

# Center for Marriage and Families

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## The Health of an Institution *A United States Marriage Index*

Condensed from *The Future of Marriage* by David Blankenhorn

**S**OCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH shows that marital status is often at least as important to people's well-being as their economic status. Because the health of the economy bears directly upon individual and social well-being, U.S. policy makers and social leaders want to know with some precision how the economy is doing. To do so, experts have developed a set of leading economic indicators — fundamental measurements that reveal the state of our economic health.

Today we should also make the same attempt to measure the health of the institution of marriage. Towards this end, we have created a “U.S. Marriage Index” to track the fundamental indicators of marriage's health. We believe that this resource can help policy makers and social leaders to assess the status of marriage as we debate the meaning and future of this socially vital institution.

Below is the proposed U.S. Marriage Index. It currently covers the years 1970 to 2000 and can be updated in the future as more data becomes available.

<b>U.S. Marriage Index, 1970-2000</b>				
	1970	1980	1990	2000
Percent of Adults Married	71.7	65.5	61.9	59.5
Percent of First Marriages Intact	73.3	67.7	62.5	58.5
Percent of Births to Married Parents	89.3	81.6	72.0	66.8
Percent of Children Living with Own Married Parents	68.7	64.0	60.8	59.7
Percent of Children Living with Two Married Parents	85.2	76.7	72.5	68.1
<b>Index of Marriage's Institutional Vitality</b>	<b>77.6</b>	<b>71.1</b>	<b>65.9</b>	<b>62.5</b>

We chose to measure the percentage of American adults who are currently married and the percentage of first marriages that are intact. Just as asking how many people attend church is one measure of a church's institutional strength, knowing the proportion of adults who are in marriages — especially committed, long-term marriages — sheds light on the strength of that institution. On these measures the data are clear: Between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of married adults and first marriages that were still intact declined from about 72 percent to about 60 percent.

Throughout history, one of the main purposes of marriage, if not the main purpose, has been to link children and parents together. In the *U.S. Marriage Index, 1970-2000* we also find some important changes in recent decades. Between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of births to married parents dropped substantially, from 89 percent to 67 percent. The proportion of children living with two married parents — biological, adoptive, or step — also declined.

**WHAT DO THESE STATISTICS TELL US?** The institution of marriage has clearly become weaker in recent decades in the U.S. All of the indicators point in this direction. Nevertheless, the majority of adults and children are still united by marriage. Marriage remains the norm in our society. The institution is fragile, but it is not broken. What's more, the weakening of marriage has actually slowed over time. Look, for example, at the "Index of Marriage's Institutional Vitality" on the chart, the figure that represents all of the other indicators combined. It declined by 6.5 percentage points between 1970 and 1980, 5.2 percentage points the next decade, and only 3.4 percentage points between 1990 and 2000.

These figures show that marriage has weakened seriously in recent decades but not to the point of inevitability. Marriage still matters a lot to Americans. The trend-line data suggest that, with concerted effort, we might halt or even reverse the recent decline. To assist that effort we should continue to track and discuss the health of marriage as an important indicator of our society's well-being.

### Sources Used for the U.S. Marriage Index

**Percent of Adults Married.** Percent of persons age 18 and older who are married. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 450, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1990* (1991), 17; Series P-20, No. 461, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1991* (1992), 2; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005, Section 1. Population, Table No. 51. *Marital Status of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1990 to 2003* (2005), 49.

**Percent of First Marriages Intact.** For 1970-1990, percent of ever-married women ages 15-65 still in first marriage. For 2000, percent of ever-married women ages 15-69 still in first marriage. (2001 datum shown for 2000). U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 239, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage by Year of Birth, June 1971* (1972); U.S. Bureau of the Census, June Supplement to the 1980 and 1990 Current Population Surveys, unpublished tabulations; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-70, No. 97, *Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriage and Divorces: 2001* (2005), 7.

**Percent of Births to Married Parents.** For 1970, percent of births to married women ages 10-49. For 1980-2000, percent of all births to married mothers. National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the United States, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report of Final Natality Statistics* (1970); National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 52, No. 10, *Births: Final Data for 2002* (2003), 10.

**Percent of Children Living with Own Married Parents.** Percent of children under 18 who live with their two married biological parents. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of the Population, Volume II, 4B, *Persons by Family Characteristics*, (1973), Tables 1 and 8 and unpublished tabulations; Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 365, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1980*, (1981); Current Population Reports, Series P-20, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the 1990s*, (1992), 11-12; Current Population Reports, Series P-70, No. 104, *Living Arrangements of Children: 2001*, (2005), 3.

**Percent of Children Living with Two Married Parents.** Percent of children under age 18 who live with two married parents, regardless of whether the parents are biological or not. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 450, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1990*, (1991), 5; Census 2000 Special Reports, No. 14, *Children and the Households They Live In: 2001*, (2004), 15.

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