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Press Release

Teens Have Positive But Changing Views of Marriage

Brief by Mathematica[®] Researchers Notes Increasing Acceptance of Cohabitation Among Teens and an Increasing Desire to Postpone Marriage

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PRINCETON, N.J. (November 6, 2008)—Today's youth hold positive views of marriage but are increasingly interested in postponing marriage until later in life and increasingly accepting of cohabitation, according to a new study by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., describing the experiences and attitudes of teenagers about romantic relationships and marriage.

In recent years, marriage patterns in the U.S. have changed dramatically, with adults spending more time unmarried, and cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing becoming increasingly common. To examine some of the potential precursors to these changes in adult marriage patterns, Mathematica's study examined teens' attitudes, expectations, and experiences associated with romantic relationships and marriage and explored their typical relationship pathways as they make the transition to adulthood. The study is based on data from four large national surveys, including the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Monitoring the Future, the National Survey of Family Growth, and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The researchers examined data on recent cohorts of teens and also tracked trends in teens' attitudes in the past 30 years.

Key Findings

Teens' attitudes toward marriage are generally favorable. Most teens think their parents have good marriages, and over 80 percent plan to marry some day. Teens in the study come from a mix of family structures, with 63 percent residing with married parents—50 percent with both biological parents and 13 percent with a parent who had remarried. About one in four live with a single parent. Teens with estranged parents hold less positive views of the quality of their parents' relationship.

Attitudes toward marriage are shifting. Although most teens express strong general support for marriage, the study suggests that they are increasingly accepting of cohabitation before marriage. The proportion of high school seniors who think it is a good idea for couples to live together before marriage has climbed steadily over the years, from 40 percent in the 1970s to 64 percent in 2006. Growing numbers also report wanting to wait until later in life to get married—47 percent in 2006 versus 27 percent in the 1970s.

Boys' and girls' views differ. Girls have less positive views of marriage, but boys are more interested in delaying marriage. Across a broad range of measures, boys are more likely than girls to support marriage. For example, 69 percent of boys think it is better for a person to get married than to go through life single, compared with 56 percent of teenage girls. However, 85 percent of 12th-grade boys want to delay marriage for at least four to five years after high school, compared with 79 percent of their female counterparts.

Shifting attitudes toward marriage among teens mirror changes in young adults' behavior. The study tracked a cohort of teens into early adulthood (ages 21 to 24) and found that, although most were in a romantic relationship, few were married. Furthermore, cohabitation is more common than marriage for this group. For example, 18 percent had ever been married,

while 39 percent had cohabited at some point. Studies of earlier cohorts of young adults found higher rates of marriage and lower rates of cohabitation among young adults.

“We have seen some substantial changes in how teens view marriage in recent years,” said Robert G. Wood, director of the study and senior researcher at Mathematica. “And we can now see how those changing attitudes are playing out in changes in their relationship choices as young adults.”

“Pathways to Adulthood and Marriage: Teenagers’ Attitudes, Expectations, and Relationship Patterns” by Robert G. Wood, Brian Goesling, and Sarah Avellar is available at www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/pathwaystoadulthoodIB.pdf. The full report is available at www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/pathwaystoadulthoodrpt.pdf

The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Human Services Policy. Other recent HHS-sponsored publications reveal how U.S. [marriage patterns differ across the 50 states](#), and [how marriage relates to family health care coverage](#).

Mathematica, a nonpartisan research firm, conducts high quality, objective policy research and surveys to improve public well-being. Its clients include federal and state governments, foundations, and private-sector and international organizations. The employee-owned company, with offices in Princeton, N.J., Washington, D.C., Cambridge, Mass., and Ann Arbor, Mich., has conducted some of the most important studies of health care, education, welfare, employment, nutrition, and early childhood policies and programs in the U.S.

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