

Growing Uncertainty in Marriage Expectations among U.S. Youth

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Abstract

Marriage rates are falling in the United States. The authors ask whether today's young adults are likely to continue this trend. Using Monitoring the Future Public-Use Cross-Sectional Datasets (1976–2022), this visualization presents U.S. 12th graders' marriage expectations. It shows declining optimism that they will be “very good” spouses and declining expectations that they will eventually marry. Both trends are prominent in the last 10 years of the survey, and both are more dramatic among young women than among young men. If these trends hold, it may foretell further declines in marriage rates in the coming years.

Keywords

marriage, attitudes, adolescents, gender, visualization

The U.S. marriage rate fell by 19 percent for men and 17 percent for women from 2008 to 2021 (Cohen 2023). Teenagers' marital expectations provide one source of information about whether these declines might continue. Brown (2022) reported a decline in expectations to marry among high school seniors from 2006 to 2020. In contrast, Severeid et al. (2023) found stable marriage expectations among Americans ages 15 to 19 years from 2012 to 2018.

We update this research with data from the 1976 to 2022 Monitoring the Future Public-Use Cross-Sectional Datasets, a nationally representative annual survey of U.S. high school seniors (Miech et al. 2023). We chart young adults' marital expectations and include trends in teens' expectations that they will be good spouses, potentially an important driver of marriage outlooks. Figure 1 presents trends in their assessments of how good a spouse they expect to be (Figure 1A), whether they expect to marry (Figure 1B), and the percentage point change for each belief over the last 10 years of the survey (Figures 1C and 1D). Additional details are available in the online supplement; data access and replication code are available at https://github.com/jrpepin/MTF_Marriage.

After growing optimism regarding marital expectations, attitudes have become markedly more pessimistic (Figure 1). About 38 percent of young men expected to be “very good” spouses in 1976, rising to a peak of 61 percent by 2001

(Figure 1A). Young women were initially more optimistic, with 47 percent reporting that their future selves would be “very good” spouses in 1976, peaking in 2012 at 64 percent. But optimism has waned since the early 2010s, with young women's expectations showing a steeper decline than young men's. In the last decade of the survey, young women were increasingly likely to anticipate being “fairly good” spouses (+10 percent) rather than “very good” spouses (–11 percent) (Figure 1C). Still, by 2022, about 80 percent of youth expected that they will be “good” or “very good” spouses.

Trends in expectations of marriage mirror those for spousal performance (Figure 1B). In 1976, 73 percent of young men and 84 percent of young women predicted that they would get married. Marriage expectations grew into the early 2000s, before a steep decline. By 2022, the proportion of young men expecting to marry had returned to the 1976 level, and young women's expectations had plunged to 73 percent, almost 10 percentage points lower than their 1976

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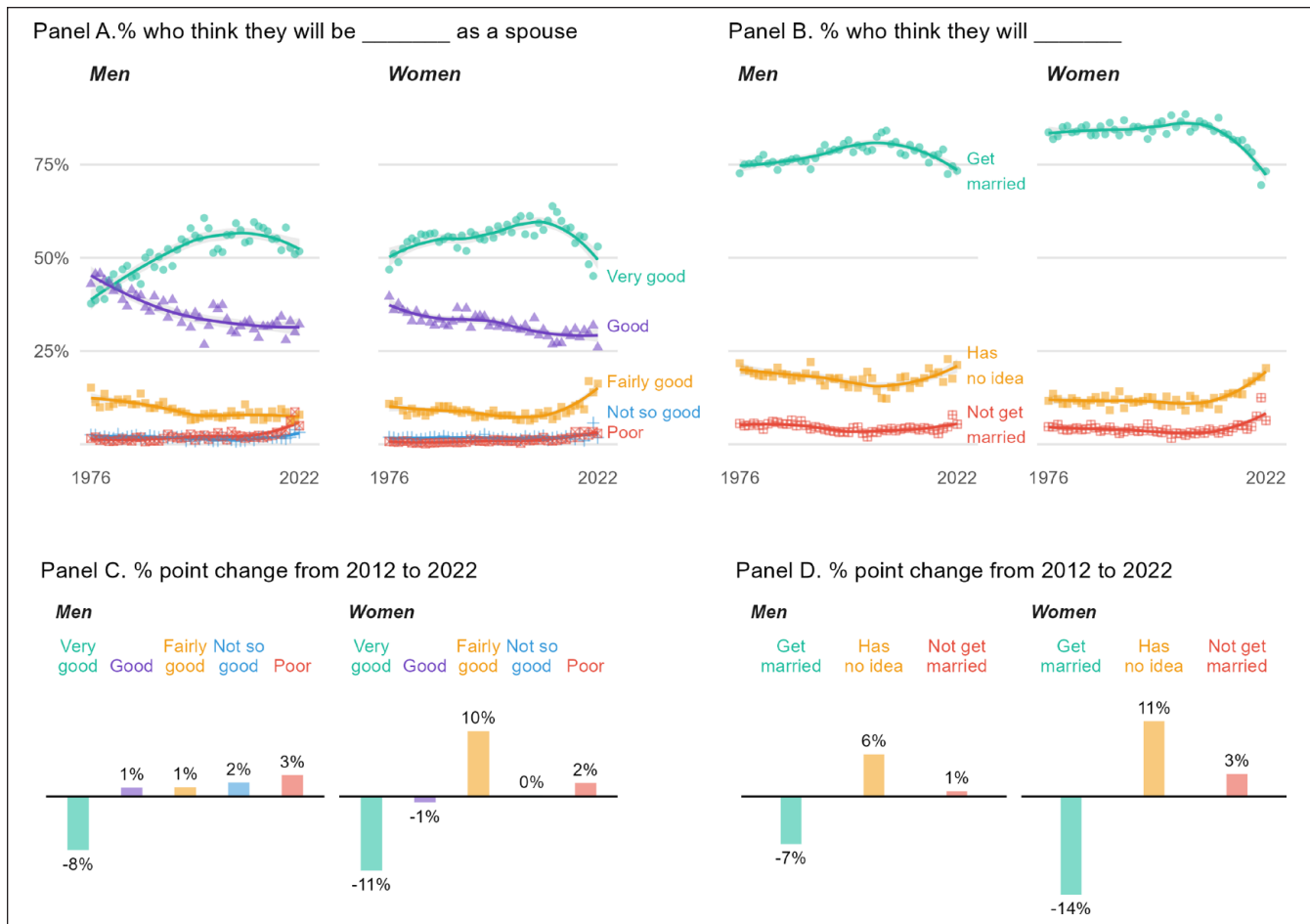



Figure 1. The figure shows data from the 1976 to 2022 Monitoring the Future Public-Use Cross-Sectional Datasets, a nationally representative annual survey of U.S. high school seniors. (A) Young adults' assessment of how good a spouse they expect to be, by gender ("very good," "fairly good," "good," "not so good," or "poor"), by gender. (B) Young adults' expectation of marriage ("get married," "not get married," or "no idea"), also by gender. The bottom panels show the percentage point change over the 10 years from 2012 to 2022 for how good a spouse they will be (C) and their expectation of marriage (D). Over the last 10 years of the survey, the percentage of high school seniors who think they will make very good spouses has dropped, as has the percentage expecting to marry. Data access and replication code are available at https://github.com/jrpepin/MTF_Marriage.

level. Figure 1D shows that the decline in expectations in the last decade of the survey was twice as large for young women (−14percent) as for young men (−7percent). Most of the increase occurred among those who are unsure if they will marry. We note that the pandemic year, 2020, produced a large spike in these trends, potentially because of data quality issues; findings show only a modest rebound after that dramatic change.

Overall, the last decade shows a large drop in both the proportion of youth who think they will be good spouses and the proportion who expect to get married, especially among young women. Whether today's teens will continue to drive marriage rates downward is unclear, but the major mood swing on marriage appears persistent at least through 2022, which implies that future declines in marriage may be on the horizon.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Joanna R. Pepin is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her research explores how couple and family relations reproduce and protect against inequality.

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