

FAMILY

Trends

- The share of disadvantaged children living with married parents declined in the 1960s but stabilized in the 1990s. Among the poorest children and children with less educated parents, the likelihood of living with two parents increased.¹
- US fertility rates have dropped beneath the rate of replacement, and this decline is associated with the decline in marriage. Survey respondents most commonly cite the inability to find a suitable partner as their primary reason for not having children, with a greater share citing this reason than personal economic reasons.²
- The family-formation gap has been steadily increasing along religious and partisan lines. Since COVID-19, interest in family formation is highest among those who are wealthy, self-identify as religious, or self-identify as Republican. With respect to socioeconomic status, the marriage gap has seemingly widened, but the childbearing gap has closed since the pandemic. The main reason for the trend is that poor people are having children at similar rates as affluent people historically have.³

Family Structure

- Children of divorced parents exhibit modestly lower levels of cognitive, social, and emotional well-being and lower socioeconomic success. They also are at greater risk of having a nonmarital birth, having weaker bonds with parents, and becoming divorced. Factors accounting for this are financial strain and limited resources, lack of consistency in parenting, and increased exposure to stress.⁴
- Children are increasingly residing in unmarried or stepfamilies, which coincides with increased chance of family instability and childhood transitions in living arrangements. Family complexity is negatively associated with children's economic well-being, regardless of family structure.⁵
- Family structure in early childhood had the strongest association with positive future outcomes, relative to family structure at other ages. Children in single-parent households had lower levels of educational attainment and increased chance of economic inactivity, childbearing at a young age, negative affect, and smoking.⁶
- The marital prospects of men experiencing economic hardship decline because women of similar socioeconomic status are less motivated to marry them; women are not less likely to have children with these men, however, thus perpetuating single motherhood. Single motherhood reduces parental resources and quality of parenting, resulting in negative effects for children. The cycle advances inequalities, particularly between racial groups and men and women.⁷
- Children living in biological two-parent households tend to fare better in educational, social, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes than their counterparts. Low-income individuals desire to get married but perceive hurdles that must be cleared first. These are primarily associated with financial stability. Couples experiencing economic hardship must also expect that the relationship will endure before they commit to marriage.⁸
- Partnership instability is a common experience for children born to unmarried parents, particularly if the mother is not living with the father. Instability is more prevalent in households

headed by unmarried minority mothers, but the effects on child behavior are similar across racial groups.⁹

- Men and women who are religious and do not cohabit before marriage are at lower risk of divorce, even when marrying in their 20s, relative to other couples.¹⁰
- While fewer students overall are being held back or suspended, students from non-intact families are more likely to be held back or suspended relative to their counterparts from intact families (families with two biological, married parents), controlling for demographic factors.¹¹
- Outcomes with respect to college graduation, poverty, and incarceration are better for black children from two-parent married households than for white children from single-parent families. Compared to black children living with two married parents, black children in single-parent households are 3.5 times more likely to be living in poverty and 1.8 times more likely to have been incarcerated by their late 20s. Compared to black children from single-parent households, black children raised by two biological parents are 70 percent more likely to earn a college degree.¹²
- Children from single-mother households tend to have greater success in college than do children of remarried mothers. If it is not possible for a child to be raised in a household with two married biological parents present, minimizing disruptions and ensuring parental participation from both parents can improve performance in college.¹³
- Cohabiting families tend to be less stable for children relative to married families. Children born to cohabiting parents are roughly 90 percent more likely to experience their parents splitting up relative to those born to married parents.¹⁴
- Children who spend more than eight hours a day on screens are significantly more likely to be depressed. Twenty-three percent of children from intact families and 31 percent of children from non-intact families who were on screens for more than eight hours a day were depressed, compared to 13 percent of light users in either family type. Children from non-intact families spend roughly two hours more per day engaged in online activities than do children from intact, married-parent families.¹⁵
- Intact families have more parental resources to enforce rules around social media use. Children from non-intact families already face disadvantages, and given excess social media usage in this population relative to their counterparts from intact families, they are likely to experience pronounced negative effects across a domain of psychological factors.¹⁶

The Success Sequence

- The success sequence is a formula of life decisions that helps adherents avoid poverty. The three steps are completing at least a high school degree, getting a full-time job, and getting married before having children.
- Of those who follow the success sequence, 96 percent of black millennials and 97 percent of Hispanic millennials were not poor in their mid-30s. Missing steps in the sequence is more detrimental to black and Hispanic adults than it is for adults of other races, but completing all three steps nearly closes racial disparities in poverty.¹⁷
- Ninety-four percent of millennials from lower-income households and 95 percent of millennials growing up in non-intact families who followed the success sequence are not poor by their mid-30s.¹⁸

- Ninety-five percent of noncollege-educated workers who have a high school degree, work, and marry before having children are not poor by their mid-30s.¹⁹

RELIGION

Trends

- The share of Americans who say religion is very important has fallen from 62 percent in 1998 to 39 percent in 2023. Younger Americans in particular are less likely to value religion, with 31 percent of adults under age 30 saying that religion is very important to them, compared with 55 percent of seniors.
- The percentage of respondents who said religion, patriotism, having children, and community involvement are very important values has fallen steadily since 1998 and drastically since 2019. Among the values polled, money was the only one that increased in importance among respondents. In 2023, 43 percent said money was very important, up from 31 percent in 1998.²⁰

Benefits of Religion

- Millennials and Gen Zers who frequently attend religious services were much more likely to say they felt “somewhat” or “very” connected to the people in their local community.²¹
- Religion generally improves psychological well-being.²²
- Globally, people are much more likely to say they are “very happy” if they attend a house of worship at least once per month.²³
- Perceived relationship with God is strongly associated with happiness. Religious attendance has a stronger effect on happiness than happiness has on religious attendance.²⁴
- People who identify more strongly as religious tend to report better health and happiness.²⁵
- Belief in divine support is positively associated with religious involvement and self-esteem.²⁶
- Religious service attendance is a protective factor against suicide attempts.²⁷
- Religion seems to reduce anti-social behavior through channels of increased self-control and social support of its participants.²⁸
- Religiosity in juvenile offenders decreases chemical abuse and criminal activity.²⁹
- Religious participation in youth is associated with greater levels of economic mobility by adulthood.³⁰

EDUCATION

Public Opinion and Curricula

- Seventy-seven percent of Americans and 76 percent of American parents support teaching students the success sequence, including 70 percent of parents who themselves did not follow the success sequence.³¹
- Seventy-seven percent of Americans support teaching that slavery was the cause of the Civil War. Only 46 percent are comfortable with textbooks covering “white privilege,” and 44 percent are comfortable with schools displaying Black Lives Matter materials.³²

Charter Schools

- Demographically, charter school student bodies are compositionally different from traditional public school student bodies. The profound compositional difference between public and charter schools seems to imply that charter schools are attracting students whose needs or preferences are unmet in public schools.³³
- Compared to nearby traditional public schools, charter schools serve more black students and fewer Hispanic students. Some charter schools serve more white students, while others serve fewer white students.³⁴
- Charter schools report fewer suspensions than traditional public schools do.³⁵
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, charter schools have outpaced their traditional public school counterparts in math and reading standardized test scores.³⁶
- Students attending high-performing charter schools in Harlem saw significant improvements on academic measures and decreases in teen pregnancy and incarceration.³⁷

Educational Interventions

- Education performance is determined by socioeconomic factors, not just race. When socioeconomic status is taken into account, race-based gaps are reduced.³⁸
- Literacy is a greater predictor of cognitive functioning than years of education for African Americans and low-socioeconomic-status whites. This highlights the importance of quality over quantity in education.³⁹
- Not all education is created equal: Returns in the form of earnings depend on educational quality and parental educational attainment.⁴⁰
- There is evidence that content-rich English language arts curricula—which introduce students to a variety of subjects—can build language skills and knowledge.⁴¹
- Content-rich curricula had a positive effect on mathematics skills, with no discernible difference across race, socioeconomic status, or language spoken at home.⁴²
- Love Notes, a relationship skills training program, reduced maladaptive behavior in its youth participants.⁴³
- Individual-level rigorous instruction to adolescent students in poverty increased math scores and grades, demonstrating that some learning loss stemming from early childhood education experiences can be overcome.⁴⁴
- Black students receiving intensive tutoring experienced increases in school attendance and English language arts scores.⁴⁵

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Entrepreneurial Mindset

- During adolescence, youth should not be encouraged to move toward dependence or independence from their families but rather interdependence. Youth are morally formed and competent when they are introduced to the morals and values of the adults in their lives but are permitted to incorporate these morals for themselves.⁴⁶
- Interpersonal connections, safety from violence, and healthy role modeling decrease negative behavior and promote positive behavior among youth. Family relationships are the primary channel of this, but schools and community organizations can also have this effect.⁴⁷

- Adolescents who are reward oriented and have a positive family environment tend to be more engaged in activities that require performance and cooperation to succeed. Behaviors associated with these engagements decrease the likelihood of substance use in adolescence.⁴⁸
- A study defines purpose as “an aspiration to contribute something beyond the self along with a commitment to act on that aspiration.” Social and environmental factors, including family, peers, church, and community groups, contribute to purpose formation.⁴⁹
- Employment increases self-efficacy in youth, but sporadically employed youth may experience the effects to a lesser degree. Supervisory support can increase an adolescent’s confidence in future family lives, community involvement, personal health, and economic achievement.⁵⁰

Youth Employment and Workforce Training

- Youth who are employed tend to have higher GPAs and be from relatively higher socioeconomic families. The inverse is also true: Youth who are unemployed tend to be from lower socioeconomic households and have lower GPAs.⁵¹
- Youth employment can be constrained by lack of relevant skills or experience, lack of information about opportunities or application processes, or lack of access to financial capital to start a business. The most effective interventions integrate multiple services, have high program retention, are tailored to the population of interest, and are delivered by a partnership of civil society entities as opposed to simply the public sector.⁵²

¹ Scott Winship, “A Half-Century Decline in Marriage . . . That Ended 30 Years Ago for Disadvantaged Kids,” American Enterprise Institute, April 21, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/a-half-century-decline-in-marriage-that-ended-30-years-ago-for-disadvantaged-kids>.

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