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## The state of our unions

Divorce and adultery are common; still, nearly all Americans at least *try* marriage

By Rick Hampson and Karen S. Peterson  
USA TODAY

President Bush wants a constitutional amendment to preserve marriage. But what, exactly, would it preserve? Traditional marriage already has been transformed, not by gays and lesbians who want in, but by straights who want out.

What the president called civilization's "most fundamental institution" is, in America, a rather peculiar one.

It's an institution that 59% of us currently inhabit and that more than nine in 10 of us eventually embrace, at least once and for a little while. It correlates with health, wealth and happiness. It's the acknowledged gold standard for raising children. And it has been extolled in cultural touchstones from *Father Knows Best* to *Sex and the City*.

But it's also an institution that over the past four decades has been increasingly severed by divorce and mocked by adultery. It has been ignored by couples who live together and have children out of wedlock. And it

has been postponed by those with better things to do first.

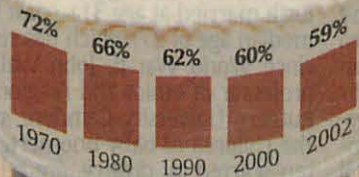
Americans believe that love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, but they also have introduced the concepts of the seven-year itch, the starter marriage and *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*. Feelings about marriage are complex, and contradictory, and nothing short of an amendment to the national psyche is likely to change that.

Marriage is such a great idea that Americans seem to love it too much — the idea, that is.

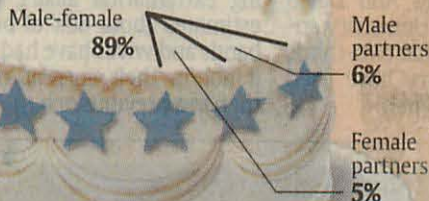
Nearly 6 in 10 adult Americans currently are married ...



... but the percentage of adults who are married has steadily declined.



About 5.5 million households are unwed couples living together:



The reality of marriage — crumbs in the bed, toilet seat up (or down), meatloaf again — suffers in comparison. And since the introduction of no-fault divorce, it has gotten easier across the nation to leave a real marriage behind and move on in search of the ideal one.

Everyone is an expert on marriage. Here's Homer, 29 centuries ago: "There is nothing more admirable than two people who see eye-to-eye keeping house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends."

And here's twice-divorced Donald Trump, two years ago: "Marriage is a great institution if you get it right."

A lot happened between the ages of these sages, including *Leave It To Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Television, in its first 30 years, was fixated on the perfect marriage as the basis for the perfect family. But anyone who compared their marriage with the Cleavers' found it wanting.

### 'Diluted and polluted'

At the moment, the institution is beset by these challenges:

► **Divorce.** A Census study showed that 73% of women who married between 1980 and 1984 reached their 10th anniversary, compared with 90% of women who married between 1945 and 1949. Although divorce leveled off in the 1990s, as many as 50% of new marriages end in Splitsville.

Peggy Vaughan, the author of *The Monogamy Myth*, says marriage's meaning "is getting diluted and polluted," not by people who refuse to marry, but by those who marry too often. "We have serial monogamy as multiple marriages become the norm." And the chance of a single, long-term marriage fades. "Somebody has to be willing to say the emperor is not wearing any clothes," she says.

Skeptics could point to "starter weddings," which might cost, on average, \$20,000, but end before the couple have kids or turn 30.

The brevity of some marriages both amuses and enrages gays and lesbians lobbying for the right to marry. Syndicated columnist Dan Savage wondered recently whether "allowing me to marry my boyfriend (of nine years) would imperil lasting, stable heterosexual marriages like the one Britney Spears enjoyed for 55 hours."

► **Cohabitation.** At least half of all newlyweds have lived together first, researchers say. And David Popenoe, a Rutgers University sociologist, estimates that two-thirds of people who marry have lived with somebody else first.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

By Bob Laird, USA TODAY

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Low

## Cover story

Live-in unions are more fragile than marriages. About 41% of unmarried opposite-sex couples living together have children younger than 18 at home. But sociologists Pamela Smock and Wendy Manning have found that children born to couples who live together have about twice the risk of seeing their parents split than those with married biological parents.

**► Children out of wedlock.** About a third of children are born out of wedlock, and roughly the same percentage live with only one parent or neither parent.

**► Later marriages.** President Bush married at age 31 — past the median age of 27, which has risen since World War II. John Wall, a professor of ethics and religion at Rutgers University-Camden, says the children of baby boomers, often scarred by divorce, are reluctant to try marriage.

**► Adultery.** Estimates on those having affairs are notoriously unreliable. But after 25 years of studying extramarital affairs, Vaughan estimates about 60% of both husbands and wives have had an affair, if not in their current marriage, then in a previous one.

Other researchers have different takes. A 1992 landmark study by Edward Laumann of the University of Chicago found 25% of men and 10% of women had strayed.

A major reason for infidelity, and a subsequent divorce, is "people don't want to give up what they think is the ultimate high, the newness, the excitement phase of marriage," Vaughan says.

To some, it all adds up to a crumbling Gibraltar. Thomas Coleman of the American Association for Single People says that, in the future, "marriage will no longer be on a pedestal. It will share the benefits and protections of society with all sorts of other legitimate living arrangements, whether that is solo singles, unmarried families, domestic partner arrangements."

Robert Thompson, who studies and teaches pop culture at Syracuse University, says, "A lot of people in the '60s and '70s thought they could escape the gravitational pull of marriage. But it proved to be a lot stronger than they thought."

Too many old wedding photos, too many bridal gowns in the attic, too many stories about the time "when your father and I . . ." Americans may be dissatisfied with marriage, but we don't know anything else. Marriage fills a certain need, and there's nothing to take its place.

"The alternatives — single parenting and cohabitation — are available to people, but they are making a bargain that requires less of them and gives them less in return," says Linda Waite, a University of Chicago sociologist and co-author of *The Case For Marriage*. Like spinach, marriage is good for you. In a report released last week, Maggie Gallagher of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy says that people in long-term marriages "live longer, healthier lives with higher levels of emotional well-being and lower rates of mental illness and emotional distress. (They) make more money than otherwise similar singles and build more wealth and experience . . . than do single or cohabiting couples with similar income levels."

And it's good for kids. David Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, a think tank that studies family issues, calls marriage "our society's most pro-child institution. . . . If you want kids to do well, then you want marriage to do well."

Marriage is, by many measures, doing just that. According to the most recent figures, 65% of men and 71% of women marry by age 30. By age 60, those figures rise to 97% for men and 95% for women.

"The institution of marriage itself strikes me as being in no trouble at all," says Robert Lang, a de-

mographer at Virginia Tech. "How many things do 95% of people do? . . . They should have a Defense of Voting Act." (The "Defense of Marriage Act" defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Congress and 38 states have passed versions of the measure.)

Many of those who divorce more than once also try again, and thus spend much of their lives, for better or worse, married.

In recent years, there have been many attempts to strengthen marriage. "We know that it is fragile, and we — the collective we — are responsible for it," says Diane Sollee, who hosts a yearly "Smart-marriages" conference.

Florida requires marriage education courses in high school. Louisiana, Arkansas and Arizona have approved "covenant marriages" in which couples voluntarily limit their ability to divorce. Arizona provides state funds to help couples attend privately run marriage-skills workshops. Oklahoma has used welfare money to reduce the divorce rate. There is a National Marriage Project at Rutgers to study and promote marriage and all sorts of courses in marriage, from Marriage 101 at Northwestern University to "Couple Communication" in suburban Maryland.

### Expand the franchise?

What stumps some people is why, if marriage is such a bedrock of traditional values, the franchise should not be expanded to gay men and lesbians.

"Because it's morally wrong," says Terry Calhoun, 47, a Catholic who lives in Stockton, Ill., with his second wife. His first marriage was annulled. "Marriage has slipped a lot," he says, and reserving it for one man and one woman would strengthen it.

This makes no sense to John Plessis, 69, of Scottsdale, Ariz. He's a retired steamship company executive who says he has lived with several women over the years but never married. "Gays are people, too," he says. "I don't see what difference it makes if they're allowed to get married."

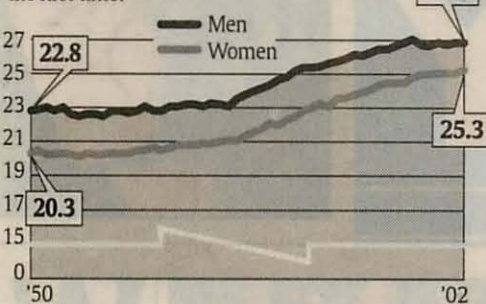
Cheryl Jacques of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay civil rights group, says same-sex marriages taking place in San Francisco and ordered by the court in Massachusetts starting in May will reassure marriage's protectors.

When gay men and lesbians marry, she says, "for the vast majority of Americans, absolutely nothing bad happens. . . . All that does happen is that the . . . gay or lesbian family is made stronger, safer and more secure."

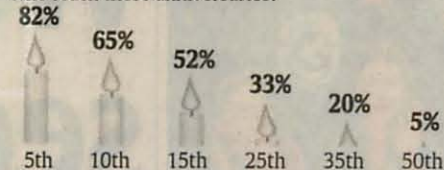
Lang, the demographer, notes that "there was a time when you couldn't marry between races. It was always to protect marriage. Isn't that what this is going to be 10-20 years from now? Culture absorbs redefinition of marriage."

## Marriage and divorce in America

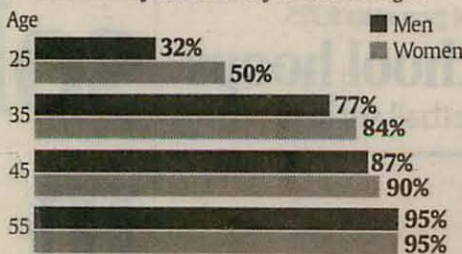
Americans are marrying later in life. Median age of men and women when married for the first time:



The percentage of married people who reach these anniversaries:



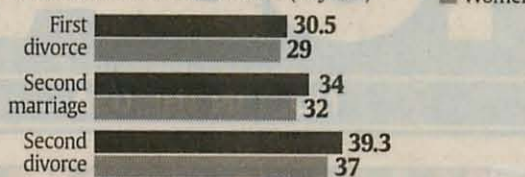
The percentage of men and women who have ever been married by the time they reach these ages:



The percentage of the population that is divorced:



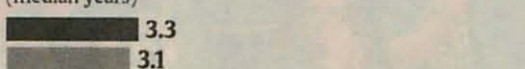
Median age for men and women at the time of these divorce-related events: (in years)



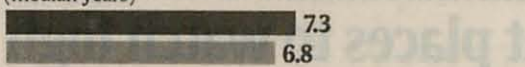
How long first marriages last if they end in divorce: (median years)



How long people wait to marry after their first divorce: (median years)



How long second marriages last if they end in divorce: (median years)



Whom children under age 18 live with:

