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## Who Needs Marriage? A Changing Institution

By Belinda Luscombe

The wedding of the 20th century, in 1981, celebrated a marriage that turned out to be a huge bust. It ended as badly as a relationship can: scandal, divorce and, ultimately, death and worldwide weeping.

So when the firstborn son of that union, Britain's Prince William, set in motion [the wedding of this century](#) by getting engaged to [Catherine Middleton](#), he did things a little differently. He picked someone older than he is (by six months), who went to the same university he did and whom he'd dated for a long time. Although she is not of royal blood, she stands to become the first English Queen with a university degree, so in one fundamental way, theirs is a union of equals. In that regard, the new couple reflect the changes in the shape and nature of marriage that have been rippling throughout the Western world for the past few decades.

In fact, statistically speaking, a young man of William's age — if not his royal English heritage — might be just as likely not to get married, yet. In 1960, the year before Princess Diana, William's mother, was born, nearly 70% of American adults were married; now only about half are. Eight times as many children are born out of wedlock. Back then, two-thirds of 20-somethings were married; in 2008 just 26% were. And college graduates are now far more likely to marry (64%) than those with no higher education (48%). ([See a video of Belinda Luscombe sharing her thoughts on the TIME/Pew survey.](#))

When an institution so central to human experience suddenly changes shape in the space of a generation or two, it's worth trying to figure out why. This fall the Pew Research Center, in association with TIME, conducted a nationwide poll exploring the contours of modern marriage and the new American family, posing questions about what people want and expect out of marriage and family life, why they enter into committed relationships and what they gain from them. What we found is that marriage, whatever its social, spiritual or symbolic appeal, is in purely practical terms just not as necessary as it used to be. Neither men nor women need to be married to have sex or companionship or professional success or respect or even children — yet marriage remains revered and desired. ([See the Pew Research Center's full report "The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Families."](#))

And of all the transformations our family structures have undergone in the past 50 years, perhaps the most profound is the marriage differential that has opened between the rich and the poor. In 1960 the median household income of married adults was 12% higher than that of single adults, after adjusting for

household size. By 2008 this gap had grown to 41%. In other words, the richer and more educated you are, the more likely you are to marry, or to be married — or, conversely, if you're married, you're more likely to be well off. ([See pictures of couples that have been married for 50 years.](#))

The question of why the wealth disparity between the married and the unmarried has grown so much is related to other, broader issues about marriage: whom it best serves, how it relates to parenting and family life and how its voluntary nature changes social structures.

### **The Marrying Kind**

In 1978, when the divorce rate was much higher than it is today, a TIME poll asked Americans if they thought marriage was becoming obsolete. Twenty-eight percent did. ([See Part I of the TIME/Pew results.](#))

Since then, we've watched that famous royal marriage and the arrival of *Divorce Court*. We've tuned in to *Family Ties* (nuclear family with three kids) and *Modern Family* (nuclear family with three kids, plus gay uncles with an adopted Vietnamese baby and a grandfather with a Colombian second wife and dorky stepchild). We've spent time with Will and Grace, who bickered like spouses but weren't, and with the stars of *Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica*, who were spouses, bickered and then weren't anymore. We've seen some political marriages survive unexpectedly (Bill and Hillary Clinton) and others unpredictably falter (Al and Tipper Gore).

We've seen the rise of a \$40 billion-plus wedding industry, flames fanned by dating sites, and reality shows playing the soul-mate game — alongside the rise of the prenup, the postnup and, most recently, divorce insurance. We care about marriage so much that one of the fiercest political and legal fights in years is being waged over whom the state permits to get married. We've seen a former head of state's child (Chelsea Clinton) marry after living with her boyfriend and a potential head of state's child (Bristol Palin) have a child before leaving home. ([See a brief history of White House weddings.](#))

So, as we circle back around to witness another royal engagement, where are we on the marriage question? Less wedded to it. The Pew survey reveals that nearly 40% of us think marriage is obsolete. This doesn't mean, though, that we're pessimistic about the future of the American family; we have more faith in the family than we do in the nation's education system or its economy. We're just more flexible about how family gets defined. ([See the Pew Research Center's interactive graphic "Five Decades of Marriage Trends."](#))

Even more surprising: overwhelmingly, Americans still venerate marriage enough to want to try it. About 70% of us have been married at least once, according to the 2010 Census. The Pew poll found that although 44% of Americans under 30 believe marriage is heading for extinction, only 5% of those in that age group do not want to get married. Sociologists note that Americans have a rate of marriage — and of remarriage — among the highest in the Western world. (In between is a divorce rate higher than that of most countries in the European Union.) We spill copious amounts of ink and spend copious amounts of money being anxious about marriage, both collectively and individually. We view the state of our families

as a symbol of the state of our nation, and we treat marriage as a personal project, something we work at and try to perfect. "Getting married is a way to show family and friends that you have a successful personal life," says Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University and the author of *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. "It's like the ultimate merit badge."

But if marriage is no longer obligatory or even — in certain cases — helpful, then what is it for? It's impossible to address that question without first answering another: Who is marriage for?

### **The New Marriage Gap**

To begin to answer that question, it might be useful to take a look at the brief but illustrative marriage of golfer Greg Norman and tennis star Chris Evert, who married in June 2008 and divorced 15 months later. From all reports, their union had many of the classic hallmarks of modern partnerships. The bride and groom had roughly equal success in their careers. Being wealthy, sporty and blond, they had similar interests. She was older than he, and they'd had other relationships before. (She'd had two previous spouses and he one.) Plus, they'd known each other a while, since Evert's newly minted ex-husband, Andy Mill, was Norman's best friend.

Apart from the interest the union generated in the tabloids, this is typical of the way many marriages start. Modern brides and grooms tend to be older and more similar. In particular, Americans are increasingly marrying people who are on the same socioeconomic and educational level. Fifty years ago, doctors commonly proposed to nurses and businessmen to their secretaries. Even 25 years ago, a professional golfer might marry, say, a flight attendant. Now doctors tend to cleave unto other doctors, and executives hope to be part of a power couple.

The change is mostly a numbers game. Since more women than men have graduated from college for several decades, it's more likely than it used to be that a male college graduate will meet, fall in love with, wed and share the salary of a woman with a degree. Women's advances in education have roughly paralleled the growth of the knowledge economy, so the slice of the family bacon she brings home will be substantial. ([See TIME's 2009 cover story "Is There Hope for the American Marriage?"](#))

Women's rising earning power doesn't affect simply who cooks that bacon, although the reapportioning of household labor is a significant issue and means married people need deft negotiation skills. Well-off women don't need to stay in a marriage that doesn't make them happy; two-thirds of all divorces, it's estimated, are initiated by wives. And not just the Sandra Bullock types who have been treated shabbily and have many other fish on their line but also Tipper Gore types whose kids have left home and who don't necessarily expect to remarry but are putting on their walking boots anyway.

The changes can be seen in more subtle ways too. New York University sociologist Dalton Conley notes that between 1986 and 2003, the most recent year for which figures are available, the proportion of marriages in which the woman was taller than the man increased by more than 10%. "In absolute terms, it's still a small minority of marriages," he says. "But I think the trend signals an incredible shift in marital

and gender norms." There has also been a sharp uptick in the percentage of marriages in which the wife is older, signifying, Conley believes, a whole different understanding of the roles of men and women in the union.

Despite the complications that have ensued from this marital restructuring, it's not likely to be undone. In the 1978 poll, fewer than half of all respondents thought that the best kind of marriage was one in which both the husband and the wife worked outside the home. In the new Pew poll, 62% do. Perhaps that's not surprising given these parallel data: in 1970, 40% of wives worked outside the home. Now 61% do. ([See the top 10 overplayed wedding songs.](#))

So fundamental is the shift that it's beginning to have an impact on what people look for in spouses. While two-thirds of all people think a man should be a good provider, more men than women do. Meanwhile, almost a third of people think it's important for a wife to be a good provider too.

On the face of it, this might explain why fewer people are married. They want to finish college first. In 2010 the median age of men getting hitched for the first time is 28.2, and for women it's 26.1. It's gone up about a year every decade since the '60s.

But here's the rub. In the past two decades, people with only a high school education started to get married even later than college graduates. In 1990 more high-school-educated couples than college graduates had made it to the altar by age 30. By 2007 it was the other way around. ([See pictures of the college dorm's evolution.](#))

What has brought about the switch? It's not any disparity in desire. According to the Pew survey, 46% of college graduates want to get married, and 44% of the less educated do. "Fifty years ago, if you were a high school dropout [or] if you were a college graduate or a doctor, marriage probably meant more or less the same thing," says Conley. "Now it's very different depending where you are in society." Getting married is an important part of college graduates' plans for their future. For the less well educated, he says, it's often the only plan.

Promising publicly to be someone's partner for life used to be something people did to lay the foundation of their independent life. It was the demarcation of adulthood. Now it's more of a finishing touch, the last brick in the edifice, sociologists believe. "Marriage is the capstone for both the college-educated and the less well educated," says Johns Hopkins' Cherlin. "The college-educated wait until they're finished with their education and their careers are launched. The less educated wait until they feel comfortable financially." ([See Part III of the TIME/Pew results.](#))

But that comfort keeps getting more elusive. "The loss of decent-paying jobs that a high-school-educated man or woman could get makes it difficult for them to get and stay married," says Cherlin. As the knowledge economy has overtaken the manufacturing economy, couples in which both partners' job

opportunities are disappearing are doubly disadvantaged. So they wait to get married. But they don't wait to set up house. ([See pictures of the busiest wedding day in history.](#))

All this might explain why there was a 13% increase in couples living together from 2009 to 2010. Census researchers were so surprised at the jump that they double-checked their data. Eventually they attributed the sharp increase to the recession: these newly formed couples were less likely to have jobs. ([Comment on this story.](#))

So, people are living together because they don't have enough money to live alone, but they aren't going to get married until they have enough money. That's the catch. In fact, the less education and income people have, the Pew survey found, the more likely they are to say that to be ready for marriage, a spouse needs to be a provider.

Cohabitation is on the rise not just because of the economy. It's so commonplace these days that less than half the country thinks living together is a bad idea. Couples who move in together before marrying don't divorce any less often, say studies, although that might change as the practice becomes more widespread. In any case, academic analysis doesn't seem to be as compelling to most people as the example set by Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Or as splitting the rent. ([See five Facebook no-nos for divorcing couples.](#))

But cohabitation among the economically blessed is a whole different ball game than it is among the struggling. For most college-educated couples, living together is like a warm-up run before the marital marathon. They work out a few of the kinks and do a bit of house-training and eventually get married and have kids. Those without a college degree, says Cherlin, tend to do it the other way around — move in together, have kids and then aim for the altar. And children, as Bristol Palin and Levi Johnston discovered, change everything. ([See TIME's photo-essay "Bristol and Levi: So Many Memories."](#))

### **The Kids May Not Be All Right**

Rarely is there a bigger chasm between what Americans believe to be the best thing for society and what actually happens than in the bearing and raising of children. Half or more of the respondents in the Pew poll say that marital status is irrelevant to achieving respect, happiness, career goals, financial security or a fulfilling sex life. When it comes to raising kids, though, it's a landslide, with more than three-quarters saying it's best done married.

Yet very few people say children are the most important reason to get hitched. Indeed, 41% of babies were born to unmarried moms in 2008, an eightfold increase from 50 years ago, and 25% of kids lived in a single-parent home, almost triple the number from 1960. Contrary to the stereotype, it turns out that most of the infants born to unmarried mothers are not the product of casual sexual encounters. One of the most extensive databases on such kids, the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*, a joint project of Princeton and Columbia universities, which has been following 5,000 children from birth to age 9, found that more than half of the unmarried parents were living together at the time their child was born and

30% of them were romantically involved (but living apart). ([See a special report on kids and mental health.](#))

Most of those unwed mothers said their chances of marrying the baby's father were 50% or greater, but after five years, only 16% of them had done so and only about 20% of the couples were still cohabiting. This didn't mean that the children didn't live with a man, however, since about a quarter of their moms were now living with or married to a new partner. That doesn't always work out as well as it seems to in *Modern Family* or *Phineas & Ferb*. Offspring from earlier relationships put pressure on new ones. For the least wealthy children, Mom's new boyfriend often means their biological father is less likely to visit and less likely to support their mother. Many stepparents are wonderful and committed, but a series of live-in lovers is not at all the same thing. "About 21% of American children will see at least two live-in partners of their mothers by the time they're 15," says Cherlin. "And an additional 8% will see three or more." ([See 10 TV moms June Cleaver would hate.](#))

Would marriage really stop the conveyor belt of parent figures? "Marriage is still the way Americans tend to do long-term, stable partnerships," says Cherlin. "We have the shortest cohabiting relationships of any wealthy country in the world. In some European countries, we see couples who live together for decades." To this day, only 6% of American children have parents who live together without being married. ([Read about Britain's divorce registry.](#))

Cohabitation seems to have no negative effect on a marriage's chances if it's preceded by an engagement, no previous live-in lovers and no children. Who has the clout to put those conditions into place? Women with their own means of support and guys who don't need a woman to look after them: the wealthy and well educated. The others often are left in limbo — not able to get married and not able to move on. "Ironically, the very people who would benefit from a committed marriage the most are the people who have the toughest time locating reliable long-term partners," says Stephanie Coontz, a marriage historian who teaches at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash.

### **The D Word**

Even when couples are married, family life is a different experience for those with a college education and those without one. Professional occupations are much more likely to offer provisions for parental leave, the ability to work from home and flexible hours. Wealthy people can outsource the more onerous or dreary or time-sucking tasks that couples fight over. And the college-educated tend to have picked up more conflict-resolution and negotiation skills along the way. Their marriage is insulated from some of the stresses of balancing work and family. A sick child throws a much bigger wrench into the machinery of a factory or retail or service worker's life.

In recent years, the overall rate of divorce has plateaued somewhat, and leaving a spouse is on the decline among college graduates. But that drop is being offset by a rise in splits among those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, the people least able to afford to divorce, so the rate is still high. Says Cherlin: "One statistic I saw when writing my book that floored me was that a child living together with

unmarried parents in Sweden has a lower chance that his family will disrupt than does a child living with married parents in the U.S."

It seems that the 21st century marriage, with its emphasis on a match of equals, has brought about a surge in inequality. It's easier for the college-educated, with their dominance of the knowledge economy, to get married and stay married. The less well off delay marriage because their circumstances feel so tenuous, then often have kids, which makes marrying even harder. "A marriage gap and a socioeconomic gap have been growing side by side for the past half-century," the Pew study's authors note, "and each may be feeding off the other." But because it's unclear whether the burdens of poverty are making people's relationships less permanent or people's impermanent relationships are worsening their poverty, the solution is not obvious. ([See pictures of famously unmarried couples.](#))

### **What to Do About I Do**

Is marriage, which used to be like the draft, now becoming more like West Point, admitting only the elite and sending the others off to the front line? Depends whom you ask. "The basis of marriage changed in the last century," says Seth Eisenberg, president and CEO of the PAIRS Foundation, one of the biggest relationship-education operations in the country. "But very few couples have had a chance to learn really what are the new rules of love and intimacy — not because the rules are so difficult to learn, just because no one told them. To interpret that as meaning there's something broken about the institution of marriage itself would be a horrible, horrible mistake."

Marriage educators' solution is to bolster marriage, to teach people how to better communicate with their spouses. While they believe their techniques could work with any couple, they're big advocates of the legal union. Marriage is like glue, says Eisenberg. You can build something with it. Living together is like Velcro. "The commitment of marriage gives people the opportunity to grow and thrive in ways that other relationships do not," he says. ([See more about marriage.](#))

Sociologists tend to believe the answers lie outside marriage. Coontz thinks that if we changed our assumptions about alternative family arrangements and our respect for them, people would be more responsible about them. "We haven't raised our expectations of how unmarried parents will react to each other. We haven't raised our expectations of divorce or singlehood," she says. "It should not be that within marriage you owe everything and without marriage you don't owe anything. When we expect responsible behavior outside as well as inside marriage, we actually reduce the temptation to evade or escape marriage."([Comment on this story.](#))

As an example, she cites the 2001-03 Fox reality show *Temptation Island*, in which couples who were living together were invited to a desert island to see if they could be lured into cheating. "They found one couple was married, and with a great show of indignation, they threw them off the island," says Coontz. "In my point of view, it's just as immoral to break up a committed cohabiting relationship as it is a marriage." ([See the top 10 reality-TV shows.](#))

Could living together become respected and widespread enough that it challenged the favored-nation state of marriage? The American Law Institute has recommended extending some of the rights spouses have to cohabiting partners. But cohabitation has not yet proved to be a robust enough substitute for most Americans to believe they can build a family on it. And as a successful marriage increasingly becomes the relationship equivalent of a luxury yacht — hard to get, laborious to maintain but a better vessel to be on when there are storms at sea — its status is unlikely to drop. As it stands, the way America marries is making the American Dream unreachable for many of its people. Yet marriage is still the best avenue most people have for making their dreams come true.

Prince William gave his intended bride Diana's engagement ring. He wanted his mother to have a part in the day, he said. And despite how his parents' marriage faltered, not all the old traditions of marriage are obsolete.

\*See next pages for charts and graphs.



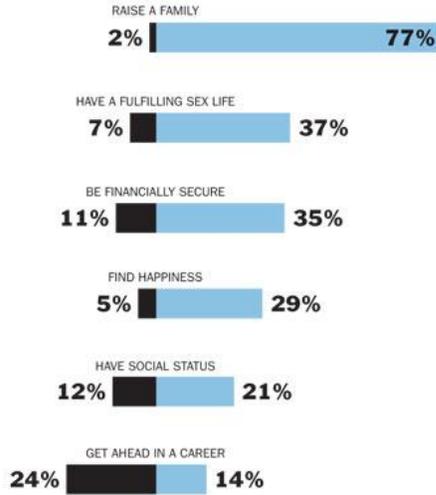
### Do you want to get married?

Percentage of unmarried people who said yes



### Do you think it is easier to ...

Easier for single people | Easier for married people



### Is marriage becoming obsolete?

Percentage who said yes

UNMARRIED PARENTS LIVING WITH PARTNER  
**62%**

UNMARRIED  
**46%**

HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION OR LESS  
**45%**

BLACKS AND AGES 18-29  
**44%**

HISPANICS  
**42%**

WOMEN  
**41%**

ALL GROUPS  
**39%**

MEN AND WHITES  
**36%**

AGES 65+  
**32%**

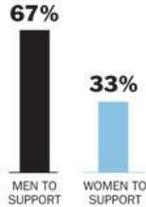
MARRIED  
**31%**

COLLEGE EDUCATED  
**27%**

Percentage who said yes in 1978

**28%**

To be ready for marriage, is it very important for a spouse to support a family financially?

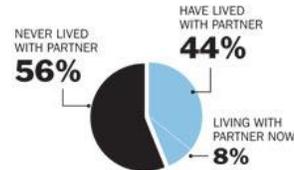


The ideal marriage is one in which the husband provides financially and the wife takes care of the house and children

**43%** 1977 | **30%** 2010



Have you ever lived with a partner without being married?



**What do you think of these trends?**



← Bad for society      Good for society →

MORE WOMEN NEVER HAVING CHILDREN



MORE UNMARRIED COUPLES RAISING CHILDREN



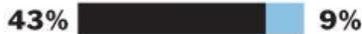
MORE SINGLE WOMEN HAVING CHILDREN WITHOUT A MALE PARTNER



MORE GAY AND LESBIAN COUPLES RAISING CHILDREN



MORE PEOPLE LIVING TOGETHER WITHOUT GETTING MARRIED



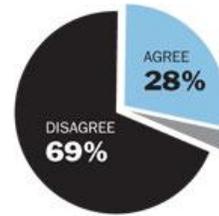
MORE MOTHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN WORKING OUTSIDE THE HOME



**Do you have a closer relationship with your spouse or partner compared with your parents'?**



**Do you agree or disagree that there is only one true love for each person ...**

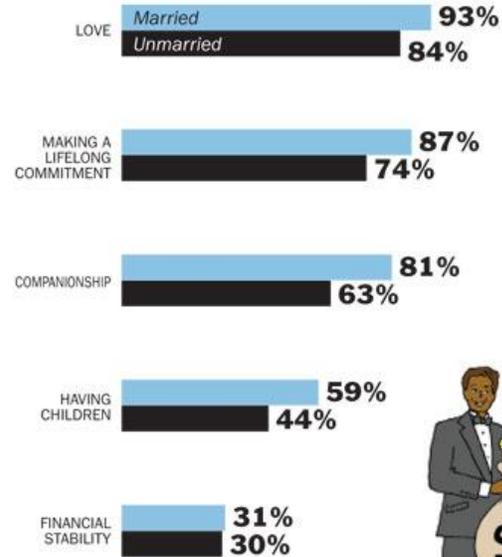


**... and have you found yours?**

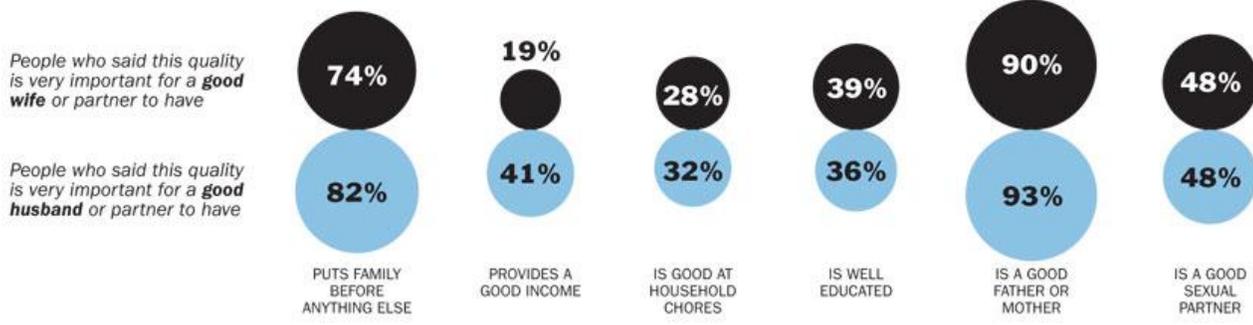
YES **79%**  
NO **17%**

**Why get married?**

Percentage of married and unmarried who said the following reasons were "very important"

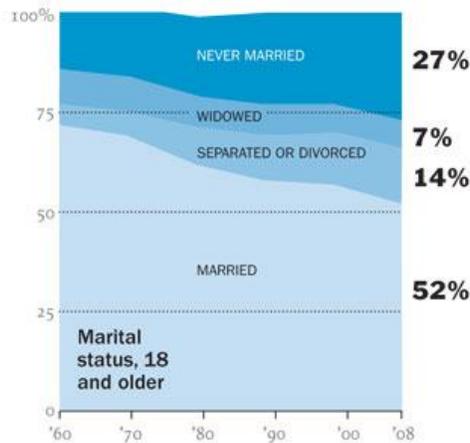


**What makes a good husband, wife or partner?**

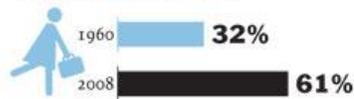


Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% because not all response categories are shown. Source: Pew Research Center nationwide telephone survey of 2,691 adults ages 18 and older conducted from Oct. 1-21 on landline and cellular phones. Demographic analysis is based on Pew Research Center calculations of 1960 to 2000 decennial Censuses and the 2008 American Community Survey (ACS)

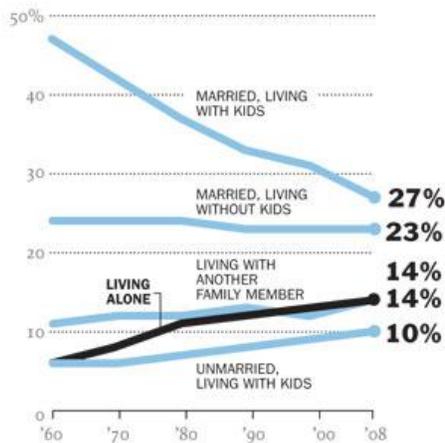
## Fewer U.S. adults are married ...



### More wives are working



## ... more are living alone ...



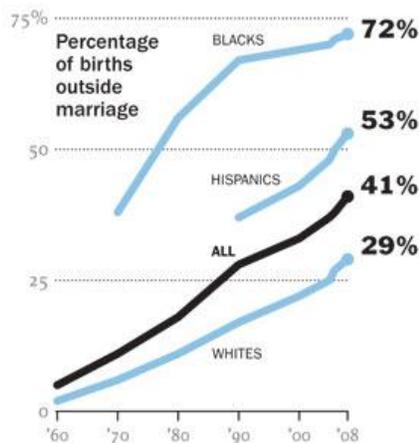
### Size of the average household is shrinking



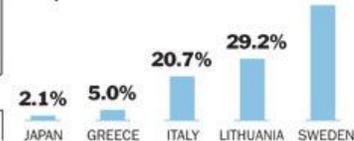
### Adults age 20 and older cohabitating



## ... and more kids are born to unmarried women



### International comparison



### Percentage of children living with married parents



Sources: Pew Research Center; U.S. Census Bureau; OECD