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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

RESEARCH METHODS

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

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

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

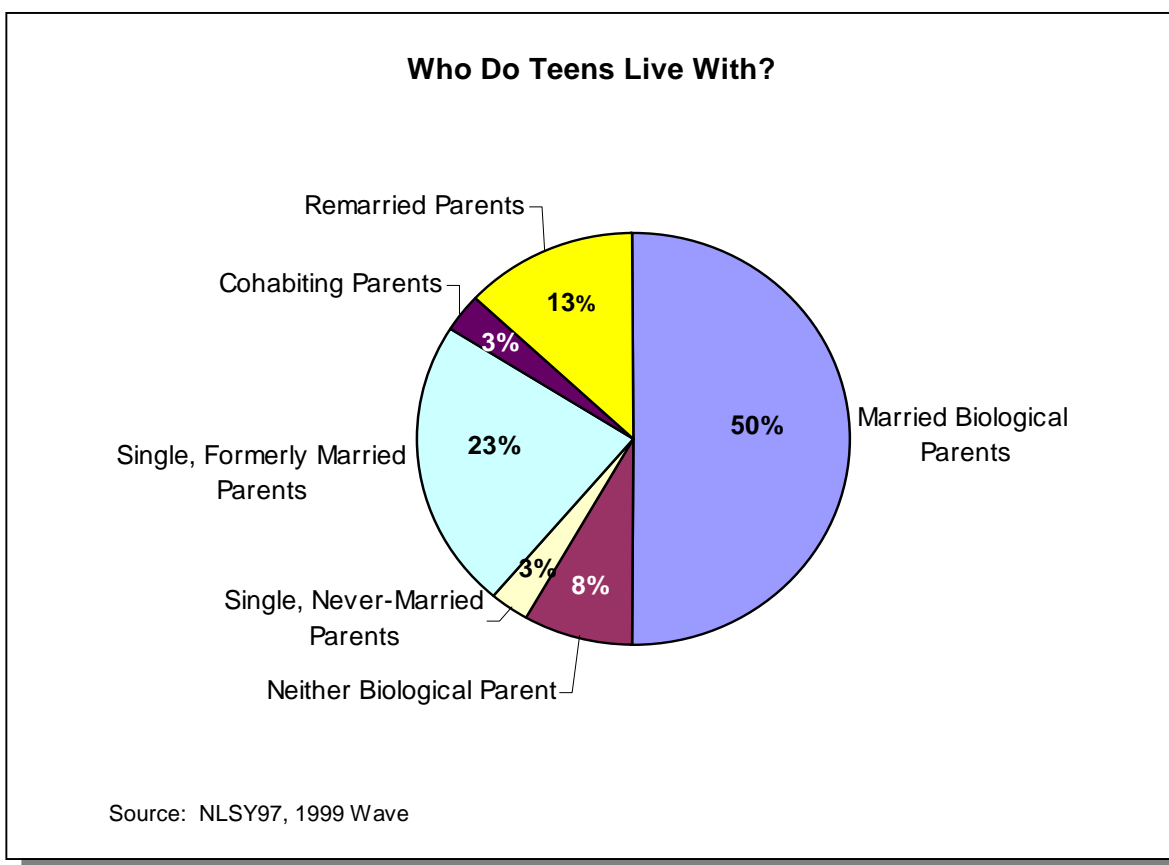
KEY FINDINGS

Teens' Experiences with Romantic Relationships and Marriage

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

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

Figure 1 Family Composition of Teens Ages 15 to 18



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

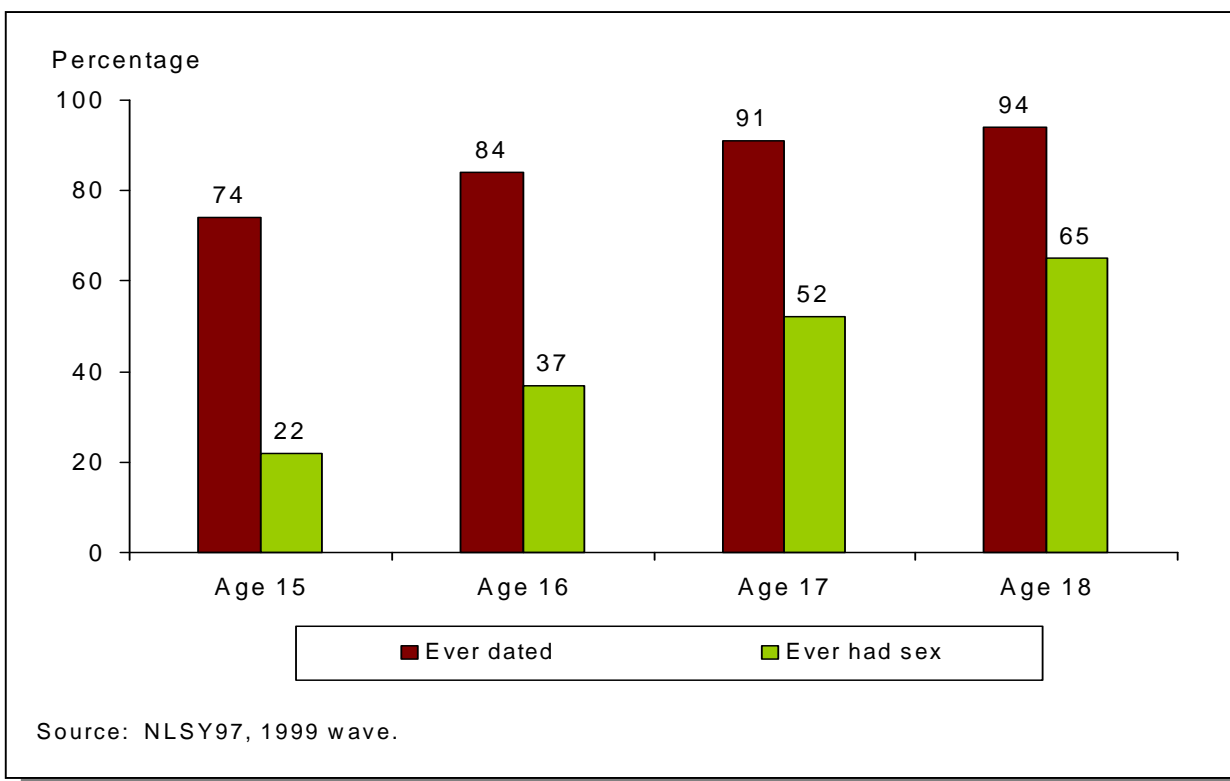
Teens with estranged parents hold less positive views of the quality of their parents' relationship than teens with married parents do. Most teens report that their estranged parents have mixed or unfriendly relations or have no contact with each other. However, these perceptions vary depending on whether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

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

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

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

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

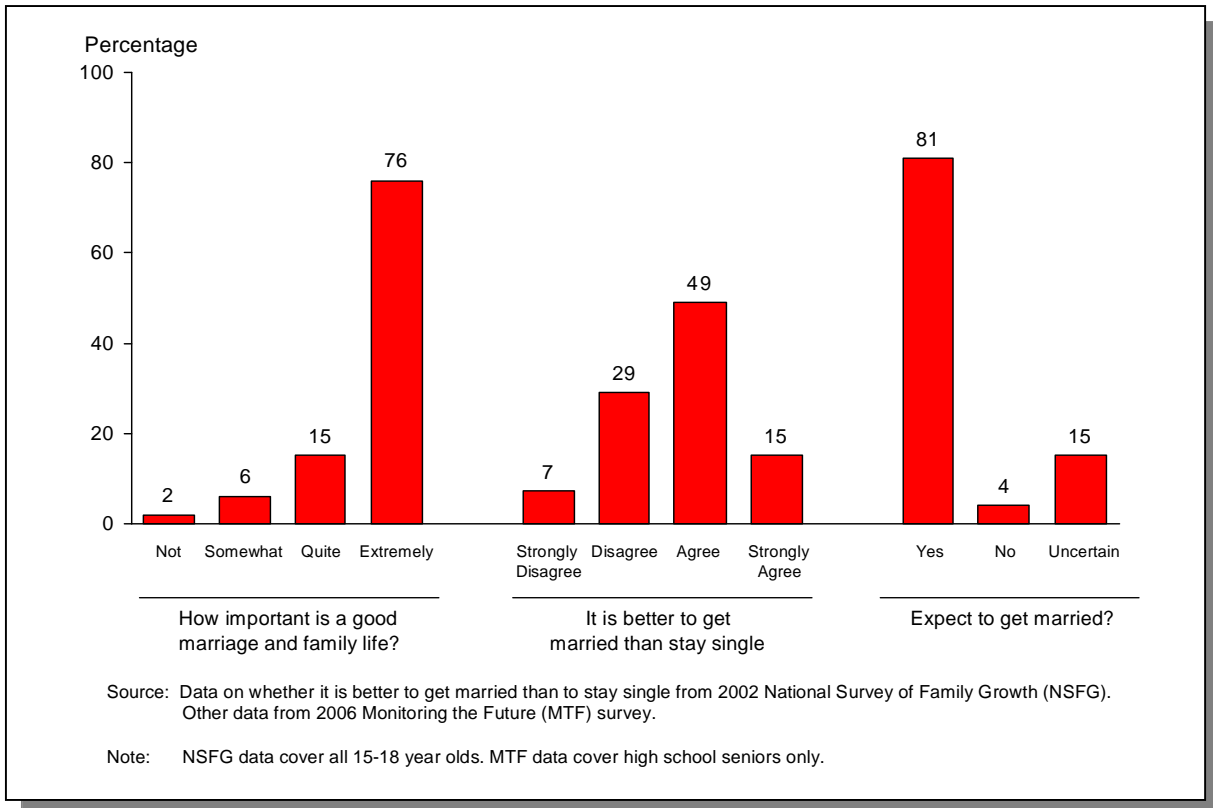
Figure 2 Teen Dating and Sexual Activity, by Age

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

Teen Attitudes and Expectations Concerning Romantic Relationships and Marriage

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

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

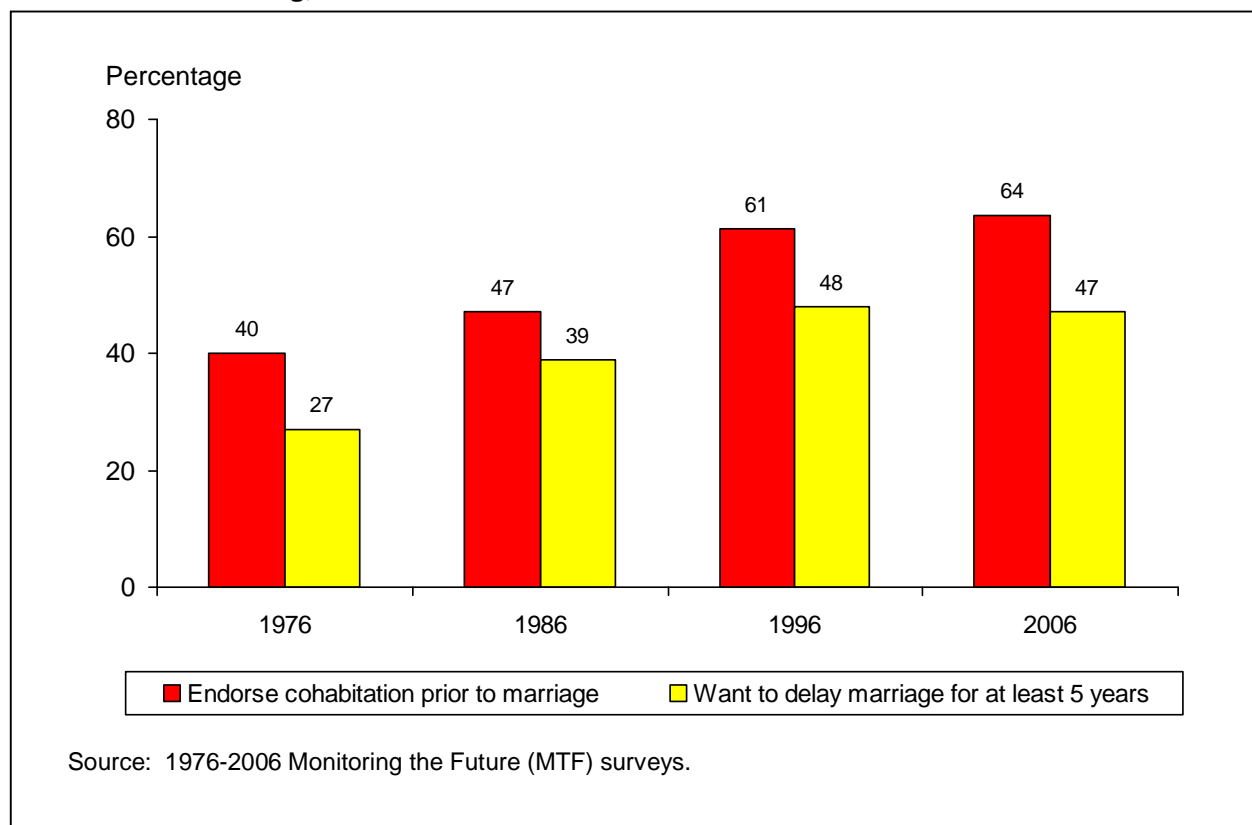
Figure 3 Teens' Attitudes and Expectations Concerning Marriage

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

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

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

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



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

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

Typical Relationship Pathways in the Years After High School

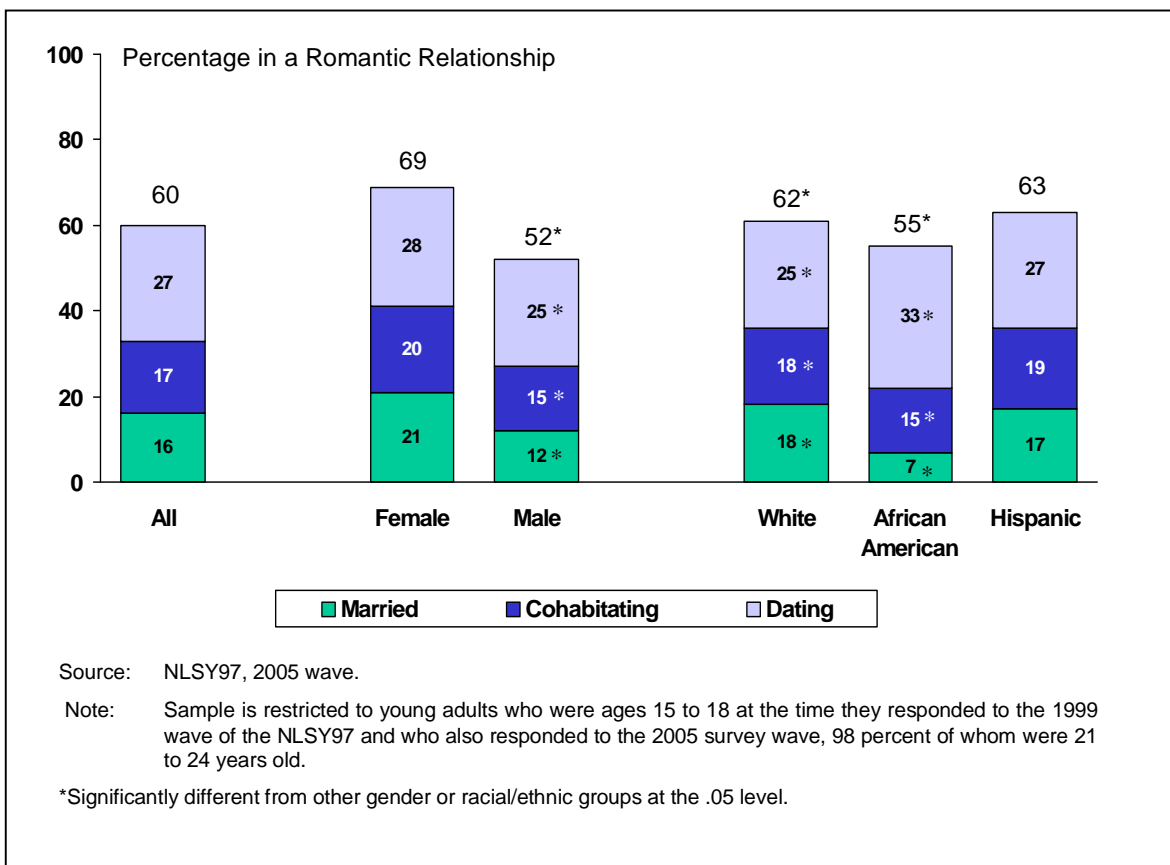
- **Most adults in their early 20s are in a romantic relationship, but relatively few are married. Cohabitation is more common than marriage for this age group.**

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

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

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

Figure 5 Relationship Status of Young Adults Ages 21 to 24



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source: NLSY97, 1999 and 2005 waves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TEENS AND MARRIAGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DATA, SAMPLES, AND METHODS

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

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

For this analysis, we focus on two waves of the NLSY97, one conducted when the respondents were in their teens and another that tracks them into their early 20s. The 1999 survey wave includes a sample of more than 6,600 teens between the ages of 15 and 18¹ and was conducted during the last year in which a large portion of the NLSY97 sample was still high school-aged. In Chapter II, we use the 1999 data to describe the youths' families and their early relationship experiences. In Chapter IV, we use the 2005 wave of the NLSY97 to examine the relationship outcomes of this same cohort of young people when they were young adults between the ages of 20 and 25. In particular, we describe their patterns of dating, cohabitation, and marriage. All of the analyses are weighted to account for the survey sampling design and to reflect the national population in the appropriate year.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

ADOLESCENT EXPERIENCES WITH ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL FAMILY STRUCTURES OF TEENS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

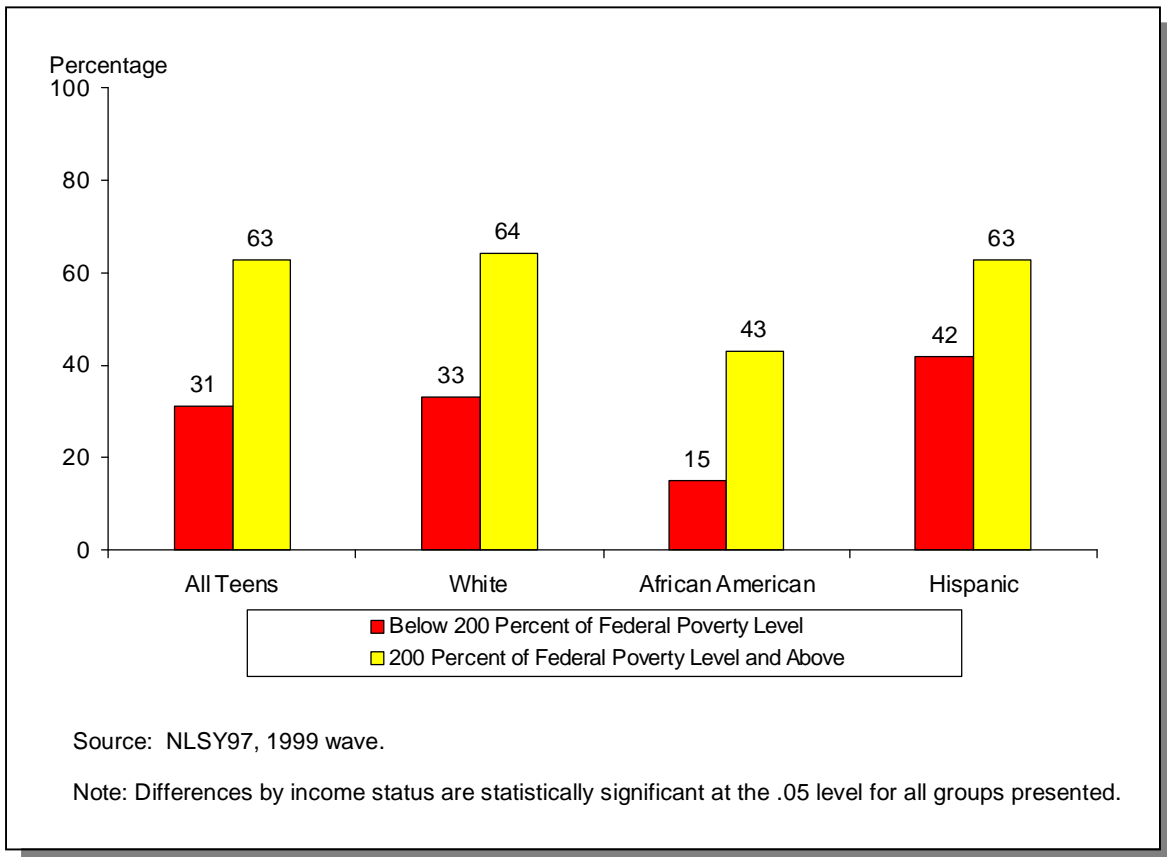
times the federal poverty level, 63 percent lived with their married biological parents (Figure II.1).¹ In contrast, the same was true for only 31 percent of lower-income teens. Racial differences remained pronounced even within income groups. For example, 33 percent of low-income white youth lived with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

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

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

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

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



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

WHAT DO TEENS THINK OF THEIR PARENTS' RELATIONSHIPS?

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

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

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

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

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

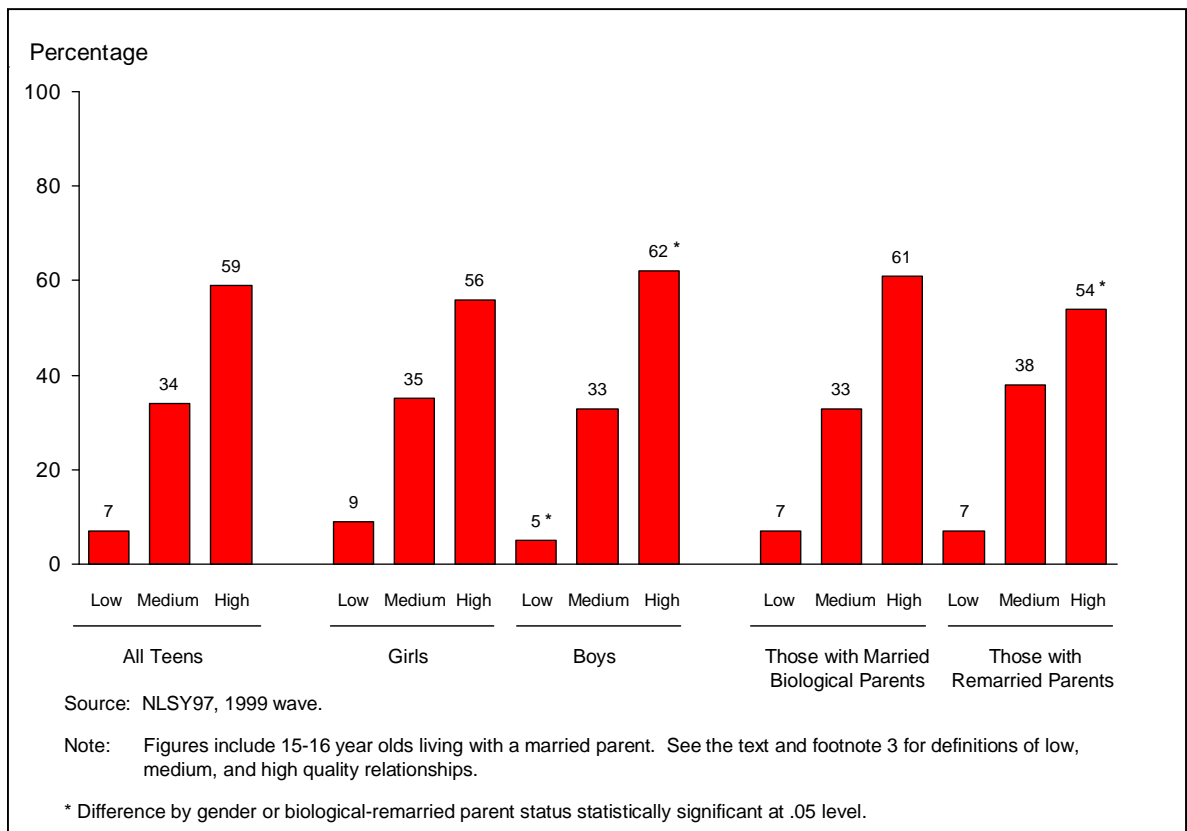
² These questions are only available for teens who were 15 or 16 years old at the time of the 1999 survey wave. Therefore, these analyses are restricted to 15 and 16 year olds. To keep the analysis focused on marital relationships, we exclude the small number of teens (3 percent of our sample) living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

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

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

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

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



⁴ These differences between boys and girls were statistically significant.

