

# Attitudes Toward Marriage

## American attitudes toward marriage have recently shifted.

### Headline/Trends

Less than one-half of all high school seniors believe that choosing marriage over remaining single or cohabiting (living together) leads to fuller and happier lives, a trend that has remained relatively stable between 1976 and 2001. Moreover, both female and black adolescents have exhibited decreases in positive beliefs about marriage between 1976 and 2001. Female adolescents' attitudes toward marriage have undergone the most dramatic changes, from nearly 39 percent believing that marriage

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leads to fuller and happier lives in 1976 to just 22 percent expressing this view in 2001. Among black adolescents, 41 percent agreed that marriage leads to fuller and happier lives in 1976, versus just 26 percent in 2001. Overall, neither white adolescents' beliefs nor male adolescents' beliefs changed during this time period (38 percent of both groups agreed in both 1976 and 2001).

### Importance

American attitudes toward marriage have undergone changes in recent years, with shifts toward an increased acceptance of nontraditional family forms.<sup>1</sup> Data have shown that Americans are developing

increasingly favorable attitudes toward nontraditional marital and family values and behaviors, such as cohabitation, divorce, remaining single, and premarital sex.<sup>2</sup> Americans are also expressing more egalitarian views toward gender roles in marriage.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, studies have found that, across groups, the majority of American adolescents express overall positive attitudes toward marriage and a desire to become married themselves.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, these findings suggest that having positive attitudes toward marriage (such as the belief that getting married is a better lifestyle choice than remaining single) is associated with an increased likelihood of becoming married oneself.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to study marital attitudes from a public policy perspective, as the success or failure of public policy is determined, in large part, by the attitudes of those it targets. If adolescents do not support policies aimed at them, then the policies will not likely create intended behavior changes. Conversely, policies with considerable support have a greater chance of succeeding at changing behavior.<sup>6</sup>

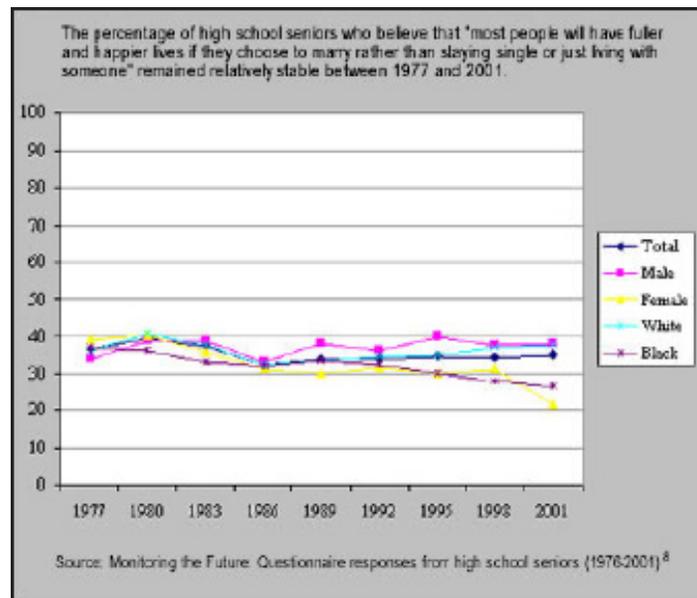


## Differences by Subgroup

While the overall attitudes of high school seniors toward marriage have become somewhat less positive since 1975, differences among subgroups have remained relatively stable. Over time, males have been consistently more likely than females to believe that marriage is a positive choice that will lead to fuller and happier lives. Similarly, as a whole, white adolescents have been more likely than black adolescents to hold a positive view of marriage. Black adolescents' attitudes toward marriage, compared with other subgroups, have demonstrated larger fluctuations from year to year.

## Definition

High school seniors' attitudes toward marriage were measured by asking them to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: "Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single, or just living with someone." 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 marriage.<sup>7</sup>



The percentage of high school seniors who believe that "most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose to marry rather than staying single or just living with someone" remained relatively stable between 1977 and 2001.

Source: Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from high school seniors (1976-2001).

### Data Source

Monitoring the Future High School Seniors Questionnaires, 1977-2001.<sup>9</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>10</sup>

Table 1. Percentage of high school seniors who believe that “most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose to marry rather than staying single or just living with someone”, 1977-2001.

	Male	Female	White	Black	Total
<b>1977</b>	33.8	39.2	36.4	37	36.6
<b>1980</b>	38.8	40.5	40.7	36.1	39.8
<b>1983</b>	39	36	37.9	33.1	37.5
<b>1986</b>	33.1	31.4	32.5	32.1	32.4
<b>1989</b>	38	30.1	33.4	33.5	34.1
<b>1992</b>	36.3	31.7	34.6	32.4	34
<b>1995</b>	40.1	30.1	35.1	30.2	34.8
<b>1998</b>	37.8	31.4	36.9	27.9	34.4
<b>2001</b>	38.1	21.5	37.7	26.4	35

Source: Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from high school seniors (1977-2001). <sup>11</sup>

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