

# ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION  
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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

*Adolescence is a crucial time for physical and emotional development and can be a pivotal period in the formation of ideas about intimacy and marriage. In this research brief, we use information from four national data sets to examine factors that may influence relationship and marriage patterns during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. We document teens' experiences, circumstances, and attitudes associated with romantic relationships and marriage. We also examine how relationship patterns of young adults vary by their circumstances, experiences, and expectations as teens.*

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 brief, 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.

#### ABOUT THIS BRIEF

*This research brief examines teens' attitudes, expectations, and experiences associated with romantic relationships and marriage and explores their typical relationship pathways as they make the transition to adulthood. This brief summarizes the findings from the full report, "Pathways to Adulthood and Marriage: Teenagers' Attitudes, Expectation and Relationship Patterns," available on ASPE's website: <http://aspe.hhs.gov>.*

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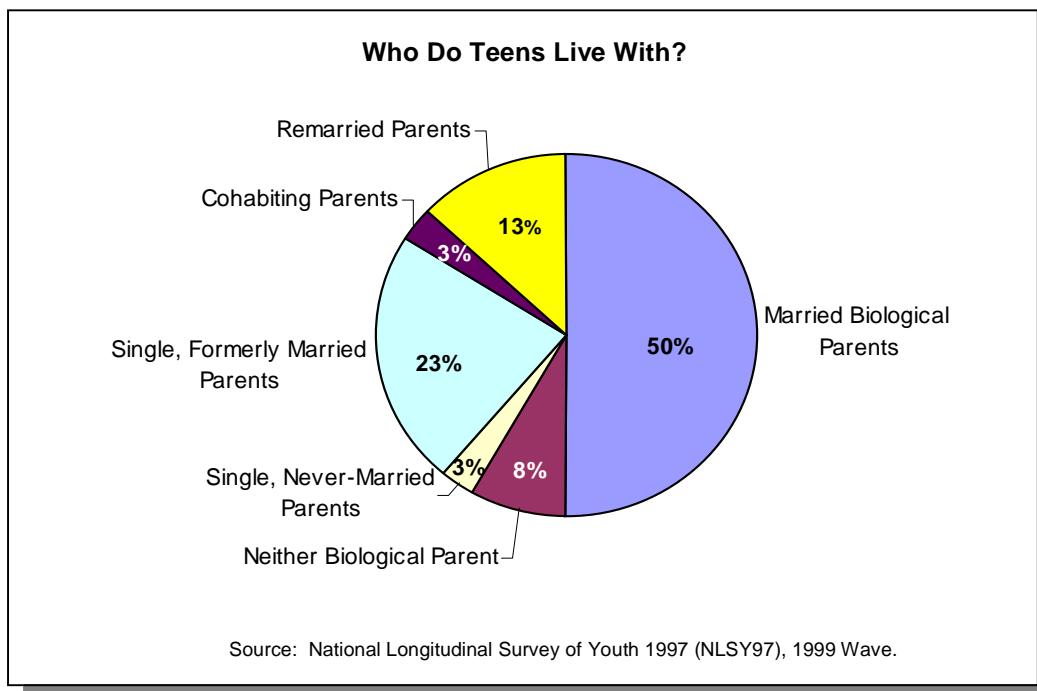
This information is useful for several reasons. First, trends in teenage attitudes toward marriage can provide an indication of whether current trends in adult marriage patterns are likely to continue. In addition, information on teen romantic relationships is an important indicator of adolescent health 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 (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.

## 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 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) 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)<sup>1</sup>. 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**



<sup>1</sup> The data sources for our analysis are described in the text box at the end of this brief.

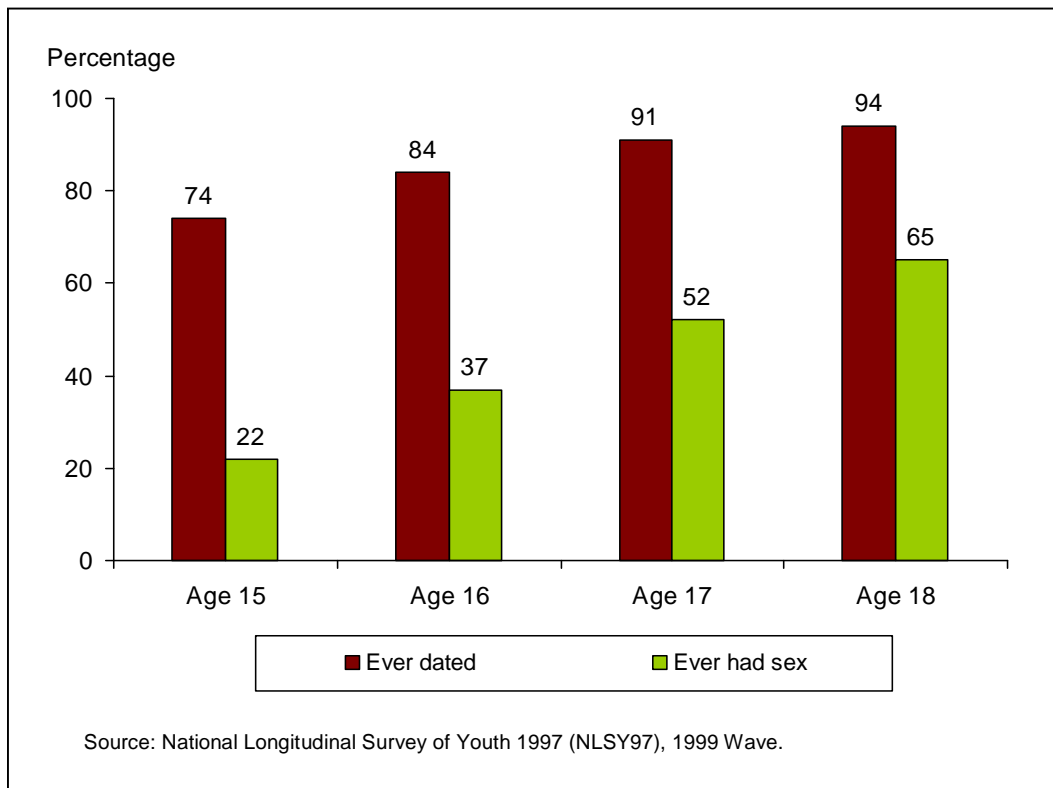
Teens may be influenced not only by their parents' relationship status but also by the quality of their parents' relationship. Most teens view their parents' marriage positively. When asked about a range of behaviors, such as compromising, showing affection, and avoiding criticism, almost 60 percent 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

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



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.

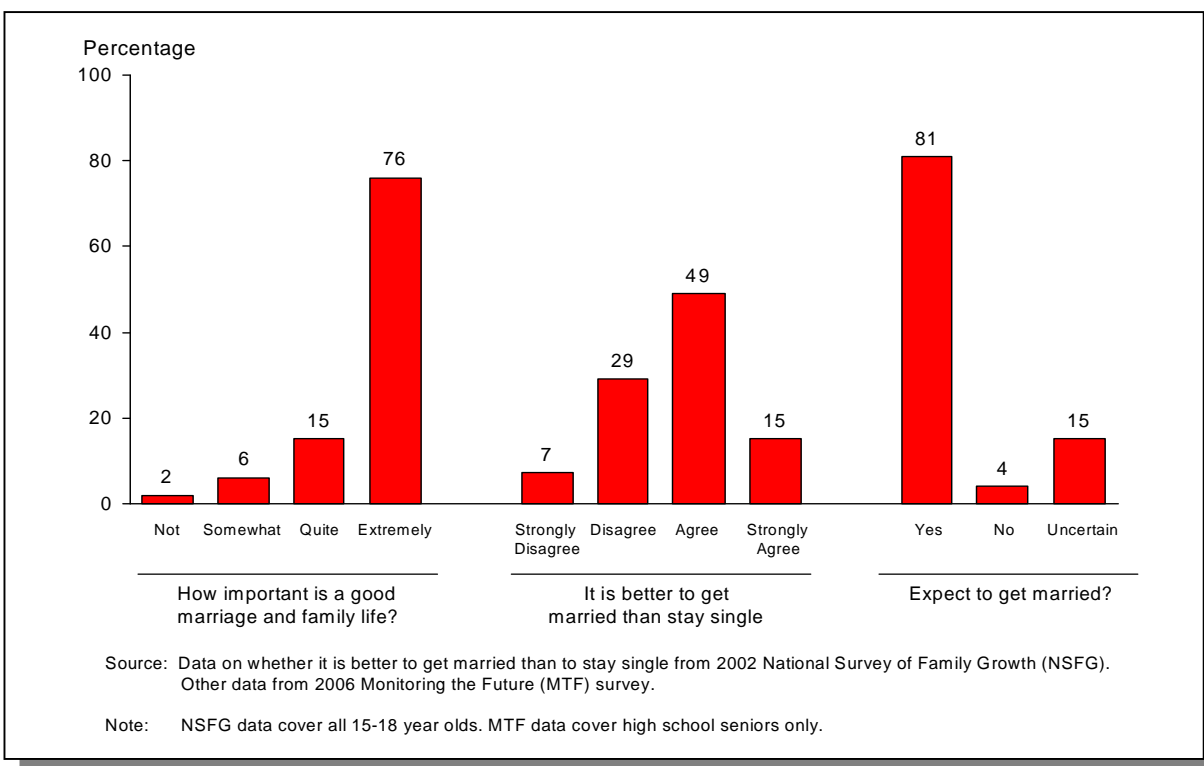
The likelihood that high school students date regularly has declined in recent years. Data from the Monitoring the Future (MTF) study indicate that the percentage of high school seniors who say they date has dropped from 86 percent in 1990 to 73 percent in 2006. The likelihood of sexual activity also fell somewhat in recent years—although less dramatically than the likelihood of dating. According to data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 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 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 in the MTF sample, 91 percent indicated

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



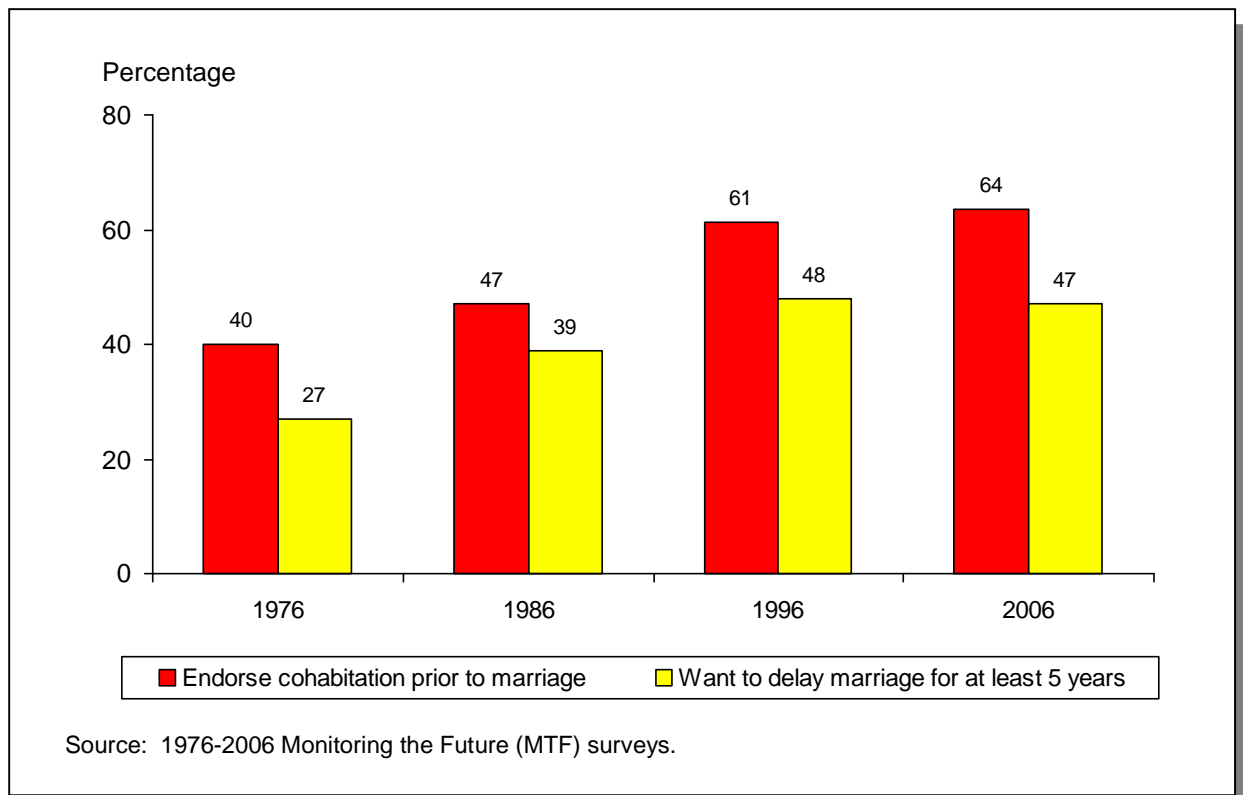
that having a good marriage and family life was either “quite important” or “extremely important” to them; 81 percent said they expected to marry some day and 72 percent indicated that they felt well prepared for marriage. Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) also reveal positive general attitudes toward marriage among teens. Nearly two-thirds of high-school-aged teens in our NSFG sample agreed with the statement, “It is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single.”

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, 85 percent

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



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.

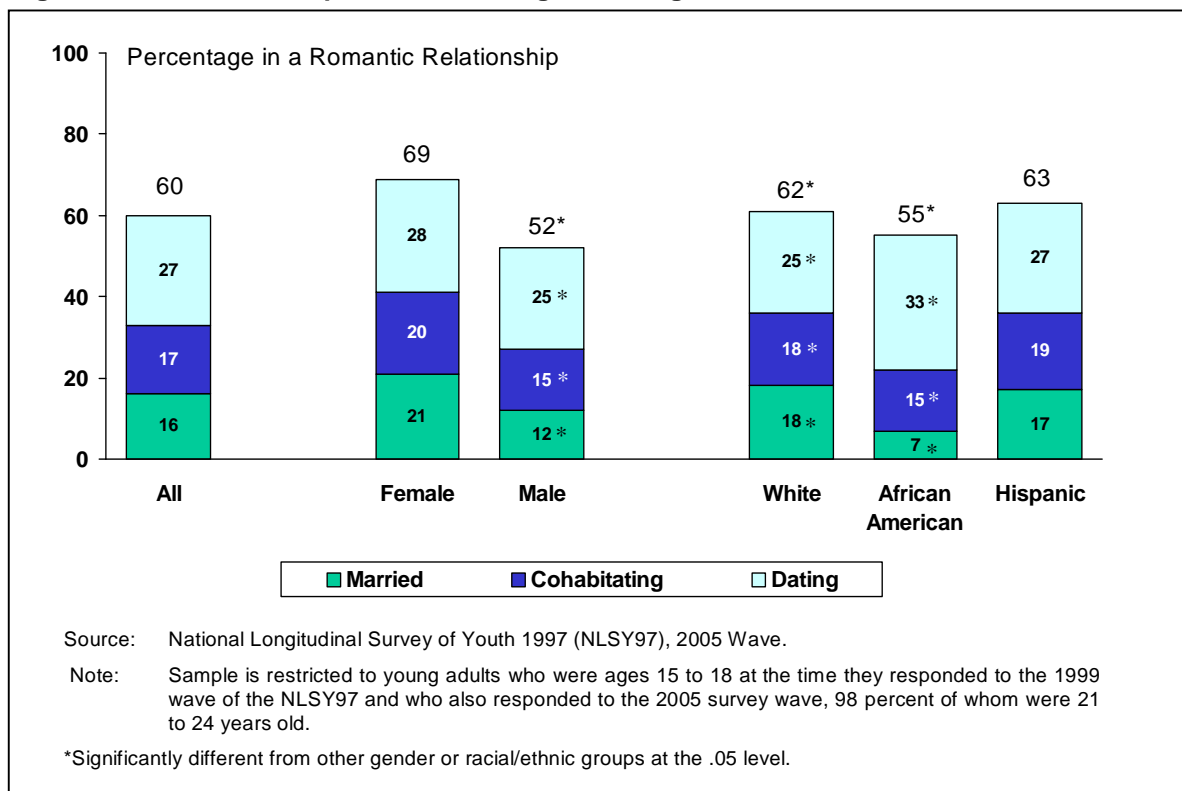
Teens' attitudes toward marriage are also closely linked with their family structure. Teens who are living with both of their biological parents express particularly strong support for marriage. Among these teens, 67 percent agree that it is better to get married than to go through life being single, 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.

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



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 (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Fields 2004; Chandra et al. 2005).

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 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

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

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

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (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.



sample who lived with married biological parents as teenagers, 32 percent had ever cohabited by their early 20s, compared with 46 percent among those who lived with remarried parents as teens and 41 percent of those who lived 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.

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## Data Sources

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 analysis, we used 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 used two waves of the NLSY97. We used data on more than 6,600 survey respondents 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. We used MTF data to examine trends in teens' attitudes and expectations concerning marriage.
- 3. The 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).** Additional information on teens' attitudes toward marriage came 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 analysis, we used data for the subsample of 1,800 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 analysis, we used information from the YRBS on trends in sexual activity among high school students.

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