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FP-10-03 Thirty Years of Change in Marriage and Union Formation Attitudes, 1976-2008

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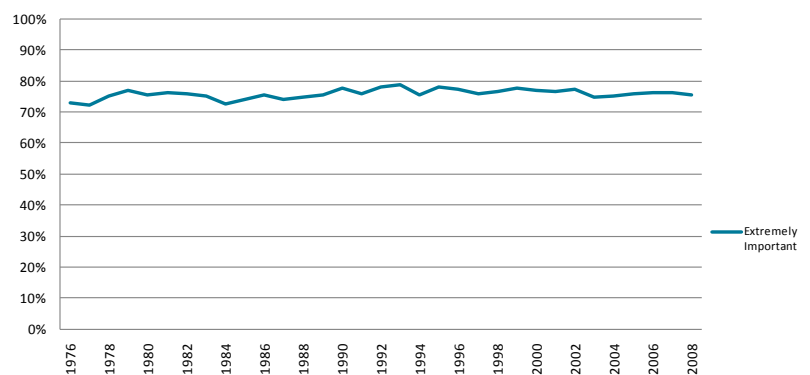
Overview

- The past 30 years have witnessed dramatic change in union formation behaviors ranging from delays in marriage to growth in divorce and cohabitation (FP-09-02; FP-09-03; FP-10-02). An examination of how adolescents' attitudes concerning marriage and union formation have shifted over time can provide insight on how future union formation behaviors of adults will unfold. Drawing on 30 years of nationally representative data from *Monitoring the Future* (MTF), this profile presents high school seniors' attitudes toward marriage and union formation. For more information on the MTF sample and study design, access the NCFMR's The Data Source by [clicking here](#).

The Importance of Marriage and Family

- High school seniors were asked to rate the following question, "How important is having a good marriage and family?" Responses ranging from *extremely important* to *not important* were used to measure the centrality of marriage and family life.
 - » Over the past 30 years, the value of marriage has changed very little with more than 70% of high school seniors reporting that having a good marriage and family is extremely important (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Importance of a Good Marriage and Family



Source: Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (12th -Grade Survey), 1976-2008.

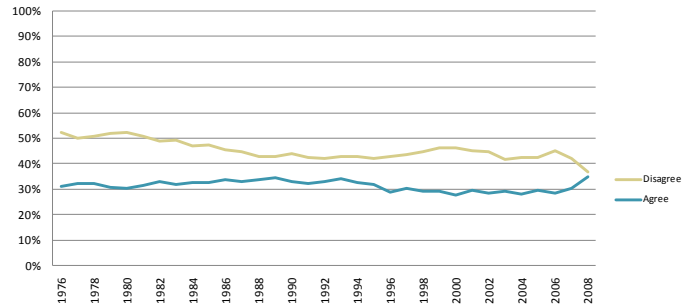
The Viability of Marriage

- High school seniors were asked to *agree or disagree* with the following statement, "One sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way of life." Responses were used to assess the viability of marriage.
 - » There has been little change over the past thirty years in the proportion of high school seniors that agree with marriage as a way of life.
 - ◊ Agreement with questioning marriage as a way of life has remained stable at about 30% since 1976, rising slightly to 35% between 2006 and 2008.

Family Profiles examine topics related to NCFMR's core research themes. Data are presented at both the national and state levels using new data sources. Written for both researchers and broad communities, these profiles summarize the latest statistics on U.S. families.

» While high school seniors have not generally questioned the viability of marriage, the gap between agreement and disagreement about the importance of marriage has been narrowing. Additionally, there has been a recent increase in questioning the viability of marriage (Figure 2).

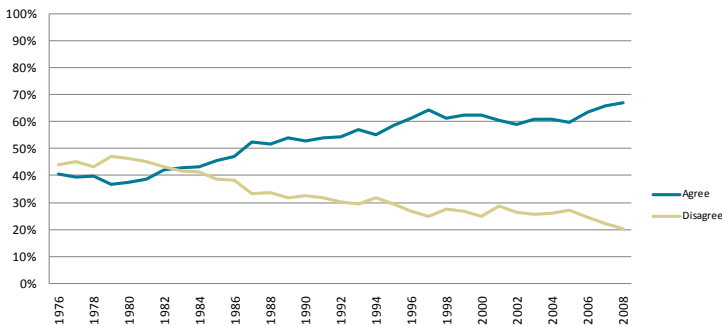
Figure 2: Questioning the Viability of Marriage*



Cohabitation as a Testing Ground for Marriage

• High school seniors were asked how much they *agree or disagree* with the following statement, "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along." Responses were used to measure how acceptable cohabitation is as a testing ground for marriage.

Figure 3: Agreement with Cohabitation as a Testing Ground for Marriage*



» Agreement with cohabitation as a testing ground for marriage has increased over the past 30 years (Figure 3). At the same time, disagreement has declined.

◊ Agreement with cohabitation as a testing ground for marriage has steadily increased over the past 30 years, rising from 40% in 1976 to just under 70% by 2008, a 75% increase.

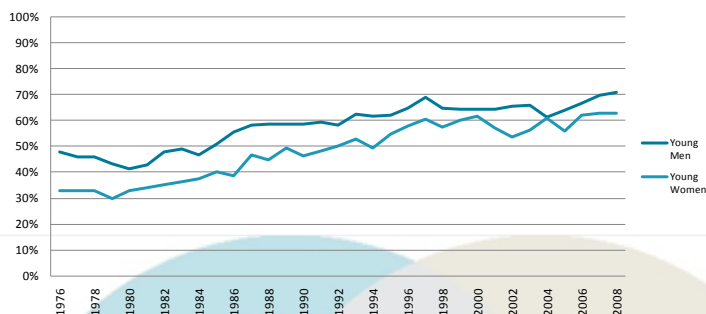
◊ Disagreement with cohabitation as a testing ground has dropped 50% over the past 30 years, falling from over 40% in 1976 to 20% in 2008 (Figure 3).

» Agreement and disagreement between young men and young women have followed similar trajectories, but young men consistently appear to be more accepting of cohabitation as a testing ground.

◊ Forty-eight percent of young men agreed with cohabitation as a testing ground in 1976, versus 33% of young women. Young women did not reach similar levels of agreement until 1989, over ten years later.

◊ Though the initial gender gap in agreement was 15% in 1976, there is evidence it may be closing. By 2008, the gap was 7%; 70% of young men agreed with cohabitation as a testing ground versus 63% of young women (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Agreement with Cohabitation as a Testing Ground for Marriage by Gender*



*Source: Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (12th -Grade Survey), 1976-2008.

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