

Says:

Teens' Attitudes Toward Marriage, Cohabitation, and Divorce, 2002



The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is the premier source of national information on teen sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and pregnancy. This Science Says issue brief uses the most recent round of the NSFG, collected in 2002, to examine teens' attitudes about marriage, divorce, and cohabitation.

Highlights:

- The majority of teens believe it is better to get married than to go through life single; more boys than girls feel this way.
- The majority of teens do not agree that divorce is the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out its marital problems.
- Despite positive attitudes toward marriage, two-thirds of teens also accept premarital cohabitation.
- Teens' life experiences, such as whether or not they grew up in a two-parent family and whether or not they are sexually experienced, are associated with significantly different attitudes toward these issues.

Marriage

Teen boys are more likely than teen girls to believe that it is bet-

ter to get married than to go through life single.

Two-thirds of boys aged 15-19 (68.9%) agree with the statement, "It is better for a person to get mar-

ried than to go through life being single," compared to over half of girls aged 15-19 (54.2%, Figure 1). The difference between the responses of boys and girls is statistically significant.¹

FIGURE 1: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) who agree "It is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single"

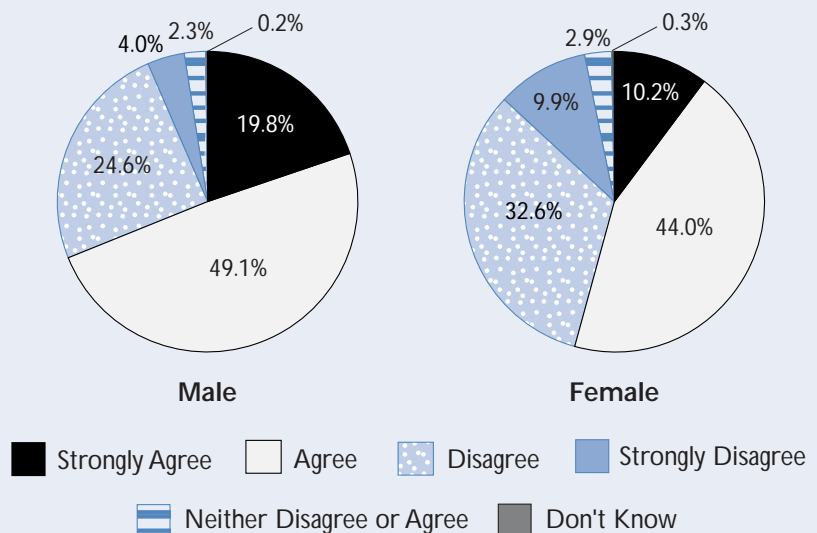
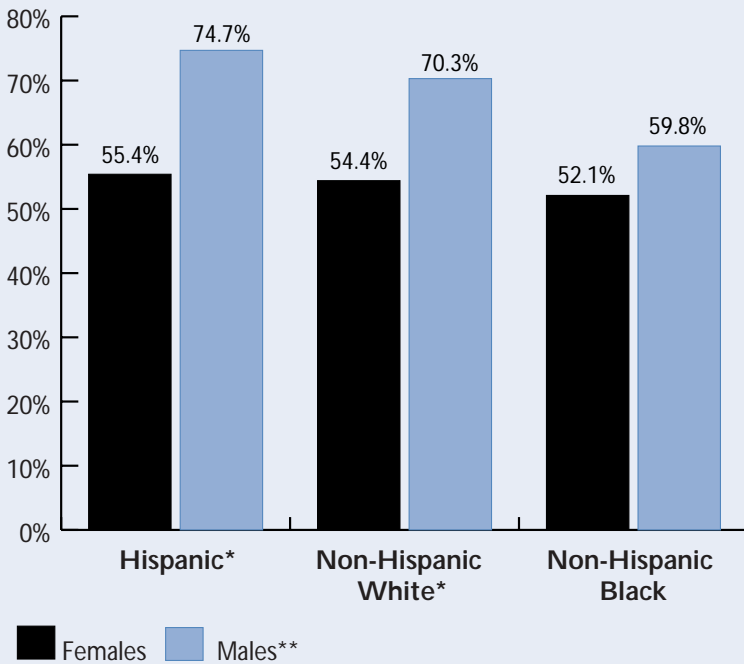


FIGURE 2: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) that agree getting married is better than remaining single, by race/ethnicity and gender



* -boy-girl difference statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

** differences between racial/ethnic groups statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

More 15- to 17-year-old boys (70.6%) than 15- to 17-year-old girls (55.8%) agree that marriage is better than going through life single. Similarly, more 18- to 19-year-old boys (66.7%) agree with the statement than do 18- to 19-year-old girls (52.0%). Differences between the responses of younger and older teens are not statistically significant, but differences between girls and boys within each age group are statistically significant.

The majority of teens of all racial/ethnic groups favor marriage.

Teen girls of different racial/ethnic groups favor marriage nearly equally. Just over half of Hispanic (55.4%), non-Hispanic White

(54.4%), and non-Hispanic Black (52.1%) teen girls agree that getting married is preferable to remaining single. Among boys, however, non-Hispanic Black teen boys are less likely than non-Hispanic White and Hispanic teen boys to favor marriage. Six in ten (59.8%) non-Hispanic Black, 74.7% of Hispanic, and 70.3% of non-Hispanic White teen boys believe that getting married is better than remaining single. Boy-girl differences are statistically significant for Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites, but not for non-Hispanic Black teens (Figure 2).

Virgins and sexually experienced teens² have similar views about the desirability of marriage.

Virgins and sexually experienced teen girls (aged 15-19) are equally likely to agree that getting married is better than remaining single (54.5% vs. 54.0%). Differences between virgin and sexually experienced teen boys aged 15-19 on this question are larger (71.5% vs. 65.9%), and are close to being statistically significant. For both sexually experienced teens and virgins, teen boys are significantly more likely than teen girls to agree that it is better to get married than to remain single.

Divorce

Less than half of teens approve of divorce as a remedy for a troubled marriage.

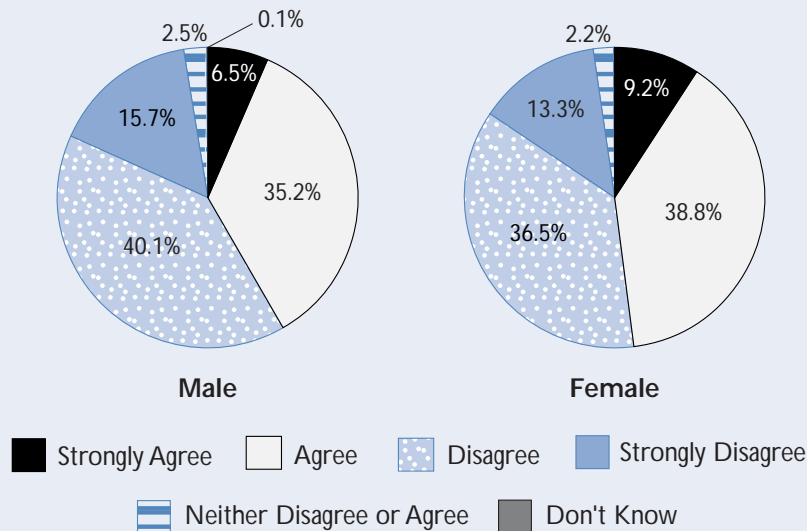
Almost half of girls aged 15-19 (48.0%) and 41.7% of boys aged 15-19 agree with the statement, "Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their marriage problems" (Figure 3). Boy-girl differences are not statistically significant.

Teens' opinions on divorce do not differ much by age or sexual experience.

Age is not a significant factor in teens' opinions on divorce. Younger (42.4%) and older (40.7%) teen boys are almost equally likely to approve of divorce. Differences between younger (51.5%) and older (42.8%) teen girls' attitudes are larger, but are still not statistically significant.

Virgins and sexually experienced teens' opinions on divorce are not significantly different. Almost half (45.3%) of sexually experienced

FIGURE 3: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) who believe, "Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their marriage problems."



teen boys and 38.6% of virgin teen boys approve of divorce (differences are close to being significant). Similarly, almost half of sexually experienced (49.2%) and virgin (46.9%) teen girls approve of divorce. Boy-girl differences on these two issues are not significant for virgins or for sexually experienced teens.

Only boys' opinions about divorce differ by race/ethnicity.

Hispanic (51.4%) and non-Hispanic Black (53.1%) teen boys are significantly more likely than non-Hispanic White (38.3%) teen boys to agree that divorce is usually the best solution for marital problems. Hispanic (58.4%) girls appear more likely to accept divorce than are non-Hispanic White (45.5%), and non-Hispanic Black (49.7%) teen girls, but these differences are not statistically significant, nor are

any of the differences between boys and girls.

Cohabitation

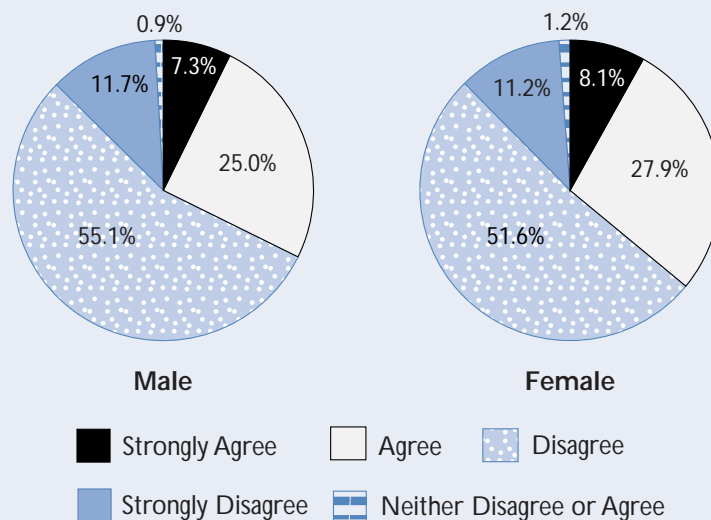
About two-thirds of all teens believe that it is okay for a young couple to live together while unmarried.

Only about a third of teens aged 15-19 (32.3% of boys and 36.0% of girls) agree with the statement, "A young couple should not live together unless they are married" (Figure 4). Differences between boys and girls are not statistically significant.

Virgins are less likely than sexually experienced teens to approve of premarital cohabitation.

While 41.4% of virgin teen boys agree that a young couple should not live together unless they are married, less than a quarter of sexually experienced teen boys (21.7%) agree with this statement. Similarly, 47.6% of virgin teen girls dis-

FIGURE 4: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) who believe, "A young couple should not live together unless they are married."



prove of cohabitation before marriage, compared to only 22.9% of sexually experienced teen girls (Figure 5). Boy-girl differences are not statistically significant for virgins or for sexually experienced teens.

Teen boys' attitudes toward cohabitation differ by age, and teen girls' attitudes differ by race/ethnicity.

Younger teen boys (35.9%) are more likely than older teen boys (27.7%) to disapprove of a young couple living together before marriage. The difference between the proportion of 15- to 17-year-old girls (38.1%) and 18- to 19-year-old girls (32.9%) who disapprove of cohabitation before marriage is smaller and not statistically significant.

About a third of Hispanic (33.5%), non-Hispanic White (31.9%), and

non-Hispanic Black (32.3%) teen boys disapprove of cohabitation before marriage. However, Hispanic (40.0%) and non-Hispanic Black (38.7%) teen girls are more likely than non-Hispanic White (33.8%) teen girls to disapprove of cohabitation. Boy-girl differences are not significant for any racial/ethnic or age subgroup.

Background Characteristics and Teens' Attitudes

Teens who grew up living with both parents tend to have more traditional attitudes toward marriage, cohabitation, and divorce.

One predictor of teens' attitudes toward divorce, cohabitation, and marriage, is whether they lived with both parents throughout their own childhood, or if they grew up in other family arrangements (single

parent households, parental divorce/remarriage, etc.).

Teen boys (36.9%) and girls (44.1%) from two biological/adoptive parent households are significantly less likely to believe that divorce is the best solution for couples with marital difficulties than are teen boys (48.7%) and girls (52.6%) from other household arrangements (Figure 6). Boy-girl differences are significant for teens from two biological/adoptive parent households only.

Teen boys (37.0%) and girls (40.0%) who grew up in two biological/adoptive parent households are more likely to disapprove of cohabitation than are teen boys (25.4%) and girls (31.3%) who grew up in other types of households. These differences are statistically significant for boys and close to being significant for girls. Boy-girl differences are not statistically different for either group.

Teens who grew up with two biological/adoptive parents are more likely than teens from other types of households to agree that marriage is better than remaining single, but the differences are not statistically significant. For both groups, boys are significantly more likely than girls to favor marriage. For example, almost three-fourths of boys who grew up with two parents (71.3%) agree that it is better to be married than to go through life single, compared with only 57.7% of girls from two-parent homes. Among teens who grew up in other family arrangements, 65.4% of boys agree that marriage is preferable, compared to 50.1% of girls.

FIGURE 5: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) who believe, "A young couple should not live together unless they are married," by gender and sexual experience status

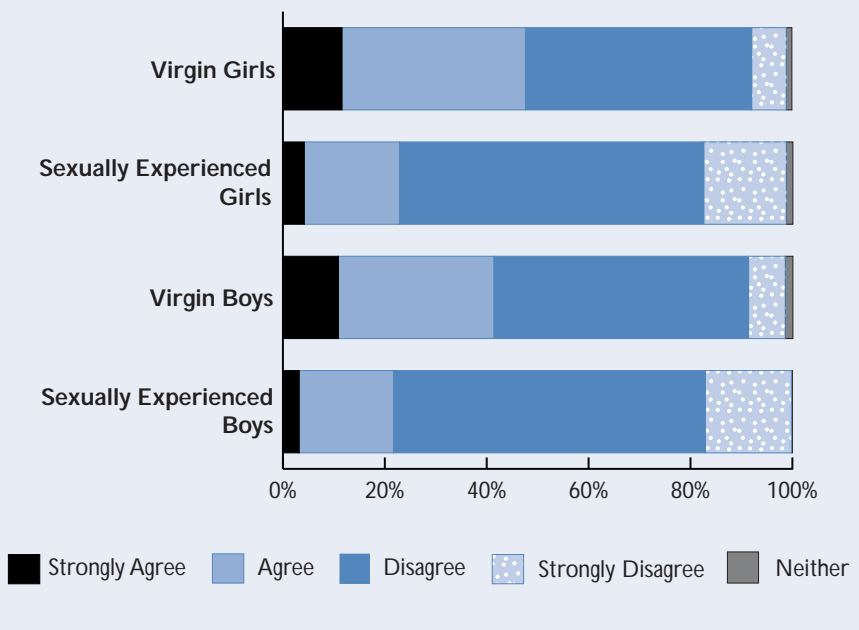
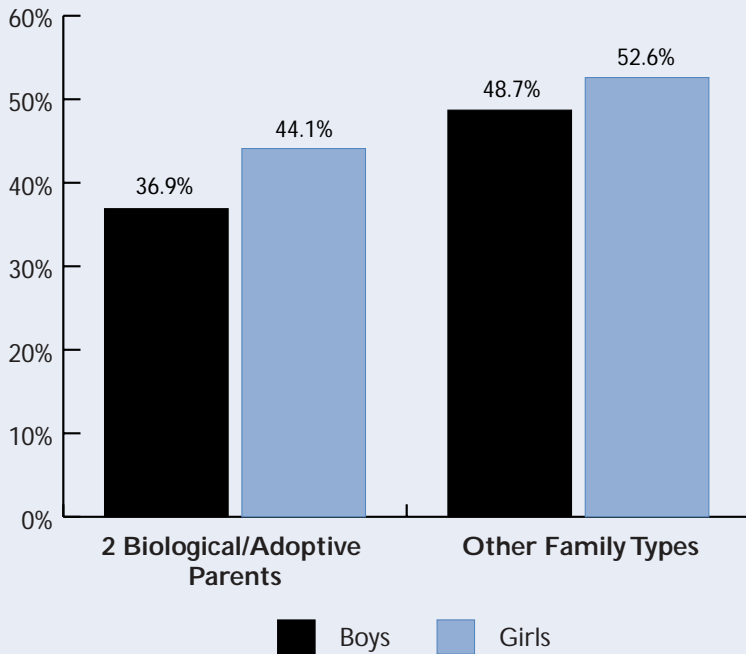


FIGURE 6: Proportion of teens (aged 15-19) who approve of divorce, by gender and childhood living situation



Not surprisingly, teens who have lived with a boyfriend/girlfriend are more likely to approve of premarital cohabitation. Their beliefs about the value of marriage and the acceptability of divorce, however, are not significantly different from the views of teens who have not lived with a romantic partner.

While there are too few married teens in the NSFG to compare their attitudes on marriage with the attitudes of never-married teens, there are enough teens who have cohabited to enable analyses of this group's responses. Less than one tenth of teen boys (8.8%) and 12.6% of girls who have ever lived with a romantic partner disapprove of premarital cohabitation, compared with 33.6% of teen boys and 39.2% of girls who have never cohabited (boy-girl differences are not statistically significant) (Figure 7).

Teens who have ever lived with a romantic partner are less likely to

agree that it is better to get married than to remain single, but these results are not statistically significant. Among teen boys, 56.4% of those who have cohabited and 69.6% of those who have not lived with a romantic partner agree that getting married is preferable to remaining single. Similarly, 46.2% of teen girls who have cohabited and 55.4% of teen girls who have not believe that marriage is preferable to remaining single. Boy-girl differences are significant for non-cohabiters, and nearly significant for those who have cohabited.

The majority of teens in both groups—those who have lived with a romantic partner and those who have not—disapprove of divorce as a solution for marital difficulties. Only 4 in 10 teen boys approve of divorce—39.5% of those who have lived with a romantic partner and

FIGURE 7: Proportion of teens (aged 15-19) who disapprove of cohabitation, by gender and cohabitation status

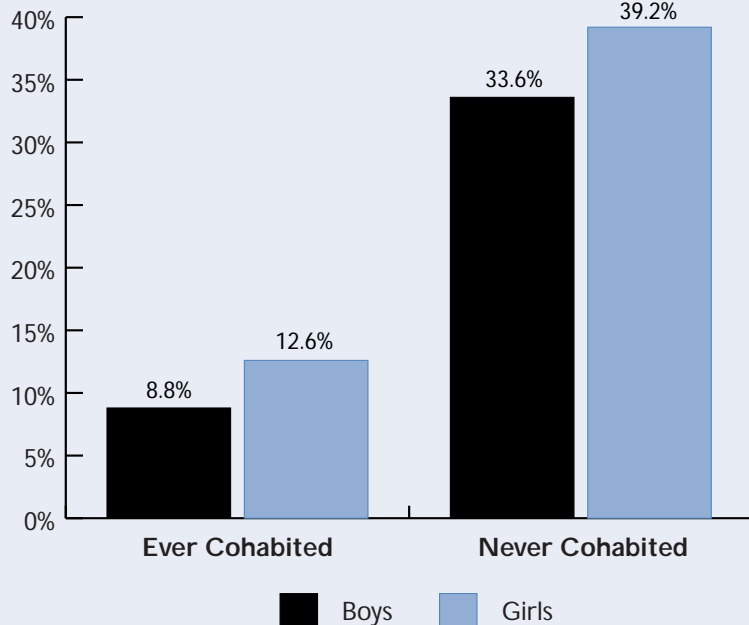
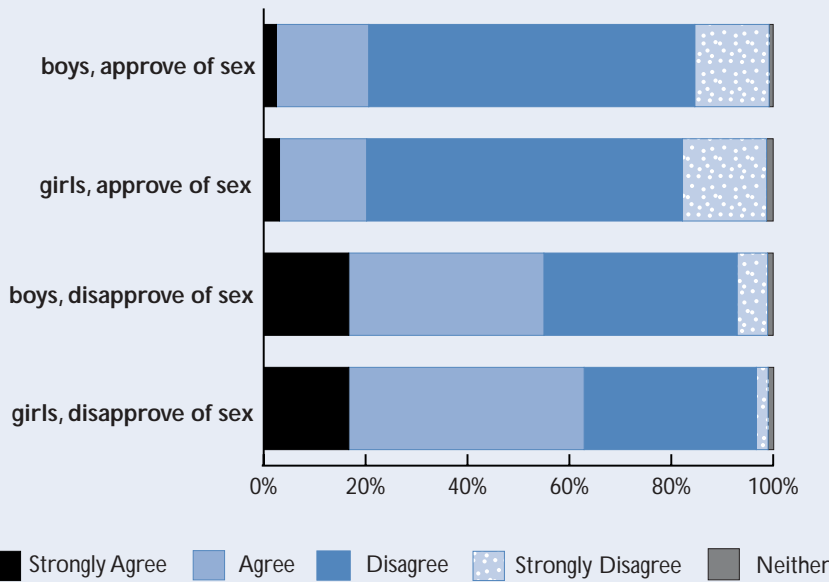


FIGURE 8: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) who agree, "A young couple should not live together unless they are married," by gender and opinion on sexual activity among 18-year-olds



41.9% of those who haven't. Among girls, just under half approve of divorce, 49.2% of those who have ever cohabited and 47.8% of those who haven't. Differences between boys and girls are not significant for either group.

Teens with more conservative attitudes about teen sexual activity also have more conservative attitudes toward cohabitation and divorce than do those with more accepting attitudes toward teen sexual activity.

As noted in a previous *Science Says*³, about two-thirds of teens disapprove of sexual activity among unmarried 16-year-olds who have "a strong affection" for each other, but only about a third of teens disapprove of sexual activity among unmarried 18-year-olds under the same circumstances. The present

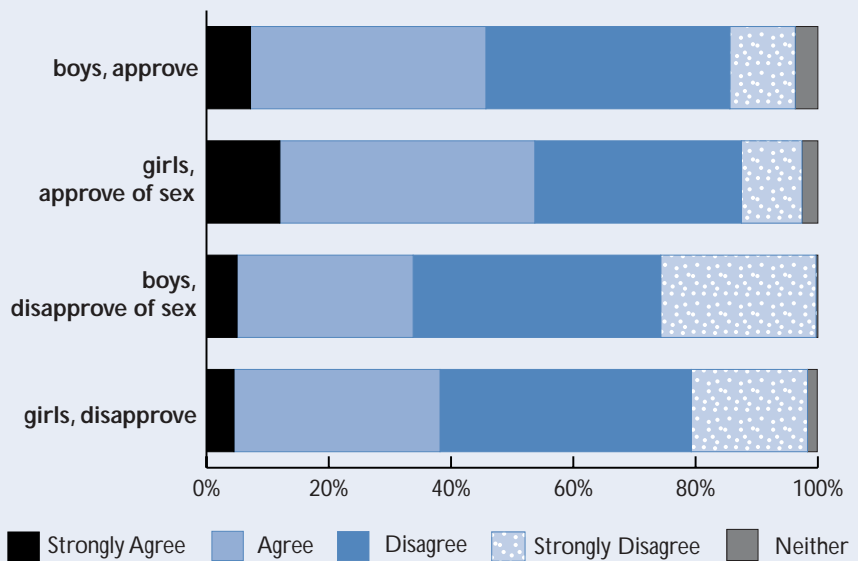
analysis reveals that teens who disapprove of sex among unmarried

18-year-olds are also more likely to disapprove of divorce and premarital cohabitation.

Teen girls (62.9%) and boys (55.0%) who disapprove of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds are significantly more likely than those girls (20.2%) and boys (20.6%) with more permissive attitudes toward teen sex to agree that it is not okay for a young unmarried couple to live together (Figure 8). Boy-girl differences are not significant.

Teen girls (38.2%) and boys (33.8%) who disapprove of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds are also less likely to agree that divorce is the best solution to marital difficulties than teen girls (53.7%) and boys (45.7%) who approve of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds (Figure 9). Here, boy-girl differences are close to being statistically significant for teens who approve of

FIGURE 9: Percentage of teens (aged 15-19) who approve of divorce, by gender and opinion on sexual activity among 18-year-olds



sex among unmarried 18-year-olds, and not statistically significant for those who disapprove.

Regarding teens' opinions about whether it is better to get married than remain single, gender is a better predictor of opinions than are attitudes toward teen sexual activity. Almost three fourths of teen boys (73.2%) and 56.4% of teen girls who disapprove of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds agree it is better to be married than to go through life single. Among those with more permissive attitudes toward sex, 66.7% of teen boys agree it is better to be married than to go through life single, compared to only 53.0% of teen girls.

Conclusion

This analysis of the NSFG data suggests that marriage remains a goal for the majority of teens, and less than half support divorce in the case of irreconcilable marital problems. At the same time, about two-thirds of teens approve of couples living together outside of marriage.

Perhaps surprisingly, far more teen boys than girls favor marriage to remaining single. For attitudes toward divorce and cohabitation, boys' and girls' responses are similar, while teens' own life experiences seem to influence these opinions. For example, virgins and sexually experienced teens hold different attitudes toward cohabitation and divorce, as do teens who grew up with two parents vs. some other living arrangement.

Author Information

This research brief was written by National Campaign staff members Christine Flanigan, Renee Huffman, and Julia Smith.

About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private foundations and donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2005. When we began in 1996, we set a goal of a one-third reduction in the teen pregnancy rate in ten years. Ten years later, it seems almost certain that the nation will reach this goal. Building on this success, the National Campaign's new challenge to the nation for the next decade will be to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by *another* one-third.

Funding Information

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Data Sources

All statistics for 2002 were generated with data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic national survey of fertility-related issues conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). NSFG data sets on CD-ROM are available free of charge from NCHS: visit www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm, call (301) 458-4222, or e-mail nsfg@cdc.gov for more information.

Notes/Sources

- 1 For those unfamiliar with the term "statistical significance," this refers to the results of statistical testing to measure whether observed differences between groups (boys versus girls, older versus younger teens, etc) are true differences in attitudes/behavior, or are due to the particular teens included in the survey, which is meant to be representative of the U.S. teen population. For the purposes of these analyses, the threshold for statistical significance is 0.05. That is, results are considered significant if the "p value" (or probability of the difference being just a random occurrence) is equal to or less than 5%. Differences referred to as being "close to statistically significant" have P values between 0.06 and 0.10.
- 2 For boys, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a female, or having answered yes to the following question: "have you ever had sexual intercourse with a female (sometimes this is called making love, having sex, or going all the way)?" For girls, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a male, having been pregnant, or having answered yes to the following question: "at any time in your life, have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man, that is, made love, had sex, or gone all the way?" "Virgins" are those who have never married, never cohabited, never been pregnant (girls only), and answered no to the question regarding having had sexual intercourse.
- 3 Flanigan, C., Huffman, R., & Smith, J. (2005). Teens' attitudes toward sexual activity, 2002. *Science Says*, 14. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.