Public-Use Data Files, Codebooks, and Documentation." *U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Center for Health Statistics*, accessed Jan. 21, 2026. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg-2022-2023-puf.htm#female>; "Census Bureau Releases New Estimates on America's Families and Living Arrangements." *United States Census Bureau*, Dec. 2, 2025. [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025/families-and-living-arrangements.html?utm\\_campaign=20251202pio&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025/families-and-living-arrangements.html?utm_campaign=20251202pio&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery); "Historical Marital Status Tables." *United States Census Bureau*, December 2025. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html>; Lawrence B. Finer. "Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954-2003." *Public Health Reports*, Jan.-Feb. 2007. Vol. 122. <https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pubs/journals/2007/01/29/PRH-Vol-122-Finer.pdf>.

New national polling from Independent Women confirms that most young adults still aspire to family life. Fully 80.5% of respondents (aged 18-29) were either married (18.5%) or said they hoped to get married one day (62%), and 70% said they either had kids already (24.5%) or hoped to have them (45.4%).<sup>3</sup>

The average age at first sexual intercourse (sexual debut) is 17.4 years for women and 17.6 years for men.<sup>4</sup> The average age for first marriage is 28.4 years for women and 30.8 years for men.<sup>5</sup> This means that there is now *more than a decade* (for the average American) between one's loss of virginity and one's wedding night. This window was much shorter for our parents and grandparents, who started having sex at 20.4 years (in the 1950s), and married at 22.5 (men) and 20.1 (women) (in 1956).<sup>6</sup>

Today's young adults need help navigating this decade in between the start of their romantic journey and its culmination in marriage. Young people's mental health is poor, their views of the opposite sex are often distorted and overly negative, and they are discouraged when it comes to marriage. Many Americans are not reaching their goals of marriage and parenthood, and it's because they are in a dating wilderness, or maybe a landmine, during their 20s. Importantly, only small minorities of young adults say they definitively do not want marriage or children, underscoring that delayed family formation often reflects uncertainty, barriers, or risk aversion rather than a conscious rejection of family life.<sup>7</sup>

***A population of atomized individuals lacks mutual trust, social capital, and community, and will look increasingly to technology, consumerism, or the government to fill its wants and needs.***

Family formation is high stakes, and not just at the individual level. On a *civilizational* level, family formation matters. American fertility is below replacement levels,<sup>8</sup> meaning that without significant increases in immigration,<sup>9</sup> our population will quickly age and shrink, which will bring about a host of policy and economic challenges.<sup>10</sup> Marriage and family ties have long served as a mitigator of political polarization, and without them, we are heading for dark territory. A population of atomized individuals lacks mutual trust, social capital, and community, and will look increasingly to technology, consumerism, or the government to fill its wants and needs.

This report examines the decade of dating—often a decade of *drifting* through life—that the average American experiences today between their late teens and late twenties. Of course, some people still wait for marriage to have sex, some people have an even longer window of time between their sexual debut and marriage, and some people never marry at all.

But the gap in median ages of sexual debut and first marriage tells us that extended adolescence or an “emerging adulthood” period is common today, and the behaviors and strategies we choose during this time are crucial.<sup>11</sup> They impact the chances and stability of our future marriages, our ability to have children, the number of children we may have, and even our health and mental health. Even so, this “dating decade” is when people encounter the least guidance and the least (or worst) information about how to reach their goals to start a family.

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This report will examine what today’s dating culture looks like, what this means for women, for men, and for our politics and society more broadly. It will also present honest information about how young adults might align their behaviors and choices with their hopes, and avoid (or minimize) wasted time or emotional heartbreak along the way. Further, this report will discuss the role of older adults, parents, policymakers, and cultural institutions in creating a healthier environment for future generations to meet and mate.

In 2001, Independent Women’s Forum partnered with the Institute for American Values to study the sex and dating lives of college women. The resulting report, “Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right,” revealed a gap between young women’s hopes, desires, and reality.<sup>12</sup> Now, 25 years later, we are revisiting this topic with new information and assessing the dating and mating trends that are most influential today.

Our connections to the people closest to us—often our families—are invaluable. They improve our health, our stability, and our well-being. These relationships comfort us during distress and heighten the joy of life’s blessings and successes. We do not, and we cannot, share the same bonds with our parents throughout our lives. Most (80-90%) of the time we spend with our parents is during childhood (before age 18), which means most people spend very little time with their parents during adulthood.<sup>13</sup> We need peers and progeny if we are to continue having secure, close, social attachments in adulthood and old age. For most people throughout history, this has meant marriage and children. Most young people today are still looking for these things. And they deserve to find them.



ONE

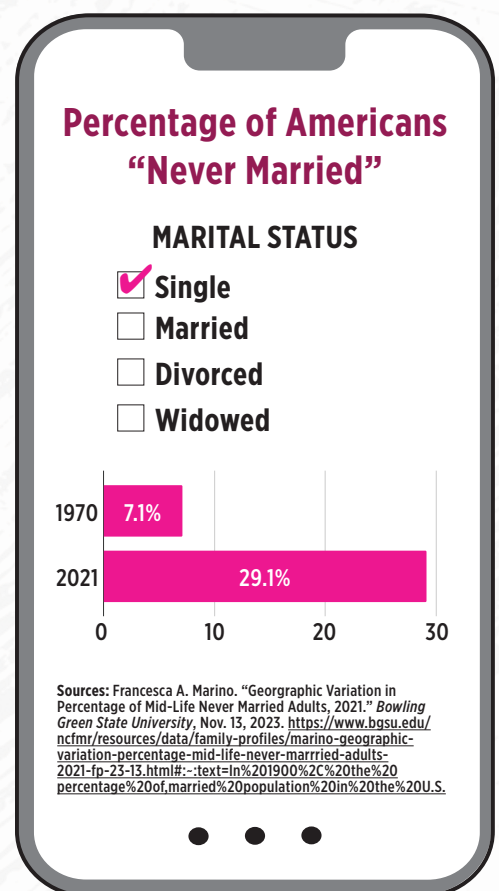
# How We Got Here: Cultural & Structural Shifts

The United States has seen many rapid social and cultural changes that have downstream effects on family formation. New technologies, social patterns, values, and economic trends all contribute to the changing landscape of dating and mating.

Furthermore, young Americans have been exposed to many mixed messages and experiences when it comes to marriage.

One key social change that has undoubtedly influenced millions of American youth is the divorce rate, which peaked in 1980 at 22.6 per 1000 married women.<sup>14</sup> Today, that rate is 14.6 per 1000. Many Millennials and members of Gen Z are children of divorce, or at least witnessed a divorce in the life of someone close to them. With prevalent social messages like “Half of all marriages end in divorce,” (although this particular statistic has been debunked)<sup>15</sup> it’s no wonder that many people became disillusioned with the institution of marriage and—either consciously or unconsciously—began to de-prioritize their pursuit of matrimony and invest more of themselves in, well, themselves.

Among young adults who are unsure about or opposed to marriage, fear of divorce emerges as a leading concern. When we asked for reasons for not desiring marriage, the top three were “People can have fulfilling relationships without marriage” (27%), “I have not found the right partner” (23.5%), and “Marriage often ends in divorce; I’d rather avoid that painful experience” (19.5%). Among women, 22.1% named fear of divorce as their primary reason for not desiring marriage.<sup>16</sup>



Much of the recent decrease in the divorce rate has to do with decreased rates of *marriage*. In other words, people can't get divorced if they aren't getting married in the first place. In 1970, only 7.1% of Americans were "never married" or single for life.<sup>17</sup> In 2021, this figure had reached 29.1%.<sup>18</sup> This means that, combined with widowed and divorced/separated people, nearly half of American adults are now single.<sup>19</sup>

How did we get here?

## **Contraception**

The birth control pill was first approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960. A study conducted from 1982 to 2010 showed that 99% of American women had used contraception at some point in their lives.<sup>20</sup>

Birth control is relevant to any discussion about family formation because of the way it separates (with increasing effectiveness) the act of sex from the risk of pregnancy. Condoms and oral birth control pills have relatively high rates of failure for "typical use" (in contrast to "perfect use"). Traditionally, about half of women with unplanned pregnancies report contraception use. But newer technologies are poised to get even closer to the promise of sex without childbearing and reduce unplanned pregnancy rates further.<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand, some young American women today are questioning the use of hormonal birth control.<sup>22</sup> But on the other hand, recent years have seen the advent (and increasingly steep uptake) of long-acting, reversible contraceptive (LARC) technologies such as intrauterine devices (IUDs) and implants. These LARCs, in contrast to traditional oral contraceptives, boast near bulletproof efficacy rates, mostly due to the near impossibility of user error. Most LARCs are hormonal, but the copper IUD is nonhormonal. The popularity of LARCs is new: In 2002, 2.4% of contraceptive users reported LARC use.<sup>23</sup> In 2018, this was up to 16%.<sup>24</sup> In part due to these new and improving technologies, teen pregnancy in the United States has seen an enormous decrease.<sup>25</sup> Sex and pregnancy are no longer as closely linked as they used to be.

This separation between sex and pregnancy—part and parcel with other changing social mores—has greatly affected relationships between men and women, especially in the pre-marriage years. When sex was more strongly associated with the prospect of children, it was more obviously a risky affair, and therefore more likely to be reserved for marriage or at least for relationships that might lead to marriage if a child was conceived. In the 1930s, about half of unwed pregnant women married before the child was born.<sup>26</sup> In the late 2000s, this figure dropped to only 6%.<sup>27</sup>

For women, one downside of widespread contraception use is that it has created a social expectation that an unplanned pregnancy is more "her fault" than his: Nearly all forms of reversible contraception—pills, shots, implants, and other devices—are designed to be used by the woman, not the man, even as both are engaging in sex. While this might seem empowering for women, the downside is that women are widely understood to have the power to mute the possibility of procreation. In the 1930s, a man who refused to

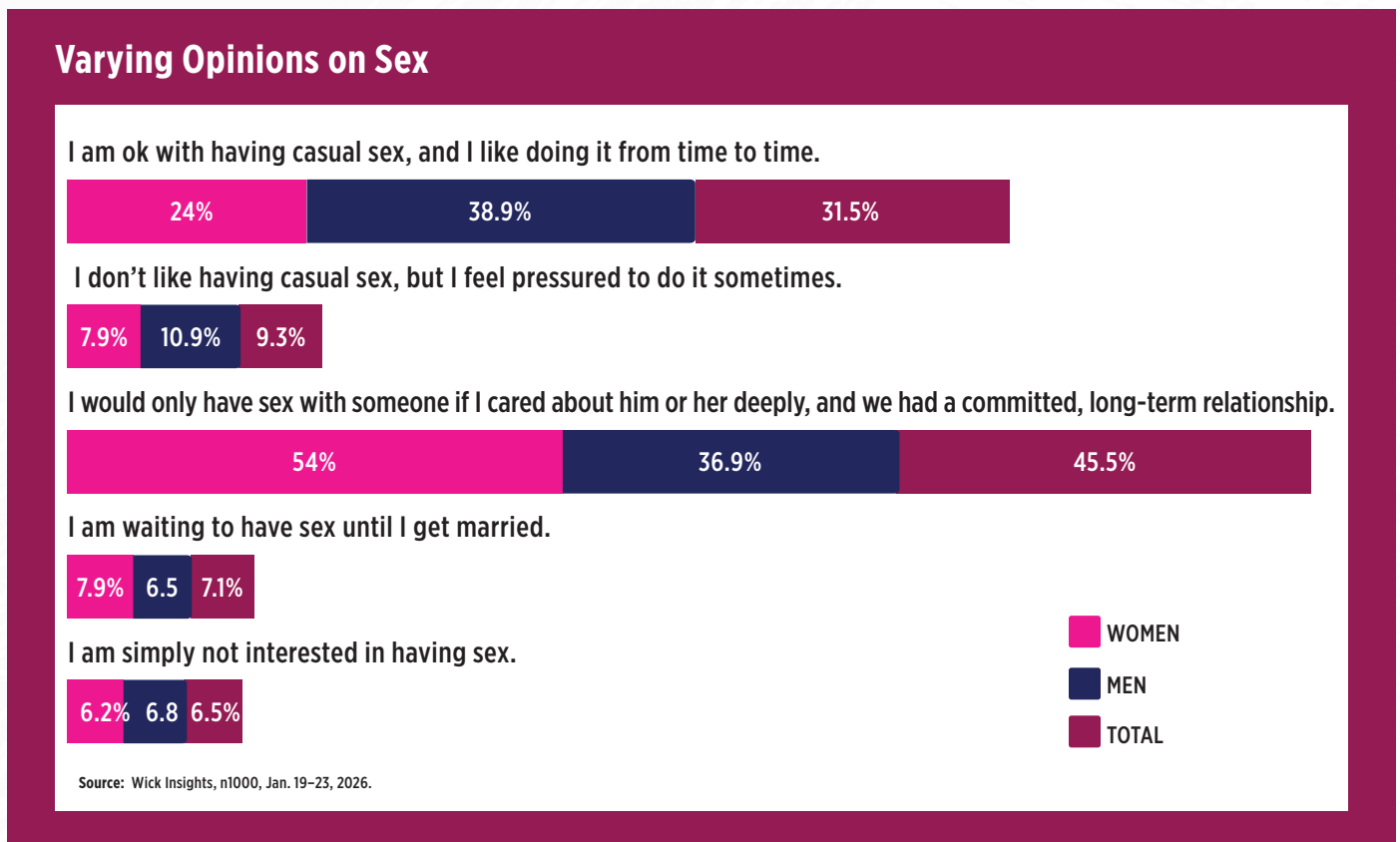
marry his pregnant girlfriend might have been thought of as dishonorable. Today, birth control gives men plausible deniability when it comes to the expectation that sex might result in a baby.

### **Sexual Attitudes, Norms, and Body Counts**

As divorce, birth control, and premarital sex have become more prevalent, they have also become more socially accepted. According to Pew Research, 61% of Americans say casual sex is at least sometimes acceptable.<sup>28</sup> But not too casual: Only 30% say sex on a first date is ok. Beneath these numbers, we can see generational differences. Fully 73% of adults aged 18-29 say casual sex is at least sometimes acceptable, compared to 44% of those 65 and older.

While traditionally, men have been more accepting of casual sex, Gen Z may be flipping the script. The Survey Center on American Life reports that Gen-Z women are more likely to approve of casual sex and open relationships than their male counterparts, which reflects a broader trend of political polarization in Gen Z, with men trending more conservative and women trending more liberal.<sup>29</sup>

But all of the above polling asks about attitudes *in general* toward casual sex. We asked young adults about their *personal* approach. Only 31.5% of adults aged 18-29 told us that they liked having casual sex and engaged in it from time to time.<sup>30</sup> Among males, 38.9% said they liked having occasional casual sex. Among women, only 24%.

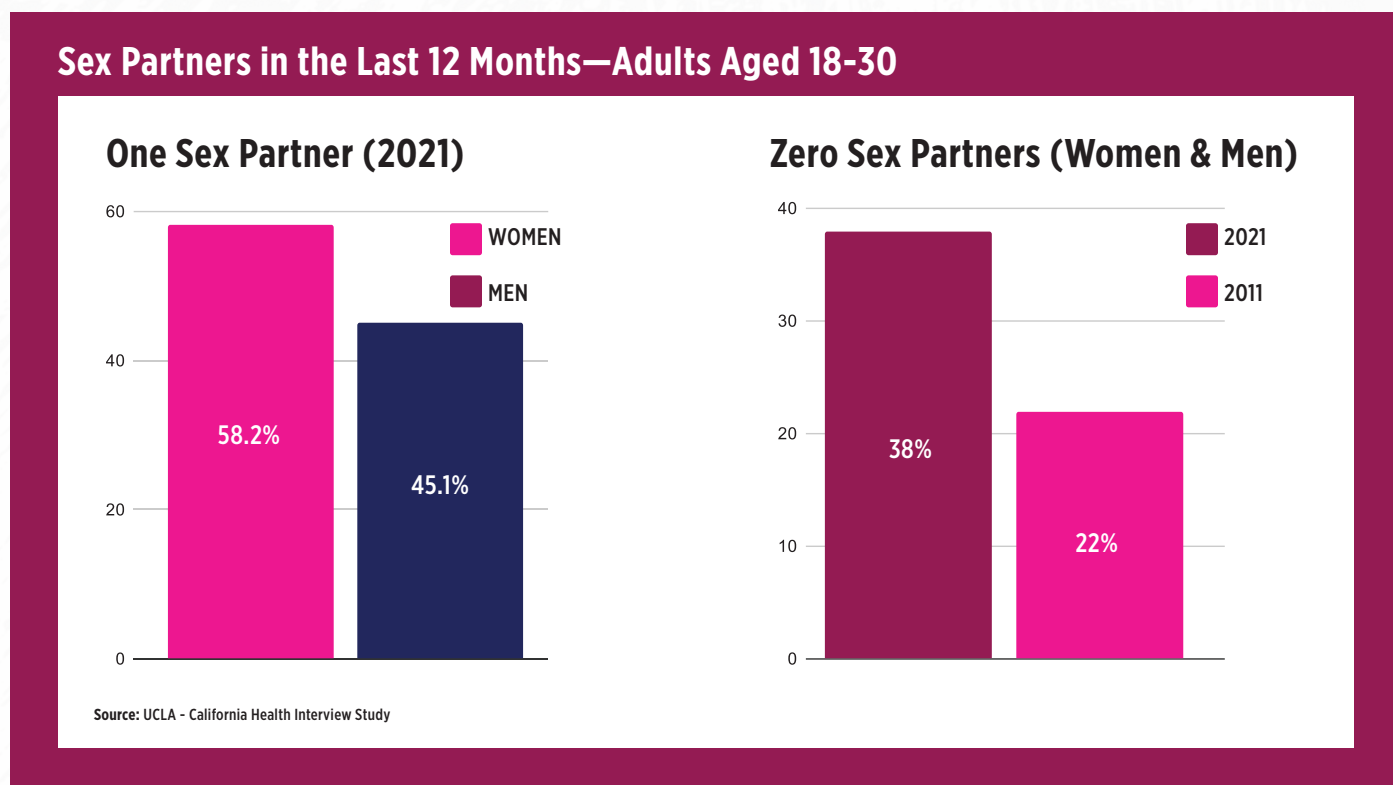


Most young adults want sex and commitment to go together. While only small minorities of women (7.9%) and men (6.5%) said they were waiting until marriage for sex, many more (54% of women, 36.9% of men)

said they would only have sex in a long-term, committed relationship.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, more men (10.9%) than women (7.9%) said they didn't like casual sex but felt pressured to do it at times.

Our polling also showed some differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors between the younger group (18-24) and the older group (25-29).<sup>32</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, fewer people (5.4%) in the older group were waiting until marriage to have sex (compared to 8.7% of the younger group). Casual sex was also more popular, with 36.6% of the older daters saying they liked doing it compared to 27% of the younger daters. Almost half (49.5%) of the young group said they would only have sex with someone in a long-term committed relationship. This dropped to 41% in the older group. All of this might suggest that as marriage-minded people leave the pool of single people, and as the dating decade drags on for others, it gets harder to practice restraint.

What about the number of partners? In 2002, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the median number of lifetime sexual partners for sexually active people aged 25-44 was 6.7 for men and 3.8 for women. (This includes all opposite sex partners for oral, vaginal, or anal sex.) In 2010, these numbers changed slightly to 6.0 and 3.9 for men and women, respectively. In 2015, they were 6.1 and 4.2, and in 2019, 6.3 and 4.3. These figures are all self-reported in confidential interviews as part of the National Survey on Family Growth.<sup>33</sup>



Young people today are not having more sex than other recent generations. In fact, they may be having *less* sex.<sup>34</sup> A University of California - Los Angeles report from 2021 showed that most women (58.2%) and many men (45.1%) aged 18-30 had just one sex partner in the last 12 months.<sup>35</sup> Another 38% of all respondents said they had zero sex partners during this time. This figure was 22% in 2011. These data are from the

California Health Interview Study, but are representative of national trends. Experts say that the trend is toward more people graduating from college as virgins.<sup>36</sup>

Time will still tell what the lifetime number of partners (what the kids these days refer to as a “body count”) for the average Gen-Z American will be, but the COVID pandemic, the increasingly complex dating interactions of the #MeToo era, and other trends (e.g., more people identifying as asexual)<sup>37</sup> may ultimately decrease this figure.

Meanwhile, today’s pornography industry is on par with the NCAA when it comes to revenues—approximately \$1.15 billion annually.<sup>38</sup> Due to near-universal Wi-Fi connectivity and cell phone use, porn is much more accessible for today’s youth than the Playboy magazines of yesterday. There is also much more pornography available than there once was, with much of it being violent and extreme. Some 70% of today’s 14- to 18-year-olds report having seen pornographic images,<sup>39</sup> while 57% of 18- to 25-year-olds report that they view pornography monthly.<sup>40</sup> The use of pornography has seen an increase in moral approval in recent years, although most Americans still disapprove. In 2018, 43% of all Americans surveyed said they thought porn was ok, a 13-point increase since just 2011.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Men and Women: Coming Apart***

While women’s sexual liberation is a subject of hot debate, women’s liberation into other areas—especially higher education and the workforce—is more generally accepted as favorable social progress. Gone are the days when a young woman might be expected to drop out of college simply because she got married.

During the last few decades, women have seen incredible increases in bachelor’s, master’s, professional degrees, and Ph.D.s, now outpacing men in all of these degree categories.<sup>42</sup> In 1995, about 25% of men and 25% of women had college degrees.<sup>43</sup> Today, there’s a gap: 47% of women and 37% of men graduate college.<sup>44</sup>

In 2010, the New York Times published a report called “The New Math on Campus,” referring to the many campuses that were becoming majority female.<sup>45</sup> The report featured distressed interviews with college women, who lamented a shortage of men and the effect on male-female relations: The power dynamic favored men, and women felt they had to compete for attention, often by being sexually promiscuous. The report was prescient. Unfortunately for college women, things are only getting worse: Total college enrollment (for both sexes combined) peaked in 2011, and the recent decrease has mostly been driven by men. Since 2011, about one million fewer men and 0.2 million fewer women are college-bound today.<sup>46</sup>

Most people prefer to marry someone with a similar level of education. Given that colleges and universities have traditionally served as a popular place to find a spouse,<sup>47</sup> a gender gap in education has obvious repercussions for marriage, both on and off campus (as some college-educated women marry non-college-educated men, usually marrying the non-college-educated men with the best financial footing).<sup>48</sup>

Today, Americans with the lowest levels of education of both sexes are least likely to marry.<sup>49</sup> For these Americans (among other challenges), men’s declining economic prospects make marriage a less attractive arrangement for potential wives.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Career Focus Dominates Early Life***

Another trend worth noting is the rise of careerism in general. Americans of both sexes place more emphasis on career and material success than previous generations. A recent Wall Street Journal poll showed decreases in the number of Americans who value patriotism, religion, and hard work, but an increase in the number who said they valued money.<sup>51</sup> And when asked about their personal version of success, both Gen-Z men and women ranked “Having a job or career you find fulfilling” first, followed immediately by “Having enough money to do the things you want to do” (above other options like having a family or helping others).<sup>52</sup>

It’s no surprise that so many young people see education and career as life’s greatest priorities: We have myriad systems in place to encourage them in these pursuits and counsel and guide them to success. Each level of the education system aims to teach students the skills and knowledge they will need for the next level. Guidance counselors help students arrange internships and opportunities to shadow professionals in careers of interest, while colleges help graduates find jobs or graduate programs.

Where are the similar systems to help young people understand and gain the skills they need to navigate and build family relationships? Traditionally, this was the purview of the family (and religious community), but with the cultural influence of these institutions in decline, education, career, and individual achievement reign supreme in the minds and goals of young people, even those who also desire family life.



Culturally, we’ve encouraged young people to stay true to their individual goals and not to allow romantic relationships to become “distractions,” while giving little regard to the idea that marriage and family life might be a worthwhile goal—far more central to long-term happiness than achieving a specific career outcome. Famously, in 2013, when a “Princeton mom” (Susan Patton) wrote an open letter to Ivy League college women with advice to be intentional about finding a spouse before graduation, she ignited a firestorm of online debate.<sup>53</sup> Much of the backlash called it antiquated, even sexist, for her to suggest that young women should prioritize finding a marriage partner during their college years. Yet her points were sound: finding a strong and supportive marriage partner was going to be critical to these women’s lives, and college remains a popular place for many young Americans to couple up for life.<sup>54</sup> To ignore or downplay this reality or to overemphasize individual pursuits over family formation does young people no favors.

## ***Decline of Religious Institutions***

Americans' changing views on marriage and sexual ethics are likely related to decreased religiosity. Religiously unaffiliated people consistently offer higher levels of moral approval to casual sex and other questions related to sexual behaviors.<sup>55</sup>

Participation in religious communities is also an important path to the social connections that, for some Americans, lead to marriage. But as religiosity declined in recent decades, religious institutions became less influential in American family life and formation.<sup>56</sup> Today, 4% of couples meet their spouse at church,<sup>57</sup> nearly a 70% decline from 1940.<sup>58</sup> That's too bad, because couples who meet through their religious communities are (self-reported) the happiest with their marriages.<sup>59</sup>

While the internet occasionally produces interesting vignettes about religious revival among young Americans, the data tell another story.<sup>60</sup> Younger Americans are less likely than older Americans to be religious (to pray, go to church, or identify with a religion).<sup>61</sup> Additionally, they are also less religious than the young Americans of yesteryear, so they are lacking the guidance other generations had when they were dating, forming relationships, and marrying. Indeed, many religious faiths emphasize marriage and family life as sacred, worthwhile endeavors, which can encourage single people of faith to pursue family life, and can offer moral support and practical guidance to already married individuals and parents.

***Decisions about starting a family, while not always explicitly religious, relate deeply to identity, morality, and meaning. It also raises the questions of what it means to be a good parent, and how social expectations of parents may be changing.***

Among young adults who are uncertain about marriage or parenthood, self-confidence looms large. Notably, among those hesitant about having children, the most commonly cited reason is “I don’t think I’ll be a good parent” (26.7%)—outranking cost (23.9%), career impact (19.4%), or societal concerns (8.8%). This becomes even more pronounced among the youngest young adults surveyed (aged 18-24): Among these respondents who don’t want kids, nearly one in three (32.3%) named “I don’t think I’ll be a good parent” as their primary reason.<sup>62</sup> This suggests that decisions about starting a family, while not always explicitly religious, relate deeply to identity, morality, and meaning. It also raises the questions of what it means to be a good parent, and how social expectations of parents may be changing.

## ***Delayed Financial Stability***

Many young Americans who desire to get married and start families see financial insecurity as their biggest hurdle. Among singles aged 25-34, 33% say they remain single because they are not financially prepared to wed.<sup>63</sup> Among singles 35 and older, 20% cite this reason, but in this older age group, it comes in third place behind “Haven’t found what they were looking for in a spouse” and “Other.”

Delayed financial self-sufficiency is measurable in many facets of American life. Fewer young Americans today own homes compared to previous generations: According to RedFin, 33% of 27-year-olds today own houses, compared to 40% of Baby Boomers at the same age.<sup>64</sup> In 1970, one in ten young adults lived with their parents.<sup>65</sup> This number reached a 50-year high of one in five in 2021. This peak may have been influenced by the COVID pandemic, but the share of young adults living with their parents remains relatively high even today at 18%.<sup>66</sup> This—no doubt—puts a damper on one’s dating life.



One significant challenge is young Americans’ unprecedented student loan debt. Nearly one in six American adults holds some student loan debt.<sup>67</sup> Bachelor’s degree graduates hold, on average, nearly \$30,000 in student loan debt.<sup>68</sup> People with master’s degrees, professional degrees, and Ph.D.s owe even more.

Employment rates for young Americans are another discouraging indicator. For men between the ages of 23 and 30 with a bachelor’s degree, the unemployment rate now stands at 6%—and rising relative to other groups.<sup>69</sup>

The unemployment rate for college-educated men is even slightly higher than that of their peers with only a high school diploma.<sup>70</sup> Young men are less likely to be financially independent (62%) than young women.<sup>71</sup>

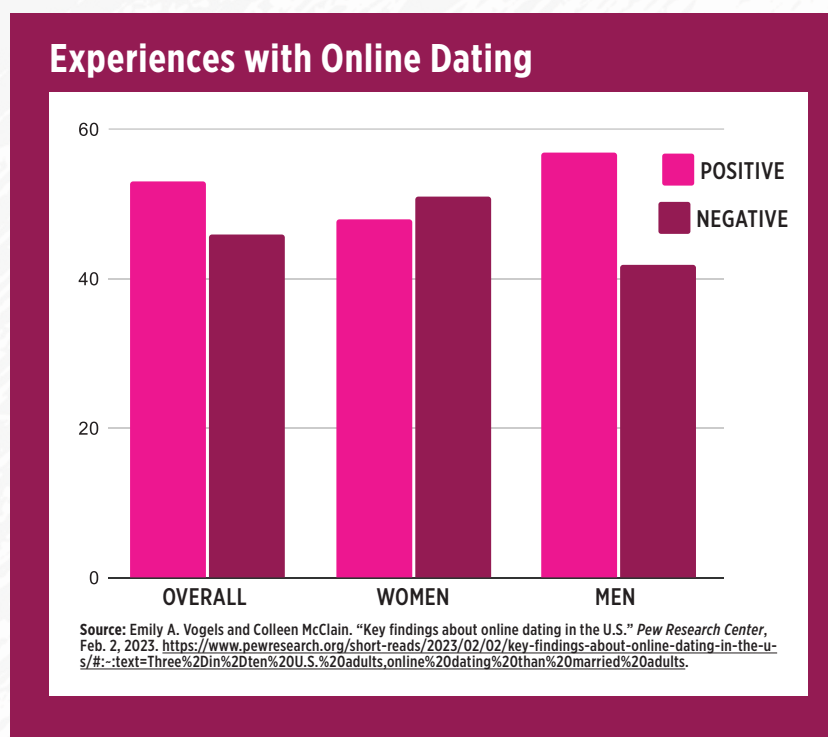
The delayed financial milestones of independence, solvency, homeownership, and gainful employment are making many Americans feel stunted in their quest for adulthood and for serious relationships that may lead to marriage. Ironically, *marriage itself* can offer greater financial stability as two people combine their assets, incomes, and efforts for a better future together.

Still, it's easy to understand why so many young adults want to achieve at least some financial security before their nuptials, if for no other reason than to demonstrate that they can provide for themselves and for any potential family in their future.

### **Dating Apps and Technological Consequences**

Dating applications or “apps” have become a dominant force in American culture. One in ten “partnered” adults (married or in a serious relationship) report meeting on a dating app, and this number jumps to one in five for adults under age 30.<sup>72</sup> While the matches made on these apps are great success stories, the experience of online daters is mixed.

According to Pew Research, most people (53%) report positive experiences with online dating, but women are flipped, with 51% reporting negative experiences.<sup>73</sup> Women are more likely (54%) to be overwhelmed by the number of messages they receive on these platforms, while more men (64%) report feelings of insecurity about *not* being messaged.



Strong majorities of dating app users report feeling burned out on these platforms, according to a Forbes Health survey, including 79% of Gen Z and 80% of Millennials.<sup>74</sup> These young online daters reported feeling tired of constantly trying to make new connections through the app, and/or experiencing undesirable dating trends such as ghosting (the failure of one party to show up to a date or continue communication), catfishing (when one party is a bot, scammer, or someone pretending to be someone he/she is not), gaslighting, or love-bombing (showering a new partner with affection with manipulative intent).<sup>75</sup>

Cultural commentators have criticized online dating for offering the illusion of endless choice in potential mates. In previous generations, daters were limited to the pool of people immediately available in their physical locale, perhaps at their school, their church, or a local bar. But with hundreds of millions of users globally, dating apps can fuel the false idea that the perfect mate is out there, leading to less satisfaction and impossibly high expectations in today's dating youth.<sup>76</sup>

This “paradox of choice” is similar to what entertainment consumers experience on platforms like Netflix: We are exposed to an endless stream of trailers and advertisements for new shows, making it harder for us to settle down and commit to one particular movie or show.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, one effect of online dating may ultimately be to present dating people with a seeming overabundance of options, making it harder for them to commit and feel satisfied with their choice once they do.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Bottom Line***

Due to a variety of changing cultural and economic factors, the old script for family formation is gone, and it hasn't been replaced with a new one. Young Americans, despite their desires for marriage and family, are adrift for much of their 20s, unsure of how to navigate dating relationships, sex, and their futures, with less stability—spiritually, socially, and financially—than ever before.

# What Young Women Are Experiencing

## ***Changing Desires Among Women***

The youngest generation of American women is the least likely to say they desire marriage and children, and according to polling, they put less emphasis on these things than their male counterparts. This represents an unprecedented shift.

When asked in August 2025 to rank a list of 13 different priorities, women aged 18-29 ranked “having children” and “being married” as number 10 and 11, respectively.<sup>79</sup> Men ranked these as number 8 and 7, respectively. Both sexes first prioritized having a fulfilling job, enough money to do what they want, and financial independence. Importantly, these are topline, and some subgroups of men and women (e.g., more conservative) were more likely to rank their family goals with greater importance.

However, in general, these rankings are consistent with other polling. Tinder’s 2023 Future of Dating Report showed that for Millennials, getting married ranked 4th in a list of life goals.<sup>80</sup> For Gen Z, it dropped to 10th place. And according to Pew Research, among adults aged 18-34, 20% and 22% say marriage and kids, respectively, are important to a good life.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, 68% and 62% say having a good job and close friends, respectively, are important. In our polling, among those who said they did not want kids, more women (22.6%) than men (16.8%) cited conflict with career goals as their main reason.<sup>82</sup>

In 2023, when 12th graders were asked if they would choose to get married in the long run, 61% of girls and 74% of boys said yes.<sup>83</sup> While this figure remains almost unchanged for boys since 1993 (76%), girls have seen a dramatic decrease from 83% to 61%.

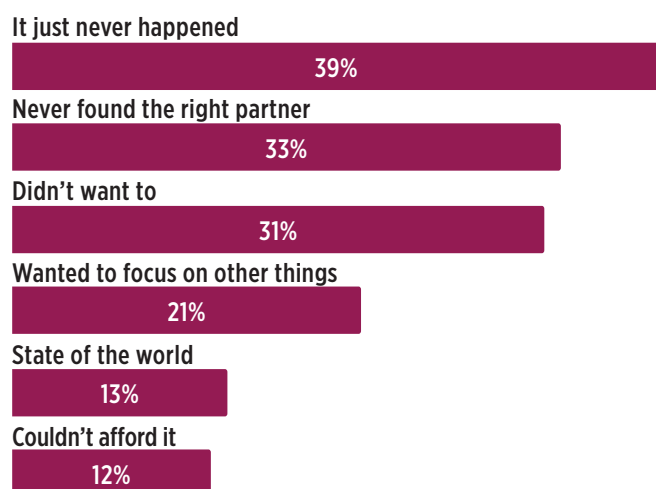
Even so, when young women are asked about their ideal relationship, 90% still say that marriage is a part of it.<sup>84</sup> The question remains open: Why do fewer high school girls today (compared to just three decades ago) say they will “choose marriage” someday? Does this truly reflect their desires? Have they become convinced that marriage is an outdated, oppressive, or harmful institution? Or do they see marriage as less *achievable*?

In other words, do they believe they are less likely to choose marriage in the long run because marriage may not be an available choice?

## The Gap Between Desires and Outcomes

While there have always been some people who remained single or child-free for life, these groups are growing in the United States today. Desires are changing (as we covered in the section above), but it's also true that outcomes don't always reflect desires. Today's older Millennials are reaching the end of their childbearing years, and many of them are reckoning with the reality that marriage and kids were not in the cards for them.

### Reasons for Not Having Children Among Adults 50+



Source: Rachel Minkin, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Carolina Aragão. "The Experiences of U.S. Adults Who Don't Have Children." Pew Research Center, Jul. 25, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/07/25/the-experiences-of-u-s-adults-who-dont-have-children/>.

When researchers compare women's fertility (the number of children they've had) to their fertility goal (the number of children they said they wanted to have), some 75% of women over 40 with no children did not meet their fertility goals.<sup>85</sup> In other words, 75% of women who end up having no children were childless *unintentionally*.

In a different poll, among today's non-parents over 50, some people (31%) said they simply never wanted kids. But more people (39%) say it just "never happened."<sup>86</sup> Another 33% cite "didn't find the right partner" as the main reason they are childless.

Given that 87% of women say they prefer to get married before having children, it's clear that these goals are strongly tied.<sup>87</sup> Even in a world where fewer young women say they want marriage or kids (than in the past), there are still many who do want a family who may struggle to create one due to challenges in today's dating world.

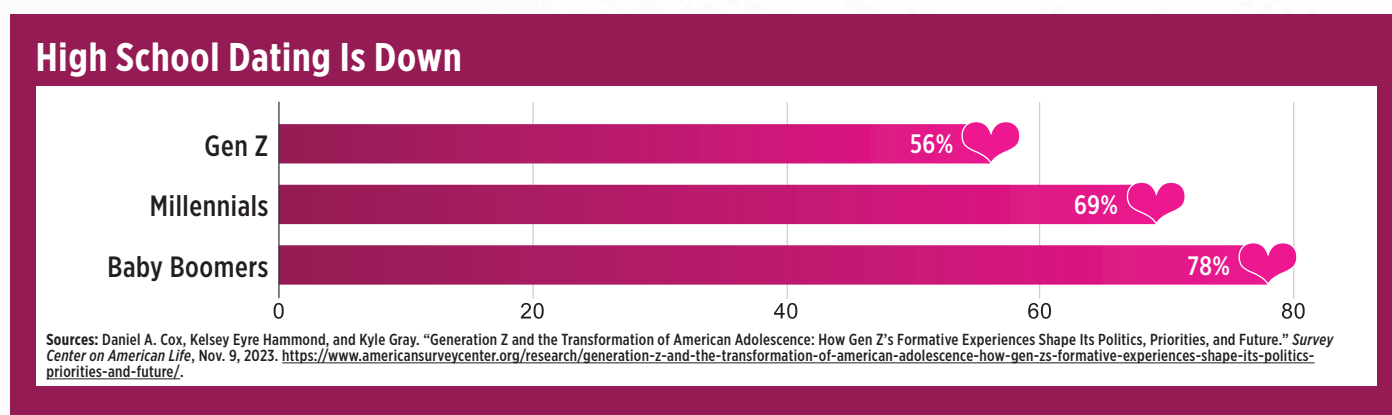
## Dating Experiences

Gen-Zers describe today's dating landscape as one with serial short-term, low-commitment relationships. There's even a word for it—"situationship"—to describe ill-defined arrangements, usually sexual (although sometimes not), in which one or both parties are uncertain as to whether they're even dating. Half of adults aged 18-34 report having been in a "situationship" at some point.<sup>88</sup>

But how much is Gen Z hooking up, exactly? Hint: The generation is actually engaged in less sex than previous generations. The age at sexual debut has inched upward for men and women in the last few

years, and the share of adults 18-29 who are virgins has increased to 19.5% for men and 18.4% for women, suggesting a shift toward delayed sexual activity.<sup>89</sup> The United States has also seen lower rates of sexual activity among teenagers, which is partly responsible for a decrease in teen pregnancy and sexually-transmitted disease (STD) rates.<sup>90</sup>

But, what appears to be good news may simply be the silver lining on an otherwise dark cloud: Gen-Zers aren't having less premarital sex—and therefore fewer teen pregnancies and STDs—out of a sudden respect for chastity, but because they are undersocialized and simply lacking opportunities or skills to engage with members of the opposite sex in the first place. It would be hard to overstate the negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and experiences of Gen Z. These young people were in the most formative years of their lives (high school, college, early career) when “social distancing” wrecked their social lives and delayed the development of important skills for dating and other relationships. This meant less teen sex, but it also meant less interaction of all kinds.



Dating among high schoolers is down: Among Gen Z, 56% report having a girlfriend or boyfriend during their teen years.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, 69% of Millennials and 78% of Baby Boomers did.

This delayed launch into the dating world, combined with a series of unserious relationships in one’s college or early-career years, can make it difficult for today’s eligible bachelors and bachelorettes to then “flip a switch” and change their dating style and strategy to one that is geared for marriage. It’s also not clear at what age marriage-minded men and women are supposed to begin this search or how to have the greatest likelihood of success.

### ***What A Girl Wants (In a Husband)***

Often, women are most interested in male partners who can *improve* their financial situation because they have a higher income. This phenomenon is known as hypergamy, and it has remained remarkably persistent, even in a world where women outpace men educationally.<sup>92</sup>

Researcher Yue Qian found that between 1980 and 2012, although more women married “down” in terms of education, they continued to marry “up” in terms of income.<sup>93</sup> Women with the same or more education

than their husbands were *even more likely to be hypergamous* (i.e., prone to marrying “up”) than other women.<sup>94</sup> About one-fifth of college-educated women today marry men without college degrees, but they tend to marry the most financially attractive men in that group, which isn’t great for non-college-educated women who are looking for stable partners.<sup>95</sup>



Overall, marriage is more common among people with college degrees, and one reason for this is that many men without degrees are struggling. Wages in this group have decreased; today, the median earnings of a young man (aged 25-34) with a high school degree are \$45,000.<sup>96</sup> This figure was \$57,600 in 1970 (adjusted to 2022 dollars).

Labor force participation among non-degreed men is also down.<sup>97</sup> Today, 87% of men with high school diplomas are in the workforce (working or looking for work). In 1970, this figure was 98%.

Reasonably, women want husbands who can provide for a family, or at least stand on their own two feet financially. The share of men who fit this description has waned, and the implication for Gen-Z women is a lack of marriageable partners, particularly among the less-educated and those with lower incomes.

## ***Mental Health***

Many Gen-Z women say that they deprioritize dating and relationships so that they can prioritize their own mental health and well-being. Even so, Gen-Z women have the worst mental health of any subgroup.

Gen-Z has struggled with feelings of isolation and loneliness in their teen years more than any other generation. In 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory on youth mental health, calling loneliness and isolation an “epidemic.”<sup>98</sup>

This is hitting Gen-Z women harder than any other demographic, in all metrics. Worldwide, 49% of Gen-Z women report that they have felt stressed to the point they could not cope, and 21% say they have had thoughts of suicide or self-harm in the past year (2023).<sup>99</sup>

Young women who are dating face a Catch-22: While dating can take a toll on one’s mental health (because of the risk of rejection and the way that modern dating, particularly the online and sexual elements, can fuel

feelings of comparison or insecurity), a strong relationship can bolster one's mental health. Marriage confers a great mental health benefit, with people of both sexes and all age groups reporting better mental health if they are married.<sup>100</sup> In fact, this advantage is greater in younger groups.<sup>101</sup>

But the path to marriage is long and laden with high levels of emotional (and physical) risk.

### **Let's Talk About Sex**

The rate of unintended pregnancies has been decreasing in recent years, from 42.1 per 1,000 in 2010 to 35.7 per 1,000 in 2019.<sup>102</sup> The biggest declines in unintended pregnancies have been among young women, in age groups 15-19 and 20-24. About 40% of all unplanned pregnancies end in abortion; about 60% result in a live birth.<sup>103</sup>

While unplanned parenthood is down, *unmarried* parenthood has become much more common in the United States over time.<sup>104</sup> It has also become much more widely accepted, although Americans are still very split in their opinions about it.<sup>105</sup> Many unmarried parents today are cohabitating couples.<sup>106</sup>

For women, the long-term effect of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy depends greatly on whether the mother is left to parent alone. Single parents are more likely to be female, black, and without a college degree.<sup>107</sup> While single mothers no doubt often make heroic parenting efforts, the reality is that two parents can offer more resources (time, energy, and money) than one. Three-in-ten single mothers live in poverty, and are six times more likely to experience poverty compared to families with married parents.<sup>108</sup>

The focus on pregnancy as a physical consequence of sex sometimes overshadows discussion of the less-obvious consequences of sex, including the effects on mental and emotional health, as well as on future relationships. But as with pregnancy, women often disproportionately bear these consequences.



Per one study based on a large sample of college students across the United States, casual sex is associated with mental distress and decreased general well-being.<sup>109</sup> Several studies find that the emotional outcomes,<sup>110</sup> rates of depressive symptoms,<sup>111</sup> and rates of post-hookup regret are worse among women who engage in casual sex than among their male counterparts.<sup>112</sup> For women who experience an unplanned pregnancy that ends in abortion, the risk of mental health disorders increases by 23%.<sup>113</sup>

Not only is casual sex making many young women less happy and more depressed, it's also undermining the chances of success for their future marriages. Divorce rates are lowest among couples who have had sex with only each other, at about 5% in the first five years.<sup>114</sup> In contrast, women who enter marriage having already had two or more sex partners face a 25-35% risk of divorce during the same period. (This is not just due to selection effects, but is the effect of premarital sex.)

Married couples who have only had sex with each other also have the highest rates of marital (and sexual) satisfaction (with more than one-in-five sexually inexperienced people reporting very high satisfaction, compared to one-in-ten among the most sexually experienced group).<sup>115</sup>

Significant evidence from neurobiology shows that hormones like oxytocin and vasopressin are released during sexual intercourse and have a bonding effect on the participating partners. This is great for married people; the act of sex helps keep them bonded for years—even decades—even through times when they are annoyed with each other or struggling to get along.

But this bonding effect can be confusing for women (and men) when they are not married. It may offer dating couples “rose colored glasses” through which to vet a potential spouse when it would be better for them to see each other with clearer eyes, in order to see if the relationship is truly a good, long-term fit.

One potential “solution” that some Gen-Z women have found for the challenges of navigating today’s sexual culture is “self-love” or masturbation, often accompanied by a sex toy and/or the consumption of audio erotica or erotic literature. While much has been said about young men’s increased porn use, less attention has been given to young women’s solo sexual habits.

“BookTok”—a subcommunity in TikTok—often promotes “spicy” content, erotic literature that is made out to be harmless, despite its explicit nature and unrealistic, often violent sexual depictions. This area deserves more study: What will be the long-term effects of this content? Like traditional (visual) porn, one might expect that it is shaping views and expectations for partnered sex that may be unrealistic.

Today’s young women are no strangers to visual porn, either. While they don’t access explicit videos or images as often as their male counterparts, they are viewing porn more than previous generations, and even creating it. Pornhub reported in 2025 that women make up 38% of users, up from 24% in 2015.<sup>116</sup> This report discusses male porn use in more depth in the next section.

Gen Z appears to be the most open-minded generation ever when it comes to moral approval of all types of sexual behaviors and lifestyles. But moral questions aside, women (and men) in this generation should still be aware of what the data say about how their sexual choices will affect them physically, mentally, and relationally in both the immediate term and the future.

## Future Fertility

Another consequence of later age at first marriage is that—for many women—this means a later age at first childbirth. The mean age for first birth has been steadily rising. Today it is 27.5, up almost a full year from 26.6 in 2016.<sup>117</sup>

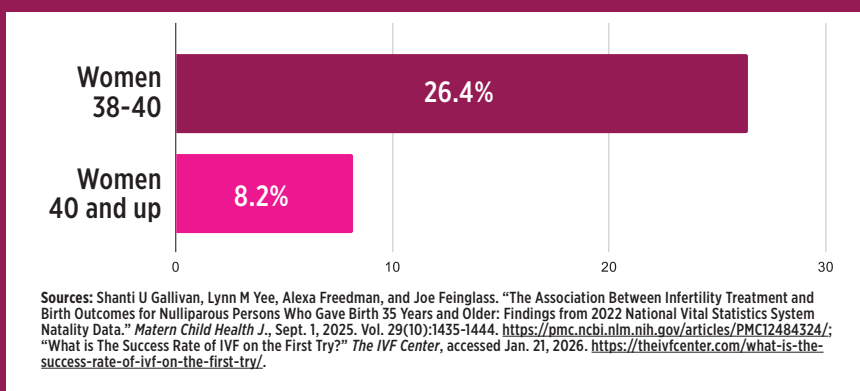
While this largely represents a shift toward later childbearing (more women are having children in their 40s), it also means that for many women, their window for married childbearing is shorter, and because of this, they may have fewer children, or they may have a more difficult time getting pregnant or carrying a pregnancy. After age 30, women’s chances of getting pregnant decrease each year.<sup>118</sup> Biologically, our peak reproductive years are between our late teens and late 20s.<sup>119</sup> This is catastrophically misaligned with today’s culture of delayed family formation.

***Biologically, our peak reproductive years are between our late teens and late 20s. This is catastrophically misaligned with today’s culture of delayed family formation.***

It is wonderful to see so many women—particularly women in Hollywood—who can have children well into their 40s. These highly visible successful pregnancies later in life may lead many young women to believe that having a child in their 40s is no sweat. But the reality is that natural childbearing is rarer after age 37, when women’s fertility declines sharply.

One in five women aged 40-44 who gave birth in the United States did so with the help of a fertility treatment.<sup>120</sup> Even then, reproductive technology offers no guarantees. For women aged 38-40 using In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF), 26.4% were successful with one cycle.<sup>121</sup> For women 40 and up, 8.2% were successful in the first cycle.<sup>122</sup>

### In-Vitro Fertilization First Cycle Success



Additionally, scientific evidence suggests that women who’ve had children previously have an easier time conceiving at later ages than those who’ve never had children.<sup>123</sup> Second Lady of the United States Usha Vance, who is 40 years old, just announced her fourth pregnancy, due in July 2026. But it should be noted that she had her first at the age of 32.

## **Bottom Line**

Women face significant hurdles in today's dating landscape: a shortage of educated, financially stable, and physically healthy men, a culture that shields them from (or distorts) information about the consequences of sexual promiscuity, and an expected timeline for marriage and childbearing that is at odds with women's biological clocks.

It's no wonder that many young women—taking stock of these challenges—are choosing to prioritize other areas of their lives. But in doing so, they may inadvertently become caught in a cultural cycle where marriage and family are weakened social institutions, less available to them if/when they hope to find them. To reverse this trend, we must both address the cultural factors that are driving down women's interest in family life and help better prepare individual young adults for family formation in today's cultural climate.

## THREE

# What Young Men Are Experiencing

### *Why Men and Boys Have Fallen Behind in School*

In 2015, Christina Hoff Sommers, now a senior fellow emeritus with the American Enterprise Institute and former national advisory board member for Independent Women, wrote the book “The War Against Boys.”<sup>124</sup> Since then, the plight of boys and men has (deservedly) received increasing attention from leaders on both sides of the political aisle—in education, the economy, and public policy. In 2023, Richard Reeves, a fellow with the Brookings Institution, founded the American Institute for Boys and Men, the first think tank dedicated to research and policy solutions for boys and men.<sup>125</sup>

In the last section, we covered some of the unequal outcomes for boys and girls in the education system. More young women are college-bound, and more women are achieving higher education degrees. Many more metrics show that girls’ academic advantage starts long before college. On average, girls have higher GPAs, are more likely to take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, and are more likely to graduate high school.<sup>126</sup>

Is it true? The old saying that “Girls go to college to get more knowledge, and boys go to Jupiter to get more ... stupider?” No. Boys aren’t stupid. In fact, on certain measures of scholastic aptitude, boys score as well as (or better than) their female counterparts. For example, boys have consistently scored (on average) 30 points higher on the math SAT for more than 50 years.<sup>127</sup> Boys’ less-than-impressive academic performance likely comes down to environmental and motivational problems in schools. For example, when EdWeek Research surveyed teachers about boys’ lackluster academic performance, teachers said boys found it harder to sit still and focus in class.<sup>128</sup>



For years, due to a higher focus on standardized tests (and changing budget priorities), many schools scaled back recess or physical education classes.<sup>129</sup> Not only does this reduce overall physical activity for all students (during a time when sedentary lifestyles and childhood obesity are significant public health challenges), but the effect on learning is clear too: Kids focus and learn better when they take breaks for physical activity during the school day.<sup>130</sup>

One encouraging sign today is that, after years of reduced PE, we may witness a pivot as public health leaders are putting greater emphasis on physical movement.<sup>131</sup> Even the White House is getting involved by bringing back the Presidential Fitness Test.<sup>132</sup>

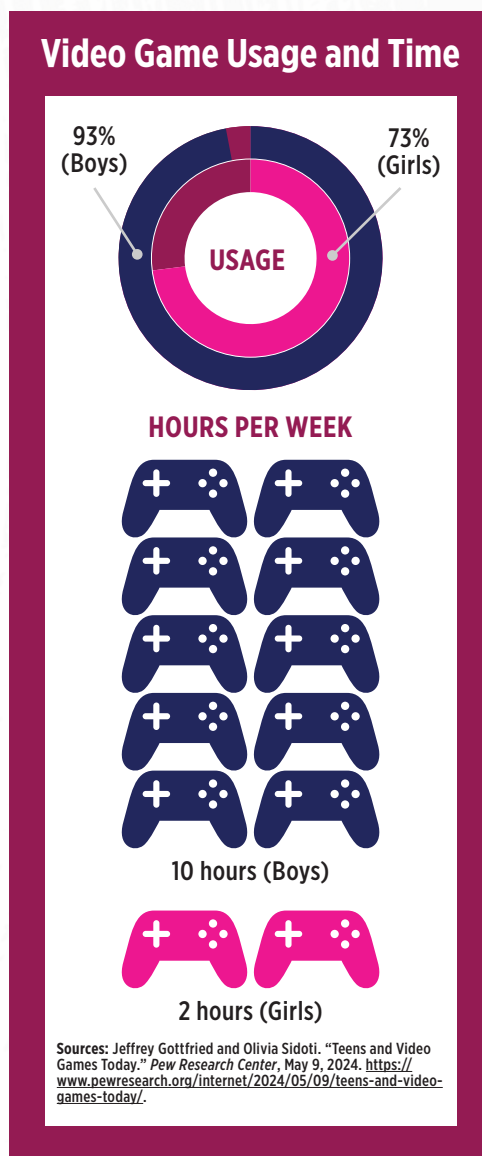
Mr. Reeves of the American Institute for Boys and Men (among others) also advocates for more male teachers.<sup>133</sup> Because much of academic achievement is motivated by strong teacher-student relationships, having more male role models in the education system is likely to help motivate boys. Today, about 77% of public school teachers are women.<sup>134</sup>

Finally, according to teacher observations, boys are more motivated (than girls) by *competition*. Unfortunately for boys, many school systems have intentionally moved away from competitive models toward greater collaboration in the classroom.<sup>135</sup> While there's much to be said about the importance of teamwork and inclusion, competitive aspects of academics—such as spelling bees, debate clubs, trivia bowls,<sup>136</sup> and the pinnacle of competition, *class rank*—may motivate more boys to maximize their efforts in school.<sup>137</sup> We abandon academic competition at our peril.

### **Peter Pan Problems: Video Games, Loneliness, and Failure to Launch**

Young men are spending less time doing physical activity and going on dates with young women. ... So what are they doing with their time? In the last 15 years, men aged 15-24 have more than doubled their time spent playing video games, for one thing.<sup>138</sup> Fully 97% of boys say they play video games (compared to 73% of girls), and boys spend (on average) 10 hours per week playing (compared to two for girls).<sup>139</sup>

Some advocates for video gaming say that boys are connecting with other players (albeit virtually) as they play, and that this provides an important social outlet.<sup>140</sup> But statistics on men's relationships and



self-reported feelings of loneliness have grown increasingly discouraging (perhaps alarming) during the same time that video game use has increased sharply.

Gallup finds that young men in the United States are uniquely lonely, with 25% of men aged 15 to 34 reporting feelings of loneliness compared to 18% of young women and 17% of the general adult U.S. population.<sup>141</sup> Young American men are also more lonely than their peers worldwide.

The American Survey Center found that male friendship is in crisis: Since 1990, the percentage of men reporting having six friends or more decreased from 55% to 27% (in 2021), and the percentage of men having no close friends jumped from 3% to 15%.<sup>142</sup>

In an earlier section of this report, we discussed the delayed financial stability of today's youngest adults. One striking statistic is the number of young adults (aged 25-34) living with their parents. According to Pew, this number reached 20% in 2021, a 50-year high.<sup>143</sup> Importantly, the COVID pandemic likely drove this number up, but today it remains high at about 18%. It's worse for young men, with 20% of young men living with mom and dad compared to 15% of young women. In some metropolitan areas, the share of young adults living with their parents is as high as 33%. Pew reports a strong link between failure to launch and unemployment—and perhaps surprisingly, no link between failure to launch and high housing costs.<sup>144</sup>

### ***Masculinity: A Moving Target***

Traditionally, courtship involved men pursuing women by asking them out on dates, paying for the dates, initiating conversations about the status of the relationship, and, ultimately, proposing marriage (or not). This leadership role for men in the dating world has come into question, but not in a cultural vacuum.<sup>145</sup> Men's leadership styles and expressions are tied up in broader shifting cultural attitudes about masculinity.

When the #MeToo movement went viral globally in October 2017, age-old criticisms of “toxic masculinity” were rebooted. Sadly, many women have had unpleasant—or even horrific—experiences with men who are inappropriate in their sexual advances.

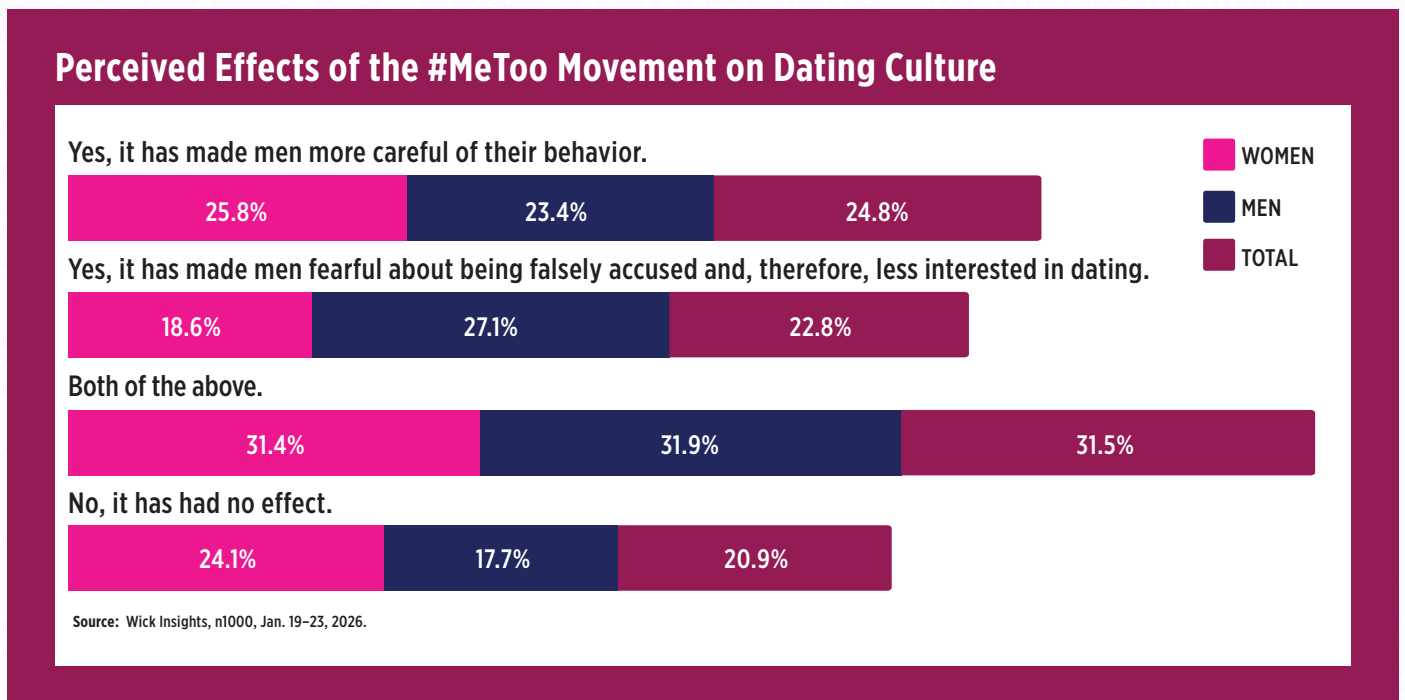
Increased awareness of this phenomenon brought out various reactions in men. While many men felt (naturally) saddened and distressed to hear about women's many negative experiences, others also developed a greater sense of anxiety about navigating romantic relationships and sexual encounters. Reasonably, as #MeToo coincided with very public accusations against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and comedian Aziz Ansari, many men feared false accusations of sexual misconduct, perhaps even built on poor communication in a dating setting.<sup>146</sup>

#MeToo had a chilling effect on all types of male-female interaction, including in the workplace, where 60% of male managers said (in 2019) that they felt uncomfortable working closely with women.<sup>147</sup>

Across all demographic groups, majorities say that it's harder for men to know how to interact with someone on a date in the #MeToo era.<sup>148</sup> This was reflected in our polling of young adults as well. A majority (54.3%) of adults 18-29 agreed that #MeToo has made men more fearful of being falsely accused of misconduct, and therefore less interested in dating.

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If nothing else, #MeToo has likely increased men's "approach anxiety" in the dating world. In a 2025 report, 77% of women aged 18-30 said they preferred that men make the first move.<sup>149</sup> But 44% of men said they are less likely to approach women because of a fear of being labeled as "creepy."<sup>150</sup> Perhaps more social awareness has been good for some men—because men sometimes overestimate women's sexual interest in them—but perhaps we've also inhibited some nice men from just saying hello.<sup>151</sup>



In the wake of #MeToo, we've also witnessed an online backlash, with truly toxic male "influencers" offering young men very bad advice about women and relationships. Rather than pushing back against the toxic culture of casual sex, these influencers tell men to take advantage of it and treat women like objects to use and discard. Andrew Tate may be the most well-known among them, but he's not the only one. This "manosphere" of online content thrives on likes, clicks, views, and shares, and may be to blame for reports of higher misogyny online.

The internet often brings out the worst behavior and rhetoric in people because of its cloak of anonymity. Even so, it's distressing that 73% of Gen-Z social media users say they have witnessed misogynistic content, and 70% say they've witnessed an increase.<sup>152</sup> As many as 44% of Gen-Z women say they've received unsolicited explicit images and unwanted sexually suggestive comments. Of all social platforms, TikTok is the worst, with 70% of users reporting misogynistic content, compared to 61% on Instagram, 37% on Twitter/X, and 30% on Facebook.

Men seem to be facing a dual crisis regarding masculinity and relationships. On the one hand, today's missing cultural scripts are causing some men to retreat from relationships with women, experiencing confusion and discouragement. On the other hand, bad actors have become more aggressive, particularly online, filling the vacuum where those cultural scripts once were and leading a growing number of men—feeling like they have no viable options—to join them.

### ***Pornography: Use, Types, Effects on Young Men***

As previously discussed, due to near-universal Wi-Fi connectivity and cell phone use, porn is much more accessible for today's youth than for previous generations.

The nature of pornography has changed as well. What was once a “professional industry” of mass-produced magazines and video productions (which still exist) has now mixed with social media and cell phones to make it easier to view pornographic material *and become it*. Porn sites such as Pornhub see more web traffic than Amazon and Netflix.<sup>153</sup> OnlyFans—which began as a social media website—has become a popular source for pornographic content, with more than 220 million registered users, and more than 3 million content creators, most of whom are young women. OnlyFans, where users can communicate with creators, offers a more personalized and interactive experience than traditional pornography.



Similarly, pornography created using artificial intelligence (AI) is on the rise. In January 2026, researchers observed one major AI tool, Grok, and found that it is used to create approximately 6,700 sexually suggestive or “nudified” images *per hour*.<sup>154</sup>

Young men start using porn at younger ages on average than young women, use porn more frequently, and prefer more hardcore porn than women.<sup>155</sup>

Troublingly, men who use porn suffer from reduced sexual self-competence, impaired sexual functioning, and decreased partner-reported sexual satisfaction.<sup>156</sup> In other words, watching porn makes men worse at sex.

Frequent porn users may experience what social scientists call “escalation theory,” meaning they become bored with regular porn and seek out ever-more kinky or intense content.<sup>157</sup> This no doubt has a spillover effect into real-life encounters, where more women (as many as 38% of women aged 18-39) are reporting unwanted choking, slapping, or spitting during sex.<sup>158</sup> And—likely also a result of widespread porn and erotica—more women express a desire for fetishized sex. For example, according to a report from Bedbible, 23.7% of women reported a desire to engage in masochism (significantly more than men at 13.9%).<sup>159</sup>

Porn use is also correlated with divorce,<sup>160</sup> erectile dysfunction,<sup>161</sup> and depression in men.<sup>162</sup> Some porn defenders say that these associations don’t imply causation. They say: Some depressed men or men in dead-end relationships may seek out porn as a comfort or last resort. This may be true in some cases, but a recent study in the *Journal of Sex Research* showed that porn use *at any level* undermines romantic relationships, even after accounting for a variety of confounding variables.<sup>163</sup>

Pornography—often sold as a male-centric easy button for sexual pleasure—is actually sabotaging many young men in their quest for real-life relationships. Its prevalence in and influence on today’s sexual culture cannot be overstated.

### ***Bottom Line***

Young men today have heard more mixed messages about manhood than any previous generation. They want to be masculine, but aren’t sure what that means. They are capable, but not always motivated. They are lonely, but disillusioned with dating relationships.

It’s not enough to turn off the noise of bad influences. Young men need more positive messages to replace the negative. They need systems (educational and economic) that value their success just as much as the success of girls and young women. They need mentors and examples of healthy masculinity. And they need confidence that if they act with respect in the dating world, they will be treated with respect. They need good information about how to succeed in family formation, and they need to have the guidance—and courage—to act on that information.

# Political Implications

The political gender gap is not new. It has, however, reached greater extremes in recent years, especially among young and single men and women.<sup>164</sup>

Among married people, a gender gap still exists, with women leaning left more often and men leaning more conservative. Even so, married people, on average, tend to be more conservative than singles. This is likely a matter of selection (conservative people are more likely to enter a marriage) and life experience (marriage makes people more conservative because they now have, according to researchers, a “socially conventional domestic life,” i.e., more stability).<sup>165</sup>

But even where a political gender divide exists among married people, they are not as far apart as their single counterparts. This may again be due to selection bias (people with more moderate views or higher tolerance of other views may be more likely to get married in the first place), but marriage may also have a moderating effect: Married people influence one another and move closer together, or at least grow more tolerant.<sup>166</sup> Evidence suggests that newlyweds’ personalities undergo significant changes in the first two years of marriage, with husbands becoming more conscientious and wives becoming less neurotic, among other personality effects.<sup>167</sup>

Young, single people who spend more time alone or in same-sex friend groups do not have this experience. Furthermore, members of Gen Z who spend more time online are becoming increasingly politically polarized as social media algorithms feed them content that solidifies or amplifies their existing biases. This is true on both sides of the aisle.

## ***Gaps in Voting Patterns, Party ID, and the Issues***

Exit polls in the 2024 election showed that young women aged 18-29 overwhelmingly supported former Vice President Kamala Harris (61%) over President Trump (38%).<sup>168</sup> Young men were evenly split, with nearly half (48%) supporting Harris and half (49%) supporting Trump. This gap is similar to previous years: 2020 and 2016 saw similar voting patterns among this youngest group of voters.

What is becoming increasingly clear below this topline data is that young, single women are identifying more and more with the most progressive wing of the Democratic Party and embracing more liberal stances on a variety of issues.

Gallup has measured the share of young women identified as “very liberal” over time. From 1999 to 2013, this share held steady at about 30%.<sup>169</sup> It increased to 44% in 2020, during the COVID pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests, and stands at 41% today. This represents a large shift toward “very liberal” identification.

Fully 53% of young women (18-29) identify as Democrats.<sup>170</sup> This is much more than any other group by age and sex: The next highest group for Democratic Party identification is women over the age of 65 at 41%.<sup>171</sup>

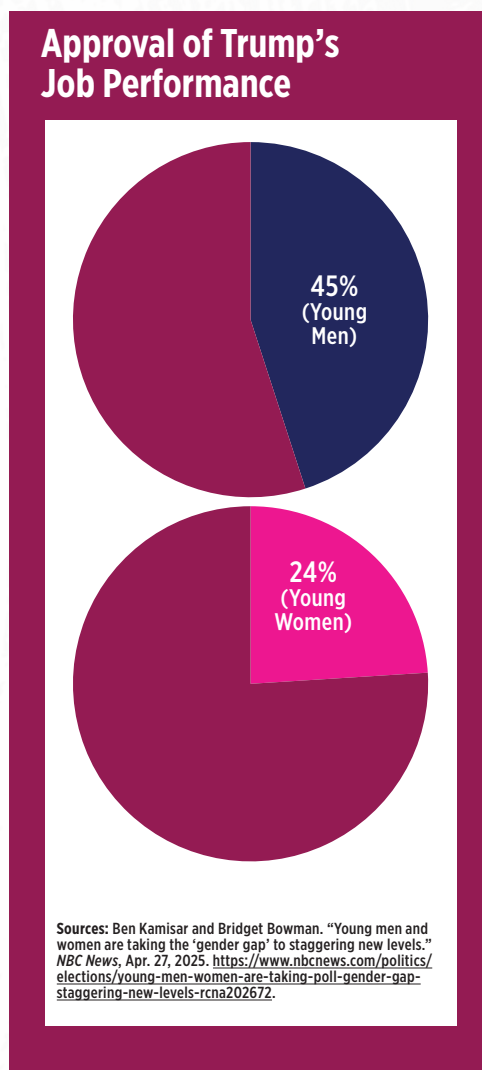
Trump is a polarizing figure: Only 24% of young women approve of his job performance during the first year of his second term, compared to 45% of young men.<sup>172</sup> This 21-point gap is much wider than the gender gap on this question among other age groups, and it is driven primarily by young women’s exceptionally low approval of Trump.

On the issues, young men and women are further apart than older Americans. And young men and women prioritize different issues. For young men, the most important issue (31%) is the economy.<sup>173</sup> For young women (22%), it’s threats to democracy. Young women are also more likely to turn out to vote than young men.<sup>174</sup>

On the question of socialism versus capitalism, more young men (56%) favor capitalism, compared to 24% of young women.<sup>175</sup> More young women (43%) favor socialism compared to 32% of young men. Among young men, 45% agree with President Trump’s handling of immigration/deportations.<sup>176</sup> Only 21% of young women do.

Culturally, Gen-Z men represent a rightward shift compared to their Millennial older brothers. They are less likely to identify as “feminist” and more likely to say they feel they have suffered anti-male discrimination.<sup>177</sup>

Young men are also much more likely to say they are proud to be American, to agree that “there are only two genders,” and that “transgender athletes should not be allowed in women’s sports.”<sup>178</sup> Only 24% of Gen-Z men say abortion should be legal in all cases, compared to 45% of Gen-Z women.



Interestingly, for all of the above, Gen-Z men are more in line with national averages. Gen-Z women represent the outlier group.

A newsmaking poll from September 2025 revealed that the gap in young men's and women's values goes beyond the world of politics to the question of what makes a successful life.<sup>179</sup> As discussed previously, men and women ranked their priorities differently, with men ranking children and marriage higher than women did.

When this poll gets broken down into Trump-voting young men and Harris-voting young women, the differences become more stark. Trump-voting young men ranked getting married and having children as the #4 and #1 hallmarks of a successful life. Harris-voting young women ranked these at #11 and #12 (out of 13 total choices). If Trump-voting young men consider having children to be a top priority, and Harris-voting young women consider it almost dead last among their goals, this has implications for the world of family formation.

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But of course, our political perspectives don't just shape how we date and live. The effect also runs the other way: Experiences inform our political views.

### ***How Experiences—Even Dating Experiences—Shape Politics***

Gen Z came of age during several major events and phenomena.

When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, the issue of abortion changed from primarily a legal issue to a legislative issue. Since this ruling, the Democratic Party has put enormous emphasis on abortion rights and messaging about this issue as an *existential threat* to young women.

The share of Gen-Z women who say abortion is the most important issue is 16%, more than double that of any other group.<sup>180</sup> For young women who are sexually active (but not married), an unplanned pregnancy poses a particular risk. As marriage ages creep up and the share of women aged 18-29 who are single increases, more women are likely to think of abortion and contraception as personally relevant.

Similarly, the #MeToo movement put focus on other political issues—personal safety and workplace policy—that especially concern young women. Many women experience sexual harassment or pressure while dating: 38% say they’ve experienced unwanted touching, 42% say they’ve felt pressured to have sex. Among younger women (under 40), 42% say they’ve received unwanted explicit pictures, and 23% say someone they’ve dated has spread rumors about their sexual history.<sup>181</sup>

In the dating world, women—particularly young women—face the greatest exposure to some of the worst behavior among men. It’s not surprising that young women with these experiences would be more open to negative messages about men, toxic masculinity, or the patriarchy. A Glocalities Trend Report from 2014 to 2023 shows a “strengthened embrace of liberal and anti-patriarchal values” among young women and “growing despair and disillusionment” among young people of both sexes.<sup>182</sup>

### ***Poor Mental Health and Progressivism***

In an earlier section of this report, we offered some information about the poor mental health of Gen Z: In nearly all metrics of mental health, Gen-Z women fare worse than men or older women.<sup>183</sup>

Interestingly, young, *liberal* women in the U.S. are faring even worse.<sup>184</sup> A majority of American liberal women aged 18-29 have been told by a healthcare professional that they have a mental health condition.

There are several possible explanations for this, some more plausible than others.

Young, liberal women may be more likely than other groups to seek out health care due to a distressed mental state, resulting in more diagnoses than other groups.

Some commentators have wondered if young, liberal women may be distressed because they don’t like President Trump or his agenda, and the constant news of his administration’s actions worsens their mental state. Maybe so, but the trend toward particularly bad mental health among young, liberal women was first noted around 2012, when former President Barack Obama was in office.<sup>185</sup>

It may be that there’s a link between progressive young women’s sexual activity and their mental health state. It’s been documented that sexual behaviors often align with political attitudes, with more liberal/progressive people desiring to have more adventurous sex and more sex partners.<sup>186</sup> As we’ve covered in this report already, having a lot of sex partners is associated with poorer mental health.

Perhaps the most compelling theory about young, liberal women’s mental health comes from Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, who point out that liberal girls suffer disproportionately from certain cognitive distortions that are popularized on college campuses, including that speech can be “violence,” that emotions are a reliable guide to reality, and that society is comprised of good victims and bad oppressors.<sup>187</sup>



According to Haidt, young, liberal women also more often have an “external locus of control” (the belief that life’s outcomes aren’t up to you, but rather are predetermined by external factors). These external factors might include luck or fate, or they might include systemic racism and sexism, bigotry, fascism, and myriad other social problems. This strips away individual agency.

Importantly, this is not to say that all progressives suffer from a victimhood mentality or from mental health challenges. But the associations are clear, and especially strong among young, female progressives.

### ***The Online Effect***

The COVID pandemic catalyzed certain trends that were already underway, including greater time spent online (among Americans of all ages). Young women and men have spent more of their lives online than any previous generation, and their political awareness has developed in this context.

More time spent online is associated with greater political polarization, and particularly affective polarization—animosity toward people from the “other side.”<sup>188</sup>

Even more concerning than political polarization, more time spent online is associated with greater support for political violence.<sup>189</sup> The Network Contagion Research Institute has researched “Assassination Culture” or the growing acceptance of political violence, and found that far-left political identification, younger age, and time spent on BlueSky, a left-dominated social media website, were predictors of support for political violence.<sup>190</sup>

Online politics aren’t just informative or persuasive; they are also *performative*. Posting and sharing social media content that aligns with a particular political view allows members of an in-group to signal their commitment to the tribe.

Online and off, young women are more likely than other groups to be influenced and pressured by their peers to adopt certain political views, and they pay a steeper social price for deviating from the left-leaning positions of the other women in their generation. Social scientists have found that women rely more heavily on cues from their social networks when it comes to politics, while men are more resistant to this.<sup>191</sup>



But men have certainly been exposed to increasingly vitriolic content online, some of which is labeled “conservative” but is actually simply racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic. These forms of prejudice are not new, but the Internet allows for—and perhaps even encourages—new extremes as a form of entertainment and ragebait.<sup>192</sup>

### ***Bottom Line***

The political divide between Gen-Z men and women is deeper and more bitter than traditional gender voting gaps, and has implications far beyond politics.

The recent focus on hot-button cultural issues such as abortion, sexual misconduct, and gender ideology has only exacerbated political divisions among Gen Z, and may now be fueling divisions over less political questions about what it means to live a good life and the importance of family life itself.

The dominance of online influences, both in the political world and the dating world, has introduced elements of anonymity that sometimes bring out the worst in men and women alike.

It’s a negative feedback loop: Marriage could help moderate some of the differences between Gen-Z women and men, but their differences pose a significant hurdle to marriage formation itself. Turning down the volume of political animosity in our culture broadly would go a long way toward ameliorating this dating dilemma.

But in the meantime, what’s a girl—or guy—to do?

**FIVE**

# Debunking Bad Dating Advice

There is no shortage of advice for young adults in the dating world. Countless influencers and dating coaches promulgate mountains of daily content with suggestions about how to find a mate. But a lot of dating advice is *bad*. Young adults deserve to be equipped with good information during their critical years of dating decisions. Many of our cultural messages on marriage are misinformed.

## ***Bad Advice: Don't Compromise On Your Individual Career Goals.***

Having a successful career—in most industries—is more straightforward than family formation. We work our way up from kindergarten to first grade, from first to second, to our graduate degree, to our entry-level job, to a mid-level job, to leadership. For motivated people who like to work hard and earn success, careers offer a good ladder. And there's nothing wrong with this! Hard work and success are laudable.

But careers can take over our lives, even to the point of precluding other pursuits. Some 43% of dating people under 40 report that being “too busy” is a major reason they find it difficult to date.<sup>193</sup> If you're too busy to date, is there room in your life for marriage (and possibly children)?

Careers can also offer us a source of identity and pride, as well as financial success. Careerism is strongly tied to *individualism*, a core facet of American culture. Individualism—while important in the face of threats such as collectivist government policies—can be a deterrent to family life, which requires self-sacrifice.

Marriage (and parenthood) requires us to put the needs of someone else ahead of our own. Our culture's message to young people is often “You do you!” or “You only live once!” as if life is mostly about pursuing individual success or good experiences. This is anathema to family life, which is about building something good together, even if it's hard or takes away from our individual success or comforts.



For some dating people, especially women, careerism represents a chicken-and-egg problem. Even if a marriage-minded woman would prefer to settle down, have a family, and eventually “lean out” of her professional work at some point to raise children, she cannot *not* (pardon the double negative) work while she is single. She must provide for herself, and naturally, this investment in her early career will open doors to more career opportunities.

While financial security is a big plus going into marriage, career success can be a double-edged sword: It can make it harder for spouses (of both sexes) to move to a new city for their partner’s job, to miss out on a promotion, to step out of the workforce for caregiving, or to make other sacrifices. This is one argument against what some experts define as “capstone” marriage, or marriage to older, more established partners.<sup>194</sup> The alternative is “cornerstone” marriage, where two younger, less established adults tie their destinies before their professional lives develop very much.<sup>195</sup>

The bottom line is this: If you are hoping to marry a *person*, don’t get married to your career. Be flexible and be prepared to compromise for the right person. Sacrifices will be necessary—but worthwhile—for family life.

### ***Bad Advice: Don’t Get Married Young***

While the number of people marrying their high school or college sweetheart has decreased, these settings remain popular places to meet: According to the Knot, 8% of people still marry a high school sweetheart.<sup>196</sup> And 15% of spouses met in college or grad school. (This is the third most popular place to meet, after online dating (27%) or through friends.) For college-bound young adults, it’s smart to use this setting to look for potential mates, as the concentration of same-age dating prospects is high.

Because average marriage ages have crept much later in life, there’s a tendency for many college-age young adults (and *their parents*) to think of relationships at this time as unserious, or “practice” relationships. This is unwise. If two college-age people share a serious commitment to their relationship, there’s no reason why they can’t consider marriage. After all, they are old enough to choose a major or professional field, old enough to vote, and old enough to serve in the U.S. military. For some people, a young marriage can be a great choice.

For some time, there was a perception that early marriage was linked to higher divorce risk. A couple of studies from several decades ago found a slightly higher divorce risk for women marrying under the age of 25. But this perception is outdated.<sup>197</sup> More recent research shows no relationship between young marriage age and marital quality or divorce risk.

Researcher Anne Marie Wright Jones posits that this change may be due to changing social norms and pressures: While women in previous generations may have rushed into young marriages due to social pressure



(or an unplanned pregnancy), there is far less social pressure to marry early now.<sup>198</sup> Therefore, the couples marrying early today are doing so out of a deliberate choice.

In fact, young brides and grooms must, in some cases, defy social pressure, as even many parents whisper to their children that they should wait to marry later.<sup>199</sup> Parents are right to be concerned about their children's marriages, but their worry is better directed at *whom* their children marry rather than *when*.

There's nothing wrong with marrying later in life. But there's nothing wrong with marrying young, either. And for many people, delaying marriage—intentionally or unintentionally—represents a risk of missing out on marriage altogether. Or missing out on having kids.

There are biological realities that come with childbearing. And these biological realities may inform your timeline for getting married. Educational and career goals can often take shape around more flexible timelines than childbearing, which, for most women, naturally ends around age 40. The New York Times reported that many Millennial women won't reach their fertility goals because many ran out of time.<sup>200</sup>

### ***Bad Advice: Don't Discuss Politics and Religion***

Politesse is a virtue; it's nice to be nice. But when dating, it's important not to put politeness ahead of intentionality. While you may have heard that it's not polite to discuss politics and religion, these are exactly the things that dating people should discuss, and early on. Politics and religion are expressions of our values. While it's fun and good to have diverse and enriching friendships with people across the ideological spectrum, research shows that marriages are stronger between people who share the same values.<sup>201</sup> Having the same core values makes it easier to navigate conflict and is therefore protective against divorce.

It's also important for people to have the same (or at least similar) approach to money,<sup>202</sup> parenting, extended family,<sup>203</sup> and life goals. If a new dating partner holds a diametrically opposed view in any of these areas, chances are that this relationship will not work out. Cut your losses early.

There are many areas where dating people can, and even should, make compromises: Okay, so he's only 5'9" and not 6' tall. Or maybe you thought you'd find a girl who could cook. But it is not smart to compromise when it comes to a core value or life goal. Establishing some non-negotiables even before a first date can save a lot of time—and heartbreak.

### ***Bad Advice: Anything Goes When It Comes To Sex***

In earlier sections of this report, we covered the risks of casual sex. Aside from pregnancy, undesirable effects on emotional and mental health, and heightened divorce risk, having sex with a dating partner too soon has one more downside: emotional blindness. Sex has a bonding effect, which is good within a marriage, but can be confusing for partners who are still trying to decide on one another.<sup>204</sup>

A satisfying sexual relationship doesn't mean two people are good potential marriage partners. In fact, enjoyable sex can mask other problems in a relationship, making it hard to address or even identify the root issues or areas of conflict. These areas can show up later, when the sex may not be as thrilling. Sex can keep people in a dead-end relationship, delaying—sometimes by years—an inevitable breakup.

Daters should keep their wits about them and recognize the seriousness of evaluating the people they meet. Although it might seem like antiquated advice, it's still sound: Abstaining from sex, at least during the first stages of a new relationship, if not until marriage, allows men and women to get to know one another first, without the hormonal and neurological effects of sexual activity. In fact, social science shows the best outcomes belong to people who marry *as virgins* or who have at least only ever slept with each other.<sup>205</sup> They have the happiest, strongest marriages of any group. And they aren't a small group. Traditionally, about 40% of married people say they fall in this category.<sup>206</sup> But dating for a decade, as is now normal, is likely to make this harder and less common.



If you *don't* fall into this category—even if you've already had many casual sexual partners—it's never too late to adopt a different framework for sexual decision-making. A report from the Wheatley Institute shows that about 10-15% of highly sexually experienced people still reported high levels of satisfaction in their marriage. The report notes that this group "... likely embraced fidelity to their spouse and adopted a more person-centered approach to love and sex."<sup>207</sup> Change is possible.

Avoiding sex with your new hot boyfriend or girlfriend may seem difficult. That's good! That means you find him or her attractive. Sexual attraction is a good, natural, and necessary facet of a dating relationship, but sexual intimacy before clear-eyed commitment puts the cart before the horse.

### ***Bad Advice: Take It for a Test Drive (Cohabitate)***

Cohabitation represents a "serious step" for many modern couples, often taken after the relationship is strongly established as exclusive, but before or sometimes in lieu of marriage. But cohabitation without marital commitment, while increasingly socially acceptable (and even expected), often creates problems.

The evidence on cohabitation is mixed, suggesting that not all cohabitations are the same.<sup>208</sup> Often, after a couple has gotten engaged and committed to getting married, they will move in together for practical reasons (e.g., to save money on rent as they plan their wedding). Among these couples, there is little evidence to suggest that cohabitation undermines their relationship or portends badly for their marriage.

But cohabitation is not a substitute for marriage. Cohabitation doesn't match the financial benefits of marriage.<sup>209</sup> And cohabitations are much more likely to end than marriages, perhaps because couples who cohabitate

experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction on average and are more likely to cheat.<sup>210</sup> When a cohabitation ends—similar to a divorce—the mental health impact on both partners is not good: Both men and women in dissolved cohabitations experience a higher risk of depression.<sup>211</sup> And men are at higher risk of binge drinking.<sup>212</sup>

Some couples move in together before they've decided on the final destiny of their relationship. This makes breaking up harder and leads some couples to stay together longer than they would otherwise. This theory of “inertia” in cohabitating relationships is supported by research by Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades. Their research also suggests that marital quality is lower among couples who cohabitated before engagement or marriage.<sup>213</sup>

Importantly, non-marital sexual relationships and cohabitation both come with the risk of a pregnancy. While every child's life is a gift, the presence of a child in the life of a dating person complicates things tremendously. The presence of a child (before marriage) also doubles divorce risk.<sup>214</sup>

### ***Bad Advice: Marriage and Kids Will Just Come Along***

In a world where marriage and family life are the norm, and in a dating culture with stronger social scripts for young people, it might be a reasonable assumption that these “natural” milestones of life will “just happen,” and that, unlike other life goals, we don't need to be especially intentional about pursuing them.

That's not today's reality. Today, dating people have access to a much larger pool of potential mates (thanks to online dating), and sorting through these options can take time, emotional energy, and intentionality.

Sociologist Mark Regnerus says it makes sense to move the conversation from the virtual world to the real world as soon as possible.<sup>215</sup> Life is too short to waste time on people who may not be who they say they are, and unfortunately, some (one in ten) online dating profiles are fake or misleading.<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, relationships and marriages take place in the real world, not behind phone screens. Don't waste time or energy cultivating a pen-pal relationship with someone who won't work out.

Many successful relationships start because of mutual friends. This is likely because our friends know us and know what we value. There's nothing embarrassing about asking friends and family members to help play matchmaker. A matchmaker (in some societies) was once the primary means of marriage. There are still paid services like this available today, but for most people, a friend or mentor will be helpful for free. Involving our loved ones in our love lives (with the right boundaries, of course) can help us see more clearly or think more creatively about our choices, and can also ensure accountability—you're less likely to be ghosted by someone who's friends with your friends than you are by a stranger on an app.

Once established, serious relationships benefit from mentoring and counseling along the way. Significant research shows that premarital counseling improves relationship quality and is protective against divorce.<sup>217</sup>

We should extend this concept even before engagement, to the early phases of relationships. Young people benefit from involving their parents and older mentors in their dating decisions.

In-person gatherings, shared values, and relationship mentorship are all built into religious communities. For religious people who are dating, their faith can be a great asset. While only 4% of people report that they met at church,<sup>218</sup> research shows that these couples are among the happiest and most satisfied.<sup>219</sup> And couples who attend church together have a 50% lower risk of divorce.<sup>220</sup> (Importantly, religious *identification* doesn't mean much for relationships, but religious *practice* does.)

***In today's world, marriage-minded dating people must pursue family goals with the same energy and intentionality as other individual life goals.***

This isn't surprising: Religion, for many people, introduces intentionality to many areas of life. But daters of all creeds and backgrounds can be intentional. As marriage expert Dr. Scott Stanley has argued, it's important for people to "decide, don't slide" into major family-formation decisions.<sup>221</sup> There may have been a time, based on cultural norms, that marriage and family life would just "come along" naturally in one's life. But in today's world, marriage-minded dating people must pursue family goals with the same energy and intentionality as other individual life goals.

### ***Bottom Line***

Dating is not a straightforward game that one might win by following all the right rules. In fact, today, it often seems like there are no rules. There is no instruction book.

Instead, much of the conventional wisdom about dating and marriage today is anything but wise. Young adults deserve better.

# Policy and Cultural Implications

Later marriage, fewer marriages, later childbearing, and less childbearing ... These issues are very personal for individuals, but they are also whole-of-society issues. And they require a whole-of-society response.

Single and married people alike should recognize the critical role that the family plays in society, and should seek to champion the institution of the nuclear family.

One of the most clear findings in all of social science is the advantage conferred to children when they are raised in a home with two married parents. Children with married parents are more likely to behave well in school,<sup>222</sup> perform better academically,<sup>223</sup> experience better mental and physical health,<sup>224</sup> avoid poverty,<sup>225</sup> avoid incarceration,<sup>226</sup> and experience greater personal safety.<sup>227</sup>

Marriage has myriad well-documented benefits for married adults as well: Married people are happier,<sup>228</sup> live longer,<sup>229</sup> earn more money,<sup>230</sup> and build more wealth than single people.<sup>231</sup> Married mothers are twice as likely to report being “very happy” than their single or childless counterparts.<sup>232</sup>

But the institution of marriage benefits even non-married people: Communities with higher rates of intact families have lower rates of violence.<sup>233</sup> Married people are more likely to vote,<sup>234</sup> volunteer,<sup>235</sup> and give more money to charity.<sup>236</sup> They are less likely to depend on social programs (if they have a child).<sup>237</sup> Marriage curbs anti-social behaviors, at least in men.<sup>238</sup>

Furthermore, marriage is a huge factor in fertility, which has been declining.<sup>239</sup> In fact, the Institute for Family Studies reports that changes in marriage patterns account for *half or more* of the change in fertility from 2001 to 2016.<sup>240</sup> And fertility affects society. A world with fewer children (i.e., people) also means a world with fewer innovators, workers, savers, spenders, and taxpayers.

Cultural institutions and governmental policymakers should work to create the best possible environment for healthy family life. What does this look like?

## ***Bring Back Home Economics***

No classroom course or curriculum will replace the influence of parents, but schools and educational institutions can do more to better prepare young people for the world of family formation. While “home economics” traditionally harkens to domestic work (e.g., cooking and housekeeping), a fuller understanding of home ec should include personal and home financial literacy, human development and child care, health and nutrition, and even healthy relationships. Students—especially those from less stable homes—would benefit from better information on these topics.

Many schools teach sexual education courses that prepare children and adolescents for puberty and cover the basics of sexual relationships, contraception, and how to minimize one’s risk of STDs. This is woefully inadequate preparation for the real world, where our hopes and desires go beyond pregnancy- and STD-avoidance. In a survey from Harvard’s School of Education, 65% of 18- to 25-year-olds said they wished their sex-ed classes had offered more information about mature, healthy relationships.<sup>241</sup>

***This is woefully inadequate preparation for the real world, where our hopes and desires go beyond pregnancy- and STD-avoidance.***

Schools are not the ideal place for kids to learn about love; the ideal place is in the home. Some of today’s hottest culture war clashes are over what is taught in schools with regard to sex, gender, and sexuality. Often, sex ed focuses on the mechanics of the sex act (or a variety of sex acts) as if sex can be decoupled from love and commitment. This doesn’t reflect what many people believe or want.<sup>242</sup>

Schools should broaden their home- and sex-education lenses and focus more on the *positive* aspects of family formation. For many people, there will come a time when their goals change from avoiding pregnancy to getting pregnant. But many women reach adulthood without a good understanding of how to make this switch (aside from desisting from birth control). In a 2022 study, a majority of women studied did not know when their fertile window was.<sup>243</sup> And often, people underestimate how sharply fertility declines for women in their 30s.<sup>244</sup> “Family planning” should be about how to have a family, not just how to avoid it.

Some states—Ohio, Utah, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee—have explored using curricula about the “success sequence.”<sup>245</sup> The success sequence is the data-supported concept that finishing high school, working full-time, and delaying children until after marriage will dramatically reduce the risk of poverty. Some critics say that teaching about these life choices will fall on deaf ears and won’t influence behaviors.<sup>246</sup> But don’t students deserve to have the facts anyway?

## ***Sex Neutrality—Not Sex Positivity***

At the very least, educators should not present choices about sex as inconsequential. While sex ed today tends to emphasize the physical risks involved with sex, we should also be clear about the emotional and neurological effects of sex, too.

This extends to programming on college campuses, such as “Sex Week” and other so-called “sex positive” resources, workshops, and events. “Sex positivity” is often framed as part of women’s empowerment. But abstinence from sex can also be an empowering choice (for women and men). Schools do not need to sponsor events about female orgasms, sex toys, BDSM, and kinks.

Understandably, we don’t want a “sex negative” culture. We don’t want people to feel ashamed about sex; sex is a normal and healthy activity. But the education system doesn’t need to be sex-negative or positive. It can be neutral, presenting the facts about how sex affects us and letting students decide how to navigate their choices.

***It is a welcome change that our society today is more accepting of diverse family arrangements, but the nuclear family—a mother, a father, and their children—should still be the norm.***

## ***Normalize and Support Marriage and Family Life***

Family formation was once an expectation of young adult life. While this social expectation may have felt oppressive to some, it set a clear norm. It is a welcome change that our society today is more accepting of diverse family arrangements, but the nuclear family—a mother, a father, and their children—should still be the norm. This does not mean that singles, divorced people, or gay couples should be mistreated or denigrated. It simply means that the nuclear family is the cornerstone of our society.

Social norms are hard to change, and often institutional changes follow cultural changes, not the other way around. For example, married student housing on college campuses has declined in recent years.<sup>247</sup> This is more of a commentary on later marriage age than a prescription for any particular outcome. But if colleges were to offer better housing options for married students and/or students who are parents, this would signal their interest in supporting family life on campus. At the very least, campuses might offer family counseling services or housing counseling for married students, alongside other existing wellness offerings.

Similarly, workplaces should be pro-family. This means offering benefits like paid family leave, on-site child care, flexible hours, and work-from-home options. If the assumption is that workers will not have families,

this contributes to a social norm. If the assumption is that workers will have families, this signals that having a family is natural, expected, welcomed—and perhaps even celebrated—by others. Of course, employers face very real costs and tradeoffs when considering pro-family policies, but when possible, these pro-family offerings can contribute to a healthier culture.

Workplaces can be more welcoming of romantic relationships, too. Although workplace relationships can present particular challenges for human resource departments, they are far from taboo: Most people (58%) approve of workplace relationships between workers at the same level,<sup>248</sup> and many workers (60%) report having been involved in a workplace romance.<sup>249</sup> As many as 43% of those who dated someone at work ended up getting married.<sup>250</sup> Rather than banning or shaming office romances, employers should simply offer clear guidelines for how to navigate them.

Outside of school and work, some subcultures—particularly where religious practice is more prevalent—already excel at promoting family life. American Enterprise Institute scholar and author Timothy Carney explored this phenomenon in his book, “Family Unfriendly.”<sup>251</sup> Carney also suggested that safer roads and neighborhoods, stronger support systems for parents (including extended family), and more *unstructured* childhood activities (versus highly structured activities like travel sports) would help normalize family life, especially for larger families.

Every church, synagogue, mosque, and temple should offer youth groups, singles groups, dating counseling, premarital counseling, and mentorship for young couples and families.<sup>252</sup> By talking about and modeling strong relationships and family life (while also being sensitive to the realities of single life), religious institutions can continue to be a pro-family beacon in confusing times.

### ***Limits of Government Policy***

It is tempting to try to encourage stronger family formation through pro-family government programs. Former President Ronald Reagan criticized big-government policies by characterizing them in this way: “If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it.”<sup>253</sup> Marriage and family life have indeed stagnated. But can subsidies fix this?

If marriage and children were simply like other consumer choices, the answer would be yes. But marriage and children are not consumer choices. For much of human history, for many people, they were not choices at all. Even today, some people would say that their marital status or whether they have children was not really their choice. (E.g., a widow is not single by choice; an infertile couple is not childless by choice.)

But for many people, decisions about family life are choices, even if they are made slowly, unintentionally, or subconsciously. These choices are expressions of our deepest desires, reflections of our values, and are driven ultimately by our worldview. These choices are different from, say, whether to install high-efficiency appliances, and therefore subsidies will have a limited (but not zero) effect.

All around the world, governments are trying to subsidize *fertility*, with little success. Pronatal policy ideas typically include government-provided child care, government-guaranteed paid leave, tax benefits, cash transfers, housing supports for parents, and workplace flexibility policies. But a broader view of pronatal policies could include any policy change that makes life easier for families (e.g., education or housing reforms), with the underlying assumption being that making family life easier will incentivize more births.

Many countries in Europe and Asia have tried implementing family-friendly policies such as family allowances or cash transfers, with great cost and modest effects.<sup>254</sup>

A recent estimate of such programs in the United States suggests that for \$250 billion annually, we could increase our fertility rate by 0.2.<sup>255</sup> This isn't nothing, but the high price tag shows how high a tradeoff policymakers face for a small effect.

What about marriage? Can government subsidies fix our marriage culture? Like pronatal policies, pro-marriage policies show mixed, and often disappointing, results. Government-funded “healthy marriage” programs that focus on marital relationship-building don't show a decrease in divorce rates.<sup>256</sup> Tax incentives for marriage may have some effect, but the effect is small.<sup>257</sup> Sometimes pro-family incentives appear to be effective in the short run when they've really just changed the timing of a child's birth or a marriage decision, and not the ultimate outcome.<sup>258</sup>

Using public funds to reward marriage may sound like an easy fix, but this approach will inevitably create unintended consequences, both practically and politically.

Politically, providing benefits predicated on marriage could be cast by opponents as showering resources on already well-off married couples and denying support to struggling single women. This could be viewed as callous and discriminatory, and could be seen as a punishment for those who do not marry.

Moreover, there is nothing in the Constitution that vests the federal government with the power to encourage people to marry, making this an abuse of federal power. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich famously criticized proposed Medicare reforms in 2011, saying they amounted to “right-wing social engineering.” One might say the same of proposals today that seek to pull the levers of government funding to incentivize family formation.

### ***Don't Punish Marriage***

The government may not be able to effectively subsidize marriage, but it *should not discourage it*. Marriage penalties in our welfare programs have deteriorated family wholeness, especially for those who are most vulnerable—those on welfare and other social support programs. Pro-marriage policymakers should address this.

A marriage penalty occurs when two single people qualify for more or higher government assistance than two married people. This is common in the design of welfare programs, including Medicaid, SNAP (food stamps), Section 8 (housing assistance), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). In some cases, people who qualify for these programs become disqualified if they marry someone, even someone with a modest income. As a result, sometimes people will remain unmarried to avoid losing benefits.

For example, the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal program designed to help aged, blind, and disabled individuals with little (or no) income. Currently, two single people who receive SSI and have no other income would lose 25% of their benefits if they married. If each person received \$841 per month while single, they would only receive \$1,261 together after marriage, representing a loss of more than \$5,000 a year.<sup>259</sup> Some program beneficiaries report avoiding marriage (or even getting divorced) because of this penalty.<sup>260</sup>

While this anti-marriage policy is clearly detrimental to a healthy culture, it's politically hard to fix. Anti-poverty programs were not designed to punish marriage; they were designed to offer support to people in poverty, which often includes single-parent households. Efforts to correct or remove marriage penalties in these programs are often (unfairly) characterized politically as attacks on single moms.

Nevertheless, welfare programs that discourage marriage should be reformed. Removing marriage penalties would not harm single mothers, but would instead financially level-set choices about marriage vis-a-vis government social assistance, returning these choices to the personal realm, where they belong.

### ***Parents: The Ultimate Cultural Influencers***

Parents have a key role to play when it comes to teaching and modeling healthy relationships. Parents who demonstrate healthy marriages to their kids and speak positively about marriage and family life can have a tremendous impact. In fact, parents may be underestimating their influence or their children's desire for their advice.

***But a few generations into the sexual revolution, some of today's parents may not even have a solid framework for sexual ethics to pass along to their children.***

Many parents often broach the topic of sex out of (reasonable) concerns about unplanned pregnancy, STDs, or how to give or get "consent" from a sex partner to avoid confusion or accusations of wrongdoing. But adolescents need more information. Parents should offer their teens a framework for sexual ethics that goes

beyond the bare minimum of consent. Religious teachings are often helpful here. But a few generations into the sexual revolution, some of today's parents may not even have a solid framework for sexual ethics to pass along to their children. This topic deserves serious attention from parents and other adult mentors. Our kids are looking to us to help them see what is right and wrong, and what is wise and unwise.

When Harvard's School of Education researched the experiences of young adults aged 18-25, 70% said they wished they had received more information from their parents about the emotional aspects of romantic relationships.<sup>261</sup> Respondents said they wished their parents had given them more guidance on "how to have a more mature relationship" (38%), "how to deal with breakups" (36%), "how to avoid getting hurt in a relationship" (34%), or "how to begin a relationship" (27%).

In our poll, we asked adults aged 18-29 who or what was the greatest influence on their views on marriage and family. Parents/family of origin was the most popular answer, with 52% of respondents naming Mom and Dad as their greatest influence. Media (including podcasts and social media) was a faraway second place with 29%, followed by friends (16%) and politicians/government (2%) at dead last.

Parents *are* giving advice about marriage one way or the other, even if they don't know it, and even if this advice is non-verbal and subconscious. The way we *model* relationships has a great effect on our kids, which is one reason why the children of married parents are less likely to divorce as adults.<sup>262</sup>

"About 41% of women and 26% of men experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime and reported a related impact," according to the CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.<sup>263</sup> Children who suffer domestic violence at the hands of their parents or see parents abusing each other are far less likely to enter a healthy marriage or raise healthy children.

This does not mean, however, that children need to witness a conflict-free marriage. Conflict inside of a marriage is normal, and when kids see their parents solve problems and communicate respectfully—even and especially when they disagree—this helps kids understand that relationships require healthy communication and give-and-take.<sup>264</sup>

Another part of modeling a healthy marriage is making time for one another. This can sometimes be directly at odds with the demands of parenting. But research shows that regular date nights reduce divorce risk and improve marital quality.<sup>265</sup> Kids may cry when they are left behind with a babysitter, but in the bigger picture, loving one's spouse well is an act of love to one's children and even one's grandchildren, because of the way healthy marriage habits are passed through generations.

Teaching and modeling good relationships extends to relationships with technology. While technology can make us more connected, it can also make us more disconnected. Parents should take a very active role in

limiting their children’s screen time and phone use and in overseeing the content they consume online. This can help guard against cyberbullying, pornography exposure, sexploitation, and the mental health effects of too much time spent on social media—namely, depression and anxiety. And while video games can sometimes be innocent fun (or even intellectually stimulating), video gaming can take away from kids’ and teens’ social time to an unhealthy degree. To be good at relationships with other humans, kids and teens have to spend time with other humans.

Perhaps counterintuitively, we should also model and encourage healthy relationships with same-sex friends. Single-sex spaces are important for boys and girls alike, so that they can develop a healthy sense of femininity or masculinity. Without these spaces, more men and women will gravitate to polarized content online that degrades the opposite sex.

***Single people, whether by choice or by happenstance, can be vital members of our society, communities, and families (as aunts, uncles, sisters, cousins, etc.).***

### ***Dignity and Personal Responsibility for All***

Educating young people about the benefits of marriage is critical, but it should also be a part of a larger message to encourage dignity and responsibility among all people. Single people, whether by choice or by happenstance, can be vital members of our society, communities, and families (as aunts, uncles, sisters, cousins, etc.).

Adults who never marry may get the impression that their choices and behaviors in dating relationships have no bearing on family culture. This is not correct. No person is an island. The same choices and behaviors that can help people have success in future marriages (i.e., sexual restraint in singlehood, treating other people with respect, having a healthy perspective on work, etc.) will also serve never-married people well, and they will foster a better culture for everyone.

Importantly, the goal of family promotion is *strong, loving families*. We should never give the impression that people should pursue or stay in relationships that are abusive or destructive. Some new, concerning trends (e.g., men pressuring their girlfriends “to retire” from the workplace)<sup>266</sup> suggest an unhealthy shift toward overly strict gender roles. We should take care not to let the cultural pendulum swing away from progressive views on family life (that family life doesn’t matter) only toward regressive views on family life (that family life is all that matters, and that our self-worth is determined only by our family roles). A healthy culture cannot be measured in marriage or fertility rates alone, but should be reflected in the dignity and moral character of all of our people, regardless of family status.

## ***Bottom Line: Culture Change is Hard***

It is often said that politics is downstream from culture. Of course, the relationship between politics and culture is not that simple.

But we have to recognize that people are not marionettes; even the most well-designed government programs cannot produce a conservative utopia of Judeo-Christian values, patriotism, strong marriages, and high fertility rates any more than they can produce a progressive utopia of perfect justice, harmony, and equality.

Changing our culture is hard, but it is possible. In a time where we are all tempted to sponsor a new federal bill or throw more content online, we might all try instead to focus on our closest spheres of influence: We can encourage our friends and family members to prioritize family life. We can offer to babysit for the young couple next door, so that they can have a date night. We can serve as mentors for engaged couples in the premarital class at our local church. We can offer support for victims of domestic violence to help them break cycles of abuse and generational trauma. We can talk to our employers about what the office is doing to support family life. We can give money to on-campus organizations that support students who are married and/or parenting. We can talk to the young adults in our lives, offering advice, support, and maybe even matchmaking, if welcome.

The government should get out of the way. Policy changes are needed. But we shouldn't expect a silver bullet subsidy or new pro-family agenda to sweep in and save family culture. We must be the heroes our culture needs.



## CONCLUSION

Even in the womb, female fetuses develop the eggs that will one day become their own children. Biologically, we are born with what we need to make the next generation of humans. But culturally and socially, we need a lot of help from our parents and communities to prepare us for marriage and parenthood and help us reach these milestones, if they are to be a part of our life's journey. Living things can reproduce, but family life is about much more than continuing the human race. It's about connection, love, commitment, identity, and meaning. Our closest family relationships hold mirrors up to us, help us develop and grow, and help us to understand how we fit into a bigger network of ancestors, descendants, and peers.

Family formation is high stakes. And it is complex. Today, in some ways, it may be more complex than it needs to be. And it certainly takes longer than it did for previous generations. As this report has documented, many young adults will spend a decade—or more—navigating romantic relationships before saying “I do,” and this presents challenges. We can respond to these challenges and do more to support all young people during their dating years and promote happy, healthy lives.

**First, we should pay closer attention** to this extended time period in early adulthood before marriage. Health experts, economists, and think tanks have given significant attention to *another* period of life that has lengthened—the time between retirement and death. But less attention has been given to the increasing time that Americans spend *dating* before forming families of their own.

This season of life can be very fun. It's a great time for personal and professional development, friendships, hobbies, service to the community, travel, and other endeavors. But as data on mental health show, it's not always fun to be young and unattached. It can be stressful, lonely, and laden with decision-making.

**We can be more honest.** In our effort to avoid coming across as judgmental toward certain sexual choices and behaviors, we have, as a society, sent young people a message that these choices don't matter. This is wrong. A longer time period between embarking on one's romantic (or sexual) journey and arriving at

marriage represents an increased opportunity for young adults to gain sexual experience before marriage. But social science shows that sexual *inexperience* upon marriage is linked to stronger and more satisfying unions.

Pornography use, cohabitation, sleeping around ... these things aren't just bad ideas because they conflict with some Americans' religious beliefs. They are bad ideas because they are often destructive to the people who do them. Young adults deserve to know this.

***Cultural messages about marriage and family life make it seem like young adults who say “I do” are voluntarily leaving the party, and no one wants to leave a party too early. But the truth is that with the right person, marriage is the party.***

**We can be more encouraging.** Negative voices and messages about family life often resonate loudest, but the truth is that marriage and parenthood are still deeply rewarding and fun. We don't need to talk young people into marrying; most of them still say they want to. But we can stop talking them out of it. Cultural messages about marriage and family life make it seem like young adults who say “I do” are voluntarily leaving the party, and no one wants to leave a party too early. But the truth is that with the right person, marriage *is* the party.

**We can focus on forming good future spouses and parents.** In our education system, in our society, and even in our families, we put enormous emphasis on career preparation. We constantly ask children, “What will you be when you grow up?” The expected answer to this question is a profession (e.g., “doctor,” “lawyer,” “gymnast”). But many girls and boys will also grow up to be wives, husbands, mothers, and fathers. To excel at these roles, young people need training in communication, conflict resolution, respect for others, and working toward shared goals. They also need to develop the social skills to navigate dating. They need less screen time, healthy bodies, and healthy minds. They need to become responsible adults in order to attract, commit to, and support a mate. This training starts at home, and early.

**We can reduce political animosity.** The political fault lines in Gen Z, often drawn between men and women, are representative of political divisions throughout our population. It's true for everyone that life experiences and political views shape each other, but Gen Z's longer period of pre-marriage singleness has increasingly contributed to shaping young adults' political identities, and in polarizing directions. A healthier political climate, where Americans of all ages and family backgrounds can relate to one another

in healthy and respectful ways, would make dating easier. Furthermore, we should be careful not to make marriage and childbearing into partisan issues, but instead look for common ground to promote what is best for young adults and our whole society.

**We can foster a more family-friendly culture and improve public policy.** Schools, workplaces, and religious institutions can all work toward greater family-friendliness while also being fair and inclusive toward people who remain single. Our governmental policies should never punish people for getting married or having children. But *incentivizing* marriage and fertility, while often a noble goal, is not easily achieved through legislation, new programs, or even subsidies. Marriage and family decisions are completely life-changing. They reflect our most deeply held values; they aren't easily influenced by any political agenda. But they are influenced—more than we might admit—by those closest to us.

It would be easy to despair about our dating culture, to throw our hands up and say that nothing can be done. But that's not right. There is plenty that we can do. Modern life poses complicated challenges for human relationships, but human relationships have survived in the face of many changes in our history and our world.

Life finds a way. Love does, too.

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**Family formation is high stakes. And it is complex. Today, in some ways, it may be more complex than it needs to be. And it certainly takes longer than it did for previous generations. Many young adults will spend a decade—or more—navigating romantic relationships before saying “I do,” and this presents challenges. We can respond to these challenges and do more to support all young people during their dating years and promote happy, healthy lives.**



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