

Trends in Teens' Views on Marriage, Family, and Work

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Background

The transition to adulthood has lengthened, and marriage is often a capstone of adulthood. Given these changes, teens may increasingly prioritize work and economic success over marriage.

Current Investigation

We consider change over 40 years in high school seniors' views on marriage and work by gender, accounting for socioeconomic and demographic factors linked to attitudes towards marriage and work and money.

Data and Sample

Monitoring the Future

- Nationally representative survey of changing high schoolers' behaviors, attitudes, and values.

Sample (n=90,395 teens)

- 1976 through 2020
- 12th graders
- 46,476 teen girls & 43,919 teen boys

Focal Attitudinal Measures

Consider responses of "important" or "extremely important" relative to other responses for

- "How important to you in your life is having a good marriage and family life?"
- "How important to you in your life is having lots of money?"

Combine measures to create a 4-category variable:

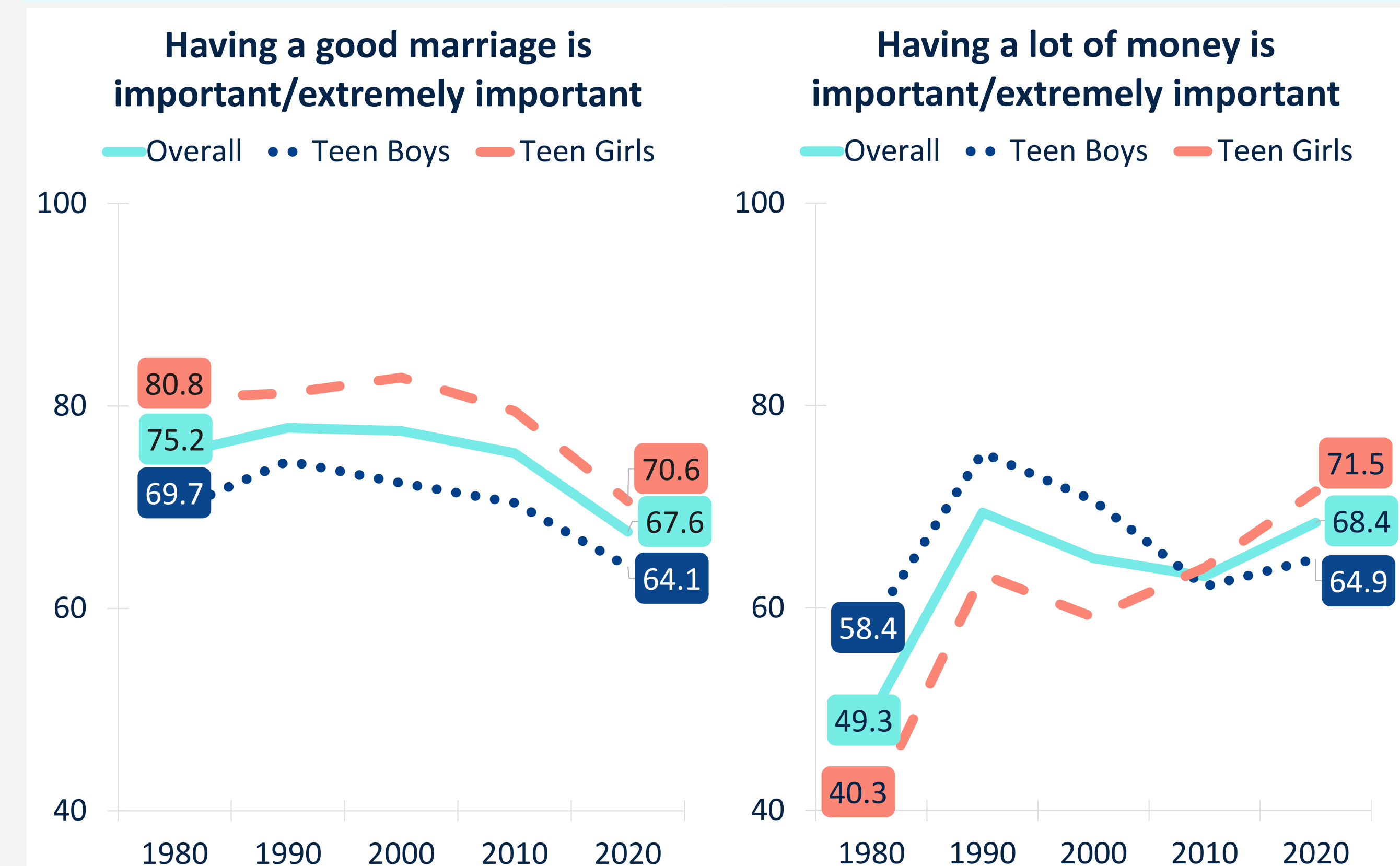
- Neither are important/extremely important
- Only money is important/extremely important
- Only marriage is important/extremely important
- Both are important/extremely important

Analytical Plan

- Trends over time by gender
- Multivariable analyses controlling for sociodemographic characteristics
 - Predicted probabilities

Descriptive Results

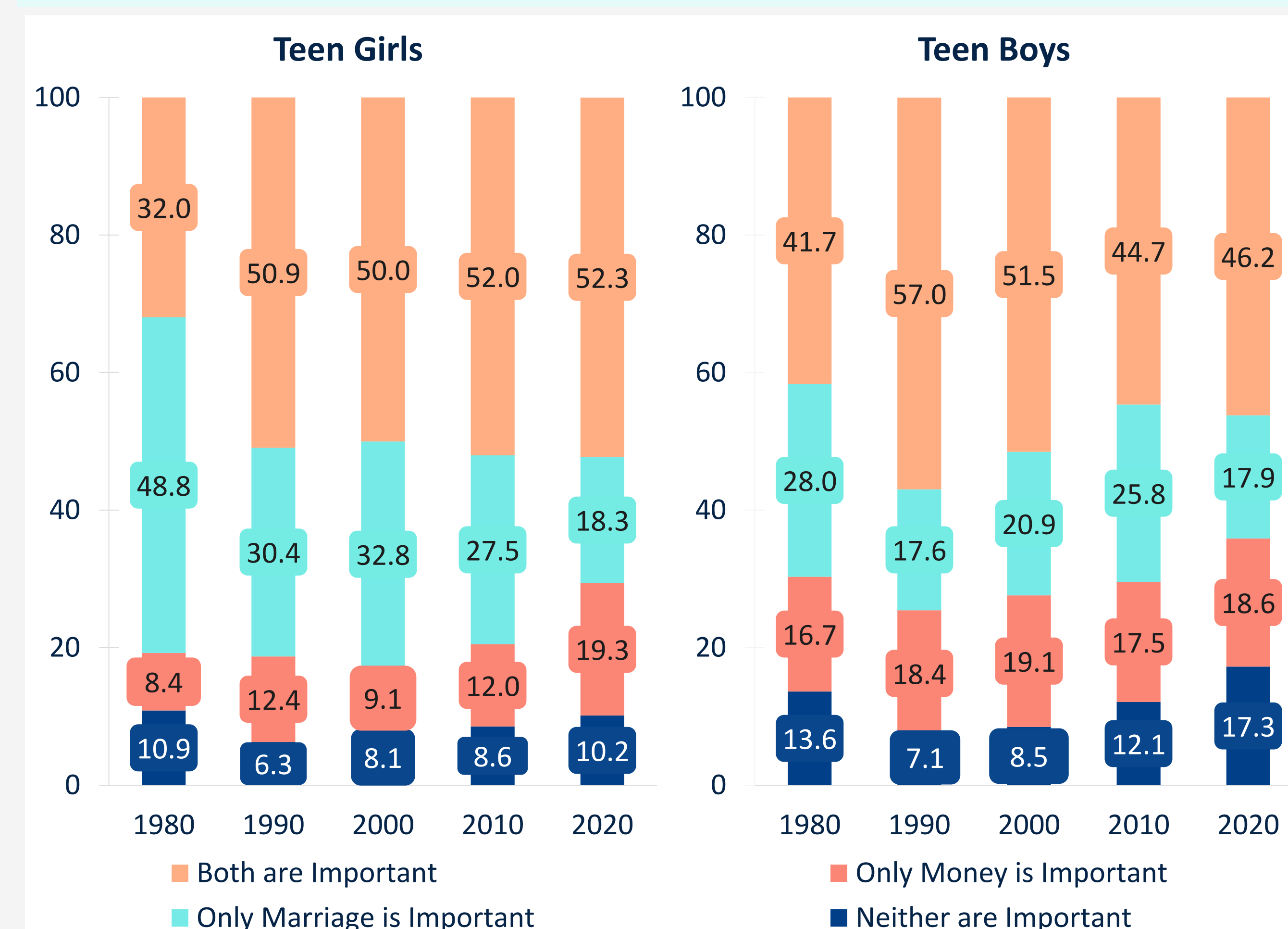
Figure 1



Trends for Marriage & Money Attitudes (Figure 1)

- The majority of teens view having a good marriage and having a lot of money as important/extremely important.
- The importance of marriage has declined while the importance of money has increased over time.
- Gender differences have narrowed, especially for money.

Figure 2



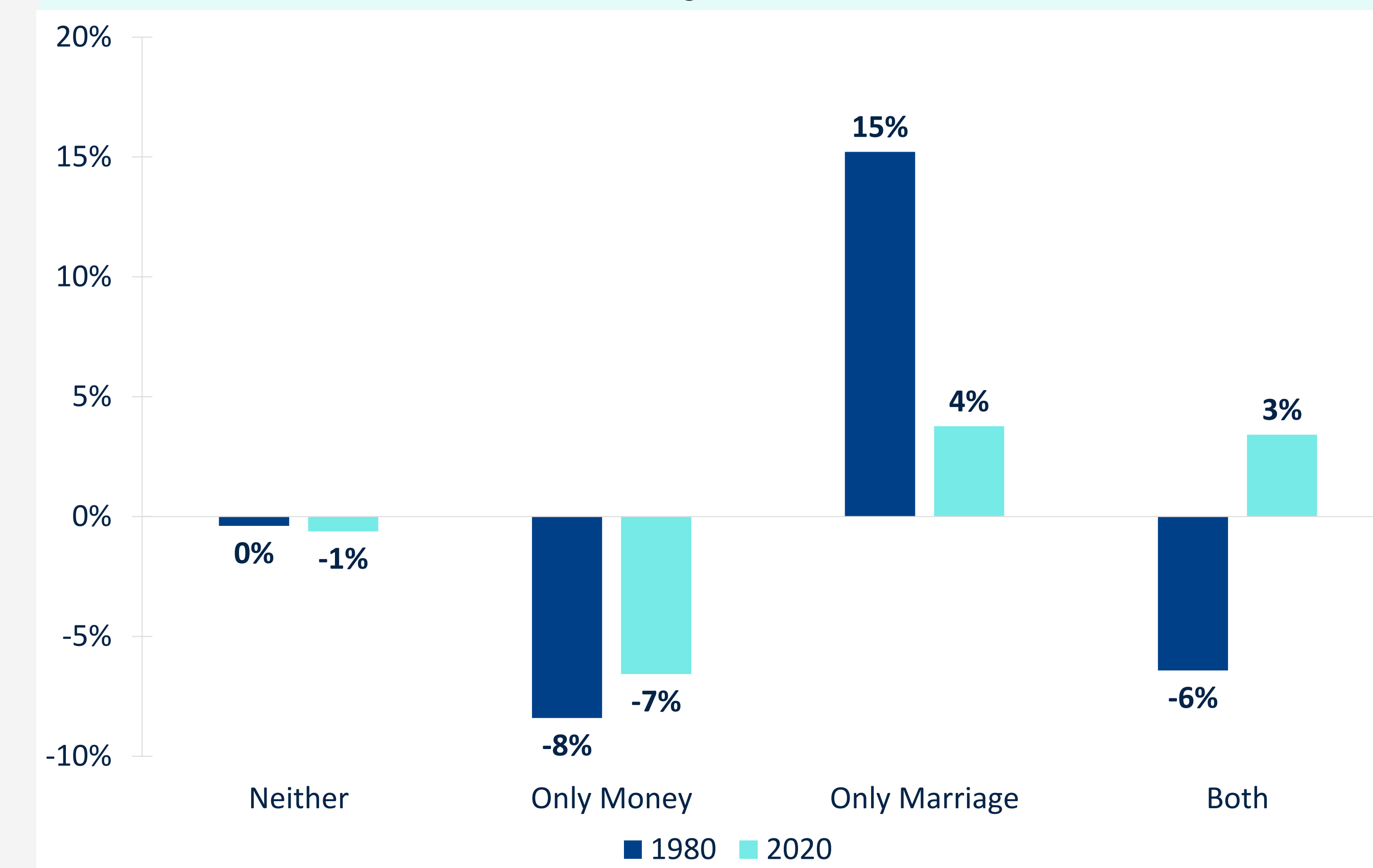
Trends in the Joint Relationship of Marriage & Money (Figure 2)

- In 1980, the most common pattern for girls was to report that only marriage was important or extremely important (49%), but this declined to only 18% by 2020.
- Since 1990, the most common pattern for girls was to say that both marriage and money were important.
- For teen boys, the most common pattern has consistently been that both marriage and money are important, with the highest proportion reporting this in 1990.

Multivariable Results

- Girls are more likely to view only marriage as important/ extremely important than boys even when controlling for factors such as family structure, parental education, and religiosity
- The likelihood of responding that only marriage is important has declined over time.
 - This change has been stronger for girls in models that interact time and gender.

Figure 3



Predicted Probabilities for Gender Differences (Figure 3)

- In 1980, teen girls were 15% more likely than boys to say that only marriage is important, but the difference narrowed to 4% by 2020.
- Teen girls were 3% more likely than boys to say that both marriage and money are important in 2020, a reversal from 1980 when they were 6% less likely to report that both were important.



Discussion

- For teens, the centrality of marriage and family life has declined as economic factors have become more important.
 - This shift is especially large among teen girls.
- In 2020, more than half of teen girls, and just under half of teen boys, reported that both marriage/family life and having a lot of money was important.
- Rising income inequality and declining support for families at the national level may exacerbate this shift over time.

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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 Public Strategies and 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. The NCFMR is supported with assistance from Bowling Green State University. From 2007 to 2013, support was also provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the state or federal government.