State *of our* Unions *2019*

iFidelity: Interactive Technology and Relationship Faithfulness

the NATIONAL MARRIAGE project
at the UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

WHEATLEY INSTITUTION

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE

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State *of our* Unions *2019*

The State of Our Unions monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America. It is a publication of the National Marriage Project of the University of Virginia. In 2019, this report is published jointly with the Wheatley institution and the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University."

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The National Marriage Project

The National Marriage Project (nmp) is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative located at the University of Virginia. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability. The nmp has five goals: (1) publish The State of Our Unions, which monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America; (2) investigate and report on the state of marriage among young adults; (3) provide accurate information and analysis regarding marriage to journalists, policy makers, religious leaders, and the general public—especially young adults; (4) conduct research on the ways in which children, race, class, immigration, ethnicity, religion, and poverty shape the quality and stability of contemporary marriage; and (5) bring marriage and family experts together to develop strategies for strengthening marriage. The nmp was founded in 1997 by family scholars David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. The Project is now directed by W. Bradford Wilcox, professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

The Wheatley Institution

The Wheatley Institution produces consequential scholarship in key topics consistent with its core mission of lifting society by preserving and strengthening its core institutions.

The School of Family Life

The School of Family Life is committed to enhancing the quality of life of individuals and families within the home and communities worldwide.

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Executive Summary

Younger Americans are more likely to push emotional and sexual boundaries online—and those who do so have worse relationships, according to ***iFidelity: The State of Our Unions 2019***. Based on a new YouGov survey of relationship attitudes and behaviors online and in real life, iFidelity presents the first generational overview of how Americans think about sexual fidelity online in the wake of the iRevolution and the first study of the links between sexual fidelity online and relationship quality among American men and women.

The newest *State of Our Unions* report from the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, the Wheatley Institution, and the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University offers three key sets of findings:

- Although a clear majority of Americans in all generations express support for sexual fidelity in their relationships and report they are sexually faithful in real life, today's young adults are markedly more likely to cross online boundaries related to sex and romance. For example, 18% of Millennial participants engaged in sexual talk online with someone besides their partner, compared to 3% of Greatest/Silent generation participants, 6% of Baby Boomers, and 16% of Gen Xers.

- Many online behaviors are rated by most Americans (70% or more) as "unfaithful" or "cheating," including having a secret emotional relationship or sexting with someone other than a partner/spouse without the partner's/spouse's knowledge and consent.

- Married and cohabiting men and women who maintain strong boundaries online against potential sexual and romantic alternatives are more likely to be happy in their relationships. Those currently married or cohabiting who blur those boundaries are significantly less happy, less committed, and more likely to break up while, conversely, those taking a more careful stance online are happier, more committed, and less likely to separate. For example, those who did not follow a former girlfriend/boyfriend online had a 62% likelihood of reporting that they were "very happy" in their cohabiting or marital relationship. Only 46% of those who did follow an old flame online reported being very happy.

The 2019 *State of Our Unions* report suggests that young adults who have come of age in the age of the internet are the least committed to iFidelity. Moreover, those who cross emotional and sexual boundaries online have markedly lower quality relationships. *iFidelity*, then, suggests that our online conduct is linked to the health of our real life relationships.

iFidelity: Interactive Technology and Relationship Faithfulness

Introduction

> **“While the vast majority of Americans remains opposed to sexual infidelity while married, younger adults are significantly more likely to engage in internet infidelity than older generations.”**

From time immemorial, stories of infidelity pervade literature, art, song, and film, depicted at times critically, at times sympathetically. Tales of romantic betrayal explore motives, precursors, and especially consequences in ways that, decades or even centuries later, still affect us. Think David and Bathsheba, Dr. Zhivago and Lara, *The Bridges of Madison County*, and all those operatic affairs.

But no such cultural cache exists—yet—for stories of online betrayal. We’re left without age-old art, historical precedent, and even modern mediums through which to give moral weight and a common paradigm to this new phenomenon. How pervasive is it, and, more to the point, how serious is it? Would Anna Karenina have thrown herself under the train if she and Vronksy kept to cybersex? Would Glenn Close have boiled the bunny over a Facebook-only *Fatal Attraction*? And would the eternal state of Graham Greene’s protagonists’ souls have hung in the balance over internet cheating that, supposedly, everyone is doing?

Or is everyone doing it? The most we have are snippets gleaned from general surveys covering myriad, often unrelated topics, or testimonials from divorce lawyers reiterating that, yes, the online flirtations matter, while other authorities say no, they don’t. So, without enduring art and cultural context, we want palpable facts and an objective look at the stakes involved to help us navigate our online lives, public and private.

This report, *iFidelity: The State of Our Unions 2019*, is a start. It initiates a more informed conversation with results from the first nationally representative survey[1] examining attitudes and behaviors

1 YouGov, an internationally known and highly respected survey research firm, conducted the iFidelity survey on behalf of the Wheatley Institution at Brigham Young University.

on fidelity—both online and in real life—from a wide swath of people who could be considered a microcosm of American society (*N*=2,000). The report also includes input from the General Social Survey, which since 1972 has provided nationally representative data on a range of social attitudes and experiences, including infidelity. Finally, like all of the previous State of our Unions reports, *iFidelity: The State of Our Unions 2019* includes an update of demographic trends that helps us understand contemporary marriage and family life.

The results indicate that our definitions of romantic and sexual loyalty and commitment are changing in the wake of the internet's seismic impact on our professional and personal lives. While the vast majority of Americans remain opposed to sexual infidelity while married, younger adults are significantly more likely to engage in internet infidelity than older generations, reflecting a discernible shift into uncharted marital territory that portends, for those under 50, possible stressors previously unnavigated by their predecessors.

Fidelity, that sense of being off the market once we enter marriage or a committed cohabiting relationship—purposefully avoiding emotional and physical intimacy with former partners, work colleagues, and friends—enters murky definitional territory in the age of online relationships.

While this report provides no crystal ball through which to envisage the long-term societal consequences of online acts of emotional infidelity, large or small, it offers two critical points for scholars and the public to consider regarding our brave new i-relationship world:

- A generational divide exists behaviorally and attitudinally, with younger adults erecting weaker and more porous marital and relationship boundaries when it comes to their online behaviors. In other words, i-infidelity is more common among younger Americans, whereas iFidelity is more common among older Americans. For instance, only 18% of Millennials think that all of the electronic behaviors that blur romantic and sexual lines with others are inappropriate, compared to 26% of Baby Boomers.
- The weakening of marital and relationship boundaries matters: relationship outcomes are markedly worse when iFidelity becomes i-infidelity. For example, married and cohabiting Americans who break three or more romantic or sexual boundaries online are 26 percentage points less likely to be "very happy" in their real life relationship, compared to those who push none of those boundaries.

Dramatic transformations in marriage and sexual mores, from the shift away from arranged marriage in the 18th century to the advent of no-fault divorce in the 1970s, intermittently disrupt the status quo. Whether what's taking place in our online lives foretells minor adjustments or major upheavals to the marital landscape remains to be seen. But as the following data inform us, change is happening, whether we fully understand the ramifications or not.

Caveats and Methodology

This report doesn't attempt to define infidelity, or "cheating," but to convey how definitions have shifted for Americans over the years, how contemporary Americans define cheating now, and to describe definitional differences and behaviors across generations. While readers may crave the satisfaction of clear-cut delineations—such as whether continually bantering on email with a co-worker or sharing confidences with a Facebook friend broaches online infidelity—this research is more of a cultural audit of current attitudes and behaviors than a demarcation of when innocent interaction ends and cybersex begins. *iFidelity: State of Our Unions* unearths public attitudes circa 2019 regarding sexual mores and offers scholars and the public a lay of the land with which to create more accurate sociocultural maps going forward.

Participants (*N*=2,000) consisted of married, cohabiting, and single individuals whose numbers mirror the current American population. This makes the report nationally representative and the most contemporary study analyzing attitudes and behaviors on fidelity. All respondents answered survey questions as individuals, not as couples.[2] A series of seven graphs summarizes attitudinal, behavioral, and generational differences. Figure 1 used all of the participants in the General Social Survey (GSS) for attitudes regarding marital affairs, but only those GSS participants who were currently married or who had ever been married were asked about actual extramarital sexual behavior. Figure 2 and Figure 4 used all participants' responses in the iFidelity survey regardless of relationship status; Figures 3 and 5 through 7 include only those iFidelity survey participants who have ever married, have ever cohabited, or both.

2 Indeed, we did not feel that it would be ethical for us to ask both (or multiple) partners in a relationship to respond to questions about infidelity given the relationship difficulties that could create.

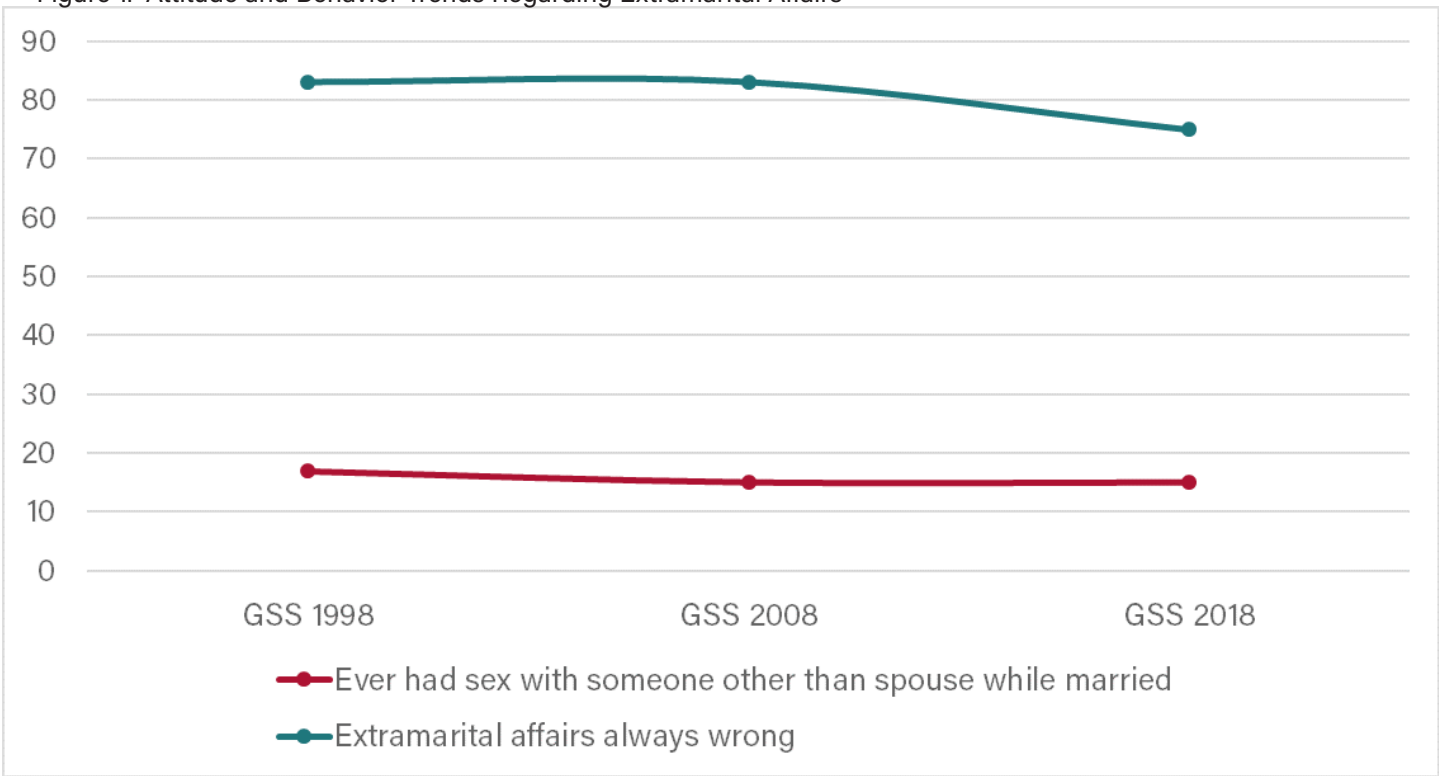
21st century definitions of cheating

“The percentage of people responding ‘Always wrong’ dropped 8 points over a twenty-year span to 75%, indicating that attitudes are indeed becoming more permissive.”

As we approach our current century’s 20th birthday, evolving attitudes and behaviors coalesce into cultural stereotypes that include Millennials committed to nothing more than a series of Tinder hookups and of Facebook affairs spawning unprecedented Boomer divorce. This disparaging narrative, aided and abetted by Netflix documentaries like “Monogamy, Explained,” deserves closer scrutiny. Reality remains more complex, and Figures 1 and 2 introduce complications to this simple narrative that in some ways affirm a more permissive trajectory, but in others ways deny it.

Figure 1 exhibits the findings from General Social Survey, which takes the temperature of American attitudes regularly and has asked the same questions regarding marital fidelity from 1998 to 2018: “What about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her husband or wife, is it …?” The percentage of people responding “Always wrong” dropped 8 points over a twenty-year span to 75%, indicating that attitudes are indeed becoming more permissive. Statistical tests confirm that this change is not likely due to chance. An attitudinal shift of 8 percentage points in

Figure 1. Attitude and Behavior Trends Regarding Extramarital Affairs



Source: NORC, General Social Survey.

Notes. All GSS responses to the attitude question in each year were used. Only those who had ever been married answered the behavioral question. Mean difference in attitude between GSS 1998 and GSS 2018 tested using a t-test. $t = 2.45$, $p < .05$, $df = 3399$).

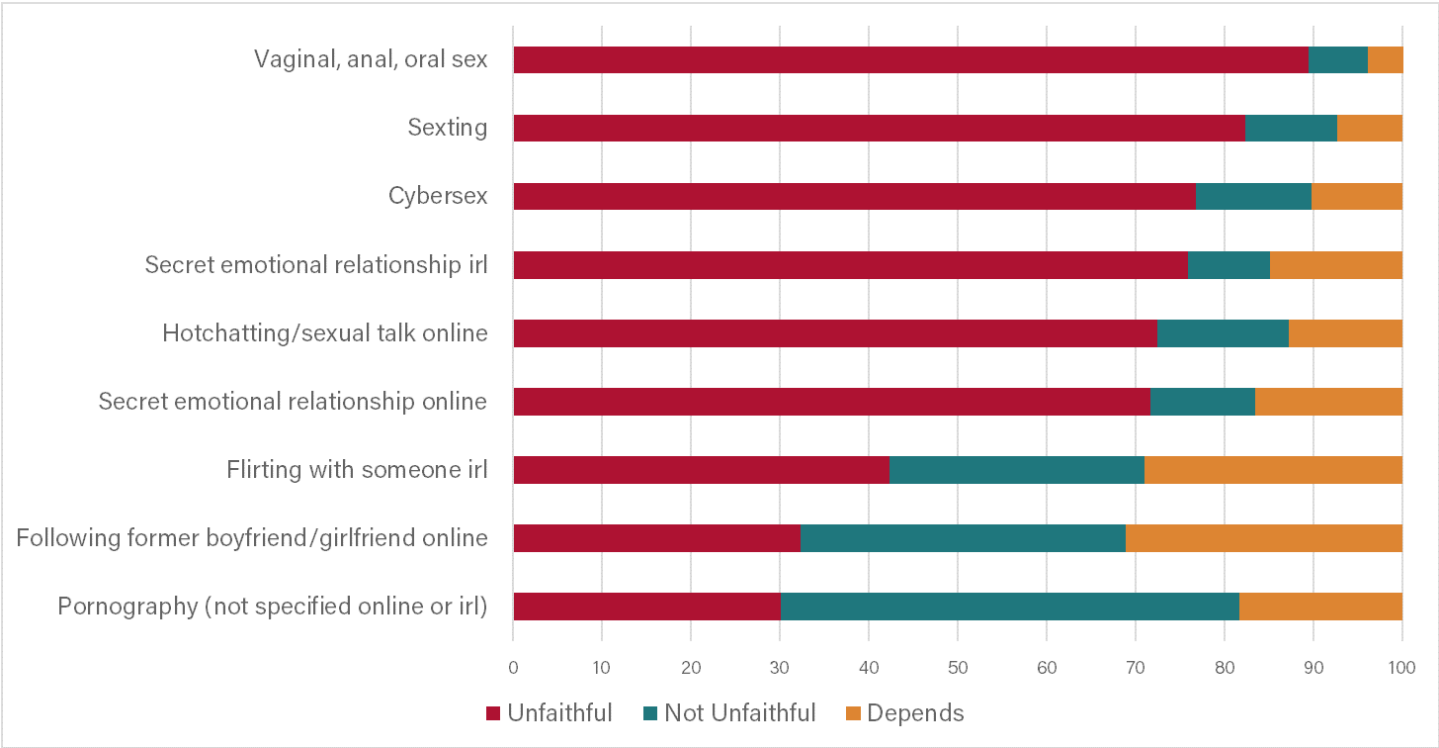
> **The vast majority of respondents, 70%, called six of the nine behaviors cheating, indicating that, overall, even in 2019, most Americans don't want their partners having a relationship online or in real life with someone else."**

the last ten years is worth noting, and does confirm a slightly more permissive paradigm.

Figure 1 also shows findings from the General Social Survey regarding ever-married individuals' extramarital affair behavior. Here the trend is essentially flat, going from 17% in 1998 to 15% in 2008 and remaining at 15% in 2018. This suggests that, behaviorally at least, married Americans are still as inclined toward faithful behavior as they were twenty years ago.

While this longitudinal overview provides invaluable insight into social change, the GSS hypothetical "what about" question involving a random married person elicits a more abstract than literal response. Conversely, Figure 2 of the iFidelity survey asked participants to classify the following behaviors as cheating or not "if ***your spouse/partner*** engaged" in them "***without your*** knowledge or consent": vaginal/anal/oral sex, sexting, cybersex, real-life secret emotional relationship, online sex talk, an online secret emotional relationship, flirting in real life, following an old boyfriend/girlfriend online, and consuming pornography. In other words, we tried to get participants' personal real-life definitions rather than hypothetical definitions involving "someone else." The vast majority of respondents, 70%, called six of the nine behaviors cheating, indicating that, overall, even in 2019, most Americans don't want their partners having a relationship online or in real life with someone else. The three exceptions that a majority of participants did not call cheating were flirting with someone in real life, following a former love interest online, and consuming pornography.

Figure 2. Contemporary Attitudes About What Constitutes Infidelity, Cheating, or Unfaithful Behavior in Relationships



Source: Wheatley Institution/YouGov iFidelity Survey

Notes. Participants responded to this question regardless of their current relationship status. IRL = "In Real Life."

Why Do You Feel That Way?

The iFidelity Survey asked participants the question from the General Social Survey (GSS) regarding how they felt about extramarital affairs. Participants' responses were similar to those in the 2018 GSS. Additionally, the iFidelity survey asked participants an open-ended question "why do you feel that way?" We coded the responses to this open-ended question to see if there were themes or patterns. Below are the three most common themes for each level of response, the percent of individuals who gave this response, and a typical quote.

Always Wrong (1,516 participants chose this level; 1,394 provided a clear response to the open-ended question):

- Staying true to marital commitment of sexual exclusivity (54%)
  - "Marriage is a promise of loyalty. Having an affair is breaking that promise."
- Non-religious moral ethics or personal values (14%)
  - "Unethical"
- Religious ethics/values (13%)
  - "Against God's will"

Almost Always Wrong (346 participants chose this level; 287 provided a clear response to the open-ended question):

- Staying true to marital commitment of sexual exclusivity (22%)
  - "Marriage is a commitment. That commitment includes fidelity."
- Unsatisfactory marriage that doesn't meet personal needs (11%)
  - "Some people have no choice [except] to stay in a marriage, but they have problems and are not happy."
- Unspecified circumstances justify infidelity (9%)
  - "There are situations where infidelity can be the lesser of two evils."

Wrong Only Sometimes (82 participants chose this level; 61 provided a clear response to the open-ended question):

- Unsatisfactory marriage that doesn't meet personal needs (27%)
  - "Being ignored by spouse or spouse uses sex as a weapon."
- Unspecified circumstances justify infidelity (18%)
  - "It depends on the person and the situation."
- With consent, extramarital sex is appropriate (14%)
  - "If it's discussed and no secrets are kept, I find it ok."

Not wrong at all (55 participants chose this level; 22 individuals provided a clear response to the open-ended question):

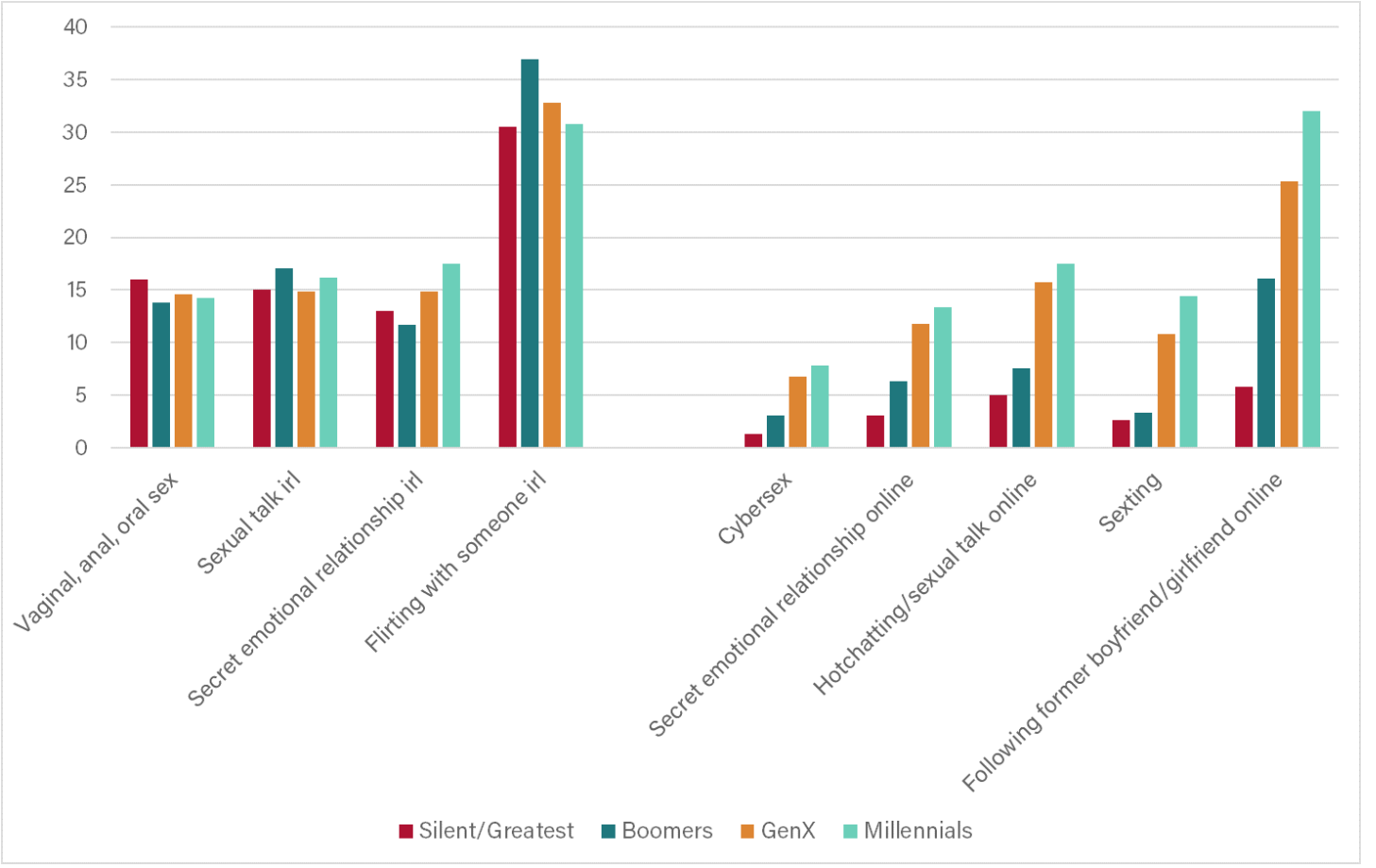
- Affirming personal choice (43%)
  - "I respect the way of life of other people."
- No adverse personal consequences to their own affairs (24%)
  - "I have had a relationship and did not feel guilty."
- Sex is an important physical drive (14%)
  - "People have urges."

Generational Shifts

Overall, the relationships we crave and form "in real life" look less like those in *American Pie* and more like those in Anne Tyler novels. Her struggling couples wade through the mundane, the traumatic, and irrational arguments like Mrs. Otis yelling at Mr. Otis for trampling on her needlepoint in her dream last night. Nevertheless, her couples, like most Americans, prize commitment and the ability to stick together.

For real-life behaviors, we find few significant generational differences. The vast majority of Silent/Greatest, Boomer, Gen X, and Millennials' relationships remain exclusive, as shown in Figure 3, which depicts behaviors (not attitudes). Indeed, with the exception that Boomers were less likely to have secret emotional relationships in real life than Millennials, none of the "in real life" (or IRL) behavior differences shown in Figure 3 reached the level of statistical significance. Each

Figure 3. Relationship Behaviors by Generation



Source: Wheatley Institution/YouGov iFidelity Survey

Notes. Only ever-married and ever-cohabited participants answered these questions. IRL = "In Real Life."

Differences tested using simple binomial logistic regression. When additional control covariates were added, the generational differences remained statistically significant. GenX and Millennial differences in the online behaviors only significant at $p < .05$ or better. None of the IRL differences were statistically significant.

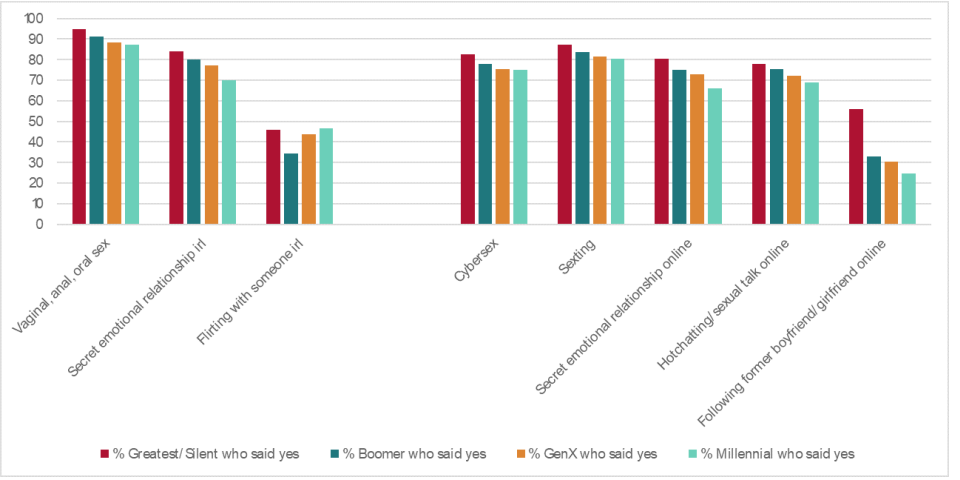
> **“There are clearly significant generational behavioral differences occurring online. … Both GenX and Millennials [are] much more likely to participate in sexting, cybersex, online sex talk, or following a former boyfriend/girlfriend online.”**

generation,[3] interestingly, owns up to extramarital affairs, secret emotional affairs, and sex talk at consistent levels of about 15%, with bar colors representing the generations in the first four offline/IRL categories hovering close. Overall, people prefer real, not cyber, infidelity and, according to Figure 3, and contrary to conventional wisdom, generational behavioral differences offline are minimal—at least for now. On the other hand, given that Millennials and Gen Xers have had less time to engage in marital infidelity, it’s possible that they may be less likely to be faithful by the time they reach later life—as have the Boomers and the Silent/Greatest Generation in our sample.

But, today, there are clearly significant generational behavioral differences occurring online. Also in Figure 3, the bars representing generations’ behaviors become ascending stairsteps when measuring how we behave on the internet, with both Generation X and Millennials much more likely than their parents and grandparents in the Silent/Greatest and Boomer generations to participate in sexting, cybersex, online sextalk, and following a former boyfriend/girlfriend online. Whatever inhibitions keeping these two generations in line and reticent in flesh-and-blood reality weaken once a computer screen lights up.[4]

Those generational differences persist and increase in Figure 4, which measures attitudes. Figure 4’s descending bars represent the phenomenon that fewer people define infidelity behaviors as cheating as the generations go on, highlighting this report’s crucial finding that our societal transformation lies less in trends toward actual infidelity and affairs, but more in a significant attitudinal and online behavioral differences among younger adults. Younger generations are more permissive in general, with younger adults manifesting their greater leniency in online behaviors. And while the beauty of the General Social Survey’s decades-persistent research may lie in its ability to capture attitudinal population change

Figure 4. Contemporary Attitudes About What Constitutes Infidelity, Cheating, or Unfaithful Behavior in Relationships by Generation



Source: Wheatley Institution/YouGov iFidelity Survey

Notes. Participants responded to this question regardless of their current relationship status, IRL = “In Real Life.”

Differences tested using simple binomial logistic regression. Greatest/Silent generation participants significantly different from Millennial generation participants in 7 of 8 attitudes. Baby Boomer Generation significantly different from Millennial generation in 6 of 8 attitudes. Generation X participants significantly different from Millennial generation in 2 of 8 attitudes.

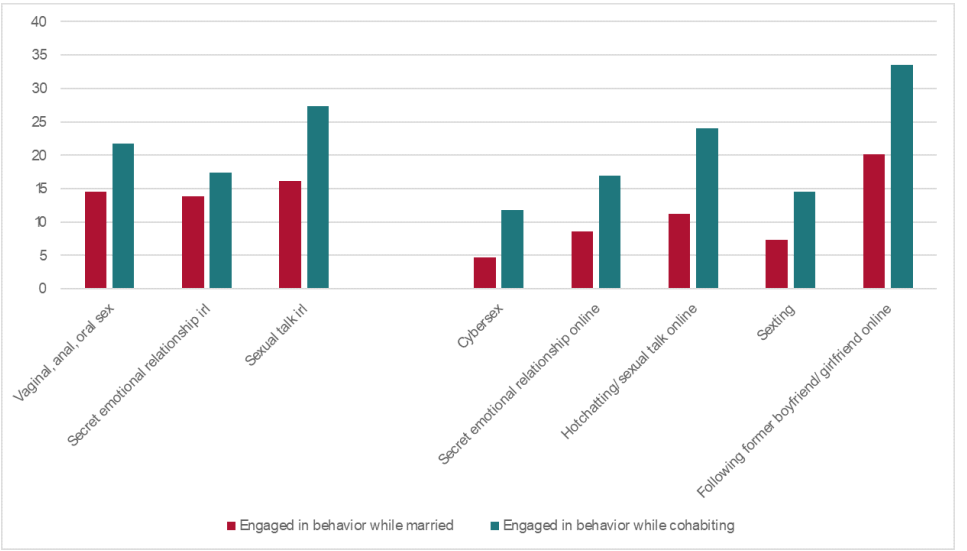
3 Younger generations, such as GenZ or the iGen were too young to participate in our survey (i.e., they were mostly under 18 years old).

4 The generational differences were statistically significant.

(possibly from decreased commitment toward marital fidelity or from younger, more permissive populations replacing older, more stringent ones, or, most likely, from a mix of both), the value of this current report lies in its dissection of those generational differences.

For example, Figure 4 shows the more permissive attitudinal shift begins not with Millennials, who've been accused of ruining everything from bars of soap to workplace formality to marriage, but with Generation X. They align with Millennials—not Boomers, interestingly—and the dividing line separating more stringent attitudes from a permissive, softening effect rests between a Greatest/ Silent Gen-Boomer alliance and the GenX-Millennial camp. Both Millennials and GenX are less likely to call these behaviors unfaithful: real-life sexual affairs and flirting, and online sexting, cybersex, sex talk, and following former girlfriends and boyfriends. For instance, only 66% of Millennials say that a secret online emotional relationship should be counted as infidelity versus 80% of Silent/Greatest Generation members.[5]

Figure 5. Behaviors by Relationship Status



Source: Wheatley Institution/YouGov iFidelity Survey

Notes. Only ever-married and ever-cohabited participants answered these questions. Differences not testable. IRL = "In Real Life."

Also worth mentioning, though eclipsed by the report's more revelatory generational distinctions, are differences between relationship types and genders. Figure 5 highlights disparities between married and cohabiting couples. When asked in what relationship, married or cohabiting, respondents had engaged in infidelity behaviors, significantly more individuals admitted to in-real-life affairs, secret emotional relationships, and sex talk while cohabiting than while married. Participants also responded "yes" markedly more while cohabiting than while married when it came to online infidelity behaviors like cybersex, online sex talk, secret online relationships, sexting, and following a former boyfriend or girlfriend online.[6] For instance, 24% of cohabitants reported sexual talk online with someone besides their partner, compared to just 11% of marrieds. And predictable gender differences also emerged. Men responded more permissively in both their cheating attitudes and behaviors and only converged with women in the practice of following an old flame online.

5 These generational differences were statistically significant.
6 These relationship differences were statistically significant.

Porous Online Boundaries and Ramifications

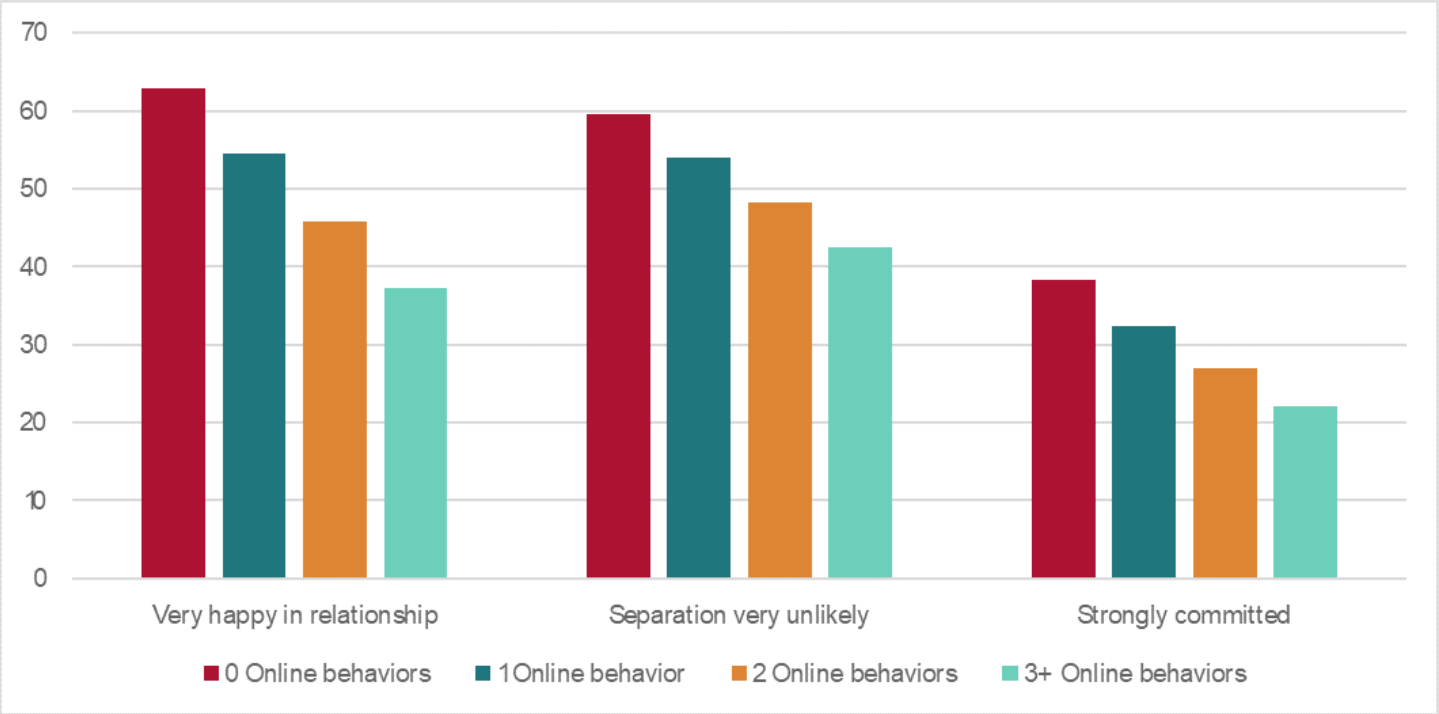
When sexual mores shift and remap marital topography, younger generations enter the cultural institutions of their predecessors liberated, in some ways, from antiquated protocol and handicapped, in other ways, by less secure markers along the route. Author Edith Wharton captured this phenomenon of shifting cultural maps in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence*, which depicts the rigid upper echelons of 1870s New York Society dooming the sympathetic protagonist Newland Archer into a proper yet banal marriage. Newland yearns for his wife's sophisticated cousin Ellen Olenska, whom tribal complicity banishes back to Europe. But twenty-six years of Newland's married life later, societal rigidity gives way to less stringent courting rituals that enable his children to marry more for love than social decorum.

Interestingly, though, after his wife's death, Newland finds his own perspective on easing standards surprisingly ambivalent: enforced fidelity, after all, offered him a lifelong marriage and three cherished children. When given the chance to finally meet with Countess Olenska again at the book's conclusion--him widowed, her single--Newland stuns his emancipated son by declining the invitation, telling him to greet her and "say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough."

Discarding the standards of bygone eras entails risks, one of them being that, as Countess Olenska points out to Newland, the new relationship country couples set out for often ends up being no different from the old country they left behind. Whether online interaction, electronic flirtation, or cyber infidelity represent an entirely new relationship paradigm or just more of the old world, this report can't answer. But its findings can answer whether online relationships are linked to the quality of contemporary relationships. According to iFidelity survey responses, porous electronic boundaries equate to more problematic relationships. Those most open to online infidelity are the least happy and most likely, in their current marriages and relationships, to break up. Conversely, those strictly faithful online are more likely to be very happy and committed to their relationship, as well as least likely to separate.

"According to iFidelity survey responses, porous electronic boundaries equate with more problematic relationships. Those most open to online infidelity are the least happy and most likely, in their current marriages and relationships, to break up. Conversely, those strictly faithful online are more likely to be very happy and committed to their relationship, as well as least likely to separate."

Figure 6. Percent Likelihood of Given Relationship Quality Groups by Number of Online Behaviors



Source: Wheatley Institution/YouGov iFidelity Survey

Notes. Only ever-married and ever-cohabited participants answered these questions. Differences tested using multivariate binomial logistic regression. Control variables were gender, education, age, race/ethnicity, relationship duration, total family income, and married vs. cohabiting status. A linear difference by number of behaviors was statistically significant.

Figure 6 illustrates these points in descending stairstep aesthetics. Controlling for respondents' gender, education, race/ethnicity, relationship duration, total family income, and married vs. cohabiting status—in other words, getting rid of all the "what abouts" involving exceptions—we measured the association between participants' numbers of online infidelity behaviors and their happiness, stability, and commitment levels in their relationships. While 37% of those engaging in three or more online infidelity behaviors still say they're very happy, fully 63% of those engaging in no online infidelity say they're very happy.

Number-parsing the minutiae of Figure 6 shows that, compared to those with no online infidelity behaviors, for those currently married or cohabiting in the 3-or-more online infidelity behavior group:

- happiness is lower by more than 26 percentage points.
- separation being very unlikely is lower by 17 percentage points.
- being strongly committed to their relationship is lower by 16 percentage points.

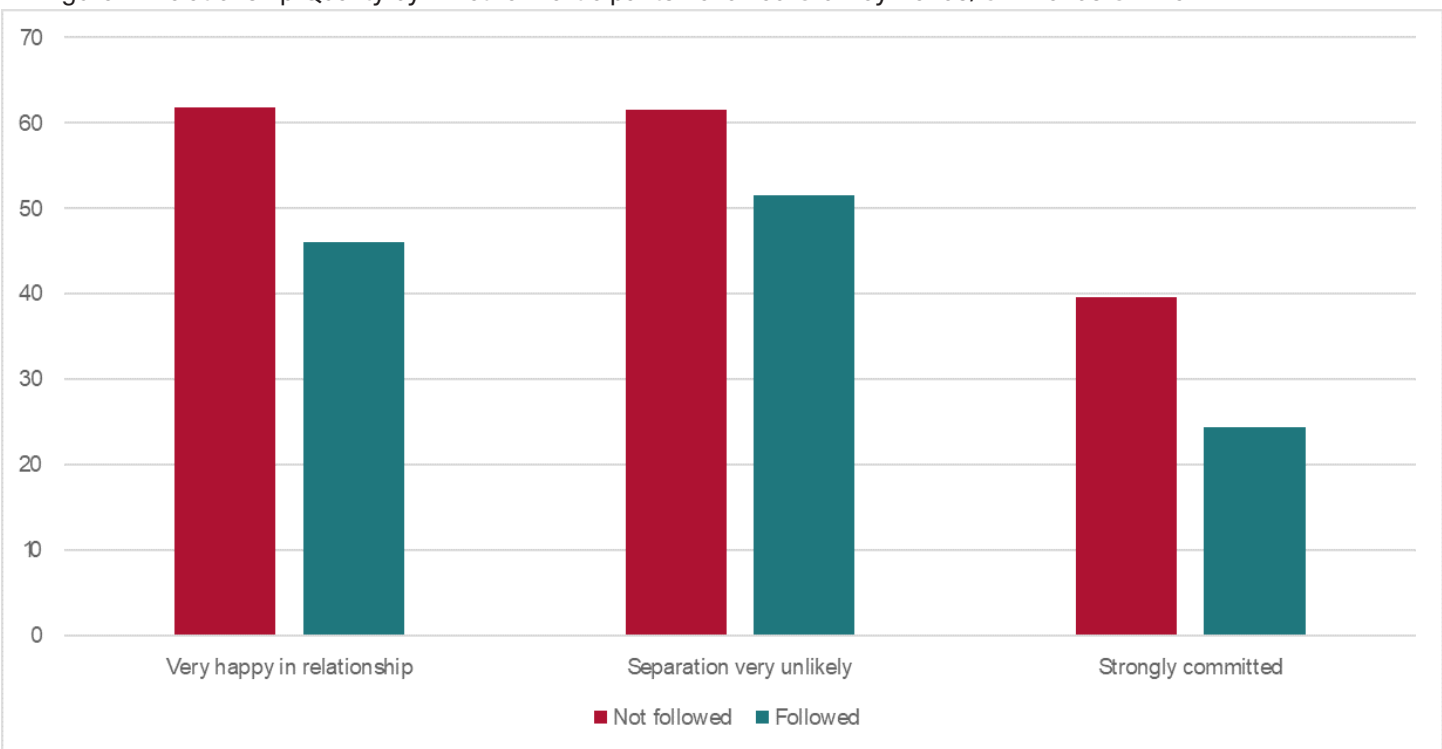
These numbers are what scientists call statistically significant, but they're also practically significant. People engaging in online behaviors with porous boundaries are the least happy and least likely to be in the "unlikely-to-separate" group.

Figure 7 illustrates the differences between those who participate in the common, and not-defined-as-cheating, practice of following a former girlfriend or boyfriend online and those who don't. Again, the descending bars reflect statistically significant results. People who follow their old flames online are:

- 16 percentage points less likely to be very happy in the relationship.
- 10 percentage points less likely to report separation is very unlikely.
- 15 percentage points less likely to say they are strongly committed to their relationship.

Figures 6 and 7 do not prove that iInfidelity causes worse relational outcomes. It could be that men and women in worse relationships are more likely to seek out romantic and sexual partners online. But there is clearly a link between such iInfidelity and worse relationship outcomes, a link younger adults should take note of. They might consider this finding akin to a State Department advisory: you are free to enter online relationship country, but keep in mind detected instability and either take appropriate precautions or decide not to go there.

Figure 7. Relationship Quality by Whether Participants Followed Old Boyfriends/Girlfriends Online



Source: Wheatley Institution/YouGov iFidelity Survey

Notes. Only ever-married and ever-cohabited participants answered these questions. Differences tested using multivariate binomial logistic regression. Control variables were gender, education, age, race/ethnicity, relationship duration, total family income, and married vs. cohabiting status. The difference between following vs. not following former boyfriends/girlfriends was statistically significant.

Conclusion

In her book H*usbands, Wives, and Lovers: Marriage and Its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France*, art historian Patricia Mainardi revisits transformations wrought by the overthrow of the Ancien Régime in 1789 France and posits that, along with political and cultural upheaval, France's sexual mores underwent a radical transformation as well. Through an exploration of art, novels, and theatrical productions at the time, Mainardi describes how the Napoleonic Code's mandate that all children, illegitimate included, be given a share of their father's estate resulted in a cultural shift in sexual norms.

We do not yet have a sustained body of fiction, movies, and paintings to make sense of our iRevolution and its romantic repercussions, the Black Mirror sci-fi series' attempts to probe humanity's ominous relationship to technology notwithstanding. So we're left to the concrete data found in this YouGov survey to make sense of the shifts that the rise of screen culture have made to our relationships. While its contributions to public and scholarly forums constitute more of a conversation starter than an authoritative or all-encompassing compendium, *iFidelity's* findings support several reasonable conclusions regarding the online and offline state of our unions circa 2019.

Four such conclusions from this report are particularly noteworthy:

- Although the vast majority (75%) of married Americans think marital infidelity is "always wrong," the share of married men and women who think this way has fallen in the last decade by eight percentage points.
- Compared to older generations, Generation X and Millennials are much more accepting of online behaviors—from sexting to following a former boyfriend/girlfriend online—that blur sexual and emotional boundaries.
- Cohabiting and younger men and women are more likely to engage in i-Infidelities—from sexting to following a former boyfriend/girlfriend online—that might threaten the quality and stability of their relationships.
- Such i-Infidelities may well matter. Americans who report such behaviors have markedly less happy, less stable, and less committed relationships than those who do not.

The bottom line is that the generations of men and women who have been most formed by the rise of the internet are most accepting of i-Infidelities, most likely to engage in i-Infidelities, and most likely, it would seem, to pay a relational price in the real world for pushing emotional and sexual boundaries in the virtual world. By contrast, American men and women who steer clear of emotional and sexual entanglements in the real and virtual worlds—who practice Fidelity and iFidelity—enjoy the most committed, most stable, and most happy relationships.

Social Indicators of Marital Health and Well-Being

Compiled by Spencer James

Marriage

Divorce

Unmarried Cohabitation

Fertility and Children

Fragile Families with Children

Teen Attitudes About Marriage and Family

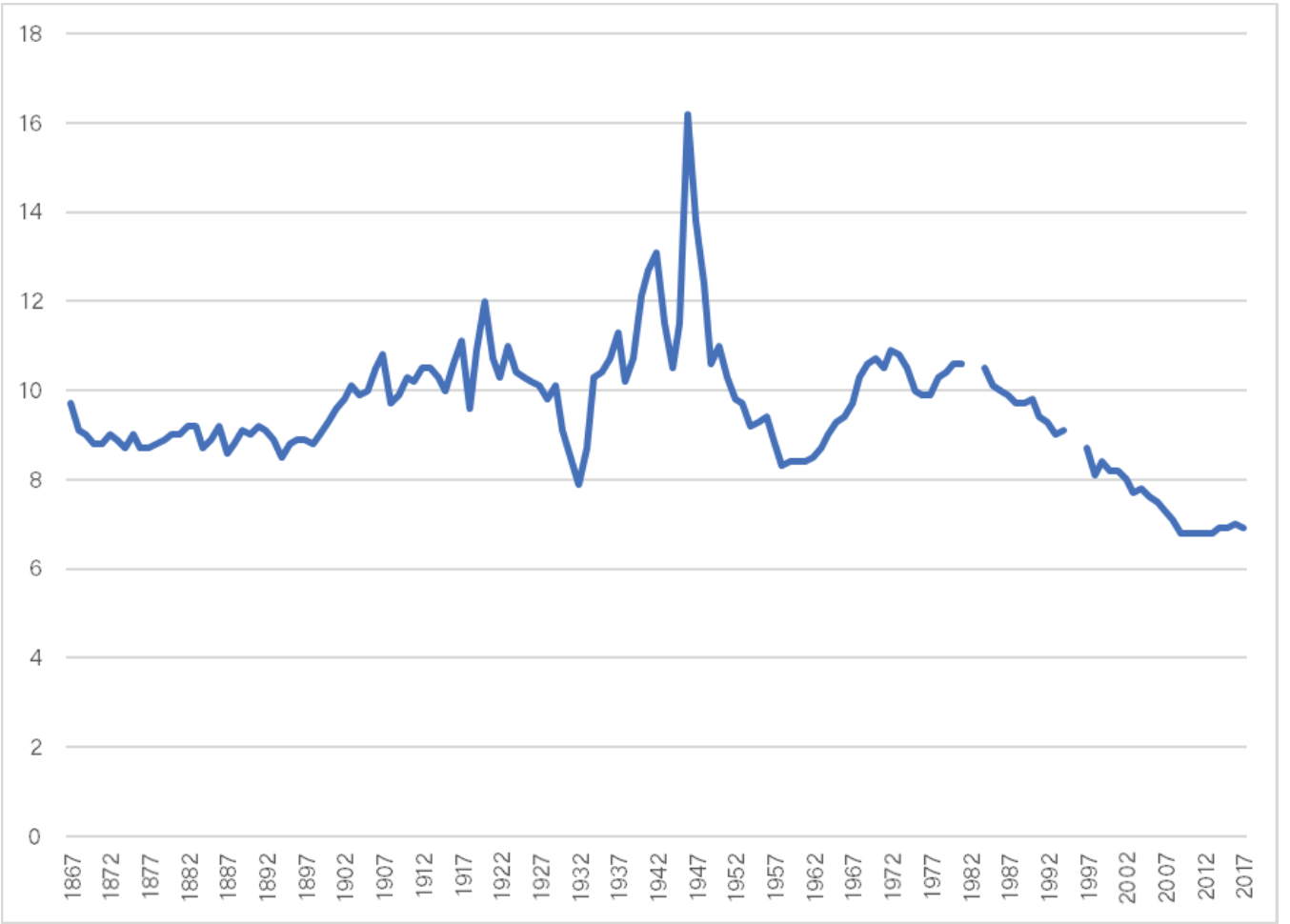
Marriage

(Figures 1, 2A, 2B, 3, and 4)

Key Finding:
Marriage trends indicate that contemporary Americans, compared to historical trends, are less likely to marry, although recent data suggest the decline may be subsiding. A greater proportion of White and Asian men and women marry when compared to Hispanic and Black men and women, suggesting important variability across racial and ethnic lines. Of those who do marry, the percentage of couples who consider their marriage to be very happy has experienced only minor declines, suggesting that marital quality has been stable.

Compared to its historic peak at the end of World War II, the marriage rate has declined dramatically from about 16 marriages per 1,000 people in 1946 to about 7 marriages per 1,000 in 2017 (Figure 1). Continual declines over the past 50 years have resulted in marriage rates below even those observed at the nadir of the Great Depression. However, marriage rates appear to have stabilized over the past decade.

Figure 1. Marriages per 1,000 Population, 1867–2017, United States

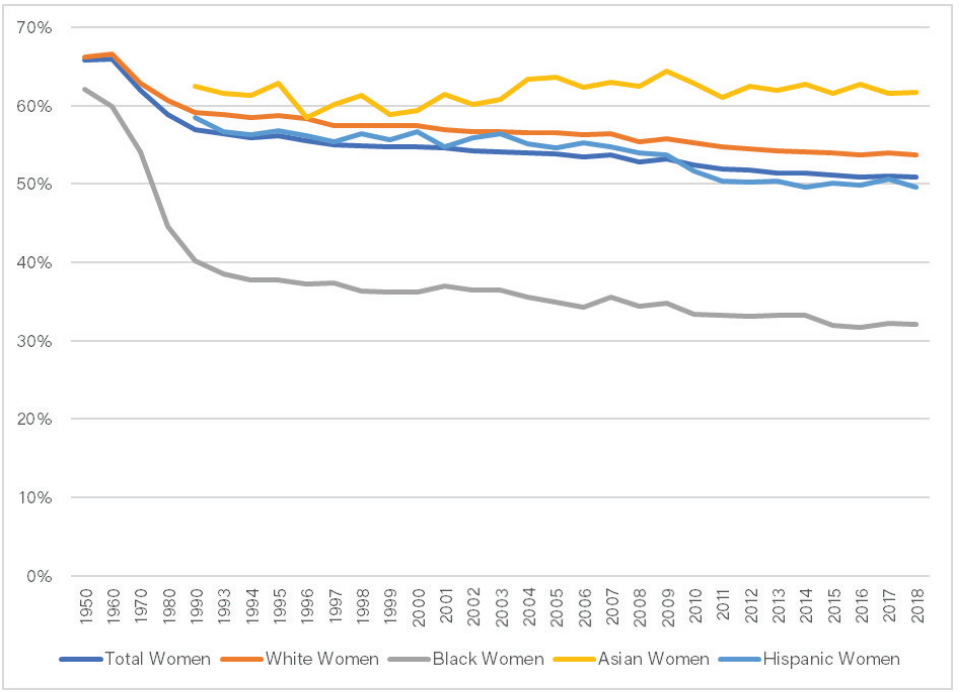


Source: U.S. Census Bureau and Center for Disease Controls. National Center for Health Statistics Vital and Health Statistics. Courtesy of Randal Olsen.

Notes. Only ever-married and ever-cohabited participants answered these questions. Differences tested using multivariate binomial logistic regression. Control variables were gender, education, age, race/ethnicity, relationship duration, total family income, and married vs. cohabiting status. The difference between following vs. not following former boyfriends/girlfriends was statistically significant.

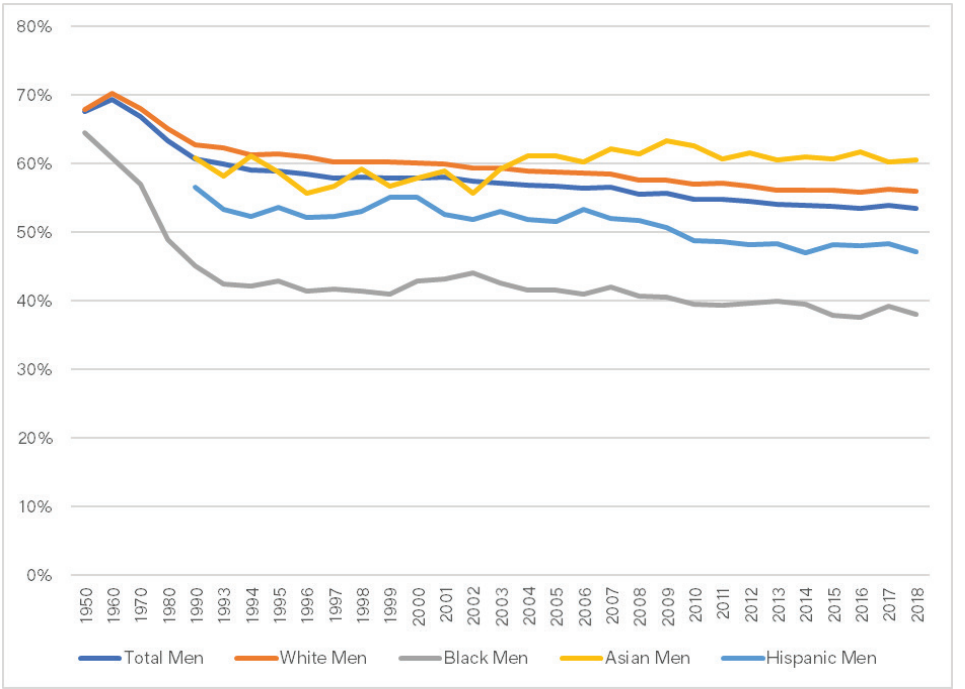
These changes in the marriage rate are reflected in the decline in the percent of men and women who are currently married (Figures 2A and 2B). Since 1950, the percent of currently married individuals ages 15 and older in the population has declined by 15 percent. This overall number masks significant racial/ethnic variation. The percent of currently married Black men and women, for instance, has declined by 26 percent and 30 percent, respectively, by far the largest decline observed. Among White men and women, the decline has been by 12 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Since 1990,[1] the percent of Asians 15 years and older who are currently married has remained unchanged, while Hispanics have experienced about a 10 percent drop.

Figure 2A. Percentage of All Women Age 15 and Older Who Were Married, by Race and Year, United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table MS-1.

Figure 2B. Percentage of All Men Age15 and Older Who Were Married, by Race and Year, United States



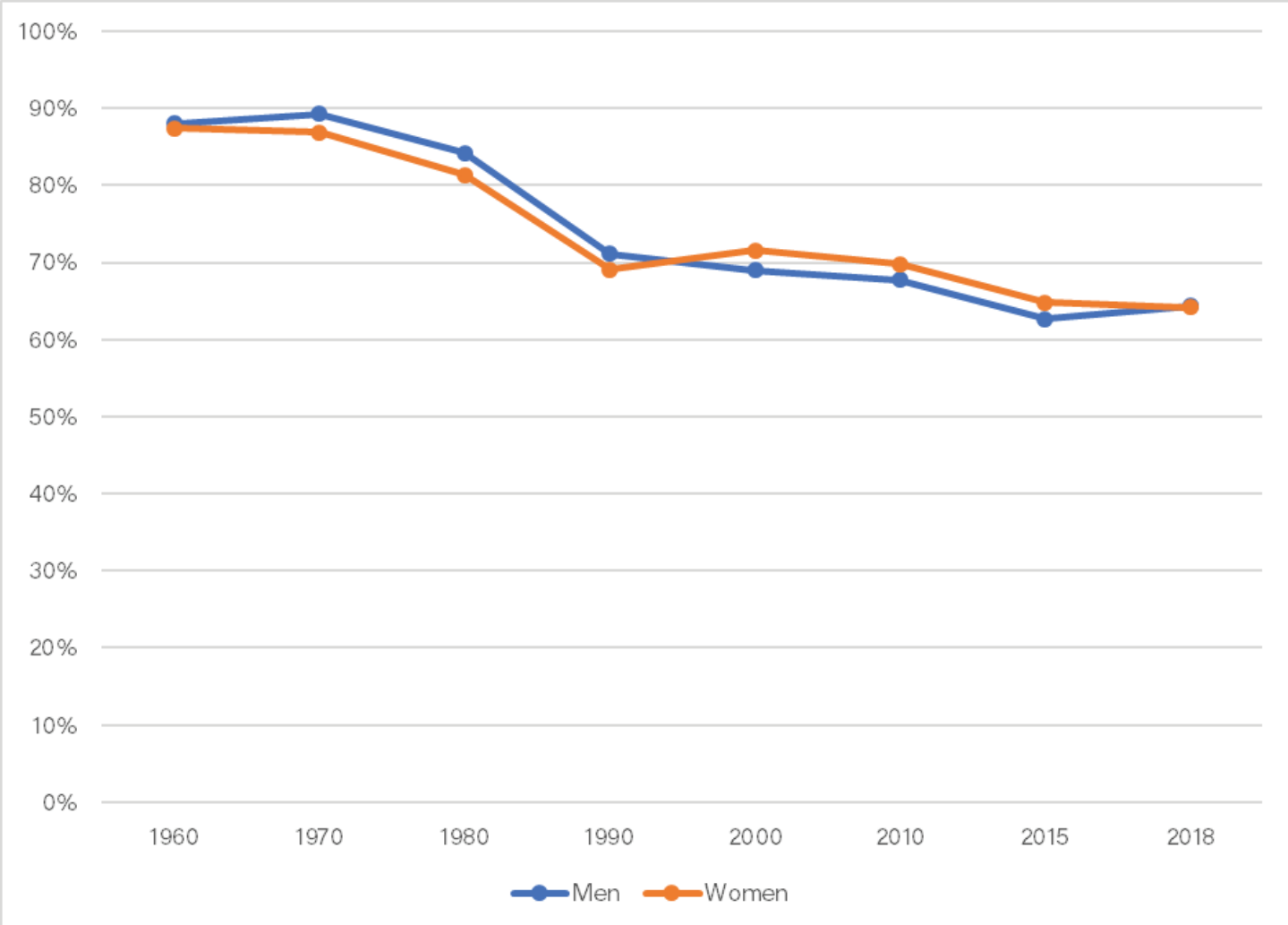
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table MS-1.Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table MS-1.

Much of this decline is due to delaying the age at marriage. At the turn of the twentieth century, median age at first marriage was 26 for men and 22 for women. By the mid-1950s, these numbers had declined to about 22.5 (men) and 20 (women). Since that time, age at first marriage has increased dramatically: in 2018, men's median age at first marriage was 29.8 and women's was 27.8. Other key factors explaining declining marriage rates are the growth of unmarried cohabitation, which we discuss later, shifting economic fortunes among those with less than a college degree, and some increase in lifelong singlehood.

To partially account for declining marriage rates due to delaying marriage to later ages, we examined changes in the percentage of individuals ages 35 through 44 who were marred (Figure 3). Since 1960, there has been a pronounced drop, most precipitously in the 1980s, in the

1 Census data collection on Hispanics and Asian groups began in 1990.

Figure 3. Percentage of Individuals Ages 35–44 Who Were Married, by Sex, 1960–2018, United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table UC3

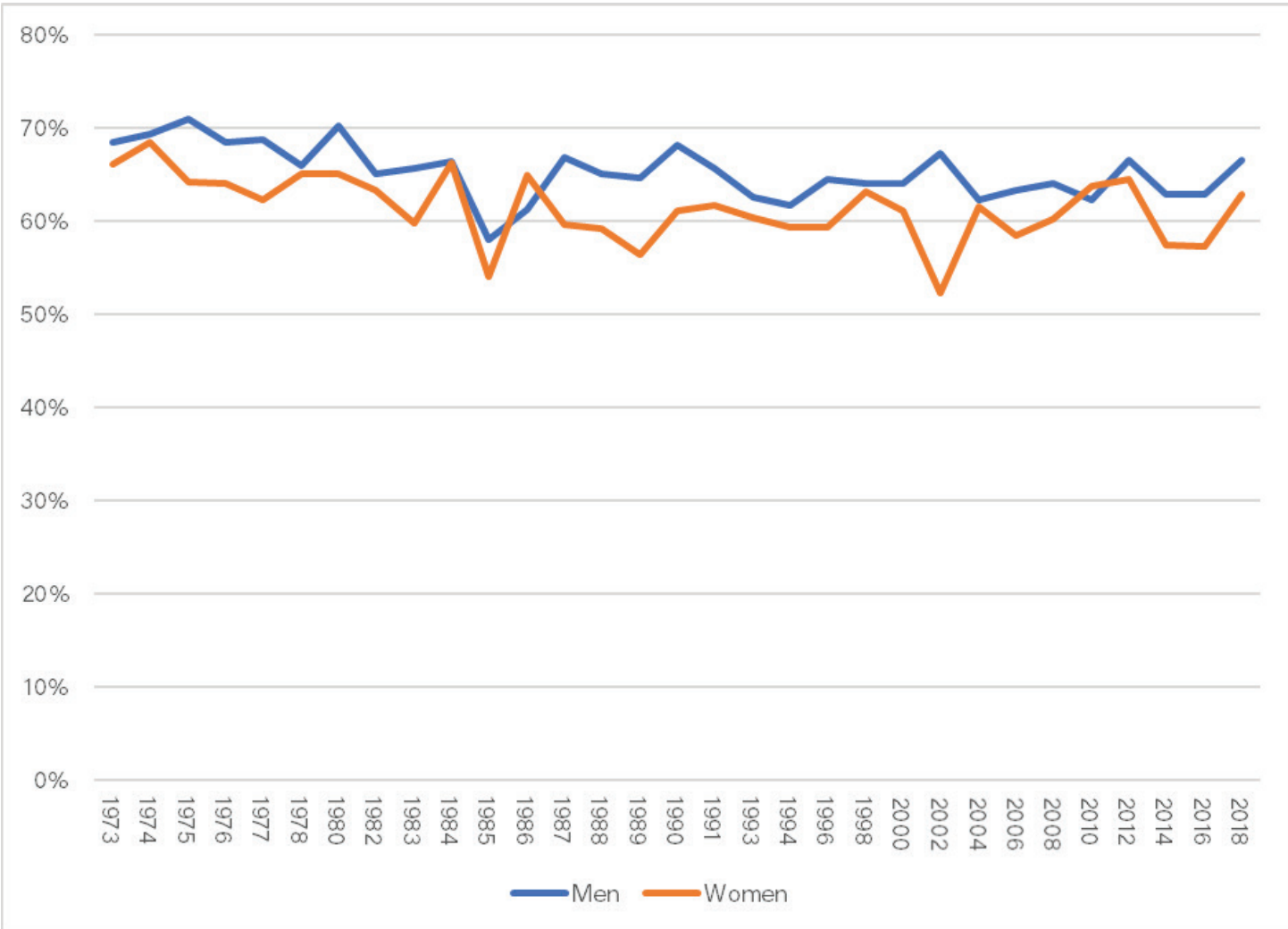
percentage of individuals ages 35–44 who were married. These patterns do not differ by sex and suggest that low marriage rates may be the new norm for American family life.

These declines in marriage rates among adults ages 35-44 are also suggestive of potential increases in lifelong singlehood. In every time period for which we have records, the large majority of all individuals who marry during their lifetimes have done so by age 45. Whereas historical data indicate that more than 90 percent of women have eventually married, today those numbers are expected to be lower, especially for those with lower educational attainment (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001), suggesting that an increasing number of people may never marry.

Of course, diminishing marriage rates do not mean people are foregoing romantic unions altogether. Rather, rapid increases in cohabitation mean that marriage is yielding ground to unwed unions. Most first marriages today are preceded by cohabitation and an even higher percentage of people in second or third marriages lived together before marrying. An increasing number of people live together with no intention of getting married. Thus, although singlehood, if defined as never marrying, is increasing in the United States, this does not mean people are forsaking (intended) long-term romantic relationships; often people are simply cutting marriage out of their long-term plans in favor of cohabitation.

One commonly held belief about marriage is that, although fewer people marry today, those who do marry have higher quality marriages. After all, if divorce removes poor marriages from the proverbial marital "pool" and cohabitation ensures some bad marriages never happen, then the remaining marriages ought to be happier, at least on average. However, the best data we have on long-term trends in marital happiness do not support this belief (Figure 4). Since 1973, the General Social Survey has asked representative samples of Americans to rate their marriages as *very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy*. The percentage of both men and women who said their marriages were very happy actually has modestly declined since the 1970s and remains essentially unchanged since the turn of the twenty-first century. Women continue to be slightly less likely than men to report being very happy, but the gender difference is quite small. In other words, if it were true that only the most committed, happiest coupled married and remained married, we would expect to find that marital happiness has increased over the past 45 years. Instead, it has, at best, remained unchanged and perhaps even declined slightly. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that Americans have higher expectations for marriage today than in the past. It therefore remains possible that only the most committed, happiest people marry today, but the goalposts for marital happiness have moved (Finkel, 2017).

Figure 4. Percentage of Married Individuals Ages 18 and Older Who Said Their Marriages Were "Very Happy," 1973–2016, United States



Source: "The General Social Survey," conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.

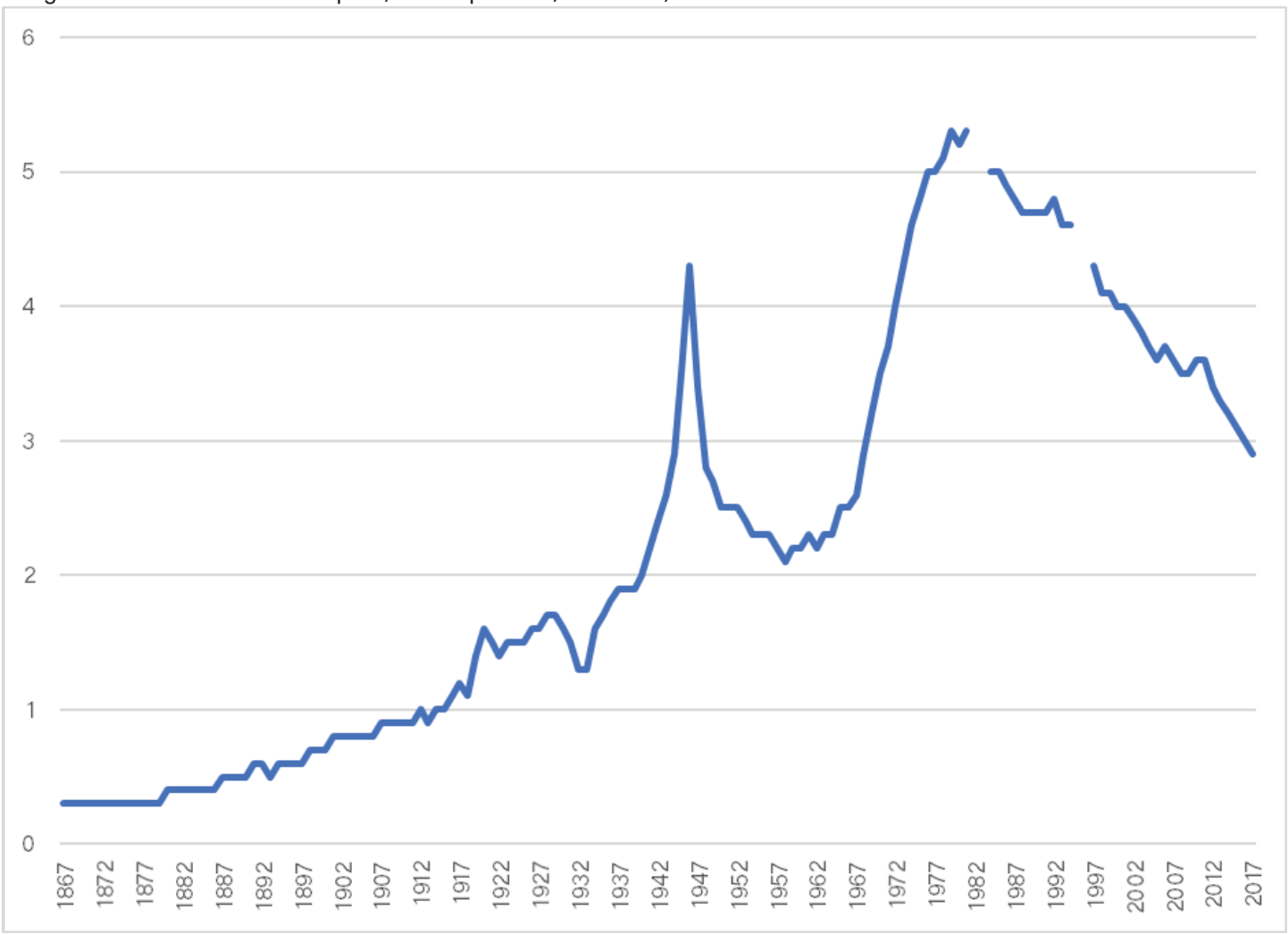
Divorce

(Figures 5, 6A, 6B, 7, and 8)

Key Finding:
The American divorce rate is about where it was in the late 1960s and has been continually declining since its peak in the early 1980s. Societal acceptance of divorce continues to climb, with nearly 80 percent of Americans agreeing that divorce is morally acceptable, up from less than 60 percent at the turn of the century. Accompanying this trend, fewer Americans than ever before believe that getting a divorce should be more difficult. For the average couple marrying for the first time, the lifetime probability of divorce falls to around 40 percent.

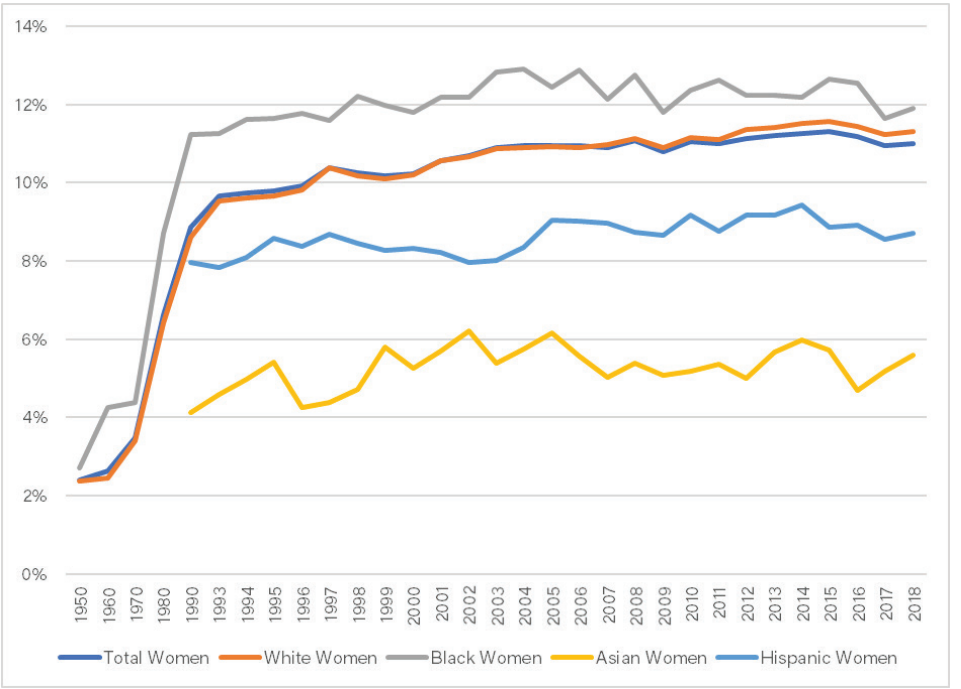
Divorce has experienced a massive increase since 1867, the first year that data are available, when the United States had just 0.3 divorces per 1,000 people (Figure 5). While the divorce rate has continuously climbed since the days of Reconstruction, there have been two major peaks, one at the end of World War II, with 4.3 divorces

Figure 5. Number of Divorces per 1,000 Population, 1867–2017, United States



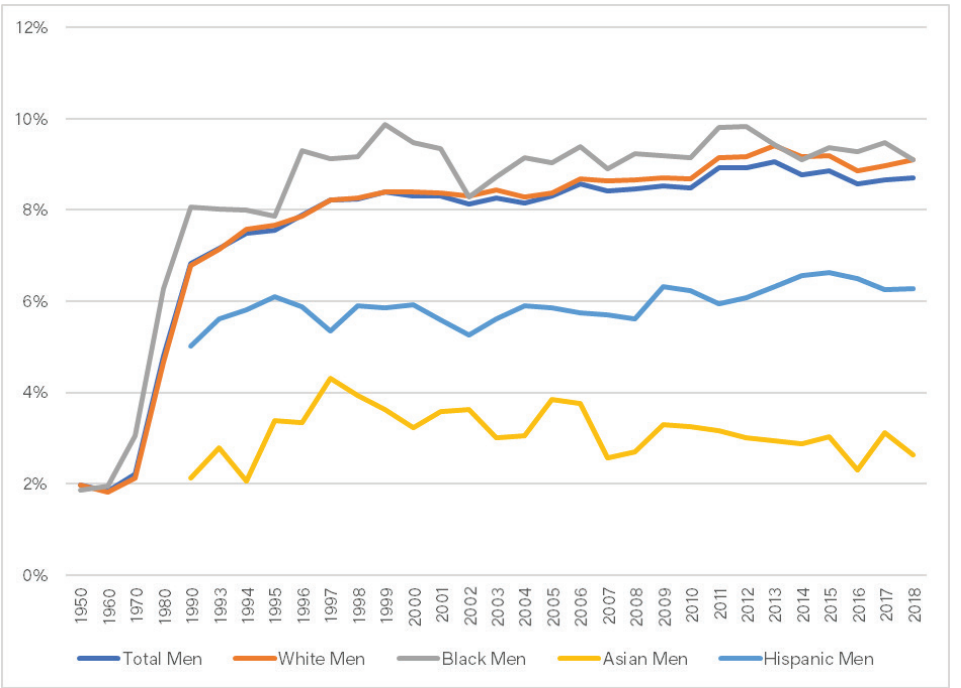
Source: .S. Census Bureau and Center for Disease Controls. National Center for Health Statistics Vital and Health Statistics. Courtesy of Randal Olsen.

Figure 6A. Percentage of all women age 15 and older who were divorced, by sex and race, 1960-2011, United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table A1.

Figure 6B. Percentage of all men age 15 and older who were divorced, by sex and race, 1960-2011, United States



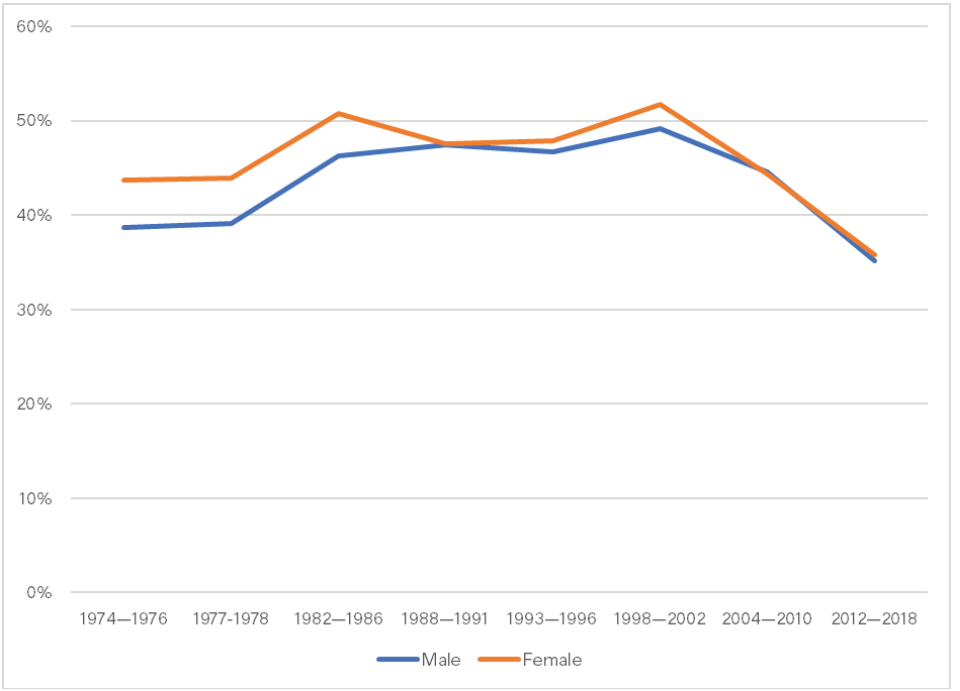
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table A1.

per 1,000 people, followed by relative stability from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, and another peak around 1980, with about 5 divorces per 1,000 people, the culmination of a 15-year spike in divorce rates. Since that time, divorce has been on the decline. Demographers have suggested two reasons for this: increasing age at marriage and an educational gradient in marital stability. Both increasing age at marriage, due to increased maturity, and increasing marriage rates among the college educated (where it is nearly universal, albeit at later ages) mean that marrying individuals have often settled themselves personally, financially, and socially before marriage and thereby are less likely to get divorced.

Despite the fact that most divorced individuals eventually remarry, the increase in divorce has led to an increase in the number of women and men who are divorced (Figures 6A and 6B). In 1950, less than 3 percent of women and 2 percent of men were divorced, with very little difference between White and Black men and women. These numbers have increased dramatically since then, with about 12 percent of Black and 11 percent of White women being currently divorced and about 9 percent of White and Black men being divorced.[2] While Asians and Hispanics have also experienced upticks in the percentages of men and women who are divorced, the percentages are lower than those for Black and White individuals, especially for Asian men and women.

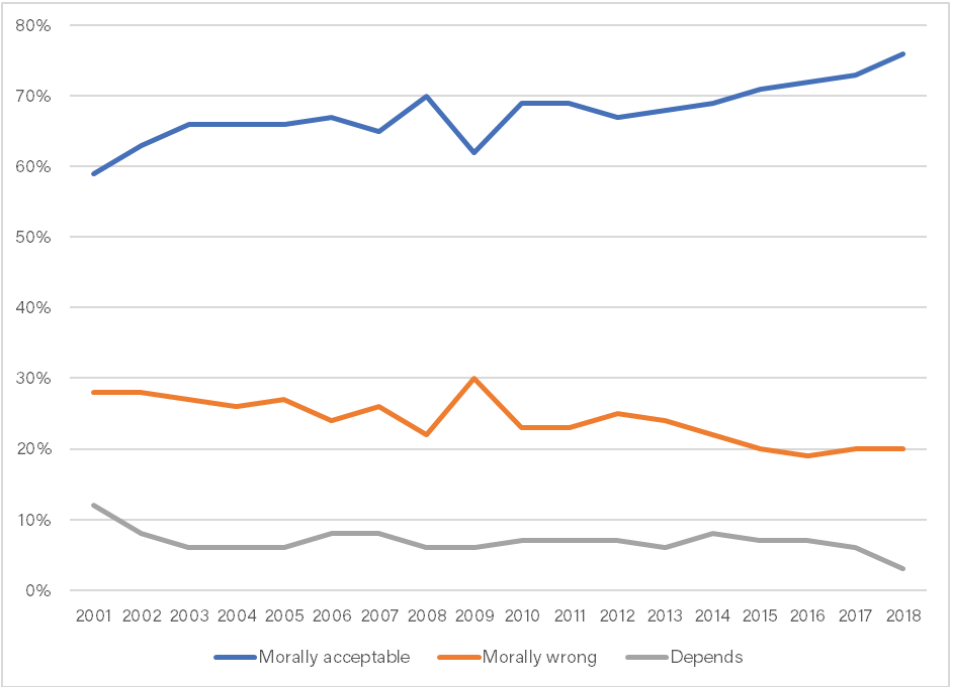
2 The gender difference is because remarriage is both more likely to happen and to happen sooner for divorced men than divorced women.

Figure 7. Percentage of Individuals Ages 18–45 Who Said That Divorce Laws Should be Changed to Make Getting a Divorce More Difficult, by Period, United States



Source: "The General Social Survey," conducted by the National Opinion Re- search Center of the University of Chicago.

Figure 8. Percentage of individuals 18 and over who believe divorce is morally acceptable, morally wrong, or it depends, 2001-2018, United States



Source: "Gallup Historical Trends", conducted by the Gallup Organization.

Increasing divorce rates, according to recent polling data, have been accompanied by greater acceptance of divorce. Americans today are more likely to oppose changing divorce laws to make getting a divorce more difficult (Figure 7) and are more likely to believe that divorce is morally acceptable (Figure 8) than in the mid-1970s. Today, just over one third (36 percent of women and 35 percent of men) believe that divorce should be more difficult to obtain, compared to 50 percent twenty years ago. Belief that divorce is morally acceptable has increased from 59 percent in 2001 to 76 percent in 2018, meaning about 1 percent of the population has shifted into this view, on average, every year for the past 17 years. This is sobering news, as more permissive divorce attitudes are associated with lower quality, more unstable marriages (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007).

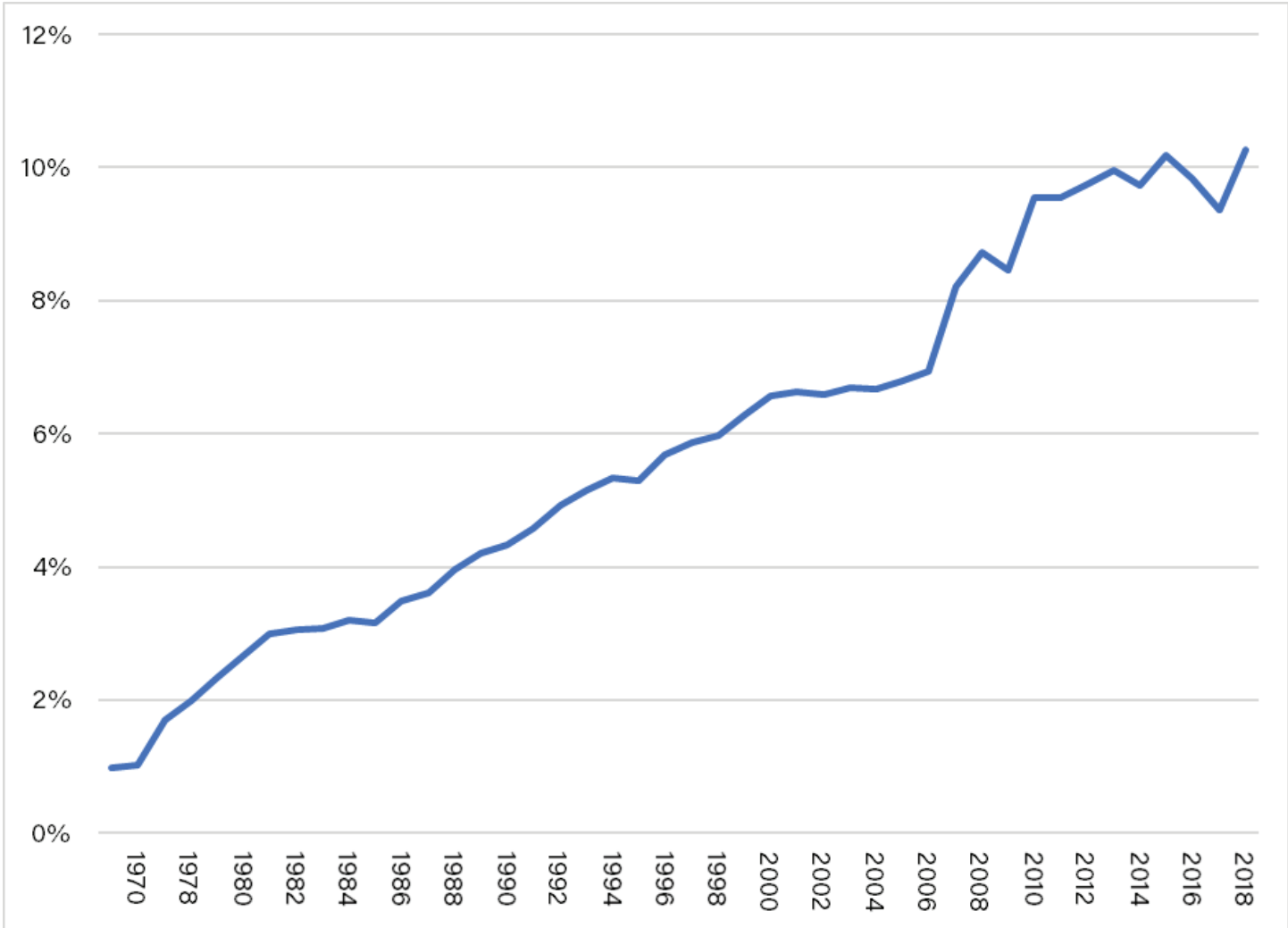
Unmarried Cohabitation

(Figures 9 and 10)

Key Finding:
Cohabitation has become a common feature of the American domestic landscape, with the number of unmarried couples increasing dramatically over the past five decades. Consequently, cohabiting households now constitute one in ten family households in the United States, up from less than one in 100 households 50 years ago.

Between 1970 and 2018, the percent of cohabiting, unmarried, opposite-sex couples that were cohabiting increased tenfold. In 1970, these couples made up just under 1 percent of all family households They increased their share of family households continuously to about 6 percent until the mid-2000s, when their share increased more dramatically, so that today more than 10 percent of all family households comprise cohabiting opposite-sex couples.

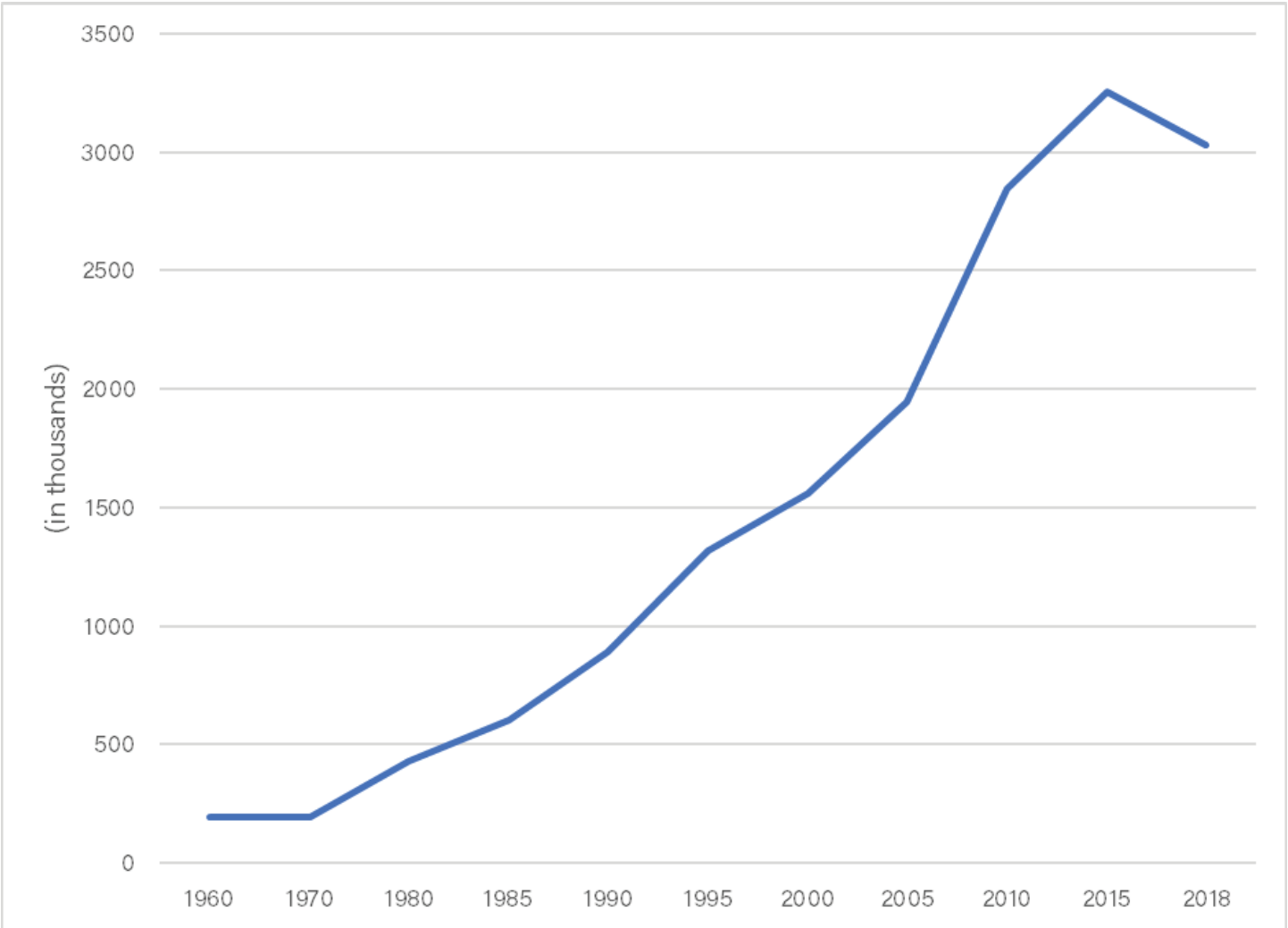
Figure 9. Cohabiting, Unmarried Adult Couples of the Opposite Sex as a Percentage of Family Households, 1970–2018, United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table UC1

Consequently, there are more children living with cohabiting, unmarried, opposite-sex couples than ever before. Figure 10 shows this dramatic increase. Because more cohabiting couples are having children—or bringing them into their newly formed cohabiting relationship—there has been about a 15-fold increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children since 1960. In 1960, there were 196,000 cohabiting couples living with at least one child. This number remained flat through the 1960s but quickly grew to 431,000 in 1980. Between 1990 and 1995, the number of cohabiting couples living with children reached 1 million for the first time. The ensuing period has seen the tripling of that to more than 3 million in 2018. Nearly half of all children are expected to spend some time living with cohabiting parents before age 18 (Brown, Stykes, & Manning, 2016).

Figure 10. Number of Cohabiting, Unmarried Adult Couples of the Opposite Sex Living with One or More Children, 1960–2018, United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table UC1

Fertility and Children

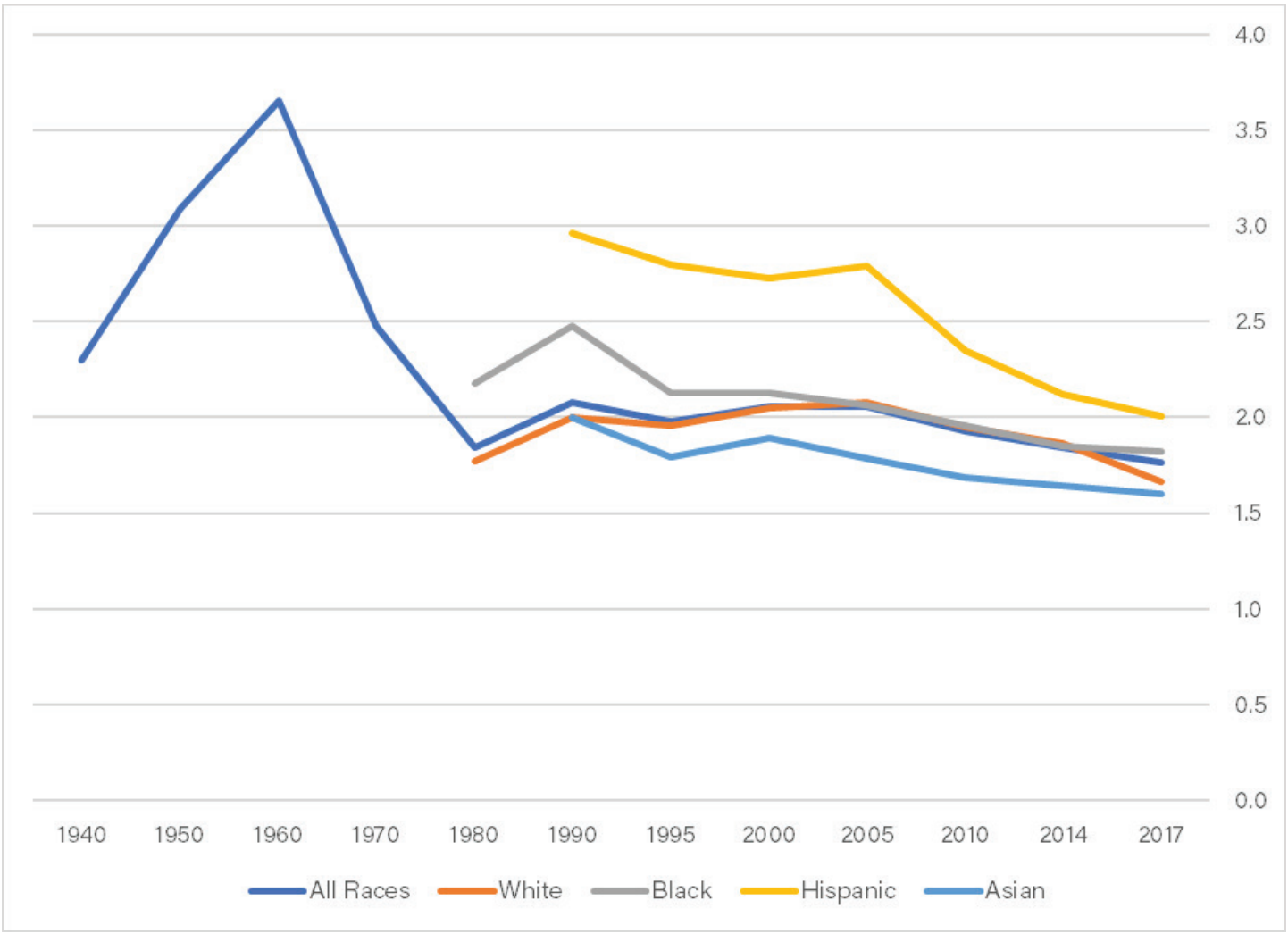
(Figures 11 and 12)

Key Finding:
The number of American children has declined significantly since 1950, as seen in declining fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Fertility rates are now below replacement levels for all major ethnic groups. More than half of American households contain no children under 18.

Throughout most human history, marriage has been geared around the bearing and rearing of children and the organization of sexuality, both male and female. Yet recent trends suggest children play an increasingly diminished role in American family life.

American have fewer children today than at any point in history. Figure 11 shows that fertility rates have dropped dramatically from their peak in the 1960s. Fertility has been gradually declining throughout American history, bottoming out during the Great

Figure 11. Fertility Rates of Women Ages 15–44, by Race and Year, United States



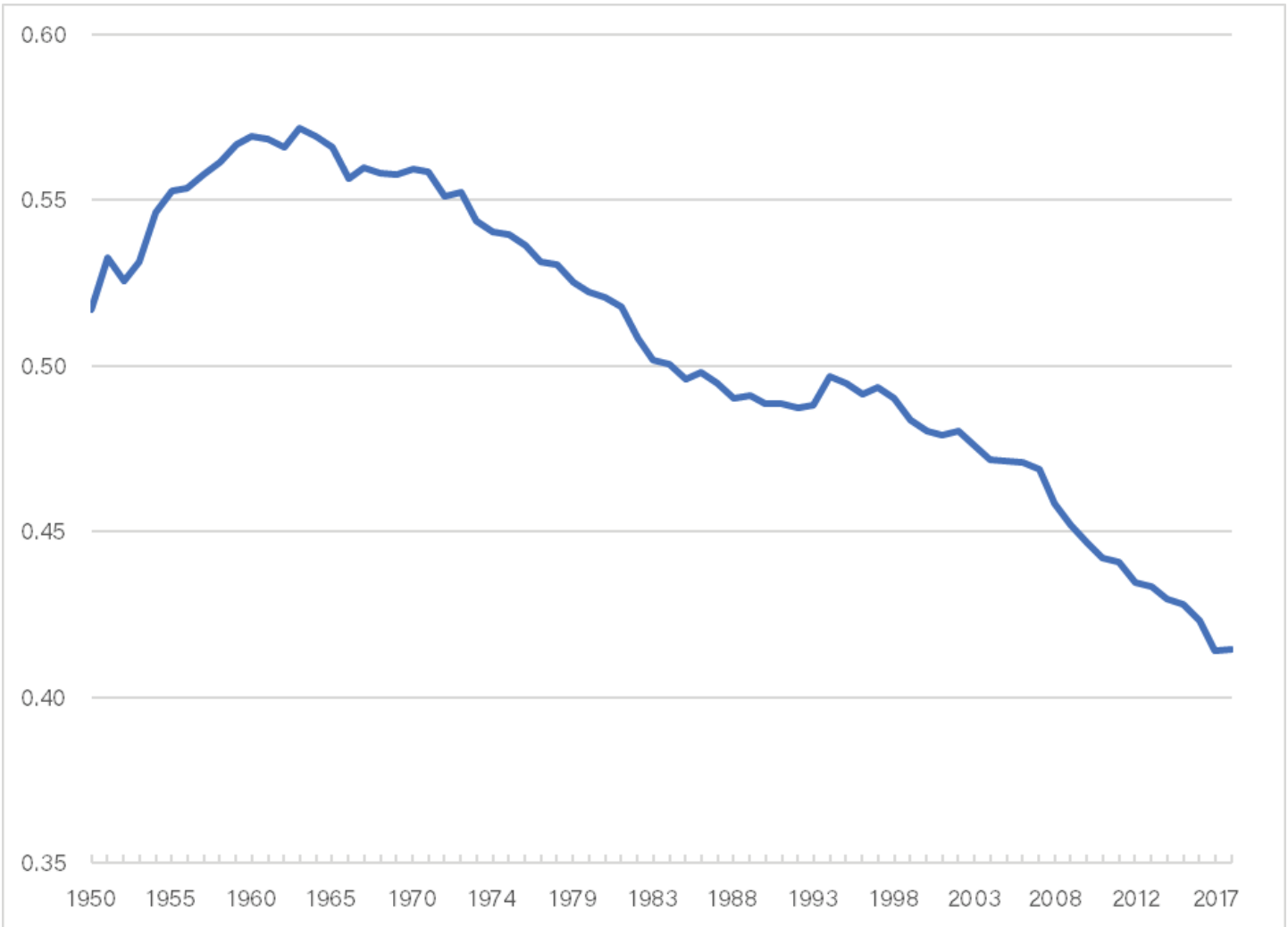
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics Reports

Depression of the 1930s before accelerating during the postwar Baby Boom of the 1940s through the early 1960s. By 1960, the birth rate had returned to where it was in 1920 and the average woman was expected to have about 3.5 children during her lifetime. Since 1960, however, the birth rate has declined sharply, with the greatest declines occurring between 1960 and 1980. Since then, the birth rate has slowly decreased each year. As of 2017, the latest year for which we have complete data, the total fertility rate (TFR) was 1.8, half the 3.5 children per woman in 1960. Hispanic women continue to have the highest TFR at 2.0 and Asian women the lowest at 1.6. While this places the United States at the higher end of fertility rates among wealthy, developed countries, where many European and Asian nations have TFRs below 1.5, it also places the United States well below the replacement level of 2.1, the average number of children each woman needs to have to keep, or replace, the population at its current level solely via births. The United States' relatively high fertility rate is due largely to the high fertility rates of its rapidly growing Hispanic population.

This long-term decline in births is directly reflected in the composition of U.S. households. Our analysis[3] shows that 90.7 percent of American households contained

3 Author estimation based on 1850 Census, 1 percent sample data. Does not include group quarters or similar.

Figure 12. Percentage of Families with One or More Children Under Age 18, 1950–2018, United States



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics Reports

children in 1850. A century later (Figure 12), the percentage of families with one or more children was at 52 percent. While rising throughout the Baby Boom period of the fifties and sixties, it began a steep decline thereafter. Then, in the 1980s, for the first time in American history, less than half of all households contained one or more children. In 2018, just 41 percent of American families had children living with them, indicating a sizeable majority of American households now contain no children under age 18. This means that fewer adults live with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain them, and that children are, for many adults, less a part of their day-to-day lives. This reflects not only declining fertility rates but is also a natural consequence of a rapidly aging U.S. society, in which the number of Americans age 65 and older is expected to double to nearly 98 million over the next 40 years and rise from 15 percent to nearly a quarter of the overall population (Mather, Jacobsen, & Pollard, 2015).

Overall, today's America has fewer households and families including children. And when they do include children, those children are more likely to live with parents who have not made a formal, marital commitment to remain together. This portends that the needs and concerns of adults may continue to supersede those of children, especially young children, as adults encounter and have responsibility for increasingly fewer children.

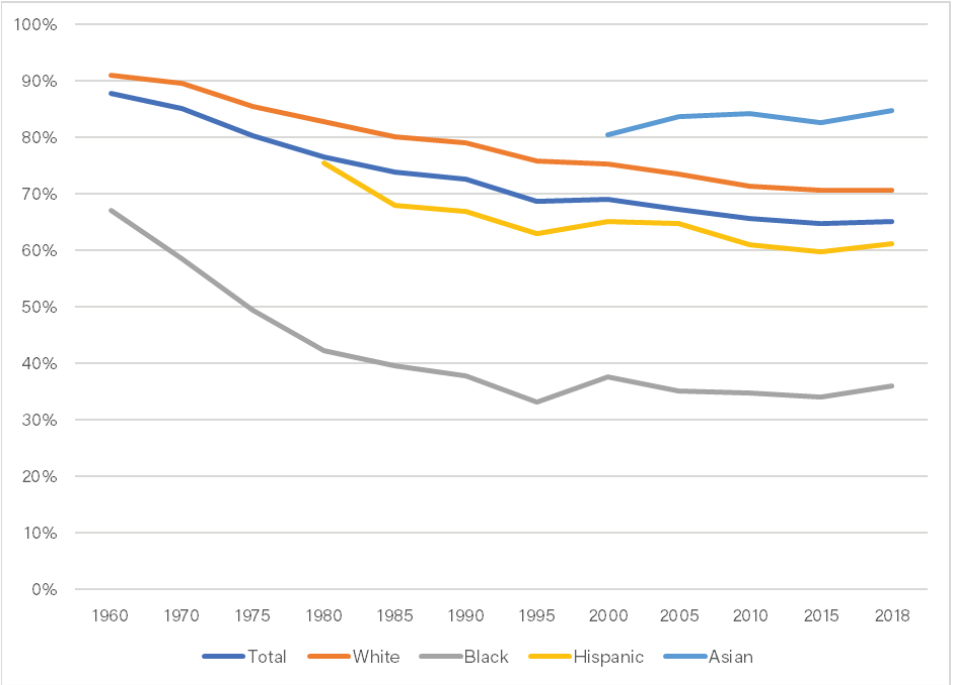
Fragile Families with Children

(Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16)

Key Finding:

The percentage of children growing up in fragile—typically fatherless—families has continued to grow over the past several decades, although trends suggest a leveling off over the past decade. Racial and ethnic variation persists, with Black children, about half of whom live with a single parent, much more likely to live in a single-parent home than any other group. In contrast, only one in ten Asian children today live with a single parent. Nonmarital fertility appears to have plateaued over the past decade, albeit at high levels, with nearly 40 percent of all births to unmarried, often cohabiting, parents. Consequently, the number of children living in fragile families is historically high, though perhaps stable. Income and education continue to be primary drivers of inequality in childhood living arrangements.

Figure 13. Percentage of Children Under Age 18 Living with Two Married Parents, by Year and Race, United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, "America's Families and Living Arrangements." Table C3.

The social science literature is clear—stable and happy relationships, often marriages, form a crucial part of well-being for adults. Such relationships are even more important for the socialization and well-being of children. A central—perhaps the single most important—feature of the institution of marriage is to maximize the chances that both parents remain invested and involved in the welfare of children from birth to adulthood and beyond.

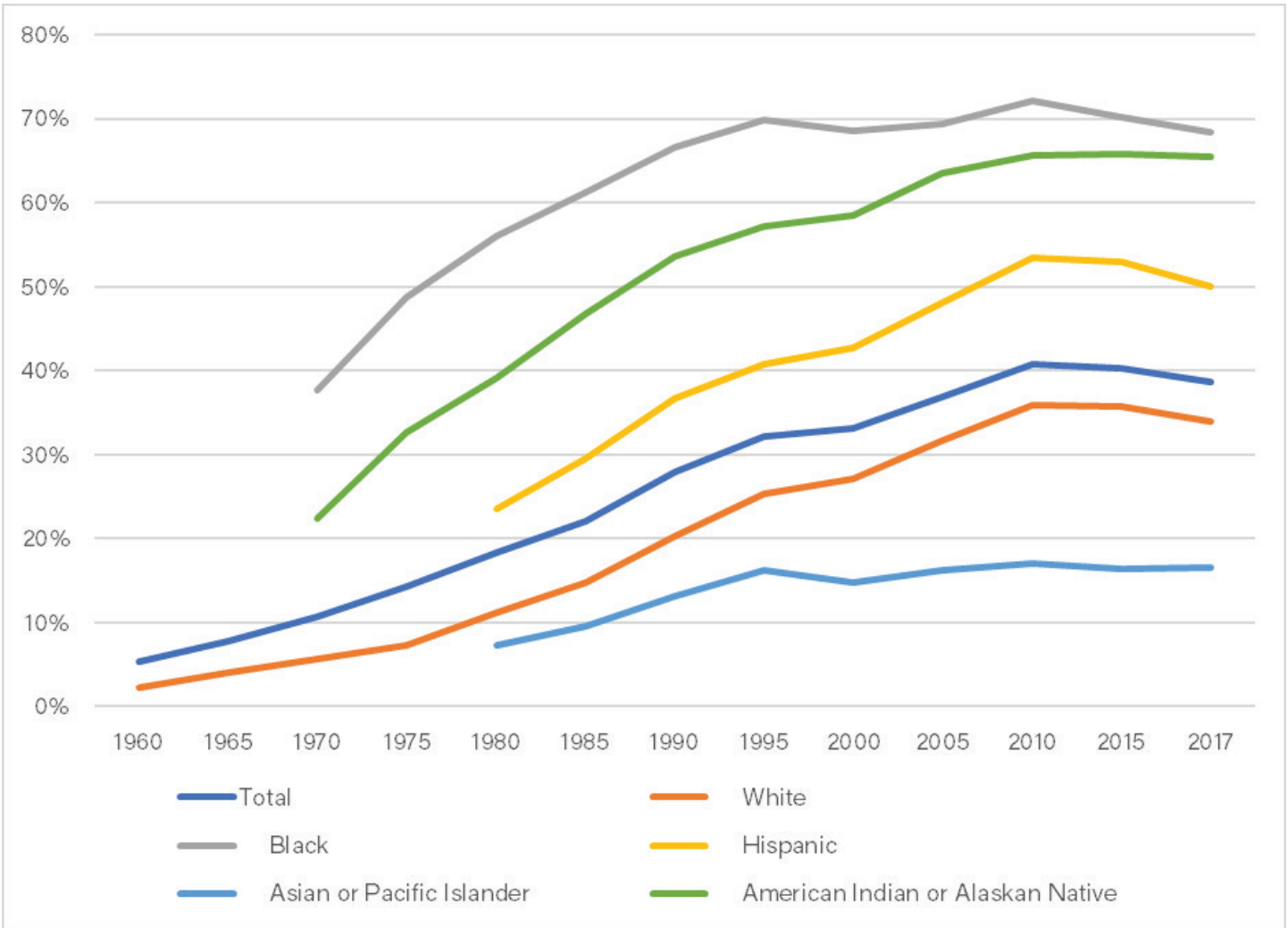
Societal trends, however, suggest that many American families struggle to provide children with a stable, two-parent family. Shifts in the percentage of children under 18 who live with their married parents (Figure 13) suggest that the next generation of children may be less likely to experience the same level of well-being as their predecessors, as children in these families have negative life experiences at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan & Sanderfur, 1994). Compared to 1960, far fewer children today live with both married parents. In 1960, almost 90 percent of American children lived with their married parents, whereas today one out of three

children do not. Among African American children, less than two out of five children live with their married parents.

These dramatic shifts in children's living arrangements are primarily driven by three trends: divorce, nonmarital births, and cohabitation. As seen earlier, divorce rose dramatically between 1960–1980. Consequently, the number of children younger than 18 who found themselves with divorced parents each year grew from less than 500,000 in 1960 to over a million by 1975. After peaking around 1980, the number has leveled off and remains close to a million new children each year, mostly because decreasing numbers of children per family are offsetting the effects of population growth, so each divorce today affects a smaller number of children.

The second reason for this shift in children's living arrangements is the rapid increase in the percentage of children born to unwed mothers (Figure 14), which took off in the 1970s. Since 1960, the percentage of all live births that were to unmarried women has skyrocketed from around 5 percent to 38.7 percent today. Fortunately, these numbers seem to have levelled off in the wake of the Great Recession, when more than 40 percent of all births were to unwed mothers. But the large majority, nearly 70 percent,

Figure 14. Percentage of Live Births that Were to Unmarried Women, by Race and Year, United States

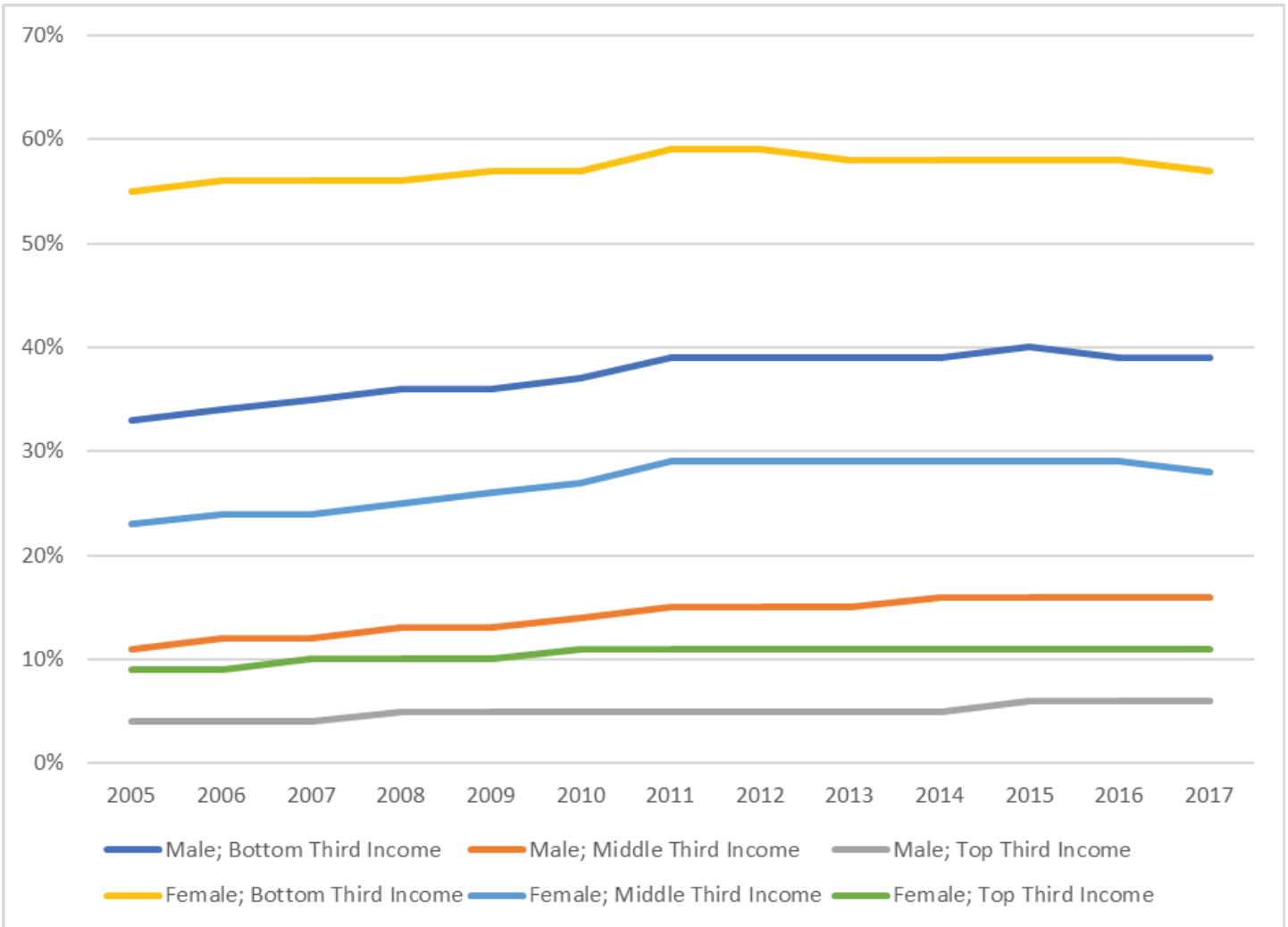


Source: Childtrends analysis of National Center for Health Statistics, Table 5, and CDC WONDER.

of births to Black women were nonmarital, compared to 35 percent among White women, 50 percent among Hispanic women, and just 17 percent among Asian women.

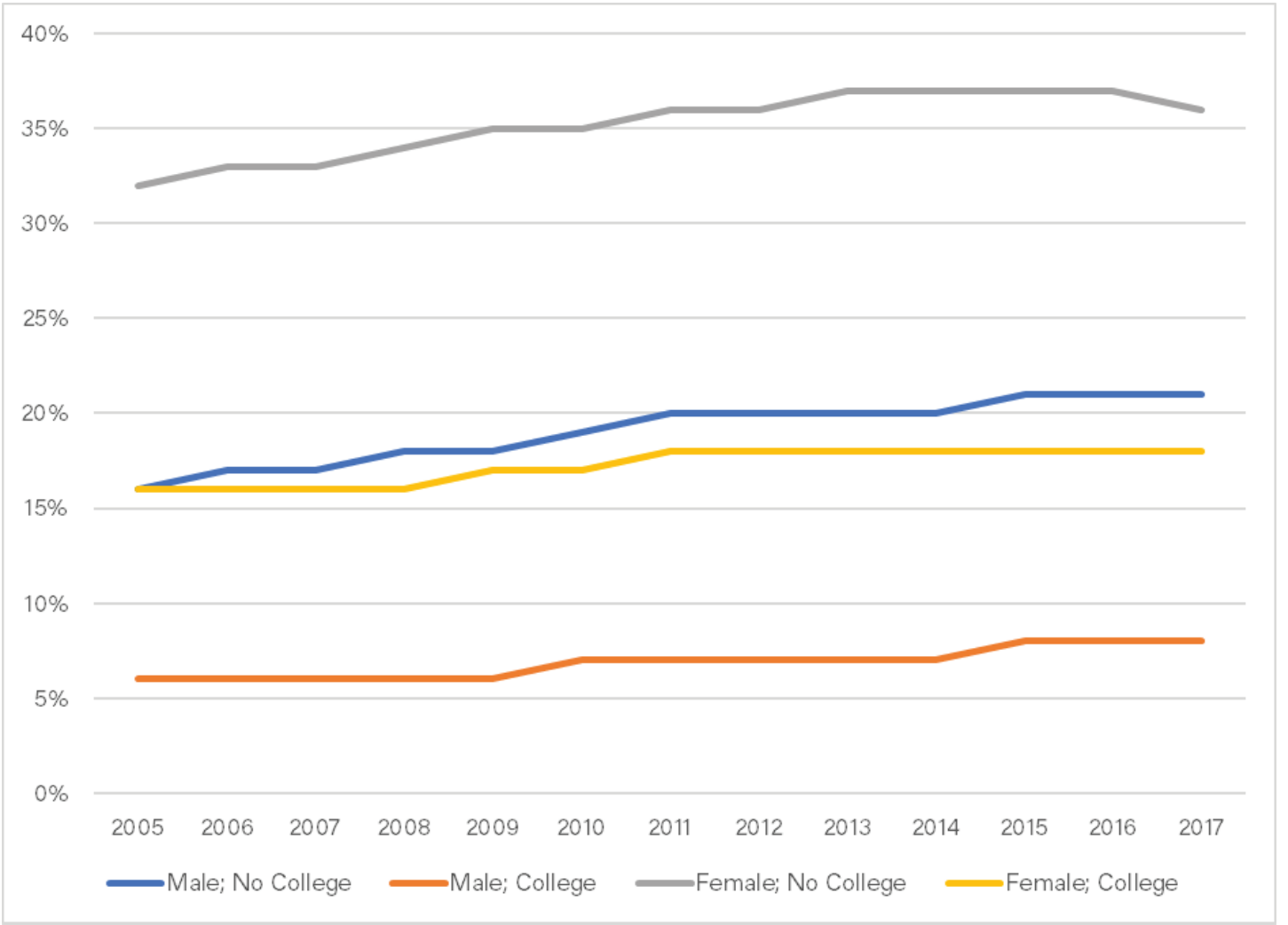
A third and even more recent trend driving changes in children's living arrangements is the widespread occurrence of parents giving birth and bringing children into cohabiting relationships (Figure 10). In 1960, there were less than 200,000 cohabiting opposite-sex couples living with one or more children. While that number remained flat throughout the 1960s, it began to grow rapidly in the 1970s through 2005, when the number of cohabiting couples living with children experienced a particularly steep spike. Since peaking in 2015 at about 3.2 million cohabiting couples living with children, this number has since come down to about 3 million couples today. There is ample reason to worry about the well-being of children living with cohabiting couples. Although many cohabiting couples plan to stay together for life and raise their children together, cohabiting couples experience much higher breakup rates than married couples and are at greater risk for domestic violence, each of which increases the likelihood of negative experiences for children.

Figure 15. Percentage of Households with Children Whose Parents Are Separated, Divorced, or Single, by Parental Sex and Income, 2005–2017, United States



Source: Author calculations of American Community Survey data from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Figure 16. Percentage of Households with Children Whose Parents Are Separated, Divorced, or Single, by Parental Sex and College Degree, 2005–2017, United States



Source: Author calculations of American Community Survey data from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

To partially explore what may undergird these trends, we examined differences in the percentage of households with children whose parents are separated, divorced, or single (SDS) by parental sex and income (Figure 15) and education (Figure 16). The marked trends showed that mothers tend to be worse off than fathers, whether separated, divorced, or single, and that income and education are primary drivers of family patterns. Between 2005 and 2017, the latest year data are available, the percentage of households with children whose parents are SDS rose only slightly from 55 to 57 percent among mothers in the bottom third of the income distribution. These are very high levels, meaning that a large number of children experience these outcomes. We see a similar pattern when separating by education, specifically by whether one parent has a college degree. Among fathers with a college degree, less than 10 percent of households with children were living with fathers who are SDS. In contrast, among mothers without a college degree, the comparable number is 36 percent. We have not seen dramatic increases in these numbers over the past 15 years, suggesting that rising inequality is likely partially responsible for the complex interplay between children's living arrangements, race/ethnicity, education, income, and parental sex.

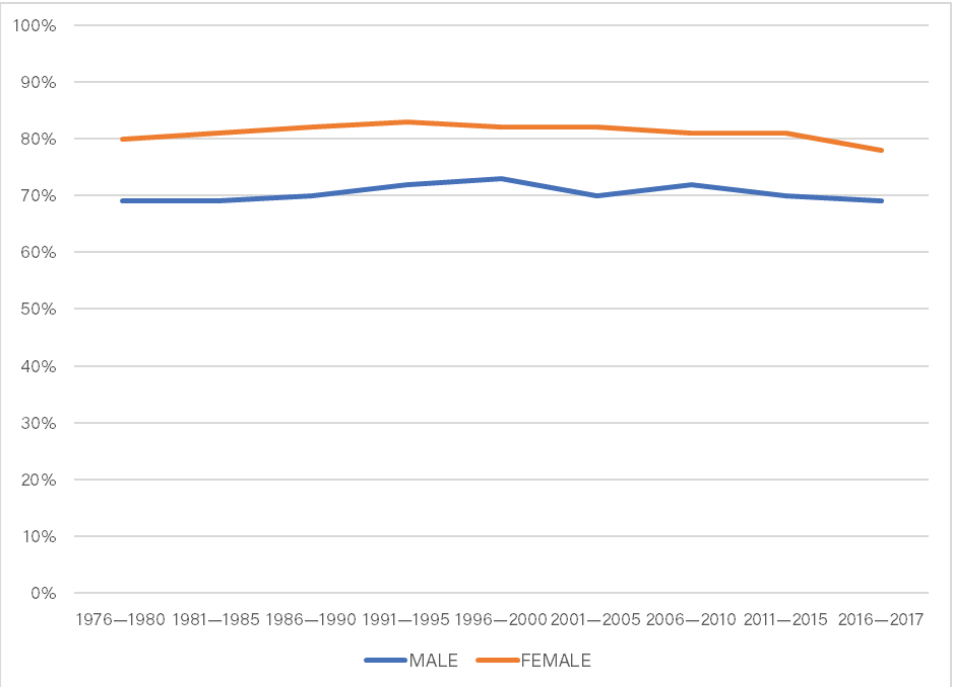
Teen Attitudes about Marriage and Family

(Figures 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21)

Key Finding:
Future trends in family are reflected in the opinion of teenagers, where both sexes have consistently desired "a good marriage and family life" for several decades now, although boys are less desirous than girls of these things. Boys are also a little less optimistic than girls about the prospect of lifelong marriage. Both sexes are increasingly more accepting of alternative lifestyles, including nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, or remaining single.

One may discern possible future trends by asking what our nation's youth think and say about future marriage and family life. Will prevailing trends continue or will the today's youth make changes that better accommodate their desires?

Figure 17. Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said Having a Good Marriage and Family Life Is "Extremely Important," by Period, United States

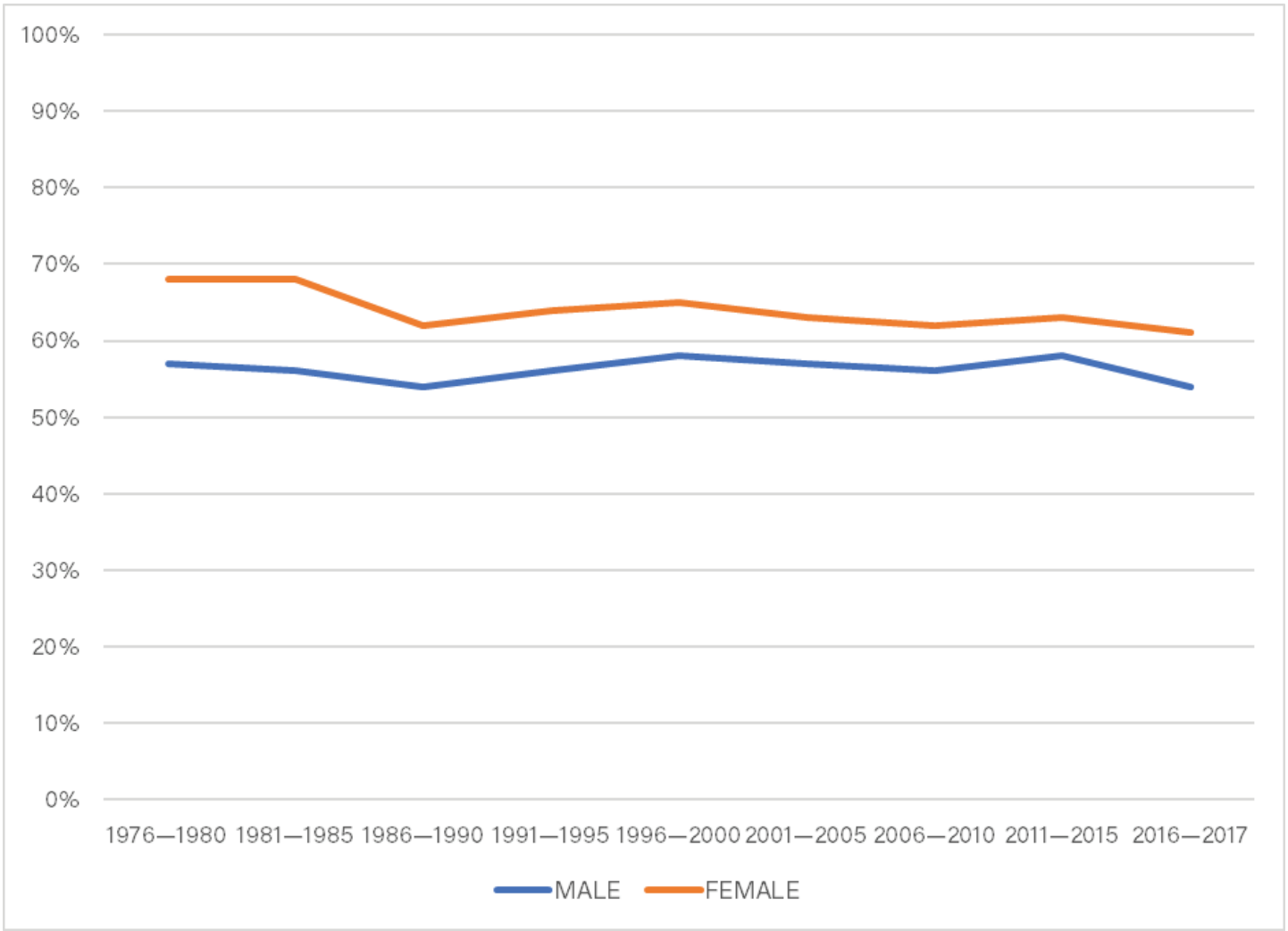


Source: "Monitoring the Future Survey," conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

To find out, we use the annual Monitoring the Future survey of high school seniors, which has asked many questions about marriage and family life. Among teenagers of both sexes, the desire for a "good marriage and family life" (Figure 17) has remained high and unchanged for several decades. About 80 percent of female and 70 percent of male high school seniors believe it to be extremely important.

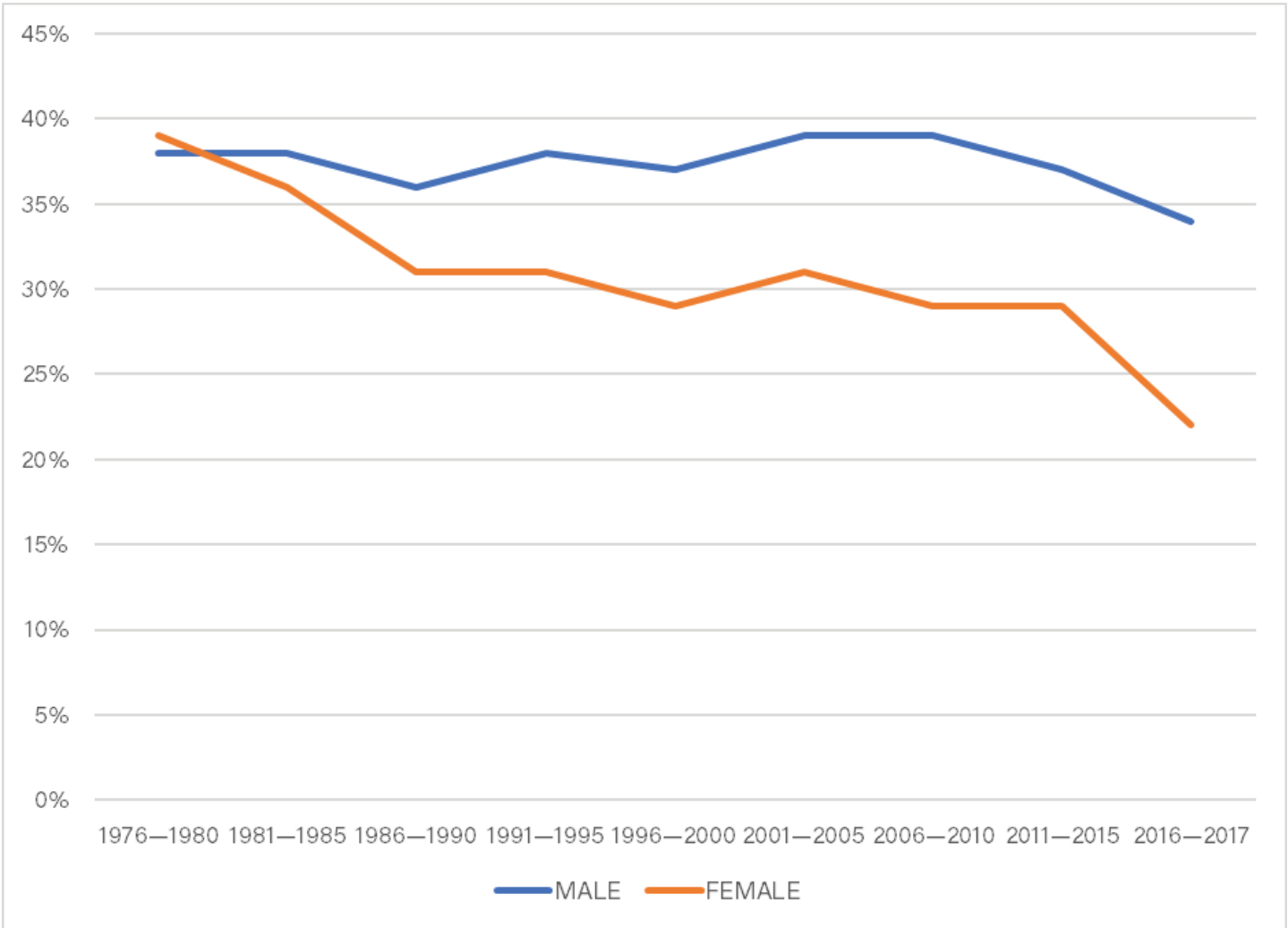
Other data from Monitoring the Future surveys show that beliefs about lifelong marriage are also high, although these numbers have declined somewhat since the late 1970s. Today, 61 percent of senior girls and 54 percent of senior boys believe they'll stay married to the same person for life, compared to 68 and 57 percent of senior girls and boys in the late 1970s (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said It is "Very Likely" They Will Stay Married to the Same Person for Life, by Period, United States



Source: "Monitoring the Future Survey," conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

Figure 19. Percentage of High School Seniors Who Agreed or Mostly Agreed that Most People Will Have Fuller Lives If They Choose Legal Marriage Rather Than Staying Single of Just Living with Someone, by Period, United States

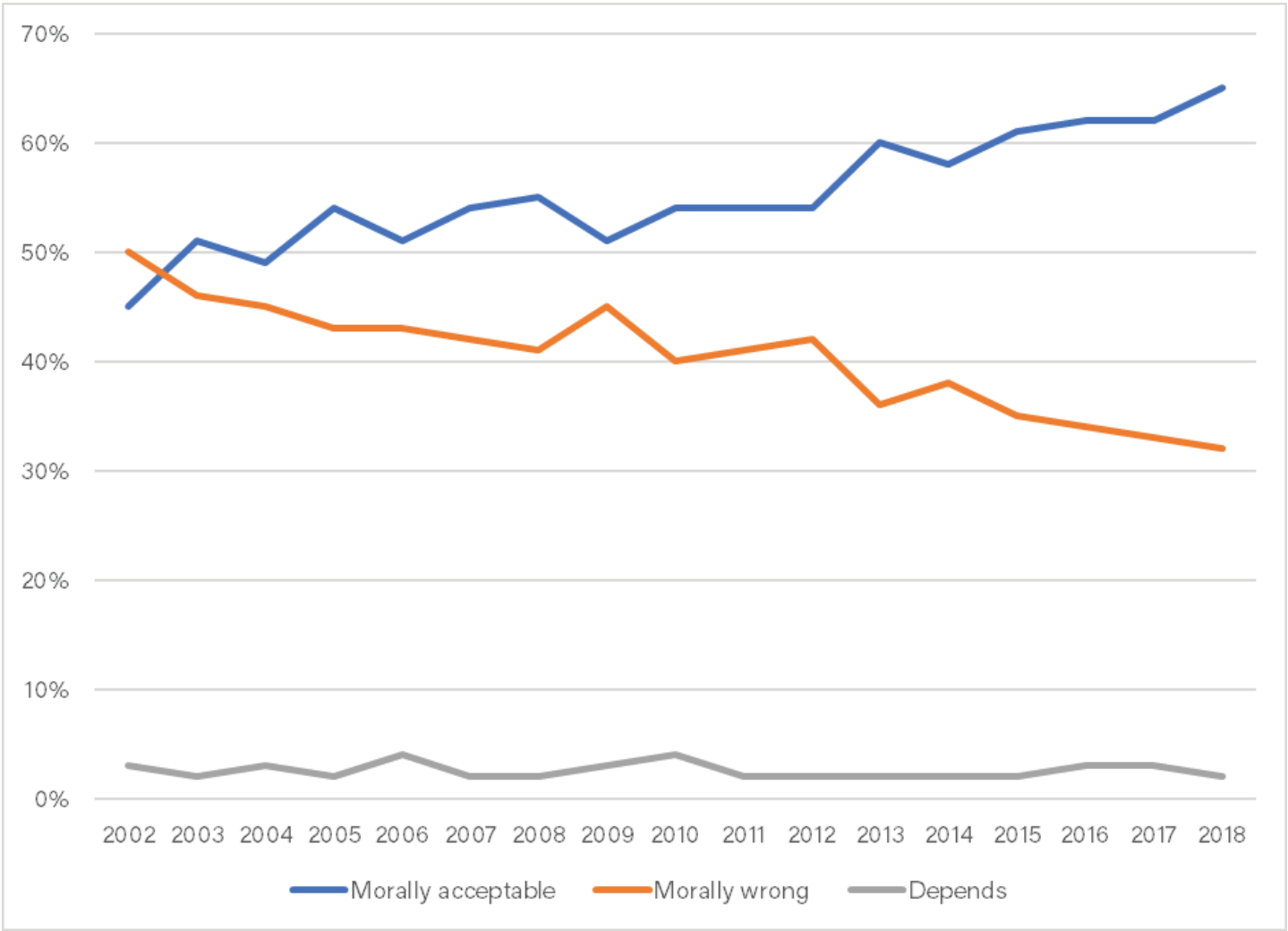


Source: "Monitoring the Future Survey," conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

At the same time, the belief that marriage, compared to staying single or cohabiting, will lead to a fuller and happier life, has declined since the 1970s, particularly among girls (Figure 19). Whereas roughly 40 percent of senior boys and girls in the late 1970s agreed that most people who marry lead fuller and happier lives, less than 35 percent of senior boys and just 22 percent of senior girls believe so today. Young women's faith in marriage's ability to deliver happiness has fallen markedly over the past several decades, despite an abundance of empirical evidence that married individuals and parents are happier and healthier than those who choose to remain single or cohabit continuously (Herbst & Ifcher, 2016; Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, & Kaye, 2013).

This acceptance of diverse lifestyles extends to the percentage of high school seniors who believe having a nonmarital birth is morally acceptable (Figure 20). High school seniors in the Monitoring the Future survey were given the options of morally acceptable, morally wrong, and depends. As can be seen, opinions have diverged dramatically since 2002, when more high school seniors believed that having a child without being married was morally wrong (50 percent) than believed it was morally acceptable (45 percent). Since 2002, however, those who believe nonmarital births are acceptable have overtaken those who believe it to be morally wrong by a wide margin.

Figure 20. Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said Having a Child without Being Married Is Morally Acceptable, 2002–2018, United States

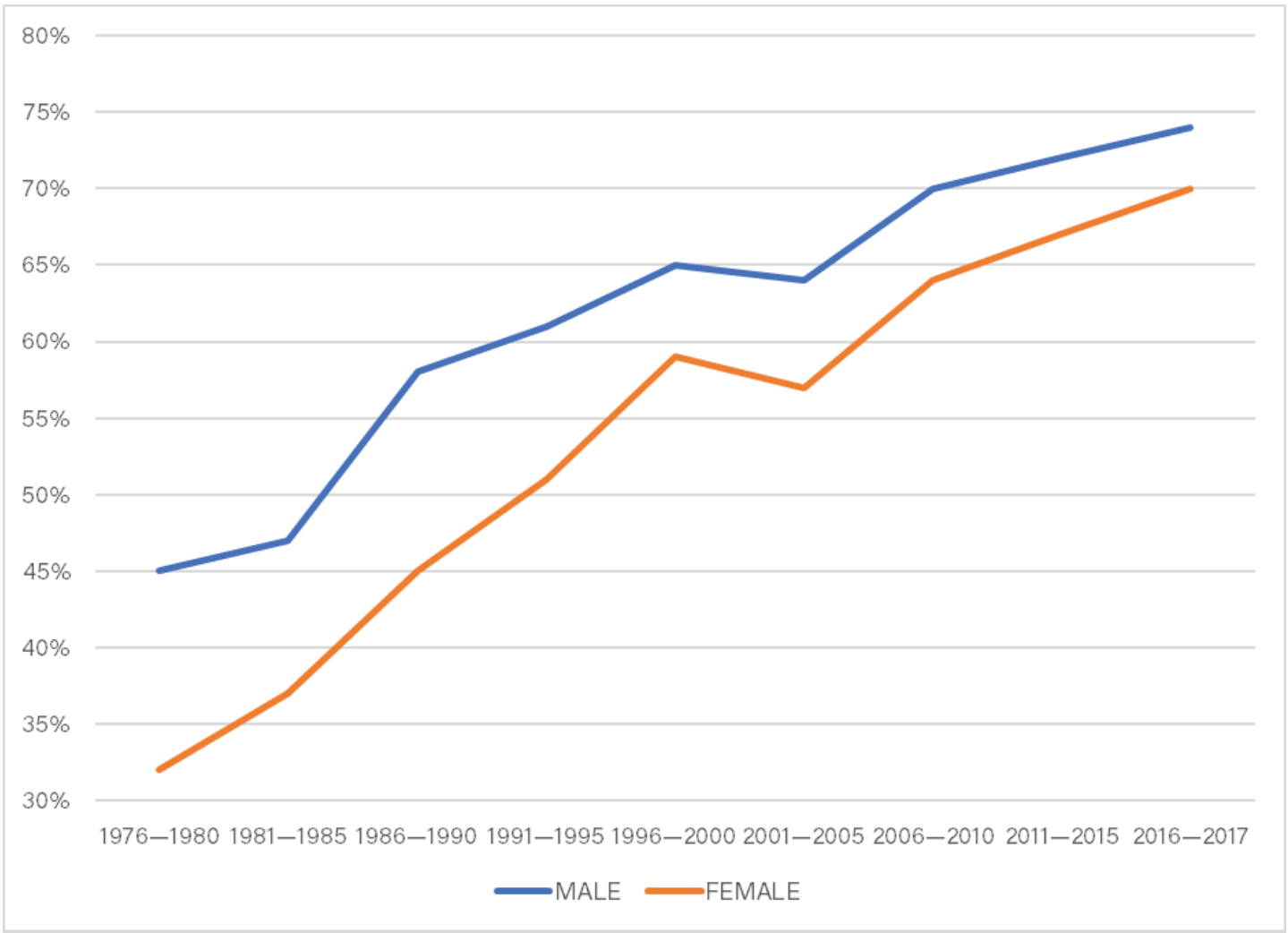


Source: "Monitoring the Future Survey," conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

In 2018, nearly two-thirds of high school seniors reported having a nonmarital birth was morally acceptable compared to 32 percent who believed it was morally wrong.

We find similar patterns when looking at the percentage of high school seniors who agree or mostly agree that premarital cohabitation is usually a good idea (Figure 21). In the late 1970s, when acceptance of cohabitation was not yet normative, just under half (45 percent) of men and less than a third (32 percent) of women agreed that is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married to find out whether they get along, a wide gap between men and women. Along with rapid increases in the acceptance of premarital cohabitation, this gender gap has shrunk, and stands today at just 4 percent. Seventy percent of women and 74 percent of men agreed with that statement in the latest period of 2016–2017, indicating that acceptance of premarital cohabitation as a test run for marriage has become normative and that the gap between men and women on the issue has all but disappeared.

Figure 21. Percentage of High School Seniors Who Agreed or Mostly Agreed with the Statement, "It Is Usually a Good Idea for a Couple to Live Together Before Getting Married in Order to Find Out If They Really Get Along," by Period, United States



Source: "Monitoring the Future Survey," conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.

In summary, while marriage and family life remain important goals and priorities among today's teenagers, they are also increasingly accepting of a range of alternative nonmarital lifestyles that may impede these goals. There is little evidence of a cultural shift toward a more marriage- and child-centric approach to family life in the next generation; instead, it appears the nation's retreat from marriage is likely to continue with marriage playing a less central role in the landscape of contemporary American family life, although it will remain personally important to many.

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