

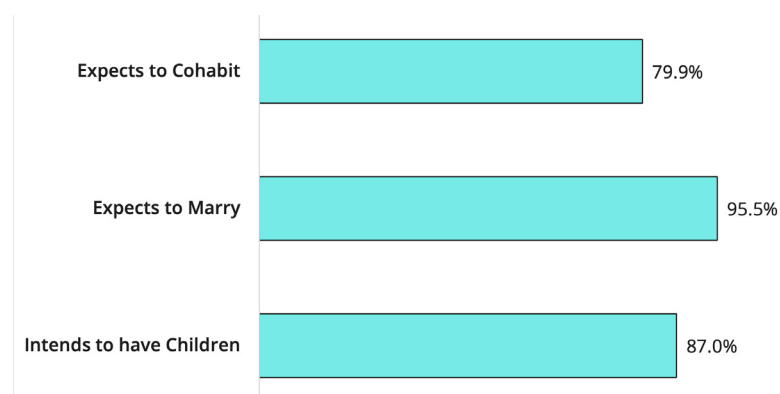
Teens' Self-Reported Expectations and Intentions for Marriage, Cohabitation, and Childbearing

Katherine Graham, Karen Benjamin Guzzo, and Wendy D. Manning

Families in the United States are changing. [People are waiting longer to marry](#) and, in some cases, [not marrying at all](#). [Cohabitation is now common in young adulthood](#) and [most people have lived with someone in a cohabiting union](#)—usually their eventual spouse—prior to marriage. Additionally, [birth rates have fallen to record lows](#) in recent years.

While there are many reasons for such changes, they do not appear to reflect a lack of interest in marriage or family formation among young people. As shown in Figure 1, recent nationally representative data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) demonstrate that the vast majority of U.S. teens ages 15 to 19 expect or intend to cohabit, marry, and have children in the future.

Figure 1. Teens' Self-Reported Marriage, Cohabiting, and Childbearing Intentions, 2017-2019



Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research analysis of NSFG 2017-2019 male and female data files

Prior research has found that individual expectations about family behaviors differ across social and demographic characteristics such as [gender](#), [family structure](#), [religiosity](#), and [metropolitan area](#). However, although the share of teens who anticipate cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood varies across these social and demographic characteristics—as we show in figures 2 through 5—the differences are relatively minor.



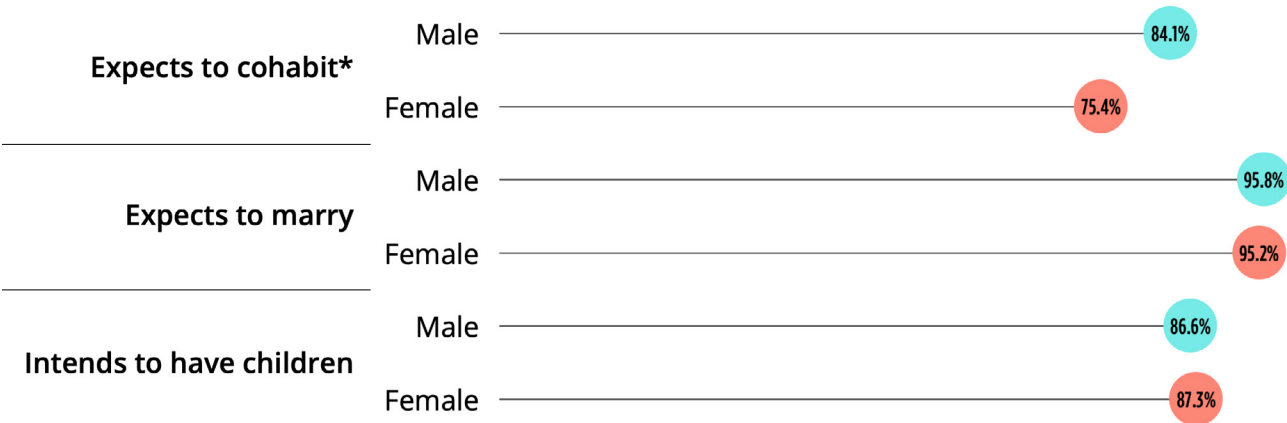
MAST CENTER RESEARCH

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. This research aims to identify critical research gaps, generate new knowledge, and help programs more effectively serve the individuals and families they work with. MAST Center research is concentrated in two areas:

- **Relationship Patterns & Trends.** Population-based research to better understand trends, predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of marriage and relationships in the United States.
- **Program Implementation & Evaluation.** Research that helps build knowledge about what works in HMRE programming, for whom, and in what context.

For instance, Figure 2 illustrates that almost all teenage boys and girls^a reported that they expect to get married someday (96% and 95%, respectively) and intend to have children (about 87%). However, while most teen boys and girls expected to cohabit at some point in the future, this share is significantly higher among boys (84%) than among girls (75%).

Figure 2. Teens’ Self-Reported Intentions about Family Formation by Sex, 2017-2019



Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research analysis of NSFG 2017-2019 male and female data files

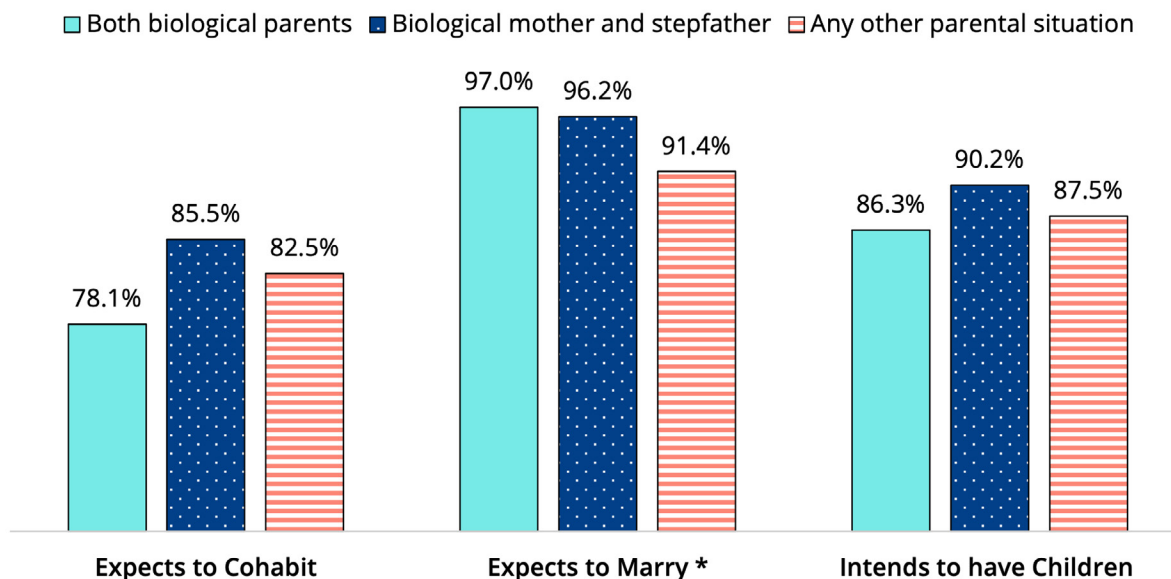
Note: * Indicates significant differences at $p < .05$

Most teens, regardless of their family structure at age 14, reported that they expect to cohabit, marry, or have children at some point in the future (Figure 3). The share of teens who expected to marry was somewhat lower (91%) for teens who lived in ‘other’ parental living situations (e.g., single-parent families, grandparent families, etc.) than for teens who lived with both biological parents (97%) or with a biological mother and stepfather (96%).



^a The NSFG has separate analytic files for females and males. The survey does not include any measures on gender identity or whether someone is transgender, so we use male/boy to refer to individuals included in the male analytic file and female/girl to refer to individuals included in the female analytic file.

Figure 3. Teens' Self-Reported Intentions by Parental Living Situation at Age 14, 2017-2019



Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research analysis of NSFG 2017-2019 male and female data files

Note: * Indicates significant differences at $p < .05$

Teens' marriage and cohabitation expectations also differed by attendance at religious services (Figure 4). A greater share of teens who attended religious services at least weekly reported expecting to marry (98%) at higher rates than those who attended less frequently (94%), and fewer expected to cohabit (71% and 87%, respectively).

Figure 4. Teens' Self-Reported Intentions by Weekly Religious Service Attendance at Age 14, 2017-2019

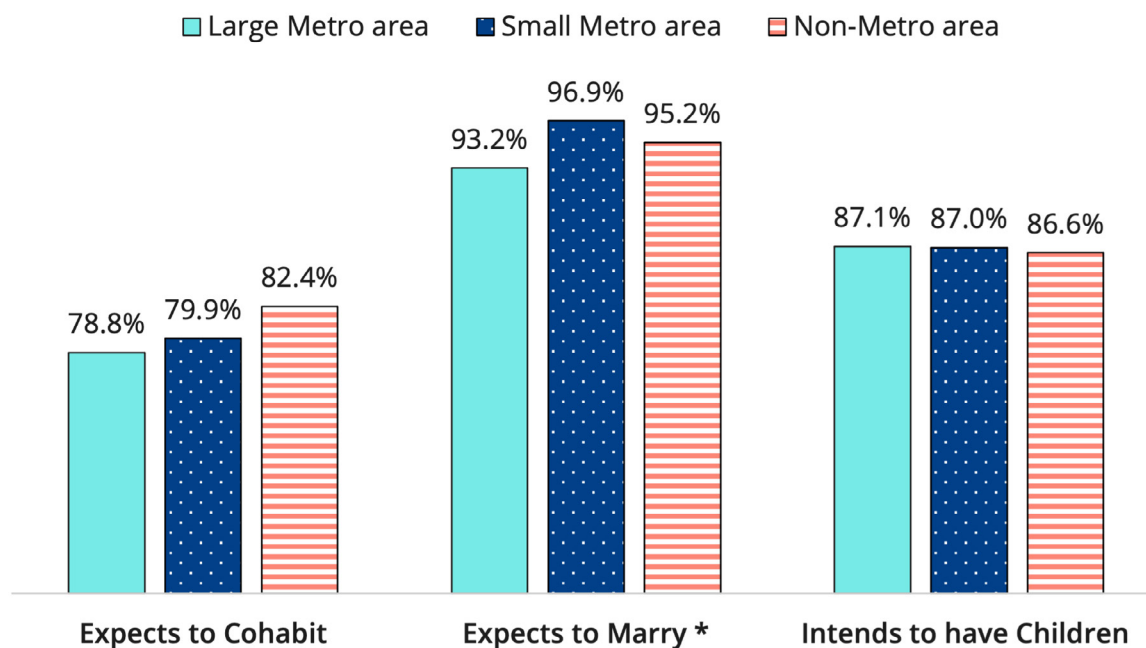


Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research analysis of NSFG 2017-2019 male and female data files

Note: * Indicates significant differences at $p < .05$

Teens' expectations about marriage varied slightly by whether they lived in a large or small metropolitan area, or in a non-metropolitan area^b (Figure 5). Among those in large metropolitan areas, 93 percent expected to marry compared to 97 percent who lived in small metropolitan areas and 95 percent in non-metropolitan areas. There were no significant differences in expectations about cohabitation or childbearing by where one lived.

Figure 5. Teens' Self-Reported Intentions by Place of Residence, 2017-2019



Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research analysis of NSFG 2017-2019 male and female data files.

Note: * Indicates significant differences at $p < .05$.

Conclusion

Even with rapid changes in family behaviors in the United States, the vast majority of teens reported expectations of forming coresidential unions and having children at some point in the future. Even when there were differences in expectations and intentions between teen boys and teen girls—or by family structure, religiosity, and one's place of residence—these differences were fairly small. However, it remains to be seen whether teens will be able to fulfill their goals. Larger economic and structural factors—such as increasing housing costs, unstable employment, changing gender norms, and education inequality—may impact young people's ability to achieve their family goals or alter their family formation expectations as they age, as could how they perceive their futures in light of structural challenges and changing norms.

^b [Metropolitan Statistical Areas](#) (MSA) have at least one urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties. The National Survey of Family Growth defines a large metropolitan area as the principal city of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), a small metro area as the other areas (not the principal city) of a MSA, and non-metro areas as those areas not in an MSA.

Methods

Our analyses use the 2017-2019 National Survey of Family Growth. Only adolescents ages 15-19 who had never cohabited, married, or had children were included in the analyses. The final sample consisted of 2,002 teens (1,032 males and 970 females). All estimates were weighted to account for survey design, and chi-square tests were used to test for significant differences in expectations/intentions across the categories of the social and demographic indicators.

Expectations of marriage are based on answers to the question, “What is the chance you will get married someday?” Expectations of cohabitation are based on answers to the questions, “Do you think that you will live together with your future husband/wife before getting married?” (if affirmative response to the marriage question) and “What is the chance that you will ever live with a man/woman to whom you are not married?” (if negative response to the marriage question). The response categories for the marriage and cohabitation questions are definitely yes, probably yes, probably no, and definitely no; our analyses show only the share who responded “definitely” or “probably” yes to cohabitation and marriage.

Childbearing intentions are based on answers to the question, “Looking to the future, do you intend to have a baby at some time?” The response categories included “yes” or “no,” and we show only the share reporting yes.

Data Source

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). 2017-2019 National Survey of Family Growth Public-Use Data and Documentation. Hyattsville, MD: CDC National Center for Health Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/index.htm>

Suggested citation

Graham, K., Guzzo, K.B., and Manning, W.D., (2022). *Teens’ Self-Reported Expectations and Intentions for Marriage, Cohabitation, and Childbearing*. (Research Brief). Bethesda, MD: Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center.



Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Steering Committee of the Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) for their feedback on earlier drafts of this data story, as well as Ria Shelton for her research support.

Editor: Brent Franklin

Designer: Catherine Nichols

About the Authors

Katherine Graham, MA, is a graduate student at Bowling Green State University's Department of Sociology where she earned her MA, specializing in family demography. She works as a research assistant for the National Center for Family and Marriage Research and Center for Family and Demographic Research. Her research explores fertility, family formation, and family structure.

Karen Benjamin Guzzo, PhD, co-leads the MAST Center's Relationship Patterns and Trends research area. Dr. Guzzo is a sociologist and family demographer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill whose research focuses on childbearing and reproductive behaviors, family formation and stability, and complex family structures. She is director of the Carolina Population Center and an affiliate of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research.

Wendy D. Manning, PhD, co-leads the MAST Center's Relationship Patterns and Trends research area. Dr. Manning is a sociologist and family demographer at Bowling Green State University whose research focuses on young adult relationships, including cohabitation and marriage among different-gender and same-gender couples. She is also the co-director of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research, development core director of the Center for Family and Demographic Research, and the Dr. Howard E. and Penny Daum Aldrich Distinguished Professor of Sociology.

About the MAST Center

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. The MAST Center is made up of a team of national experts in marriage and relationship research and practice, led by Child Trends in partnership with the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University.

The MAST Center is supported by grant #90PR0012 from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The MAST Center is solely responsible for the contents of this brief, which do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services