

# Attitudes Toward Cohabitation

Americans have become more accepting of nontraditional family structures.

## Headline/Trends

The percentage of high school seniors who believe that cohabitation (living together) prior to marriage is a good idea has increased fairly steadily between 1975 and 2001 (from approximately 35 percent to approximately 60 percent). This increase reflects a national trend in which Americans have become more accepting of nontraditional household and family structures.

American attitudes toward marriage have undergone changes in recent years, with shifts toward an increased acceptance of nontraditional family forms.<sup>2</sup>

Male adolescents are still more likely than female adolescents to hold favorable attitudes toward cohabitation prior to marriage, a trend that has held true since at least the mid-1970s. In 1975, 42 percent of male high school seniors agreed that cohabitation was a good idea, versus approximately 28 percent of their female counterparts. In 2001, nearly 64 percent of males agreed, versus only 57 percent of females. While black adolescents have been more likely than white adolescents to hold a favorable view of cohabitation, trends for black adolescents have seen more dramatic fluctuations over time, compared with other subgroups.<sup>1</sup>

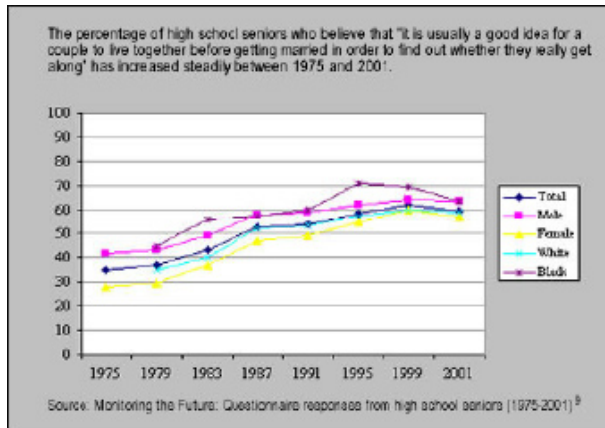
## Importance

American attitudes toward marriage have undergone

changes in recent years, with shifts toward an increased acceptance of nontraditional family forms.<sup>2</sup> Data show that Americans are developing increasingly favorable attitudes toward nontraditional family structures, such as cohabitation.<sup>3</sup> While most American adolescents express positive attitudes toward marriage and a desire to become married themselves, more and more are accepting of nontraditional marital activities such as cohabitation and premarital sex.<sup>4</sup> Rates of cohabitation are on the rise among American couples.<sup>5</sup> These nontraditional attitudes and increasing rates of cohabitation have several consequences for well-being. Cohabiting couples face challenges that are unique from married couples, due in part to the fact that their relationships may be considered “incompletely institutionalized.”<sup>6</sup> Research has shown that couples who cohabit prior to marriage have less stable marriages and are more likely to divorce than couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage.<sup>7</sup>

It is also important to study marital attitudes from a public policy perspective. The success or failure of public policy can be affected by the attitudes of those





it targets. If policies are designed with the intention of changing adolescent behavior and do not have the support of adolescents, then policy change is less likely to create behavior change. Conversely, policies with considerable support have a greater chance of succeeding at changing behavior.<sup>8</sup>

### Differences by Subgroup

While the overall attitudes of high school seniors toward premarital cohabitation have become more positive since 1975, differences between subgroups have remained relatively stable. Over time, males have been consistently more likely than females to believe that cohabitation is a positive choice. Similarly, as a whole, black adolescents have been more likely to agree that cohabitation is a good idea, compared with white teens. Black adolescents, however, have shown a less steady pattern in their attitudes toward cohabitation. Rather than the nearly steady increase in positive attitudes seen in other groups and the population as a whole, black adolescents' views on cohabitation since 1976 have had a tendency to fluctuate more dramatically from year to year.

The percentage of high school seniors who believe that "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" has increased steadily between 1975 and 2001. Source: Monitoring the

Future: Questionnaire responses from high school seniors (1975-2001).

### Definition

High school seniors' attitudes toward cohabitation were measured by asking them to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement 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." The five possible response categories are: Disagree, Mostly disagree, Neither, Mostly agree, and Agree. Data reported here were derived by combining the last two response categories (Mostly agree and Agree) to capture the percentage of high school seniors over time who hold favorable attitudes toward cohabitation.<sup>10</sup>

### Data Source

Monitoring the Future High School Seniors Questionnaires, 1976-2001.<sup>11</sup> Monitoring the Future has surveyed samples of high school seniors annually since 1975. Each year, approximately 16,000 12th-grade students from 133 schools are selected to take part in the study. Samples are designed to be representative of 12th-grade public and private school students in the contiguous United States.<sup>12</sup>

Table 1. Percentage of high school seniors who believe that it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married, 1975-2001.

	Male	Female	White	Black	Total
1975	41.5	28	-	-	34.5
1979	43.4	29.4	34.7	44.8	36.8
1983	48.9	36.6	39.8	55.9	42.9
1987	58.1	46.9	51.9	57.6	52.7
1991	58.7	48.8	52.9	59.9	53.9
1995	62	54.6	57.5	71	58.5
1999	64.1	59.8	60	69.4	61.9
2001	63.9	56.6	59.2	63.6	59.7

Source: Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from high school seniors (1975-2001).<sup>13</sup>

1. Note that data by race are not available from Monitoring the Future until survey year 1976.
2. Barber, J. S., & Axinn, W. G. (1998). Gender role attitudes and marriage among young women. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39, 628-640.; Lye, D., & Waldron, S. (1997). Attitudes toward cohabitation, family, and gender roles: Relationship to values and political ideology. *Sociological Perspectives*, 40, 199-225. ; Whitehead, B. D., & Popenoe, D. (1999). *Changes in teen attitudes toward marriage, cohabitation, and children: 1975-1995, The Next Generation Series*. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey: The National Healthy Marriage Project.
3. Barber, J. S., & Axinn, W. G. (1998). ; Hetherington, E. M., Bridges, M., & Insabella, G. M. (1998). What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the associations between marital transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 53, 167-184.; Lye, D., & Waldron, S. (1997).; Whitehead, B. D., & Popenoe, D. (1999).
4. Martin, P. D., Martin, M., & Martin, D. (2001). Adolescent premarital sexual activity, cohabitation, and attitudes toward marriage. *Adolescence*, 36(143), 601-609.; Martin, P. D., Spector, G., Martin, M., & Martin, D. (2003). Expressed attitudes of adolescents toward marriage and family life. *Adolescence*, 38(150), 359-367.
5. Bumpass, L. and H. Lu (2000). "Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States." *Population Studies*, 29-41.
6. The concept of an incomplete institution suggests that, unlike married couples, the roles and responsibilities of cohabiting and visiting parents are not clearly defined. For example, while married couples are expected to pool financial resources and share expenses, norms of financial management are not as well-established for cohabiting couples and visiting parents. Additionally, this lack of an institutionalized conception of cohabitation can result in a lack of social support from family and friends that may not be experienced by a married couple. See: Cherlin, A. J. (1992). *Marriage, divorce, and remarriage*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
7. Martin, P. D., Martin, M., & Martin, D. (2001).
8. Moore, K. A., & Steif, T. M. (1991). Changes in marriage and fertility behavior: Behavior versus attitudes of young adults. *Youth and Society*, 22(3), 362-386.
9. See entire annual series by J. G. Bachman, L. D. Johnston, & P. M. O'Malley (1975-2001): *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
10. Note that state requirements mandated that this question be omitted from questionnaires administered to youth in California beginning in survey year 1997.
11. Available in a book series: *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 1975-2001*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
12. Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2005). *Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2004* (NIH Publication No. 05-5726). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse.
13. Available in a book series: *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 1975-2001*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.