

Child TRENDS[®] RESEARCH BRIEF

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Young Adult Attitudes About Relationships and Marriage: Times May Have Changed, But Expectations Remain High

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O*verview.* Many scholars and commentators have observed that the life experiences of today's young adults differ from those of young adults in past decades.¹¹ Young adulthood has become a more distinct stage of life, as many young people postpone family-related transitions and focus on education and employment. The developmental stage of young adulthood today also allows for an extended period of identity exploration. This period serves as a foundation for making choices about behaviors related to forming relationships and families now and in the future.^{3,10}

Compared with previous generations, fewer young adults today are married, and the age of first marriage has risen.¹¹ At the same time, living together—or cohabitation—is more common. In fact, cohabiting unions have become the most prevalent type of relationship among men and women in their twenties. Such increases in cohabitation have changed the context of relationship and family formation for young adults. In the past, teen births have comprised the majority of nonmarital and unintended births in the United States. However, in the context of changing patterns of relationship formation, including continually rising rates of cohabitation, the majority of births to 20- to 24-year-olds currently occur outside of marriage.⁹ The highest rates of unintended pregnancy and childbearing also occur to women in their late teens and early twenties.⁹ Research shows that unintended and nonmarital childbearing are associated with a host of negative consequences for both parents²³ and children.^{1,6,14,16} Thus, the sexual and romantic relationships that young adults form influence not just their own lives, but also the lives of their children. This reality underscores the importance of increasing understanding about the context in which young adults view how they form relationships and create families.

This Research Brief provides a portrait of the attitudes and opinions of young adults about relationships and the importance of marriage. To develop this portrait, Child Trends analyzed data from Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health by gender, race/ethnicity, and relationship status. Results of our analyses indicate that most young adults have high expectations for marrying someday, though fewer wish to be married currently. Moreover, many young adults are currently in a cohabiting or marital relationship and the vast majority agrees that cohabitation is acceptable. We also found that young adults value love, fidelity, and commitment as part of successful relationships.

TYPES OF YOUNG ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Men and women in their early twenties are involved in a variety of types of romantic relationships, and many young adults are sexually active. At Wave III of the Add Health survey (2001-02), young adults reported that they were married, cohabiting, in non-residential romantic relationships, or were single.

The vast majority of young adults have had sexual intercourse.

- Nearly 90 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds reported that they have had sexual intercourse, and this pattern generally held true across gender and racial/ethnic groups. This percentage closely matches findings from other research.^{5,17}

Most young adults are in a romantic relationship. Seventy-six percent of 20- to 24-year-olds reported that they were in a romantic relationship, compared with 24 percent who said they were not.

ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative survey of U.S. students who were in seventh through 12th grade in 1994-1995. It was designed to provide a broad understanding of the health and well-being of adolescents and their subsequent development by conducting multiple surveys with the same respondents over time.¹³ The third survey, referred to as Wave III, followed-up with participants in 2001-2002 and includes information on unique areas of young adults' lives, including relationship and marital attitudes and histories. Our study sample included 11,988 young adults between the ages of 20 and 24. Women accounted for 53 percent of the sample. The sample's racial/ethnic breakdown was as follows: 52 percent non-Hispanic white; 21 percent non-Hispanic black; 16 percent Hispanic; and 8 percent Asian. All analyses were weighted to present population-level estimates, and all differences presented in this brief are significant ($p < .05$). We include analyses for the full sample, as well as by gender, race/ethnicity, and relationship status.

- The largest proportion of young adults said that they were currently in a nonresidential romantic relationship (35 percent). Among the group of young adults who lived with their romantic partners, 21 percent were married and 20 percent were cohabiting. (See Figure 1.)

respondents who reported being in a nonresidential relationship ranged from 31 percent among Hispanics to 42 percent among blacks, but the proportion of respondents reporting not being in a relationship was about one-quarter across all groups.

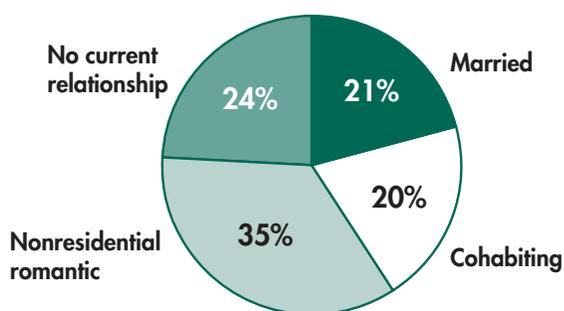
ATTITUDES ABOUT A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP

Relationship quality can directly influence twentysomethings' decision making about relationships and sex, and thus may influence their reproductive health outcomes. The Add Health survey identifies four elements that may serve as barometers of the relationship quality of couples between the ages of 20 and 24: love, fidelity, lifelong commitment, and having enough money. Respondents rated the importance of these elements for a successful relationship using a 1-10 scale in which 1 indicates not important at all and 10 indicates very important.

Although young adults' beliefs about successful relationships differ by gender, the majority of both men and women regard love, fidelity, and lifelong commitment as very important to a successful relationship.

- More than three-fourths of young adults agreed that love, fidelity, and making a lifelong commitment were very important to a successful relationship. In contrast, less than one-fourth of respondents indicated that having enough money played a very important role in establishing a successful relationship. (See Figure 2.)
- More young adult women than men considered love (91 percent, compared with 81 percent), fidelity (93 percent, compared with 85 percent), and lifelong commitment (82 percent, compared with 72 percent) very important for a successful relationship. Meanwhile, young adult men were somewhat more likely than

Figure 1 Current Relationship Status, Among All Young Adults Aged 20-24

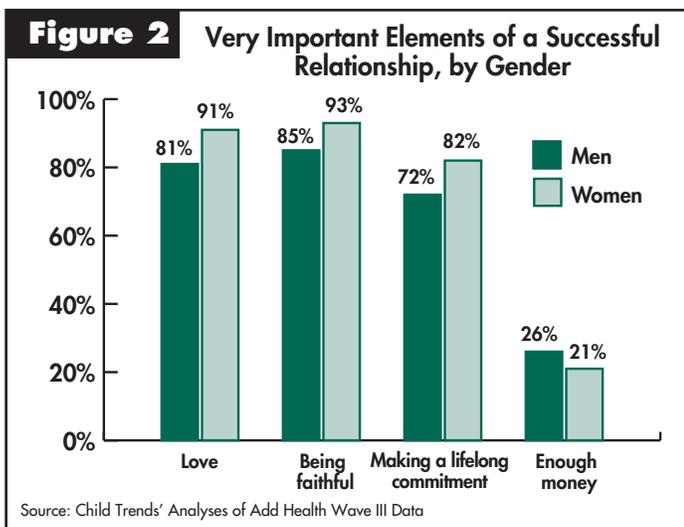


Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

The proportion of young adults in each type of relationship differs by gender and race/ethnicity.

- Women were more likely than were men to report being in any romantic relationship (81 percent versus 70 percent, respectively). Overall, similar proportions of men and women reported being in a nonresidential relationship or cohabiting. However, 25 percent of women were married, compared with 16 percent of men.
- About three-quarters of young adults in each racial/ethnic group reported being in some type of romantic relationship. However, fewer black and Asian young adults were married than were their white and Hispanic counterparts (about 15 percent, compared with close to 25 percent). The rates of cohabitation were fairly stable across groups. The proportion of

were women to think that having enough money was very important to a successful relationship (26 versus 21 percent). (See Figure 2.)



The attitudes of young adults about how important love and money are to a successful relationship differ by their race and ethnicity.

- Asian young adults were less likely to regard love as a very important element of a successful relationship than were their white, black, and Hispanic counterparts (77 percent versus 86 percent, 85 percent, and 86 percent, respectively).
- More than 45 percent of black respondents viewed money as a very important element of a successful relationship, whereas this opinion was held by only 17 percent of white respondents, 31 percent of Hispanic respondents, and 25 percent of Asian respondents.

How young adults rate the importance of love, fidelity, lifelong commitment, and having enough money for a successful relationship also differs by their current relationship status.

- Young adults who were married were more likely to view love, fidelity, and lifelong commitment as very important elements of a successful relationship. More than 90 percent of married respondents said that they regarded love and fidelity as important elements of a relationship. In terms of lifelong commitment, 91 percent of married respondents considered it important, compared with only about three-quarters of those in cohabiting or nonresidential romantic relationships, or those who were not in any current relationship.
- Young adults who were cohabiting were somewhat more likely to feel that having enough money was a very important element

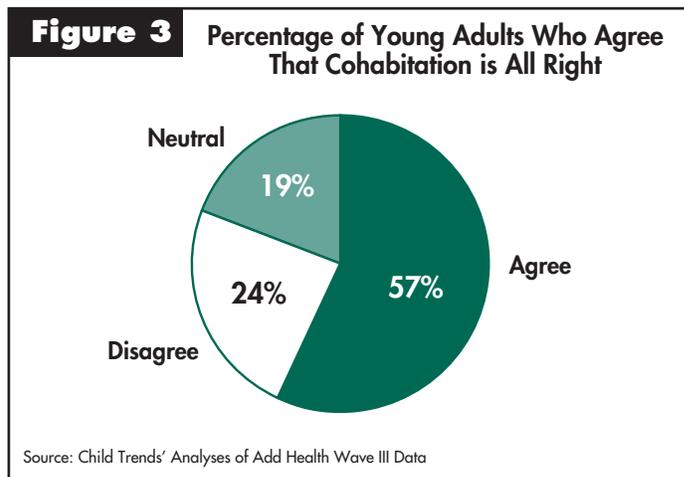
of a successful relationship, compared with young adults in all other relationship types (27 percent versus 20 percent of respondents who were married, 22 percent of respondents who were in nonresidential romantic relationships, and 23 percent of respondents who were not in any current relationship).

ATTITUDES ABOUT COHABITATION

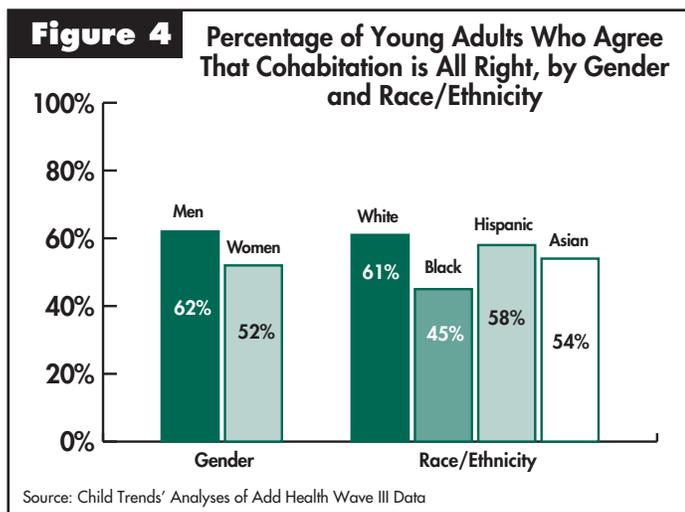
Cohabitation rates have increased dramatically during recent years, and many young adults will cohabit before or as an alternative to marriage. According to national estimates, the proportion of women that had cohabited by their late thirties has steadily increased from 30 percent in 1987, to almost 50 percent in 1995,²⁰ to 61 percent by 2002.⁵ Motivations for cohabiting may include testing compatibility as a couple before marriage,⁴ wanting to spend more time together, and needing to share financial burdens.²¹ Although the reasons that men and women cohabit are diverse and not fully understood, it seems clear that cohabitation increasingly has become viewed as an acceptable type of family formation even among young adults who have never been married and never cohabited.²¹ Therefore, it is important to understand how young adults perceive cohabiting relationships, and how these perceptions differ by their relationship status.

We obtained information about young adults' attitudes about cohabitation from a question that asked respondents to report their level of agreement that "It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together even if they are not interested in considering marriage."

Many young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 agree that it is OK for unmarried couples to live together even if marriage is not being considered. Fifty-seven percent of respondents agreed that cohabitation was all right, whereas 19 percent were neutral about the statement, and 24 percent disagreed with it. (See Figure 3.)



- Young adult men were more likely than were women to agree that cohabitation was all right (62 percent versus 52 percent). (See Figure 4.)
- Black young adults were least likely to agree that cohabitation was all right, compared with young adults of other race or ethnicity (45 percent of black respondents versus 61 percent of white, 58 percent of Hispanic, and 54 percent of Asian respondents). (See Figure 4.)



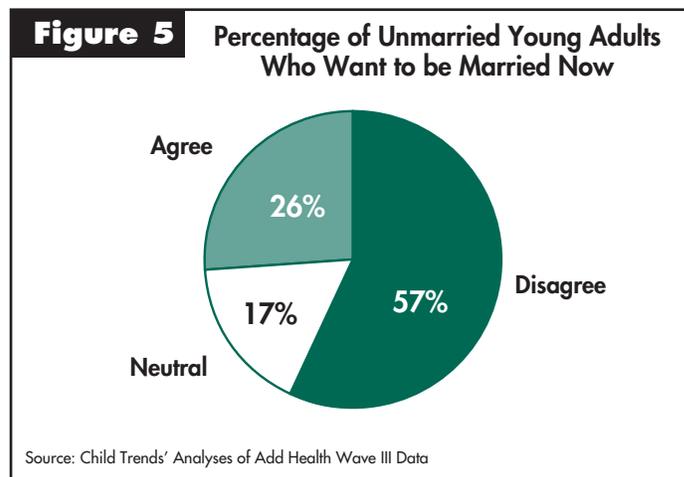
- Young adults who were married were the least likely to agree that cohabitation with no intent for future marriage was all right, compared with people who were involved in other types of relationships (46 percent versus 70 percent of those in cohabitating relationships, 59 percent of those in nonresidential romantic relationships, and 60 percent of those not involved in any current relationship). However, more than one-half of the married respondents had cohabited prior to marriage. Further, 30 percent of people who were currently cohabitating were neutral about cohabitation or disagreed that it was all right. These apparent discrepancies between attitudes and actions may reflect couples' diverse reasons or motivations for cohabiting.

ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE

Although only one in five young adults was married at the time of the survey and many reported positive attitudes about cohabitation, most still had high expectations that they would marry in the future. The low rate of marriage among young adults can be explained partially by the trend toward delaying marriage. Whereas the median age at first marriage in 1960 was 20 for women, by 2006, the median age had risen to 26.¹¹ Men marry later than do women, with a median first marriage age of 23 in 1960 and 28 in 2006. Our findings suggest that the majority of

young adults hope to marry someday. Apparently, however, most are prepared to postpone marriage because only a small percentage of respondents indicated that they wanted to be married at the time that they answered the survey questions.

Most unmarried 20- to 24-year-olds do not want to be married currently. Only one in four unmarried young adults reported that he or she would like to be married at the time of the survey. Almost 60 percent of respondents reported that they did not want to be married, whereas 17 percent were neutral about whether or not they would like to be married. (See Figure 5.)

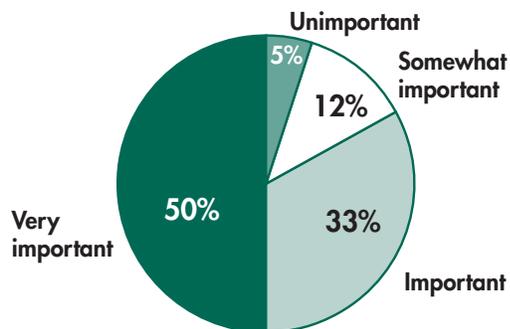


- More women (33 percent) than men (21 percent) agreed that they currently would like to be married. This gender difference reflects social norms about earlier ages at first marriage for women, compared with men.
- Nearly 30 percent of unmarried black and white young adults reported that they wanted to be married at the time of the survey, whereas only one in five Asian young adults said that they did. The proportion of Hispanic young adults who agreed that they would currently like to be married was in the middle of this range: at about 25 percent.

However, the majority of unmarried young adults would like to be married at some point in their lives. Eighty-three percent of unmarried respondents reported that they thought it was important or very important to be married someday, compared with 5 percent who considered it unimportant and 12 percent who felt it was only somewhat important. (See Figure 6.)

- Men and women had similar aspirations for marriage in the future (about 83 percent said it was important). However, women were somewhat more likely to report that marriage was very important (53 percent) than were men (47 percent).

Figure 6 Importance of Being Married Someday, Among Unmarried Young Adults

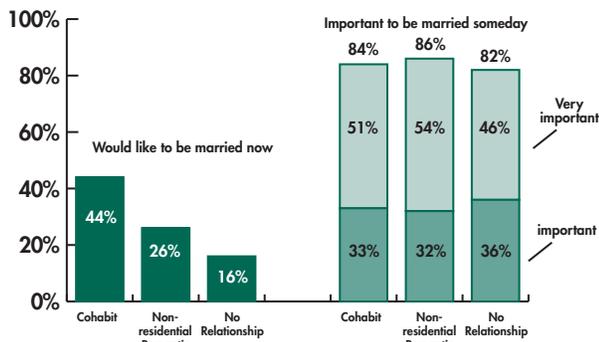


Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

- Asian young adults were most likely to report that marriage in the future was important to them (88 percent), followed by white young adults (84 percent), Hispanic young adults (83 percent), and black young adults (78 percent).
- Even young adults who supported the idea of cohabitation felt that marriage was important. Among those who agree that cohabitation was all right, 80 percent agreed that it was important (35 percent) or very important (45 percent) to them personally to get married someday.

Current relationship status is associated with attitudes about marriage. Among unmarried young adults, the proportion wanting to be married at the present time differed by relationship status. However, the importance of marrying someday was fairly comparable across different types of relationships. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7 Percentage of Unmarried Young Adults Who Want to be Married Now and Importance of Being Married Someday, by Relationship Status



Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

- Forty-four percent of young adults in cohabiting relationships reported that they would currently like to be married. One-quarter of those in nonresidential romantic relationships also reported that they wanted to

be married now. Among those not currently in a romantic relationship, 17 percent reported that they wanted to be married.

- Despite differences in their desire to be married now, slightly more than 80 percent of unmarried young adults reported that they felt it was important to be married someday, and this trend was consistent across all types of relationships. However, only 46 percent of young adults who were not in a relationship reported that it was very important to marry someday, compared with 54 percent of those in a nonresidential romantic relationship and 51 percent of those in a cohabiting relationship.

Many young adults expect to be married in 10 years. Nearly 40 percent of unmarried young adults indicated that they were almost certain that they would be married in their early thirties, and another 30 percent expected that they had a good chance of being married then. Twenty percent said that they had a 50-50 chance of being married in 10 years, and only one in 10 reported a very slim chance of marriage.

- As with views on the importance of marriage, expectations of marriage in the early thirties differed by gender, with more women (44 percent) than men (35 percent) reporting that they were almost certain that they would be married in 10 years.
- The majority of young adults in cohabiting relationships expressed the belief that they would almost certainly be married in 10 years (55 percent). In contrast, only 26 percent of those not currently in a relationship reported such a high likelihood of marriage and 44 percent of those in nonresidential romantic relationships said that they were almost certain to be married in their early thirties.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This *Research Brief* has focused on young adults' attitudes and opinions about relationships, including cohabitation and marriage. The findings highlight some important themes about how young adults view relationships, what they value in relationships, and their expectations for their current and future romantic relationships:

- **Young adults have high expectations for love, commitment, and fidelity in their relationships.** The vast majority of men and women view love, commitment, and fidelity as very important elements for a successful relationship, whereas few consider money of

overriding importance. Earlier generations were likely to view economic security and childrearing as important elements of successful relationships, particularly within marriage,²² but more couples today value the emotional side of relationships. The finding that men were slightly more likely than were women to say that having enough money was very important indicates that some level of traditional notions about relationships persist. Black young adults were also shown to value having enough money more than young adults in other racial/ethnic groups, possibly reflecting the differing socioeconomic circumstances of many young black couples, compared with those in other racial groups. Research focusing on unmarried mothers has found that black women place more emphasis on the affordability of marriage (the amount, source, and regularity of income from fathers) than do white women.⁷ Similarly, research has shown that people with lower income and educational levels tend to rate such financial considerations as more important for relationships than do people with higher socioeconomic status.²²

- **Young adults generally have positive attitudes about cohabitation.** One in five young adults in our sample was unmarried but living with a romantic partner, or cohabiting, at the time of the survey. Further, only about one-quarter of respondents disagreed that it was OK for unmarried couples to live together even if marriage was not being considered. These findings point to the widespread acceptance of cohabitation, and are consistent with other research showing that the majority of marriages and remarriages began as cohabitations, that most young adults have cohabited or will do so, and that cohabitation has become an increasingly common context for childbearing and childrearing.²¹

Black young adults were the least likely to agree that cohabitation without the intent to marry is all right, and they were the most likely to report that they wanted to be married at the time of the survey. These patterns provide useful information for understanding the meaning of cohabitation for black men and women. Prior research has shown that black couples are more likely to cohabit^{4,15} and to settle upon cohabitation as a substitute for marriage,¹⁵ whereas white couples tend to cohabit as a transitional stage leading toward

marriage.¹⁸ However, our results suggest that cohabitation does not represent a preferred alternative to marriage for young adult black couples, and many black couples desired marriage at the time of the survey even when they were in their early twenties. It is evident that among minority populations, marriage is still held as the ideal situation, even if it is not the experienced reality.^{8,12}

- **The vast majority of young adults think it is important to be married someday.** Eighty-three percent of unmarried 20- to 24-year-olds were in this category, and 70 percent expressed the view that there was a good or certain chance that they would be married within the next 10 years, suggesting that most young adults continue to value marriage despite many people's concern that marriage as a social institution is in decline.^{2,19,25} The fact that only about one-quarter of young adults wished to be married at the time of the survey reflects a delay in the age of first marriage that has been occurring since the 1970s, but not a complete movement away from marriage. We should note, however, that 11 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds expressed the belief that there was little or no chance that they would be married in 10 years, although we don't know if people in this group intend to never marry or if they plan to delay marriage even longer.
- **Cohabitation may represent an alternative to marriage during young adulthood, but many cohabiting couples hope to marry in the future.** Looking only at young adults within cohabiting unions provides further insight into whether cohabitation has replaced marriage for some couples. Less than one-half of cohabiting young adults agreed that they wanted to be married at the time of the survey, lending support to the notion that cohabitation does not represent a transitional stage in the marriage process. Cohabitation may actually serve as an alternative to marriage, but only temporarily, because most cohabiting young adults felt that it was important or very important to be married someday, and about one-half of married couples cohabited prior to marriage. Among all unmarried young adults, cohabiting individuals also expressed the highest level of certainty that they would be married within the next 10 years. These trends suggest that although cohabitation represents

an increasingly popular type of relationship among young adults, they maintain positive attitudes and expectations about marriage.

CONCLUSION

Increases in childbearing outside of marriage and of unintended childbearing among twentysomethings have fueled a need to better understand the nature of relationships among men and women in their early twenties. This *Research Brief* provides insight into what young adults think matters for successful relationships and what cohabitation and marriage mean in the context of their lives. Both these topics, of course, have implications for relationships and family formation. The current attitudes, values, and behaviors of young couples reflect a greater separation of sexual activity, co-residence, and childbearing from marriage, resulting in a growing concern about the strengths of relationships and families.²⁴

Despite the recent trends in nonmarital and unintended childbearing, most young adults in the United States have positive views of marriage and wish to marry one day, and these positive views and expectations exist across gender and racial and ethnic groups. Although we found some noteworthy differences between men and women and between whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians regarding the importance of the emotional and financial aspects of relationships and the value of cohabitation and marriage, overall, results of our analyses show that young adults value love, fidelity, and commitment in their relationships, have positive attitudes about cohabitation, but also have high aspirations and expectations for marriage. In fact, young adults today share many (but not all) of the values that were important to previous generations.

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