The Heritage Foundation

2026 INDEX OF CULTURE & OPPORTUNITY

edited by
Roger Severino,
Jonathan Abbamonte,
and Rachel Sheffield

with a foreword by Senator Mike Lee

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Foreword

Centuries ago, the fastest form of long-distance communication was a letter delivered by horseback. Today, people on opposite sides of the world can send messages almost instantaneously, and ideas that once took centuries to spread now circulate in seconds. This transformation does more than accelerate communication—it reshapes how people think, interact, and organize their societies. In other words, technology doesn't just transmit culture; it actively molds it. The cultural power of technology is undeniable.

The same can be said of the economy. Economic outcomes are deeply influenced by cultural norms and social structures. For example, the strongest predictor of whether an American child is poor is not wage growth or the labor participation rate, but whether that child's father is present in the home. This suggests that policies encouraging stable family structures—such as marriage and childbirth within marriage—can play a significant role in reducing childhood poverty. More broadly, when a culture does not respect basic norms like property rights, markets struggle and often fail. Just as technology reshapes culture, culture in turn shapes economic outcomes, making the two inseparable.

Because culture, the economy, and technology share a mutual fate, their interaction must be measured and analyzed. That task, however, is not an easy one. Economic indicators—per capita income, inflation, GDP—are commonplace. Similarly, with tech, it is easy to track computer processing speed, bandwidth and latency in wireless networks, and thousands of other tech metrics. But culture isn't so easy to measure.

So, how do we measure *cultural* health? The purpose of The Heritage Foundation's *Index of Culture and Opportunity* is to answer that question by measuring and assessing the progress or decline of American culture and by tracking key indicators that are proxies for cultural health.

Behind the choice of measures lies the conviction that culture and economic opportunity are inseparable. Simply put, a healthy culture—stable families, healthy children, vibrant religious and virtue-forming institutions and practices—has economic benefits as profound as limited government, market-driven prices, and rule of law. So, then, in the long run, the health of our economy depends greatly upon the health of our culture, and vice versa.

It would be nice if a healthy culture always gave rise to tech innovation and economic growth, and if these, in turn, always strengthened culture, but the real world is often messy. Wealth is not always paired with virtue, and technology, even at its best, has both an upside and a downside. Thomas Sowell's dictum, "There are no solutions; only tradeoffs," certainly applies. A high-speed internet can deliver free and engaging math tutorials to homeschool families. It can also deliver toxic ideas—from gender ideology to racism—and addictive pornography to vulnerable teens.

Thus, the effect of technology on culture can be counterintuitive. Take, for instance, the decline in teen sexual activity since the 1980s. In isolation, it's good news that fewer teens, on average, are having casual sex. But this trend has little to do with a growing commitment to chastity. It's likely due to the debilitating forces of social media and online porn, which are fueling an epidemic of teen loneliness and eroding traditional dating norms. Social isolation is hardly the best treatment for promiscuity.

Perhaps widespread prosperity and vice can coexist for a time. Maybe per capita income and tech innovation could surge along with, say, the abortion rate and the rate of out-of-wedlock births. But the wiser bet is that, in the long run, the culture and the economy will stand and fall together. The erosion of marriage and religious observance mirrors persistent economic ills such as rising government spending and declining fertility rates. Fatherless homes lead not just to more crime, but also to sicker kids.

Obviously, the decline in religious attendance—from 35 percent weekly in 1975 to 22 percent in 2022—signals a broader drift away from the Biblical roots that once grounded American culture. What may be less obvious is that that decline has almost surely harmed the stability of families, the mental health of children, and even total fertility rates.

Yet, amidst these challenges, there are glimmers of hope. The recent surge in school choice programs in the states is a shining example. Yes, this is largely due to the collapse of trust in public institutions, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns and mandates. Still, greater choice for families introduces market competition where it is most needed. It also allows parents to tailor learning to their worldview and to their children's needs.

Volunteerism, a cornerstone of American civic life, also remains robust. The 2024 flood disaster in North Carolina exposed the inadequacy of FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but it also created space for thousands of Americans to help victims—many of whom were strangers. This taught us that societies left free to forge bonds of mutual affection will do so by creating strong neighborhoods, virtuous friendships, and tightly knit families. Government programs, contrarily, often create dependency and more easily erode the cultural fabric.

A third sign of hope is border security. The data included here reveals the near collapse of border security during the previous Administration. That trend has radically reversed with a change of policy under President Trump.

Finally, the rise in heart disease, obesity, and diabetes shows that Americans, who spend more on "health care" than any other country, are in the throes of a chronic disease epidemic. Thankfully, this crisis is now at the center of public concern, and the leaders of our federal health agencies now seem sincerely committed to tackling it.

The *2026 Index of Culture and Opportunity* is not a random collection of disparate data points. Rather, it is a carefully prepared mosaic of key indicators that show where policymaking should go. Legislators and thought leaders would do well to discern in these pages the interrelated trends that can guide their future choices. Whether fixing the marriage penalties embedded in our welfare programs, healing the root causes of declining fertility, or considering whether the rise of religious "nones" may erode the "free exercise of religion" guaranteed by the First Amendment, cultural renewal demands that both citizens and public servants think clearly, and act boldly. But in order to fix or improve our culture, we must first measure and take stock. This *Index* does exactly that. I hope readers find it as illuminating as I have.

Mike Lee
U.S. Senator
May 2026

Executive Summary

The *Index of Culture and Opportunity* measures the health of American culture and the vitality of economic opportunity by tracking long-term trends across key social, moral, public health, and economic indicators. Culture shapes the habits, expectations, and norms that influence whether individuals flourish, families remain stable, communities are strengthened by a vibrant civic life, and society supports individual freedom, free enterprise, limited government, and productive lives. Opportunity encompasses the means by which individuals can exercise their unalienable rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness and their ability to strive to achieve their full potential unencumbered by government. The *Index* tracks several indicators that are key to gauging social and economic changes in the United States over time and provides expert commentary to explain the context and causes of these trends, what they mean for American society, and their implications for our future.

The *2026 Index* shows that many indicators of culture and opportunity continue to move in the wrong direction even as some areas, such as education choice, show improvement. Family formation has weakened, religious participation has declined, and social disorder remains elevated. Trends in crime, fertility, labor force participation, and youth development suggest that cultural erosion carries substantial social and economic costs that should serve as warning signs for policymakers.

How We Track

Each indicator tracked in the *Index* is represented by a time series that shows how the particular social or economic factor has changed over time. In most cases, the indicator is represented by a single time series, but in some cases, it has proved instructive to disaggregate the data by demographic groupings or discrete classifications. The time series for each indicator include historical data up to the most recent data that are publicly available at the time this *Index* was published. The data for each indicator are illustrated in chart visualizations at the beginning of each chapter.

The *Index* focuses on the long-term trends for indicators rather than short-term fluctuations. Year-to-year changes can be informative, but many cultural and social indicators evolve gradually and are influenced by such factors as demographic change, economic cycles, and policy shifts, and without historical context, it is difficult to ascertain whether one-year changes represent meaningful significant shifts from the status quo or random variation. For most indicators where the data come from a nationally representative survey or probabilistic estimates, confidence intervals are provided to help the reader to see where the time series trends have meaningfully changed on the order of statistical significance and where changes are not statistically different.

Data for each indicator are drawn from regularly updated, nationally recognized sources including federal statistical agencies, government surveys, and other authoritative data providers.

Commentary and Interpretation

A defining feature of the *Index* is the expert commentary that accompanies each indicator.

Contributors are Heritage Foundation scholars, policy analysts, and subject-matter experts who explain why each indicator matters and place the data in their cultural, economic, and institutional context. The commentary does not merely describe trends; it also examines their implications for opportunity, human flourishing, and the future of American society.

What We Track

The *Index* monitors trends across nine key categories that measure the status of culture and opportunity in America:

- **Family Formation and Stability.** Marriage as a share of adult life continues to decline, and a large percentage of children are born outside of marriage. Divorces have fallen from their historic peak, but this is largely because fewer Americans marry in the first place. The rise of nonmarital childbearing and multi-partner fertility has contributed to greater instability for children and families. These trends are closely linked to worse outcomes for educational attainment, workforce participation, and long-term economic mobility.

- **Culture of Life.** America faces a deepening demographic challenge. Fertility has remained below replacement for decades and has fallen to historically low levels in recent years. At the same time, abortion rates have risen both because of cultural changes and because of regulatory changes that have expanded access to chemical abortion drugs even in states that legally protect the unborn. Persistent low fertility combined with declining marriage threatens long-term population growth, economic dynamism, and generational renewal.

- **Youth Development.** The data on teen sexual activity, cyberbullying, and tech usage underscore the pressures facing younger Americans. Technology has amplified both opportunity and risk, often weakening parental authority and social norms that once guided adolescent development. These trends raise concerns about the formation of the next generation, civic responsibility, and social development over the life course.

- **Religious and Civic Participation.** Religious practice and civic engagement continue to decline across much of American society, weakening the institutions that historically foster social trust, moral formation, and community cohesion. Fewer Americans attend religious services regularly, and charitable giving has diminished. These institutions play a critical role in transmitting norms of responsibility, service, and mutual obligation—norms that support family stability, law-abiding behavior, and productive citizenship. As religious life and civic life recede, social isolation increases and informal support networks erode, leaving individuals more vulnerable and communities less resilient.

- **Social Disorder.** Drug use, homelessness, and crime remain serious concerns. Illicit drug use among adults has increased over the past two decades, reflecting a cultural shift that treats substance abuse with greater tolerance and less stigma. Violent and nonviolent crime have declined substantially over the past three decades, but a recent uptick in crime has been fueled by Soros-funded rogue prosecutors, defunding of police departments, and demonization of the police. Recent sharp increases in illegal immigration and homelessness further strain communities and public resources and indicate that many are being left behind.

- **Health and Social Well-Being.** Indicators of physical and mental health reveal growing challenges. Depression, loneliness, obesity, and chronic disease affect a large and rising share of Americans.

Declining social connection—reflected in reduced religious participation and increased isolation—has compounded these problems. Cultural factors, including weakened family and community ties, play a central role in shaping health outcomes.

- **Education.** Rising high school graduation rates mask serious concerns about academic readiness and skill development. At the same time, labor force participation—especially among younger Americans—has declined substantially from historic peaks. A bright spot has been widespread expansion of school choice, which enables parents to leave failing schools and give their children an education that matches their values.

- **Freedom and Opportunity.** The growth of government spending has imposed a heavier tax burden on American taxpayers, and ever-increasing government regulation weighs down small businesses and undermines entrepreneurship. The increased role of government has had distortionary and inflationary effects on the economy. Higher housing costs and lower workforce productivity growth limit upward mobility and impair the sense that Americans can afford to start and raise their families.

- **Poverty and Dependence.** Material living standards have improved in many respects, but long-term dependence on government assistance remains elevated, particularly among working-age adults. The persistence of poverty and reliance on transfer programs with built-in marriage penalties are closely linked to declining marriage rates, reduced labor force participation, and weakened expectations around work and self-sufficiency. When employment, family formation, and community support break down, public assistance increasingly substitutes for institutions that once helped individuals to move toward independence. Sustained opportunity depends not only on economic growth, but also on a culture that reinforces work, responsibility, and pathways out of dependence.

Why It Matters

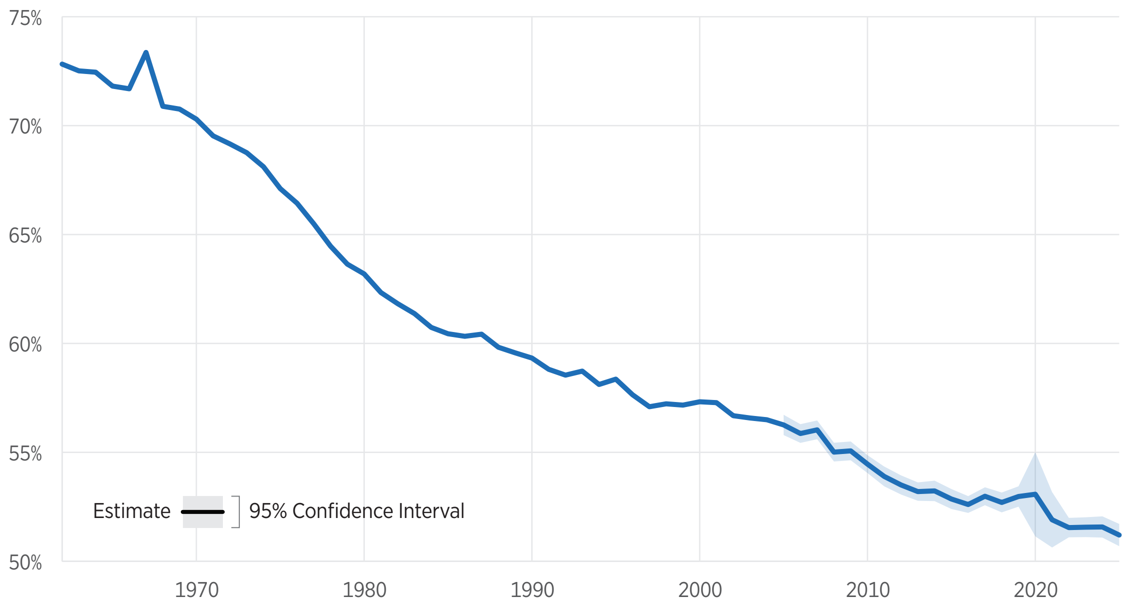
The state of our nation's culture has broad implications for socioeconomic outcomes, the vitality of civic life, and the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and society at large. **Law and public policy alone cannot sustain liberty, opportunity, the rule of law, and the very principles on which this nation was founded if the cultural and moral foundations of our republic erode.** As John Adams famously wrote, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Stable families, the protection of human rights, the cultivation of morals, participation in religious and civic institutions, the formation of our youth, and a culture of personal responsibility are essential complements to sound economic and social policies. If American opportunity is to be revitalized, the cultural conditions that allow individuals and communities to flourish must be restored and strengthened.

Cultivating a society in which opportunity flourishes is also essential to securing liberty, free enterprise, limited government, wealth, well-being, and the ability to achieve the American Dream. True freedom comes with the ability to achieve one's potential through personal commitment. When families are burdened by taxation, held back by excessive government regulations, trapped in their conditions by government handouts, limited by poor health, constrained by inflation and the rising costs of living, or confined in their opportunities because they lack access to meaningful work or quality education, individuals are not fully free to pursue their dreams, build wealth for their families, or live truly fulfilling lives. If America is to remain a nation where freedom and wealth prosper, opportunity must be fostered and preserved both now and for the next generation.

Section 1:

Family Formation and Stability

Percentage of Adults Ages 18 and Older Who Are Married



SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement* as distributed by IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota, https://www.ipums.org. For full citation, see appendix.

American Marriage: From "Early and Often" to "Less and Later"

Delano Squires

American family life has changed significantly in recent decades, largely because men and women are delaying marriage or no longer marrying at all. The chart above shows that roughly half of American adults are married, down from more than 70 percent in 1960. This is one reason why the percentage of American households composed of married couples has decreased from 74 percent in 1960 to 47 percent today.[1] A Pew Research Center study released in November 2019 found that more adults ages 18 to 44 had cohabited (59 percent) than had been married (50 percent).[2]

One reason why fewer married couples are living with their children is that adults are waiting longer to marry. The median age at first marriage in 1970 was 23 for men and 21 for women.[3] Today, it is 30 for men and 29 for women.[4]

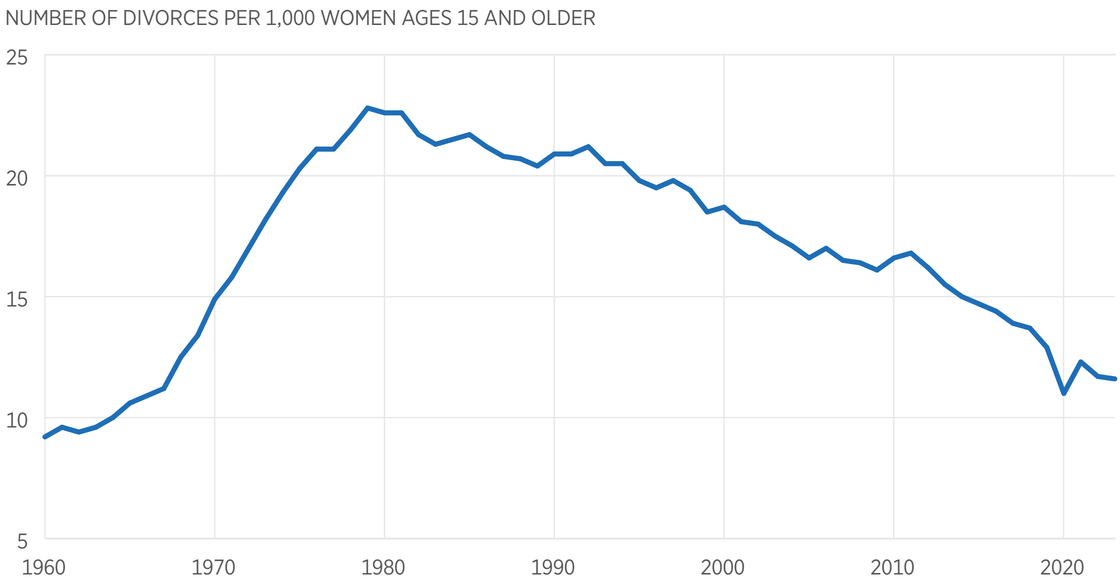
Men and women in previous generations married young, and their relationship was the foundation of a life built together. This is what social scientists often call the "cornerstone" model of marriage.[5] The age of first marriage has increased in recent decades because men and women often delay marriage until they achieve several personal and professional goals, including advanced degrees and home ownership. This approach is known as the "capstone" model of marriage.[6]

Changes in marriage rates and family formation norms also affect children. Roughly 40 percent of American children are born to unmarried parents.[7] Additionally, the United

States leads the world in the percentage of children who live with a single parent (23 percent).[8] While these statistics often prompt policymakers to extol the importance of involved fathers, the truth is that there is no way to promote pro-family policy without addressing the decline in marriage.

The family is the foundation of civil society, and the cornerstone of the family is marriage—the union of one man and one woman. A nation that rejects the importance of stable marriages and strong families weakens its ability to pass on the blessings of prosperity to future generations. This is the reality that Americans face today, and the response to the decline in marriage will determine the health and survival of the American Republic.

Divorce Rate



SOURCES: National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement* as distributed by IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota, https://www.ipums.org. For full citation, see appendix.

What the Decline in Divorce Says About Modern Marriage

Delano Squires

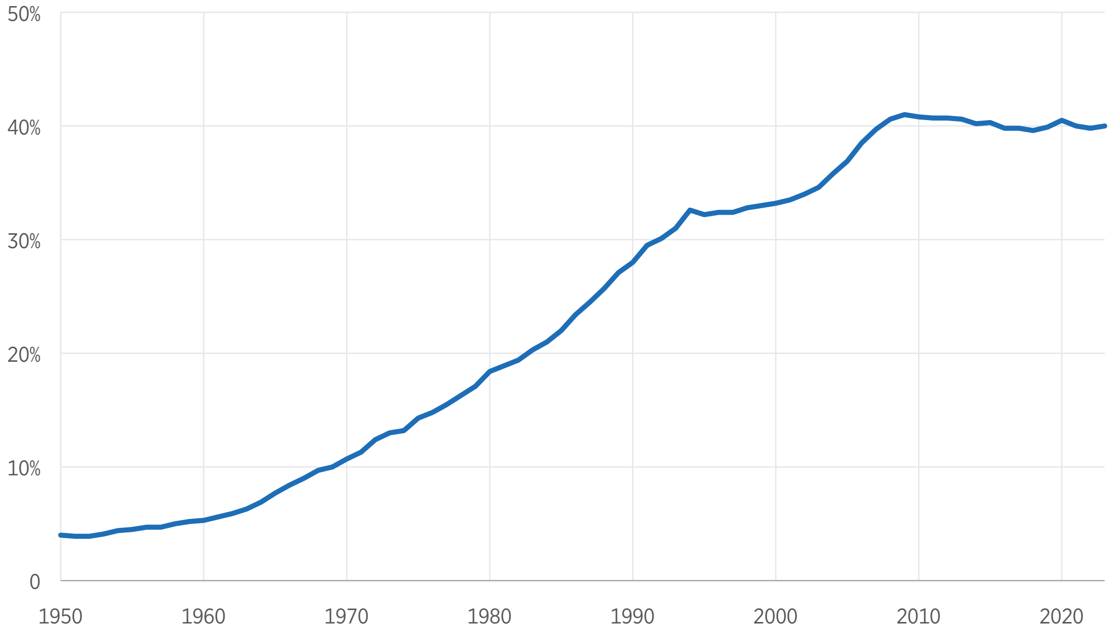
One of the most common beliefs about American family life is that half of all marriages end in divorce. This idea likely began when divorce rates increased dramatically in the 1970s after the passage of no-fault divorce laws.[9] There is no denying that divorce has become more common since then, but rates have actually decreased since their high in the 1980s. The chart above shows that the rate of women experiencing a divorce was 9.2 per 1,000 married women in 1960.[10] It reached 23 per 1,000 married women in 1980 but decreased to approximately 12 per 1,000 married women by 2022.[11]

Divorce rates have declined since the 1980s partly because marriage is on the decline. In 1970, married couples comprised 70 percent of all American households.[12] Today, married couples comprise less than half of American households (47 percent).[13]

The most common reasons that people cite for divorce include lack of commitment, infidelity, high levels of conflict, drinking and drug use, growing apart, and domestic abuse.[14] Research suggests, however, that about half of divorces are to couples who were in low-distress marriages.[15] Factors associated with a reduced likelihood of divorce include not cohabiting before marriage (or at least not before engagement), being actively involved in a religious community, and having children only after marriage.[16]

Any news suggesting that marriages are becoming more stable is a positive sign for families and policymakers. Given the self-selecting nature of marriage today, however, divorce data must be analyzed within the context of broader cultural changes in American family life.

Percentage of Live Births to Unmarried Women



SOURCES: National Center for Health Statistics and ChildStats.gov. For full citation, see appendix.

The "Carriage Before Marriage" Trend: Reversing Cultural Norms

Delano Squires

Since the 1960s, policy debates about the rise in out-of-wedlock births have focused largely on teenage mothers and low-income women in large cities. That is no longer the case. The chart above shows that 40 percent of all American children are born to unmarried parents—a significant increase from 5 percent in 1960.[17]

Although unwed childbearing is common across all racial groups, 53 percent of Hispanic children and 70 percent of black children are born outside marriage compared to 13 percent of Asian children and 28 percent of white children.[18] The disparities across education levels are even greater. Approximately 90 percent of births to highly educated women are within marriage,[19] and most children born to women without a high level of education are born to unwed mothers. Specifically, two-thirds of births to mothers with low levels of education are outside marriage, and 53 percent of births to women with moderate levels of education are outside marriage.[20]

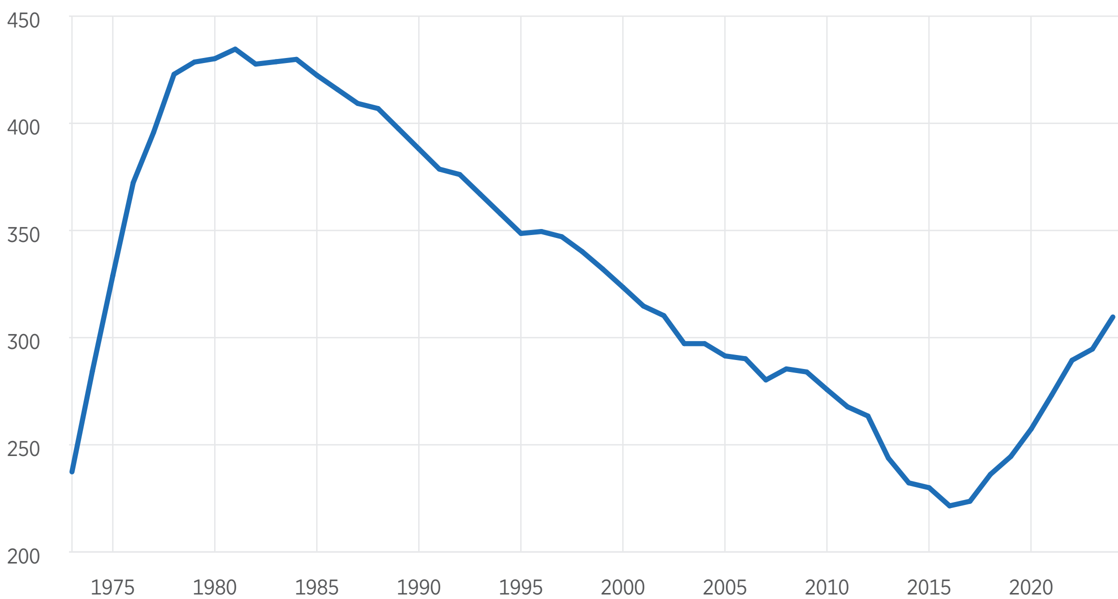
Another reason for the increase in nonmarital births is the steep decline in "shotgun marriages," the post-conception unions that occurred after a couple became pregnant but before the baby was born. According to research from the U.S. Congress's Joint Economic Committee, 43 percent of births in the early 1960s that began from nonmarital pregnancies occurred to women who married shortly before the birth took place. By the early 2000s, the "shotgun marriage rate" had dropped all the way to 9 percent.[21]

The increase in nonmarital births, coupled with a decrease in marriage, has also led to more people having children with multiple partners ("multi-partner fertility"). According to a 2021 U.S. Census Bureau report, 18 percent of American parents have a child with more than one partner.[22] About one in four parents that have more than two children have multi-partner fertility.[23]

The family formation sequence that served as a cultural norm for decades can be summed up by the popular nursery rhyme, "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage!" Regrettably, because of shifting social norms around sex, relationships, and family, that is no longer the case. It is clear that for an increasing number of couples today, babies are welcome, but marriage is optional.

Section 2:
A Culture of Life

Induced Abortions per 1,000 Live Births



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCES: Guttmacher Institute, National Center for Health Statistics, and author's calculations. For full citation, see appendix.

The Abortion Ratio

Jonathan Abbamonte

After declining consistently for most of the past 40 years, the incidence and prevalence of abortion in the United States are tragically on the rise again. Between 1983 and 2017, the number of induced abortions nationally fell almost every year. The abortion rate and abortion ratio also fell consistently over this period. Since 2017, however, the prevalence of abortion has been on the rise.

The chart above shows the abortion ratio in the United States since 1973 when *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in all 50 states.[24] The abortion ratio is the number of abortions per 1,000 live births. It tells us approximately how common abortion is relative to the level of fertility in any given year. Ratios for the years between 1995 and 2022 when the Guttmacher Institute did not conduct an Abortion Provider Census are estimated using a cross-validation selected least angle regression using state-level data reported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as predictors.[25]

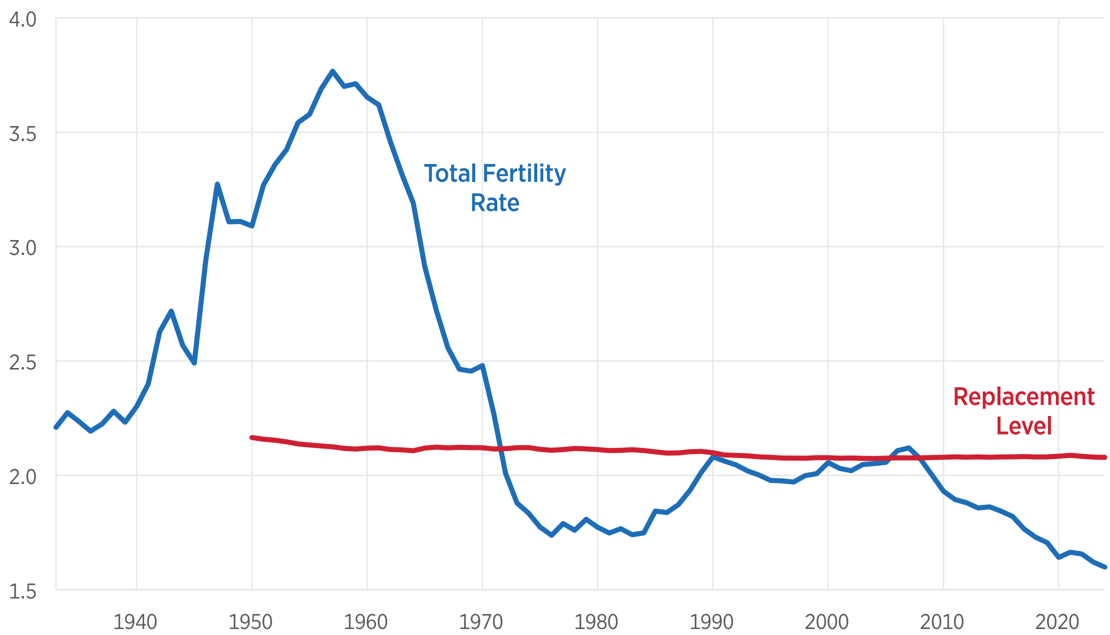
According to the Guttmacher Institute, there were an estimated 1,123,700 abortions in the United States in 2024,[26] the highest count on record since 2009. The abortion ratio in 2024 was 310, which means that there were 310 abortions for every 1,000 babies born alive that year. The last time the abortion ratio was that high was in 2002. National vital statistics show that the number of stillbirths per 1,000 live births has declined since 2016,[27] and birth rates have continued to fall every year except in 2021. As a result, it is likely that the rise in the abortion ratio since 2016 is an indication that women are increasingly opting for abortion when they become pregnant.

The incidence of abortion has risen in recent years even as many states have increasingly adopted robust laws protecting the unborn. In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the central holding of *Roe v. Wade* in its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, returning to the states the ability to legislate on abortion.[28] By the end of 2023, 15 states had banned abortion completely at some point, and an additional five states had restricted abortion to six to 12 weeks gestation. Numerous studies have found clear evidence that pro-life laws are effective in reducing abortions and saving lives.[29] Why, then, is the prevalence of abortion nationally rising when so much progress has been made at the state level?

There appear to be two main reasons. The first, hyped by the fearmongering of the media and politicians, is that many Americans have bought into the lie that women would die if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned and abortion were made illegal. The Left had been hammering this message for years before *Dobbs* because abortion advocates could read the writing on the wall as states enacted more and more robust laws protecting the unborn. The most recent polls show that the percentage of Americans who think abortion should be legal under any circumstances is at an all-time high,[30] and a majority of Americans now believe that abortion is morally acceptable.[31] But despite the alarmism about women dying as a result of abortion bans, maternal mortality in the U.S. has declined every year since *Dobbs*.[32]

The second reason for the recent rise in abortions is that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has significantly loosened access to mifepristone (the "abortion pill"). Before 2016, the FDA had required abortionists to dispense the abortion pill in person in a clinic setting, and abortionists were required to follow up with in-office visits both three and 14 days later to ensure that there were no serious or life-threatening complications. After 2016, the number of required office visits was reduced from three to one. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the FDA further permitted mifepristone to be dispensed through the mail and eliminated any requirement that the woman seeking abortion have in-person contact with the abortionist. Abortion pills can now easily be sent anywhere in the United States, making it easier than ever before to obtain an abortion. The Comstock Act prohibits the mailing of any drugs or devices with the intention of inducing an abortion via the U.S. Postal Service,[33] but the Biden Administration failed to enforce this law. Until states and the federal government can stop the mailing of abortion-inducing drugs and reinstate the FDA's former safety restrictions on the abortion pill, the prevalence of abortion is not likely to decline significantly anytime soon.

Total Fertility Rate



SOURCES: National Center for Health Statistics and United Nations Population Division. For full citation, see appendix.

The Total Fertility Rate

Jonathan Abbamonte

The United States is on an unsustainable demographic path. For decades, fertility in the U.S. has been below replacement, defined as the level of fertility that is theoretically necessary for a generation to replace itself. If fertility in the U.S. remains below replacement and immigration levels are insufficient to bridge the gap, the population of the United States will begin to shrink.[34]

The chart above shows how America's total fertility rate has changed over time. The red line shows the estimated replacement fertility rate. The total fertility rate is defined as the number of children that women on average are on pace to have by the end of their childbearing years if current age-specific fertility rates remain fixed over time. Because age-specific fertility rates have changed dramatically over the past several decades, the total fertility rate does not necessarily reflect the actual average number of children women end up having during their reproductive years. Nevertheless, it is a useful measure of fertility insofar as it helps us to gauge prevailing age-specific fertility rates in the aggregate.

Fertility rates in the United States fell precipitously after the Baby Boom and have never recovered. The total fertility rate peaked in 1957 at 3.77 children per woman, but by 1972, it had fallen below replacement. Since 1972, the total fertility rate has peaked above replacement only once, from 2006–2007. Since the start of the Great Recession in 2007, the total fertility rate has fallen every year except in 2014 and 2021. In 2023, it fell to the lowest level on record: 1.62 children per woman.

The total U.S. fertility rate has declined because women have been postponing births.

Over the past few decades, fertility has declined significantly for women under 30 and has increased substantially for women over 30.[35] There are many reasons why women are postponing fertility. For many, the reasons are financial.[36] Others are related to not having found the right person to marry, to a desire to delay marriage, or to massive shifts in the culture that have changed what Americans value and how they spend their time.

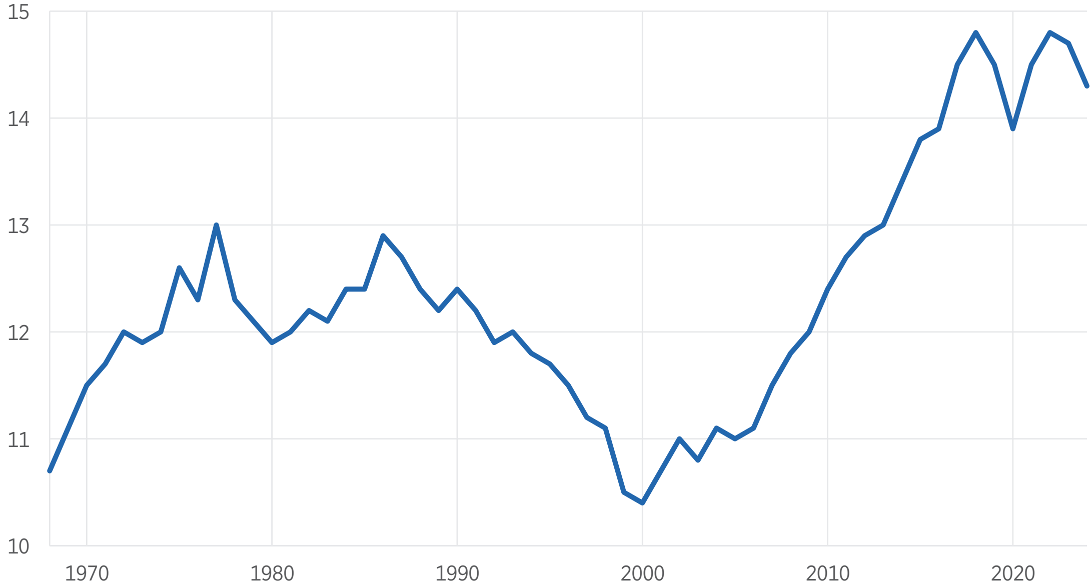
Young adults, especially women, are spending more years in education to remain competitive in an increasingly specialized and technical skills-based market.[37] Young adults also face mounting student debt, rising rent and housing costs, and diminished wealth on average compared to prior generations[38] and increasingly tend to prioritize becoming established in a career before getting married and having children. Many of today's young adults experienced the divorce of their parents while growing up, and this has made them more wary of entering into and committing to marriage.[39]

Massive shifts in cultural values have also made Americans more accepting of premarital sex and cohabitation. The increasing prevalence of cohabitation and longer time spent dating are leading young people to delay marriage to later in life, and many are forgoing marriage entirely. Research has shown that, on average, Americans who cohabit are spending longer in cohabitation and are less likely to transition to marriage than they were several decades ago.[40] Moreover, because fertility rates in the U.S. are higher for married women than for unmarried women,[41] longer time spent unmarried translates to fewer births.

Although the total fertility rate has continued to plummet since the Great Recession, the desire for children surprisingly has not. After the Baby Boom, Americans' ideal number of children fell with the fertility rate, but since 1980, the ideal number of children has remained more or less unchanged at around or just above 2.5 children.[42] The sizeable and growing gap between Americans' ideal number of children and the total fertility rate is an indication that Americans want to have more children than they are on pace for having. Today's adults are having fewer children not necessarily because they do not want them, but rather because they cannot attain them with the priorities they have chosen and the financial difficulties they face.

Crude Suicide Rate

SUICIDES PER 100,000 POPULATION



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For full citation, see appendix.

Human Connection in the Battle Against Suicide

Rachel Sheffield

Suicide rates have increased dramatically during the past couple of decades in nearly every age group with a particularly large spike among teens. Suicide also has increased substantially among middle-aged adults, especially since the Great Recession. On a more positive note, suicide rates among many older age groups are lower than they were in the 1980s and 1990s, although suicides among the most elderly (ages 85 and older) have spiked since the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.[43]

During the COVID pandemic, something interesting occurred. Overall, people's reported feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide increased, but actual suicides declined noticeably.[44] Coming out of the pandemic, suicide rates returned to their upward climb, particularly among teens, but for a short period, things had taken a turn for the better.

Scholars have pointed out that suicides likely dropped during the pandemic because people had fewer opportunities to carry out their self-demise. More people were at home with family members or roommates and thus were under closer surveillance. Even though overall mental health declined during the pandemic, simply being around others more of the time seemed to decrease the likelihood of suicide.

On the other hand, among the oldest adults, rates of suicide jumped during COVID. This group is the most likely of any age group to live alone and thus may have been more socially isolated during the pandemic. Opportunities for interaction with people outside the home decreased for everyone during the pandemic, but decreased social interaction likely impacted the elderly more than it did other groups because of their frequency of living alone and greater reliance on people outside the home for care.[45]

The natural experiment of the pandemic shows how people being together (or in some cases not being together) may affect suicide rates. Today, Americans spend less time together than they did in previous generations, and social capital has frayed, particularly in the most vulnerable communities.[46]

Less time together obviously is not the only factor driving suicide. Scholars point to the rise of smartphone use and social media as a potential cause of the drastic rise in teen depression and suicide rates in the past several years.[47] Technology can also play into poorer mental health because of increased social comparison and more negative interactions.[48]

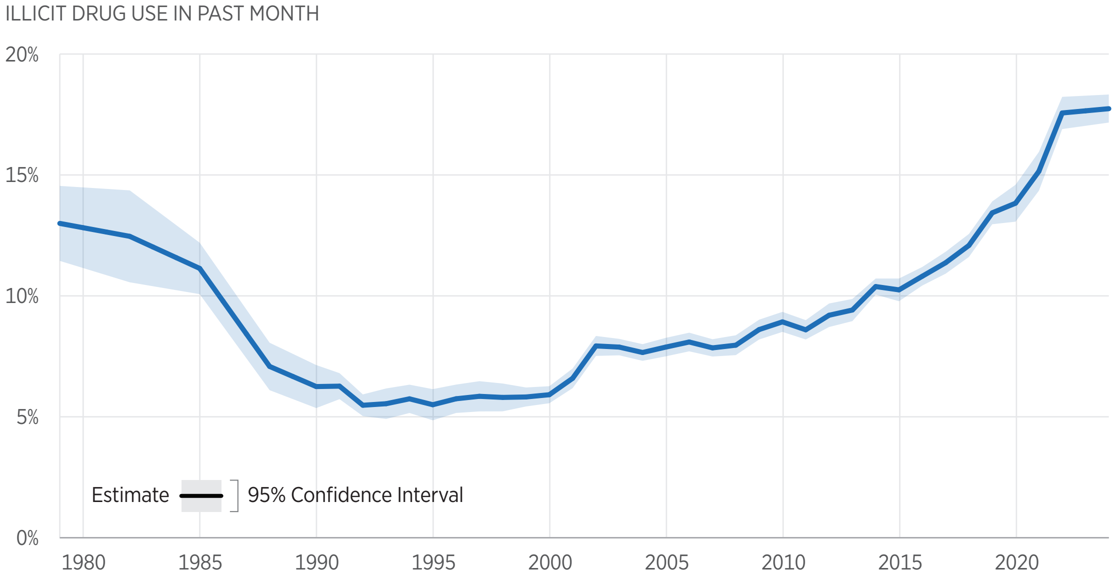
Suicide rates among middle-aged adults accelerated over a longer period that began around the time of the Great Recession (although they had already been increasing for a few years before the recession).[49] The decline in labor force participation among prime-age men has been on a downward trend for decades, but the Great Recession dealt a further blow, indicating that unemployment may be a contributing factor.[50]

Another factor contributing to suicide rates may be the increased momentum for legalization of assisted suicide.[51] This movement undermines the value of human life and teaches the falsehood that allowing people to end their lives is compassionate and dignifying. These types of cultural messages may increase acceptance of suicide even if people don't avail themselves of assisted suicide.

The U.S. has a long way to go in addressing its suicide crisis. Increasing opportunities for families and neighbors to have meaningful interaction, appropriately monitoring and limiting screens and social media use for youth, helping people to reconnect to the workforce, and pushing back against assisted suicide can all be effective in fighting the tragedy of suicide.

Section 3:
Social Disorder

Illicit Drug Use Among Adults Ages 18 Years and Older



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)*.
For full citation, see appendix.

Avoiding the Drug Addiction Trap

Paul J. Larkin

Despite the widespread knowledge that illegal drugs are addictive, life-worsening, and potentially deadly, their use by adults has been increasing for more than two decades. (See chart above.) Part of the problem is that American culture does not treat illicit drug use with the same disregard (to say nothing of contempt) that we now regularly and widely attribute to smoking tobacco. We have known since the mid-1960s (if not earlier) that smoking burning carbon compounds can cause emphysema, lung disease, cancer, and preventable deaths.[52]

Ironically and dangerously, however, our nation has not yet widely adopted the same disapproving or contemptuous attitude toward smoking botanical cannabis. On the contrary, since 1996, a majority of states—willing to be duped into believing that cannabis is a harmless divertissement or potential pain-relieving drug, or hungering for promised tax revenues that cannabis legalization is supposed to deliver—have adopted medical or recreational cannabis programs that allow individuals to purchase that drug at local stores.[53]

This phenomenon has arisen even though federal law continues to treat the cultivation, sale, and possession of cannabis as a federal crime; even though some cannabis users will "drive while stoned" and thereby put at risk the safety and lives of innocent third parties; and even though scientific research has shown increasingly that smoking cannabis—particularly today's version, which is far more powerful than grandaddy's ganja—is harmful physically and psychologically. The message that this sends to minors and adults is that we are not serious about protecting their health and are willing to be hypocritical when it is profitable to do so. That attitude is proof of the aphorism that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue.

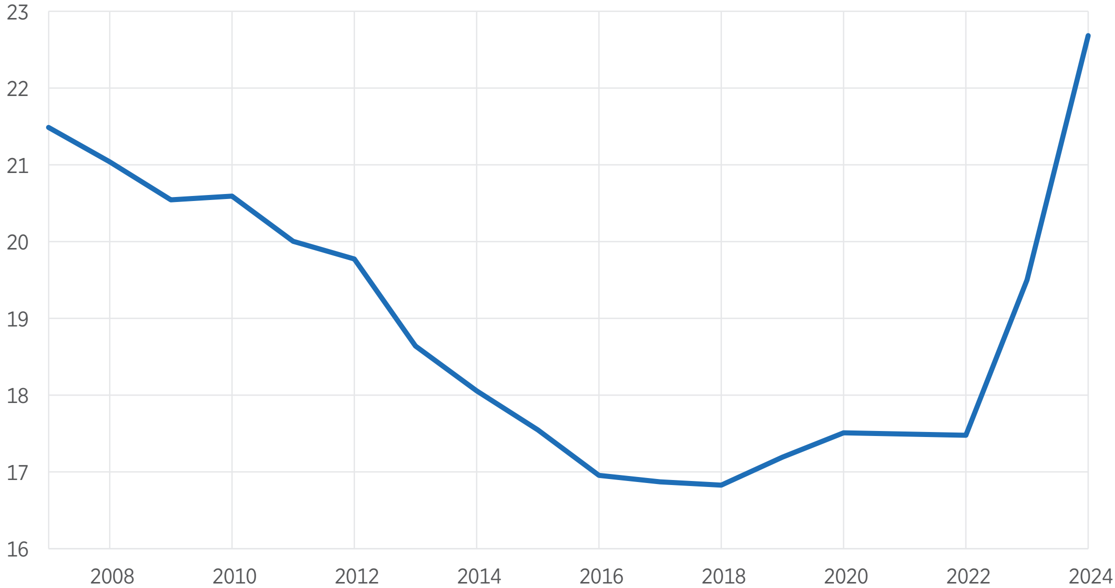
But we have a problem even if we put cannabis aside. The Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations use pill presses illicitly to manufacture "look-alike" drugs that resemble lawfully manufactured and sold pharmaceuticals with legitimate uses.[54] For example, Adderall is used to treat Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder, but it is also used at times by students who need to remain awake to cram for a final exam or write a term paper. Sadly, students who obtain those drugs over the internet might be getting a pill that resembles a legitimate pharmaceutical but is full of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid 50–100 times more powerful than morphine. As a result, students who would never knowingly take a nonprescription opioid wind up unknowingly ingesting an exceptionally powerful one that can cause a fatal overdose.[55]

Supply-side approaches to illicit drug use, such as law enforcement and border protection, are necessary to fight our drug problem, but they need to be combined with demand-side efforts.[56] For example, we need to change the culture from one of approbation or professed ignorance of (or hypocrisy toward) illicit drug use to one of dissuading minors from even starting down that road. As Dr. Robert DuPont, a former "Drug Czar" and expert on all things involving drugs, has found, people who do not use tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs before age 21 are very highly unlikely to do so thereafter.[57] This is not to say that anyone who does is destined to become a 21st century Julian Wells,[58] but it does mean that your chances of succumbing to that fate are far less likely. We need well-known figures to endorse opposition to drug use. Just persuading Denzel Washington and Taylor Swift to oppose it would save thousands, if not millions, of lives because drugs that you do not take cannot cause an overdose and cannot kill you.

The era of recreational drug use is over: Fentanyl killed it.[59] We shouldn't let it do the same to us.

Homelessness Rate

NUMBER OF HOMELESS PERSONS PER 10,000 POPULATION



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Census Bureau. For full citation, see appendix.

The Surge in Homelessness: Moving from "Housing First" to Upward Mobility

Rachel Sheffield

Homelessness has been climbing upward in the United States for several years, but 2024 saw the largest jump in homelessness since the federal government began to collect data on this issue: an increase of 18 percent from the previous year.[60] The second highest recorded increase was between 2022 and 2023 when homelessness grew by 12 percent.

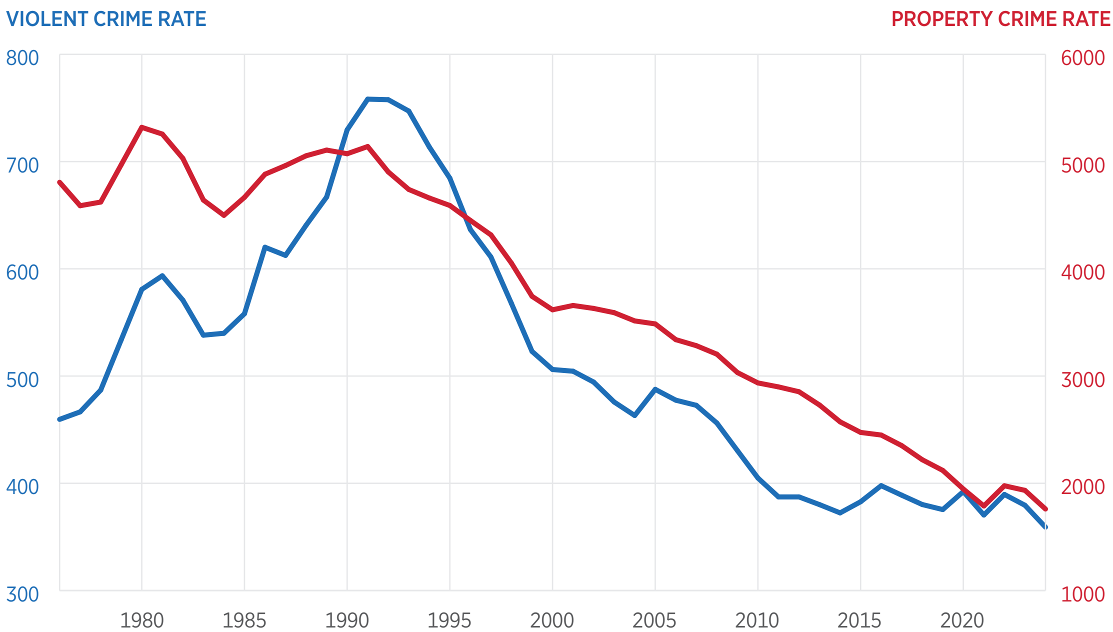
The rise in homelessness in 2024 was due largely to an influx of illegal immigrants into homeless shelters, particularly in New York, Illinois, and Massachusetts,[61] but a porous border is not the only factor driving homelessness. Stories of soaring homelessness in several U.S. cities have been in the headlines for years.[62]

Unfortunately, the federal government's policy approach to homelessness, called "Housing First," fails to address the underlying causes of homelessness and poverty. In fact, the government's approach stands in the way of efforts that work to address deeper human challenges. It prioritizes programs that provide permanent housing without barriers to entry and penalizes programs for the homeless that require people to engage in activities like drug rehabilitation, work training, or mental health treatment.[63]

Housing First not only fails to help people overcome problems like drug addiction, unemployment, and mental illness. It also is a very costly approach that fails to reduce overall rates of homelessness.[64]

Policymakers must see beyond material need if they are to address homelessness effectively. They should recognize the spiritual, emotional, and social needs of human beings and focus on "treatment first" programs that pair material help with programs like job training, drug rehabilitation, and mental health treatment. Helping our brothers and sisters rise from homelessness and poverty will require creative strategies and thoughtful leaders. Beginning with a correct view of the problem is a crucial first step.

Violent Crime and Property Crime Rates per 100,000 Population



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation. For full citation, see appendix.

The Price of Leniency: How Cities Lost and Are Reclaiming Public Safety

Charles D. "Cully" Stimson

A government's first duty is to protect its citizens. The federal government plays a key role in fighting crime, but states and localities prosecute 90 percent of crimes across the country. The 50 state legislatures, 3,000-plus sheriffs, 18,000 police departments, and 2,300 elected district attorneys all play a major role in protecting us.[65]

Many of us take public safety for granted, largely because most of us have not been the victims of violent crime. Violent crime is geographically and demographically concentrated in the inner cities across this country.[66] Minorities suffer the brunt of violent crime.[67] Nonviolent crime like shoplifting and theft is spread more evenly across the country.

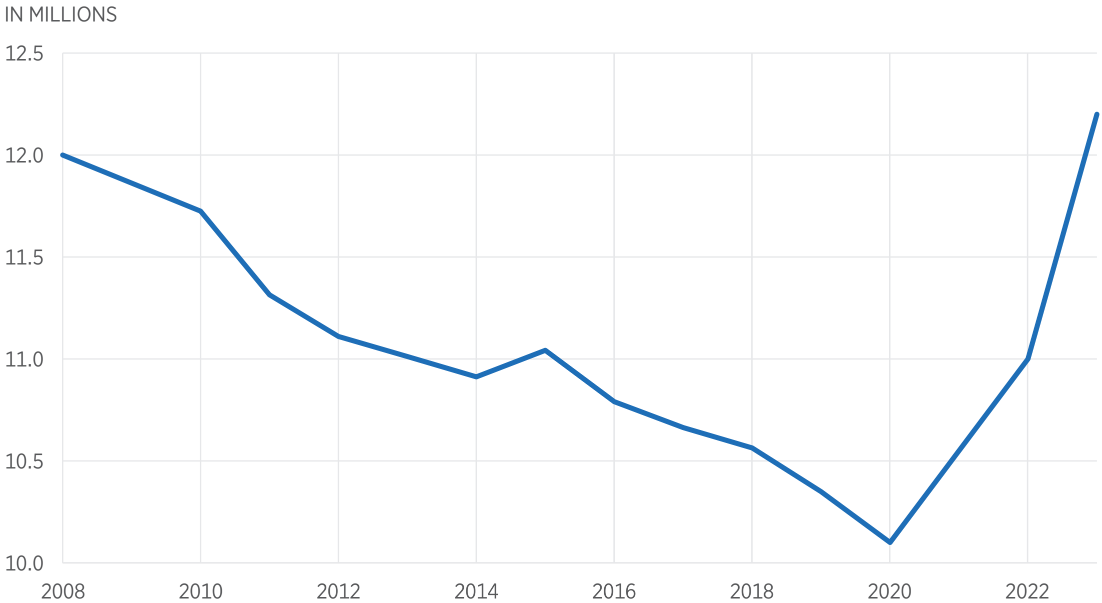
As the chart above shows, violent and nonviolent crime rates in our country have fallen dramatically since the last crime peak in 1992. That happened because states (1) passed stronger laws holding violent and recidivist criminals accountable and (2) at the same time created alternative courts and programs to provide services that keep offenders from reoffending. The essential ingredient is accountability.

The reason for the uptick in crime in 2018 in cities like (among many others) Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia was simple: It was the toxic trio of the "progressive" rogue prosecutor movement funded by George Soros, the defunding of police departments' budgets, and the demonization of the police in general.

Rogue prosecutors refused to prosecute misdemeanors, watered-down felonies, and implemented other pro-criminal policies that emboldened criminals and undercut accountability. Crime exploded in those blue cities and peaked in 2022. (See chart.)

The rogue prosecutor movement is fizzling out in large part because residents of blue cities want public safety, accountability, safe streets and communities, and thriving businesses: Simply put, they want their cities back. They ousted Soros rogue prosecutors Chesa Boudin, George Gascón, and Marilyn Mosby from office because all three failed to keep law-abiding citizens safe and hold criminals accountable. Protecting our streets and communities requires fully funded police departments and elected district attorneys who will hold *all* criminals accountable.

Number of Illegal Immigrants Residing in the U.S.



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: Center for Migration Studies. For full citation, see appendix.

From Wall to Wave: The Unmaking of Border Security

Alexander Frei

A country without secure borders is not truly sovereign. When a nation loses control of who enters and remains within its territory, it also loses control of its laws, its security, and ultimately its future. Borders are not just geographic markers; they are the foundation of national identity and self-governance. Without them, the distinction between citizen and noncitizen collapses and, with it, the principles of accountability and democratic rule.

When Donald Trump ran for President in 2016, a central pillar of his campaign was cracking down on illegal immigration. Support for his proposed border wall was overwhelming among Republicans—and for good reason.[68] At the time, the U.S. had around 10.6 million illegal immigrants. (See chart above.) However, what many overlook is that this number was already down significantly from an estimated 12 million in 2008, suggesting that even under President Barack Obama, illegal immigration declined by nearly 1.5 million.

Once in office, the Trump Administration followed through on its promises, continuing the downward trend. By 2020, the estimated number of illegal immigrants had dropped to just over 10 million—but then came a sharp reversal. Under President Joe Biden's Administration, illegal immigration surged. In just four years, the number jumped to roughly 11.7 million, erasing a decade of progress in a fraction of the time.

On his very first day in office, President Biden signed a proclamation halting construction of the U.S.–Mexico border wall, the signature initiative of the Trump Administration.[69] This action marked more than a policy change; it sent a clear message that the United States was shifting toward a more permissive approach to border enforcement.[70] It was the first in a series of deliberate moves that signaled to potential migrants that the southern border was effectively open. Soon afterward, the Administration dismantled the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy, which had required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their U.S. immigration hearings were pending.[71]

While some progressives see no issue with the increase in illegal immigrants and display signs that read "No Human is Illegal," and while some libertarians argue that borders are arbitrary and should not exist, the real-world consequences of unchecked illegal immigration are anything but abstract. When the number of illegal immigrants in the United States reaches into the millions—now estimated at over 11.7 million—the costs are borne by working Americans, strained public services, and the very foundation of our constitutional system.

One of the most overlooked consequences of unchecked illegal immigration is its distortion of our democratic representation. The U.S. Census counts every resident, regardless of immigration status, which means that states with large numbers of illegal immigrants receive more congressional seats and Electoral College votes than their citizen populations alone would justify. This shift disproportionately benefits blue states like California and New York, effectively granting them greater political power without a single additional legal vote.[72] In short, illegal immigration does not just strain public services and depress wages; it also quietly reshapes our political system in favor of those who refuse to enforce the law.

The economic costs of illegal immigration are just as real.[73] An oversupply of low-wage labor drives down earnings for working-class Americans and depresses upward mobility. Mass illegal immigration hurts those who can least afford it: our own citizens who are struggling to make ends meet. At some point, we must ask: Who is this policy really serving? From where we stand now, open borders look less like compassion and more like political engineering that benefits elites while leaving working Americans behind.

Fortunately for the American people, there are signs that the tide may be turning. A new Administration has taken steps to regain control of the border and enforce immigration laws as written. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), illegal border crossings dropped sharply in March 2025 with the lowest number of southwest land border encounters since February 2021, marking "the most secure border in history."[74] In March alone, the Border Patrol recorded approximately 7,180 southwest border crossings—a dramatic decline compared to the monthly average of 155,000 over the previous four years. Daily apprehensions have fallen to around 230 per day, a staggering 95 percent drop from the previous Administration's average of 5,100.

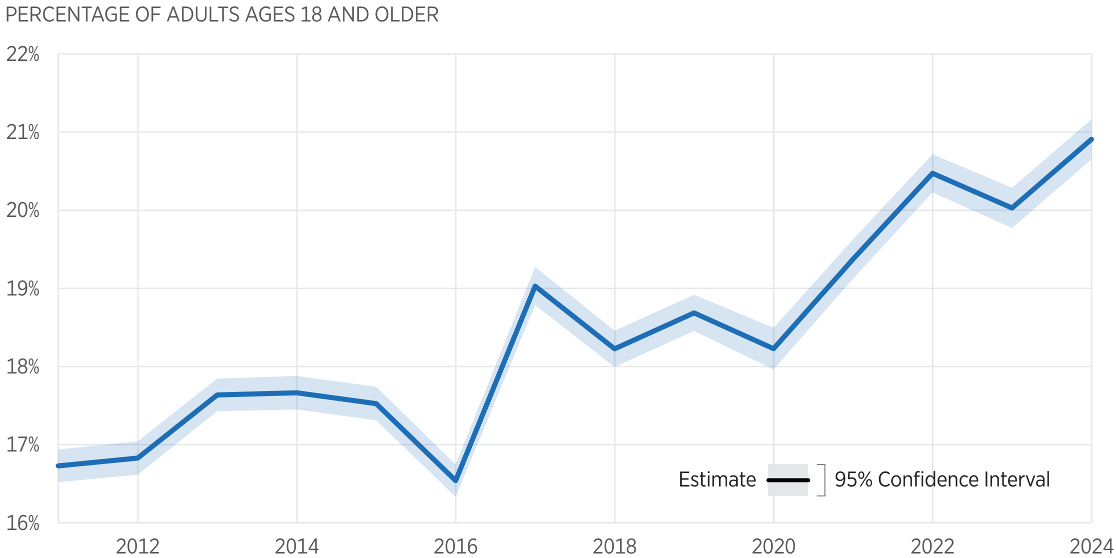
This is what operational control looks like: a federal government that recognizes its obligation to protect the sovereignty of the nation and the dignity of lawful immigration. The lesson is clear: When leaders prioritize enforcement and the rule of law, good results follow.

Section 4:

Health

Percentage of Adults Ever Diagnosed with Depressive Disorder

Includes Diagnosis of Depression, Major Depression, Dysthymia, or Minor Depression



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). For full citation, see appendix.

The Adults Are Not Okay: America's Mental Health Decline

Jennifer Galardi

Concern about the decline in the mental health of many Americans is a principal focus of many researchers and influencers. Everyone from renowned authors such as Jonathan Haidt to popular podcasters like Joe Rogan is talking about the alarming rates of (and potential remedies for) the depressive disorders that seem to afflict Americans today. The chart above demonstrates the stark reality of this problem.

There have been two noticeable spikes in the incidences of diagnosis of depression, major depression, dysthymia, or minor depression in adults above the age of 18. In the first, the rate soared from around 16.5 percent in 2016 to just over 19 percent in 2017. Some have attributed this to Donald Trump's election as President and have even gone so far as to call it "Trump depression."[75] Reports circulated that many liberals felt deep despair over the direction of the country. In fact, many studies have shown that those who self-identify as politically liberal often report lower levels of happiness and psychological well-being than their conservative counterparts report.[76] This suggests that perception determines reality and that some worldviews lend themselves to despair.

The sharp increase between 2020 and 2022 is no mystery. The lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on almost everyone's socio-emotional well-being. There were documented increases in alcohol use,[77] drugs, domestic violence,[78] and marital strain.[79]

Social isolation along with persistent fearmongering in the media led even the most optimistic to despair. The World Health Organization reported that the pandemic triggered a 25 percent increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.[80]

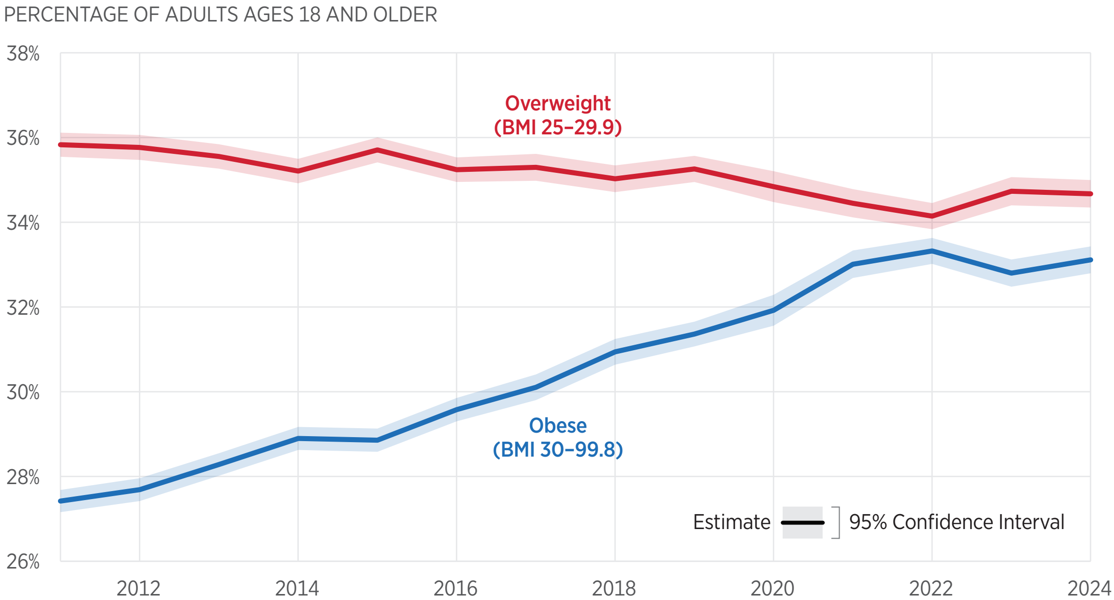
Since its high of 21 percent, the rate of depression-related disorders for adults seems to be on the decline, but it is nowhere near its all-time low at the beginning of 2016.

It is important to note that these data are collected by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS),[81] which collects state data on U.S. residents' health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions, and use of preventive services. This means that diagnosis is self-established and self-reported.

Because emotions and feelings are subjective, complex, and nuanced, pinpointing the causes of mental health issues is difficult. However, many experts point to a decline in social cohesion,[82] fracturing of the nuclear family,[83] a rise in ideological education at institutions of higher learning, economic strains,[84] and a decrease in religious participation.[85]

The rates for youth in this category are even higher and correspond with the introduction of handheld computers and intense use of social media. This does not bode well for the future of America, which will require today's younger generations to develop into sound, stable, and responsible leaders.

Percentage of Adults Who Are Overweight or Obese



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). For full citation, see appendix.

Obesity: America's New Epidemic

Jennifer Galardi

Obesity has accelerated at an alarming pace in the United States since 2011, even as the rate of those who are overweight has remained relatively steady and, in some years, has declined. What has been labeled an epidemic takes a toll not only on Americans' health, but also on their wallets: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that obesity costs the U.S. health care system almost $173 billion a year.[86]

From 2019 to 2022, while the number of adults (over 18 years of age) who were overweight decreased, that number is almost inversely proportional to the number of those who are obese. This signals a disturbing trend: More and more Americans are not just a few pounds overweight; *they are grossly and dangerously overweight.*

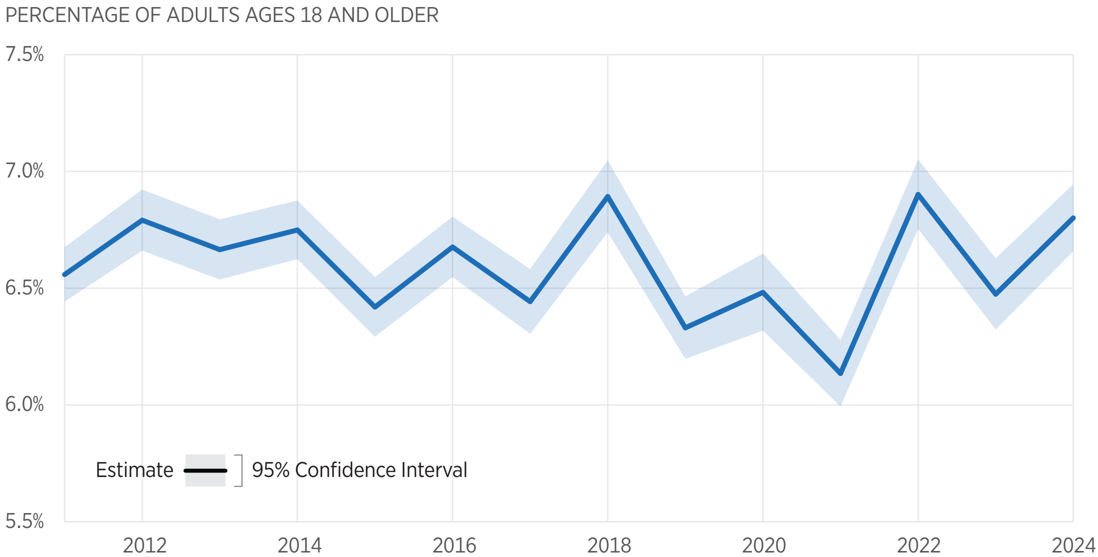
This trend began to change in 2021 when the number of obese people declined and the number of overweight people increased. This small shift could be a result of the off-label use of GLP-1 inhibitors, known by the brand names Ozempic, Mounjaro, and Wegovy. Initially a medication to control blood sugar for diabetics, they began to be used to reduce appetite and, for some, to quiet what is known as "food noise."[87] However, the FDA currently lists concerns about the use of unapproved GLP-1 drugs for weight loss,[88] and many experts have expressed apprehension over long-term safety.

Obesity is categorized as a chronic disease. According to the CDC, "[c]hronic diseases are defined broadly as conditions that last 1 year or more and require ongoing medical attention or limit activities of daily living or both."[89] Overweight is defined as having a body mass index, or BMI, of 25–29.9; a BMI of 30 or higher signals obesity.[90] BMI has been a standard used by health practitioners for decades to determine obesity. It is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height in meters squared.

Some have questioned whether BMI is the most accurate representation of a person's health. Because muscle is denser and more compact than fat, it takes up less room than fat and could lead to false conclusions about obesity. Someone could weigh much more than an obese person and still be slimmer and have better metabolic health because of increased muscle mass. This is the origin of the saying "muscle weighs more than fat," which is not empirically true; a pound of muscle weighs the same as a pound of fat, but the consequences for health are radically different. A person with good muscle mass will likely measure better in all other health outcomes than someone who may have a lower BMI but much more body fat.

This is an important fact to consider when determining how much of the country is actually obese and overweight. Nevertheless, the percentages still alarm many in the health policy community, and the solutions are complex. Reversing this threat to America's public health will require a multi-pronged approach that includes shifts in food and nutrition, agricultural, and pharmaceutical policies. It will also require that Americans take responsibility for altering diet and exercise habits in ways that lead to better health outcomes.

Percentage of Adults with History of Coronary Heart Disease or Myocardial Infarction



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). For full citation, see appendix.

Rethinking Heart Disease: The Truth About Cholesterol, Diet, and Statins

Jennifer Galardi

Coronary heart disease or myocardial infarction has been dubbed "the epidemic of the 20th century,"[91] but the percentage of Americans suffering from a heart-related disease has declined significantly since the mid-1900s when it was at its peak and has hovered between 6 percent and 7 percent over the past decade. This would seem to be good news if it were not for the fact that the incidence of heart disease is projected to rise significantly over the next decade.

Heart disease was uncommon before the mid-1900s, but by mid-century, the number of cases had exploded. Most associated this new chronic disease with such dietary and lifestyle changes as increased smoking rates and an uptick in cholesterol serum levels. That seems to be partly true, but while smoking undoubtedly contributes to heart disease, more recent studies indicate that dietary cholesterol and saturated fats are not responsible for heart attacks and other heart failures. The theory, often referred to as the "lipid hypothesis,"[92] was promoted by Ancel Keys in the latter half of the 20th century and has remained the dogma for over half a century. Keys pointed to his Seven Countries Study (1958–1999) as evidence that regions whose diets were based on fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, pasta, and olive oil, such as the Mediterranean, suffered fewer heart attacks and had lower cholesterol levels.[93]

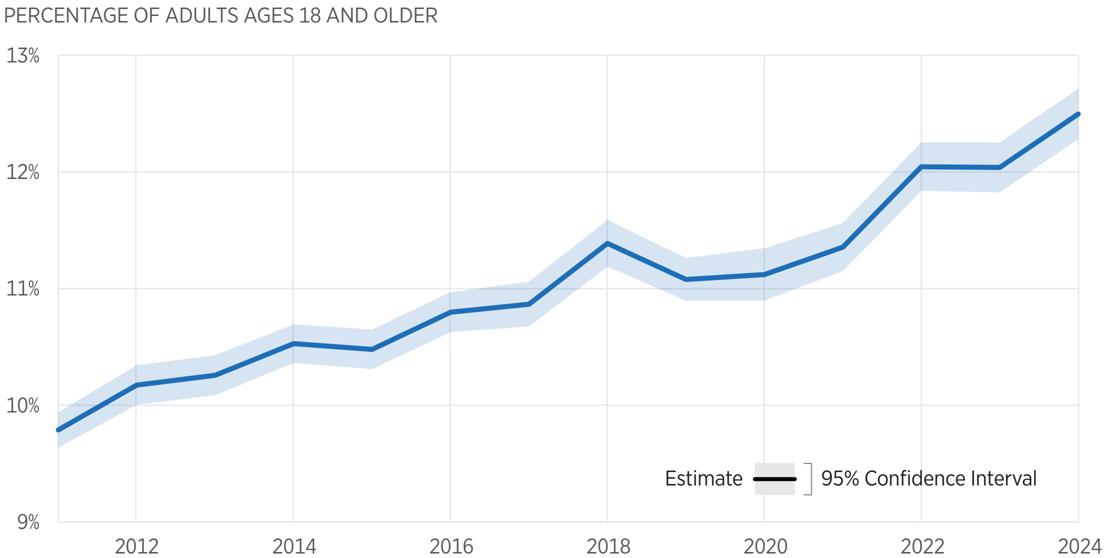
This position has come under strong scrutiny over the past decade.[94] Many credible doctors and nutritionists have exposed both what they see as flaws in the study[95] and the monetary incentives to promote corn, soybean, and cotton, the most heavily subsidized agricultural commodities in the U.S. today.[96] Current research shows that animal products, which contain higher levels of cholesterol than plant-derived fats, have been demonized unnecessarily and are vital components of a nourishing diet. They provide essential nutrients like fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K, which are crucial for the production of hormones[97] and also increase satiety and can be an effective tool in weight management.

Moreover, while heart attacks and all coronary heart disease have diminished drastically thanks to pharmaceutical interventions (specifically, statins), this has not been without cost. Drug intervention is prescribed to millions of Americans to the tune of billions of dollars per year. In 2022, Medicaid spent $314.3 million (before rebates) on 28.6 million pharmacy prescription claims for statin medications, and the use of statins reportedly increased approximately fortyfold between 1991 and 2022.[98] According to the American Heart Association, the direct and indirect costs of cardiovascular disease currently total $555 billion with a projected expenditure of $1.1 trillion by 2035.[99] The benefit of statins has even been called into question.[100]

In dealing with coronary heart disease and proper nutrition, good science is essential because it dictates all federal and state-level nutritional regulations and provides the model for healthy eating for all Americans. Ensuring accurate guidance is imperative not only for heart health, but also for our waistlines and wallets.

Percentage of Adults Ever Diagnosed with Diabetes

Diagnosis of Type I or Type II Diabetes, Both Non-gestational and Gestational Diabetes



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). For full citation, see appendix.

Diabetes and the American Diet: A Crisis We Can't Afford to Ignore

Jennifer Galardi

Diabetes or hyperglycemia (high blood sugar) is a chronic disease that affects millions of American adults every year. With little exception, rates have climbed steadily since 2011 when 9.5 percent of adults were diagnosed with the disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now estimates the rate of diabetes to be 14.7 percent or 38.1 million among adults, up from its leveling off point of approximately 12 percent in 2023.

Diabetes is an expensive disease. A 2022 American Diabetes Association report found the annual cost to be almost $413 billion, including $306.6 billion in direct medical costs and $106.3 billion in indirect costs.[101] People with diagnosed diabetes now account for one of every four health care dollars spent in the U.S. The American Diabetes Association report also found that national health care costs attributable to diabetes increased by $80 billion from 2012 to 2022.[102]

This is an unsustainable path for health care in the United States. While some cases of diabetes, like Type 1,[103] are hard to prevent, they represent less than 6 percent of overall cases. Most reported cases of diabetes are Type 2,[104] which can be reversed with diet and lifestyle changes. These changes typically also contribute to better health outcomes with respect to such other problems as heart disease and obesity, also outlined in this report. In fact, many studies demonstrate that insulin resistance is a root cause of many metabolic disorders.

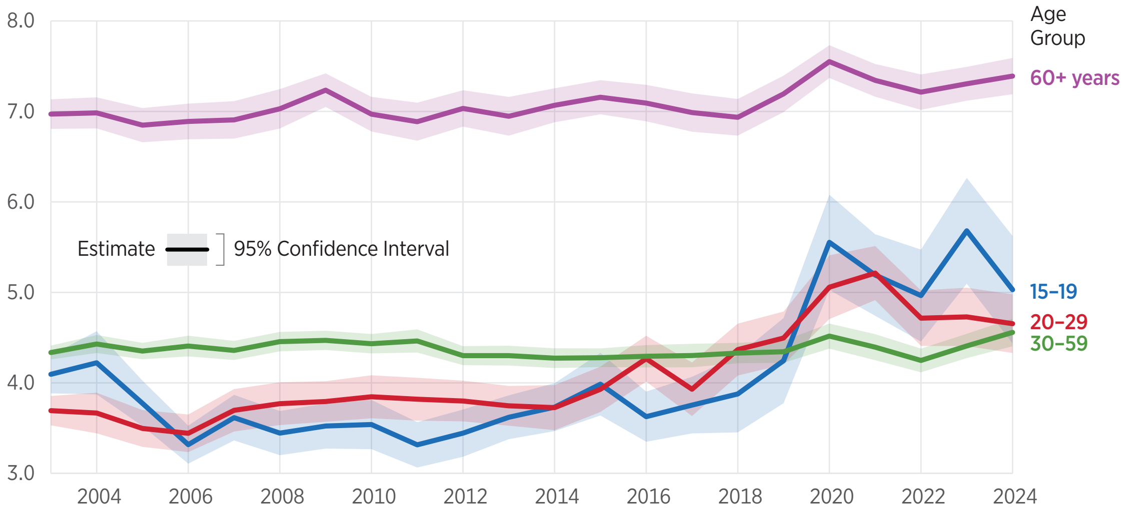
A diet high in refined carbohydrates, particularly one that includes a lot of sugar, is the easiest path to diabetes. The astronomical rise in the consumption of highly processed foods,[105] which are almost always high-glycemic foods, and the decrease in whole food diets are directly correlated to the rising rate of diabetes.

Gestational diabetes (GDM) is defined as any degree of hyperglycemia that is first recognized during pregnancy.[106] While its cause has been described as "multifactorial," GDM can be affected by the dietary habits of the mother. One study showed that women who developed GDM had erroneous knowledge regarding nutrition.[107]

The Biden Administration liked to tout the fact that it capped the cost of insulin for patients at a $35 copay. A more constructive change in the long run would be to help people get off their insulin medications completely by promoting dietary changes and an exercise program. Whether it is the patient or the taxpayer, everyone pays for diabetes, and it will continue to impose a heavy burden on all Americans until we break our addiction to sugar and processed foods.

Average Daily Waking Hours Spent Alone

AVERAGE NON-WORK, NON-PERSONAL WAKING HOURS SPENT ALONE PER DAY



NOTE: Average daily waking hours spent alone represents the average number of hours in a day during which respondents did not report anyone present when engaged in an activity. Time spent alone excludes time spent working a job, sleeping, grooming, or spent on personal or private activities. Because data for 2020 were not collected from March to May, results for 2020 are not comparable to results for other years.
SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *American Time Use Survey* as distributed by IPUMS ATUS, University of Minnesota, https://www.ipums.org. For full citation, see appendix.

Time Spent Alone: Trends and Implications for Social Connection and Human Flourishing

Christos A. Makridis, PhD

Trends in time spent alone vary markedly by age. Older Americans (age 60 and above) consistently spend the most time alone—around seven hours per day on average, reflecting such factors as retirement, empty-nest living, or widowhood. Younger cohorts historically have spent far less time alone. Teens (ages 15–19) and adults in their 20s averaged only about 3.5–4.5 hours alone per day in the early 2000s as school, work, and active social lives kept them more frequently in others' company.

However, these age gaps have narrowed over time. Even before 2020, the charts show a gradual rise in solitude among young people. By the late 2010s, adults who were 20–29 years old were spending about four to 4.5 hours alone—an increase that may reflect changing social habits (for example, more time on smartphones or online interaction, replacing some in-person activities).[108]

The divergence sharpened after 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, time alone surged across all ages, but proportional increases among younger groups were especially large. Remote schooling, curtailed social events, and delayed milestones (for example, entering the workforce or forming new households) left adolescents and young adults unusually isolated. In 2020, teens and adults in their 20s spent roughly five or more hours alone per day on average—a level approaching that of older adults. Although solitude for youth receded somewhat as schools and universities reopened, it has not reverted to earlier baselines. By 2022, a typical individual aged 15 to 29 still spent roughly 30–60 minutes more alone per day than his or her counterpart did in the preceding decade. Older adults saw less change: Their alone time rose in 2020 but remained near the 6.5- to 7-hour range in 2022, which was similar to pre-pandemic levels.

A major structural driver of increased alone time is the rise of remote work. The share of employees working from home skyrocketed from under 5 percent to over 60 percent during the initial onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 before settling to around 28 percent of work days at home by 2023. This large-scale shift in work arrangements has reduced daily in-person interactions. Hours once spent commuting or working alongside colleagues are now often spent physically alone. By 2022, controlling for demographics, workers in remote-capable jobs were spending an average of 50 fewer minutes per day working (compared to 2019) and about 37 more minutes per day on leisure—a trend that continued even after the lockdowns ended.[109] Much of this newfound leisure likely occurs at home, potentially in isolation.

Crucially, the reduction in work time was not merely due to less commuting: It reflected actual declines in hours worked. These changes were most pronounced among certain demographics—notably single, older men. Single males over 45 who worked remotely cut their work hours by an average of two hours per day in 2022 versus 2019—far more than other groups.

For individuals who live alone or lack family at home, remote work can mean that both work and non-work hours are spent without face-to-face contact. Other national surveys confirm a link between remote arrangements and heightened loneliness: Fully remote employees report frequently feeling "lonely" at substantially higher rates (25 percent) than those who are working exclusively on-site (16 percent).[110] In short, while telework offers flexibility and saved commute time, fully remote arrangements may also amplify physical isolation, whereas hybrid arrangements may offer the best of both worlds.[111]

The rise in time spent alone, although not on its own a driving explanation behind loneliness, nonetheless raises flags because human well-being is deeply intertwined with social connection and collaboration. Loneliness is not a transient emotion; chronic social isolation has been linked to worse health outcomes and reduced life expectancy on par with or even exceeding other risk factors.[112] By contrast, strong relationships are associated with better mental health, happiness, and economic and educational success.

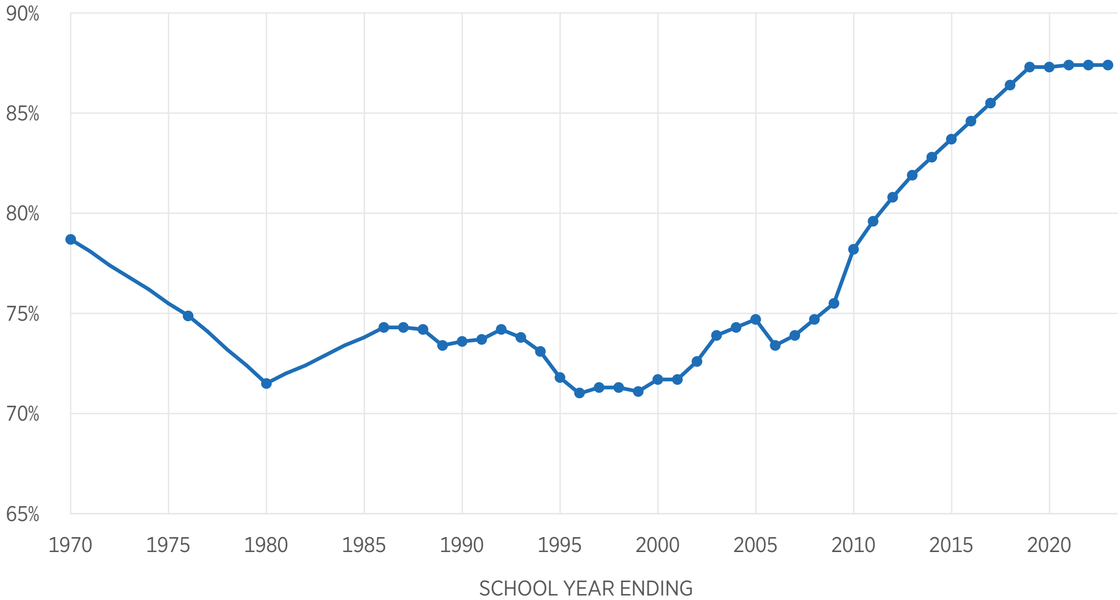
The Global Flourishing Study—a new 22-country longitudinal study of individual flourishing—highlights social relationships as one of the pillars of "flourishing." Close social connections are nearly universal in their importance: Studies across more than 100 countries show that having supportive relationships is among the strongest correlates of life satisfaction, in some analyses equivalent to the effect of a fivefold increase in income.[113] Yet about one in five people worldwide report having few or no close social supports. In the Global Flourishing Study's first wave, for example, 17 percent of young adults said they did not have anyone in their lives to whom they felt very close—a stark indicator of social isolation.

Economic, technological, and cultural shifts have altered how people form and maintain relationships. For instance, the decline of in-person community activities, the rise of social media, and labor market changes (like remote work or gig jobs) all shape the structural context of socializing. Structural factors, especially financial precarity and economic anxiety, can facilitate or impede social connection, which in turn affects health and happiness.[114] In this sense, trends toward greater time alone may reflect not just individual preferences, but also systemic changes in how we live and work.

Section 5:
Education

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for Public School Students

ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE A REGULAR DIPLOMA WITHIN 4 YEARS OF ENTERING 9TH GRADE



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. For full citation, see appendix.

Rising High School Graduation Rates: Not Always a Reliable Indicator of Student Success

Madison Marino Doan

Public high school graduation rates have risen steadily for almost two decades, but this trend, while commendable, is not without its concerns. In the early 2000s, several states began to reduce their graduation requirements; New York, for example, took significant steps as early as 2003.

In November 2024, the New York State Education Department announced that, beginning in 2027, students will be required to *take* but no longer required to *pass* the Regents Examinations—a series of statewide standardized tests in core high school subjects—in order to earn a diploma.[115] In 2015, California similarly eliminated its requirement that students must pass the high school exit exam, a test designed to ensure students' proficiency in mathematics and English by assessing middle school–level math concepts and basic high school English skills, in order to graduate.[116]

As of December 2024, only six states—Florida, Ohio, Louisiana, New Jersey, Texas, and Virginia—were enforcing compulsory exit exams for high school graduates.[117] This represents a significant departure from the 24 states that administered an exit exam or graduation assessment during the 2013–2014 school year according to the National Center for Education Statistics.[118]

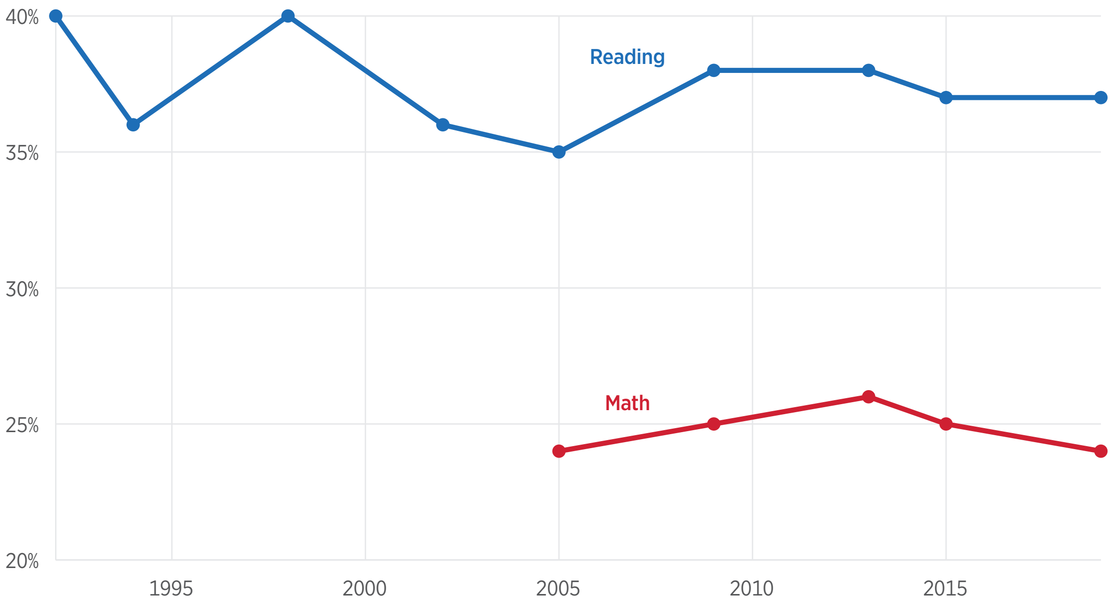
The fact is that higher graduation rates do not always correlate with student success.

"Graduation rates alone," as a former Heritage Foundation analyst has noted, "are not a reliable indicator of a quality education and future success; it could be that while completion rates have increased slightly, the value of a high school degree has not."[119] This is reflected in the number of college students who are placed in remedial courses because of inadequate preparation in high school. According to *The Hechinger Report*, 96 percent of 911 two-year and four-year colleges analyzed in the 2014–2015 school year enrolled students who required remedial courses, and at least 209 of these institutions placed more than half of their incoming students in at least one remedial class.[120]

State-level data further underscore the issue. In Nevada, 58 percent of the state's recent high school graduates were placed in remedial courses in 2014, and in Delaware, more than half of public high school graduates required enrollment in remediation courses upon entering the state's public colleges and universities in the same year.[121] A report from Maryland that included data from Baltimore City Public Schools found that 96 percent of students who enrolled at Baltimore City Community College in 2011 needed remedial math courses, and 67 percent needed remedial writing courses.[122] At the Community College of Baltimore County, 89 percent of 2011 graduates tested into remedial math classes, and 49 percent tested into remedial writing courses.[123] These two institutions alone accounted for more than 60 percent of Baltimore's graduates during this period.

Rising graduation rates may seem like a sign of progress, but they should be viewed with caution. Because many states have removed exit exam requirements over the past two decades, these higher graduation rates cannot necessarily be assumed to reflect student preparedness. A far more reliable indicator is the need for growing numbers of high school graduates to be placed in remedial courses upon entering two-year or four-year colleges and universities.

Percentage of 12th Grade Students Proficient in Math and Reading



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP Report Card*. For full citation, see appendix.

After Decades of Stagnant 12th Grade Proficiency, What's Next for Education?

Madison Marino Doan

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), popularly known as the Nation's Report Card, was introduced in 1969 and provides critical data on student performance in mathematics and reading across the United States. Administered every two years to 4th-grade, 8th-grade, and 12th-grade students, NAEP serves as a benchmark for academic proficiency.

The most recent 2019 assessment for 12th graders revealed troubling results: Only 24 percent were proficient in math—a figure virtually unchanged from 2005 when proficiency stood at 23 percent. (Data on reading are available for the years from 1992 to the present, but because of significant changes in assessment content and administration, comparable pre-2005 data on math results are not available.) Reading proficiency has also declined. In 1992, 40 percent of 12th graders were proficient in reading; by 2019, that number had dropped to 37 percent, marking a statistically significant decline. These stagnant or worsening outcomes raise serious concerns about the effectiveness of America's current education system.

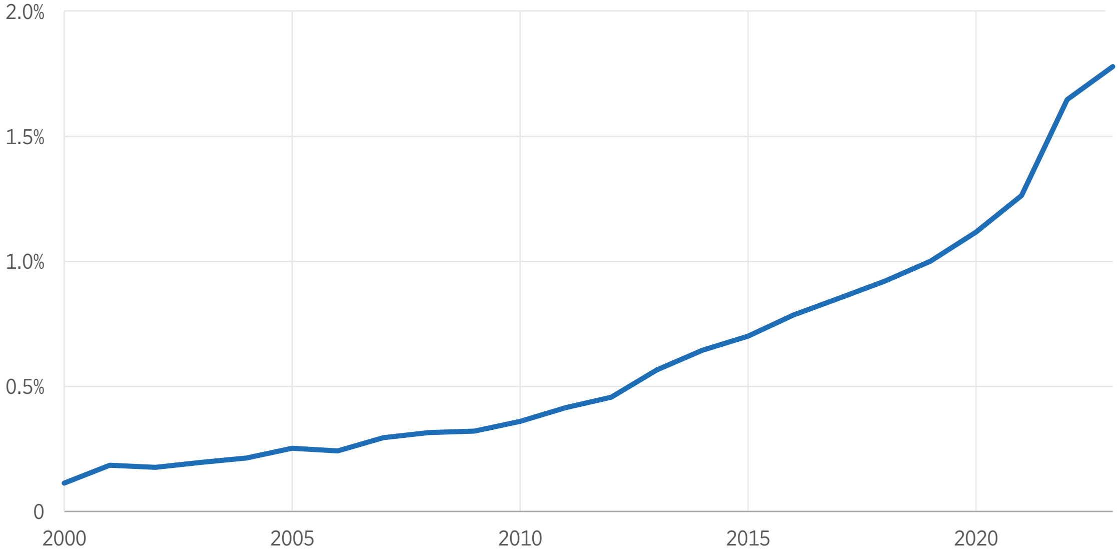
Some argue that insufficient spending is the reason for low proficiency levels, but the data tell a different story. Federal spending per pupil, even after adjusting for inflation, has more than doubled since 1979 when the Department of Education was established.[124] Despite this increase, NAEP scores have remained stagnant; in some cases, such as reading, they have even declined. A major factor in this disconnect is how education funds are allocated. Instead of being used for classroom instruction, much of the increased spending has been used for administrative expansion. "Since the 1950s," as Heritage Foundation education expert Lindsey Burke has noted, "the number of school personnel per student has skyrocketed by a staggering 381[%], and the number of non-teaching staff has increased by a staggering 709%."[125] Additionally, in 2010, teachers made up "only 50% of total school staff, down from 70.2% in 1950."[126]

One way to improve resource allocation is to give parents access to their child's share of education funds, thereby allowing them to choose the best educational environment for that child. Fostering an environment of educational choice yields numerous benefits, including enhanced academic achievement and attainment among students, increased competitive pressure on schools, and improved overall quality of local schools.[127] School choice also makes schools more accountable, as parents can vote with their feet and leave a school district with their education dollars if the district is not meeting their needs.[128]

Overall, the nation's alarmingly low 12th-grade proficiency levels reflect a significant need for improvement in both reading and math. These students are on the verge of adulthood, preparing to enter the workforce or higher education. If they lack fundamental skills in math and reading, we are failing them—and our society. It is time to give families the power to choose the educational setting that best meets their child's needs. This will not just benefit today's students; it will create pathways for upward mobility for generations of students yet to come.

Education Choice Student Participation Rate

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN AN EDUCATIONAL CHOICE PROGRAM



SOURCE: Data provided by EdChoice.

The Surge in School Choice

Jonathan Butcher

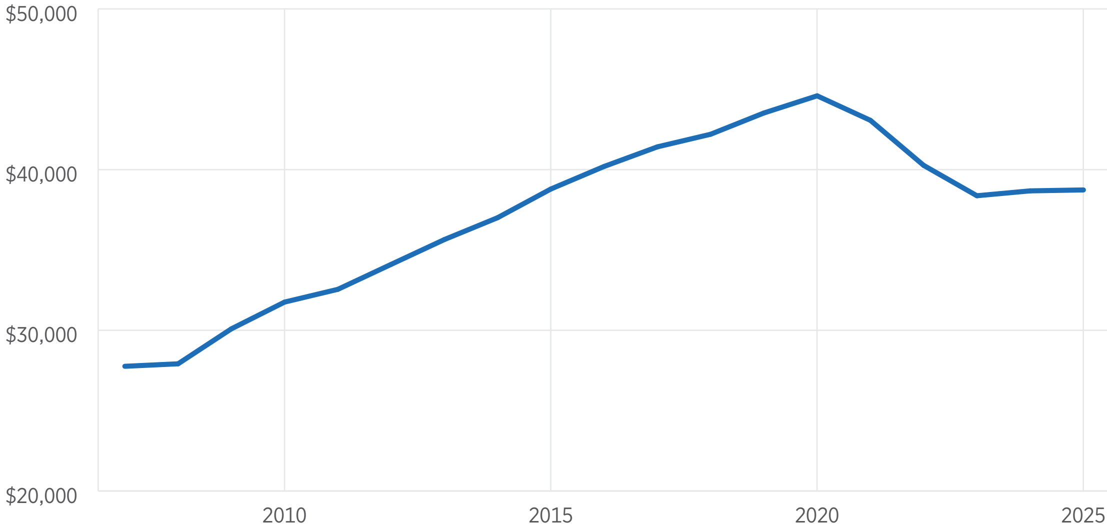
America's K–12 education system is in the early stages of a dramatic transformation. Over the past 25 years, participation per capita in private education choice programs—vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and K–12 education savings accounts—has increased more than tenfold.[129] This surge in participation has been accompanied by the adoption of robust education choice policies by growing numbers of states, particularly in the wake of COVID-related school closures and increasing awareness of the politicization of the district school classroom and "woke" policies that put males into girls' locker rooms and on girls' sports teams.[130] Since 2020, 18 states have adopted policies that make every one of their K–12 students eligible for education choice programs.[131] By the end of 2025, more than half of K–12 students nationwide were eligible to participate in a private education choice program.[132]

However, much remains to be done. Students participating in these choice programs represent less than 2 percent of the total K–12 student population nationwide. Moreover, universal eligibility does not imply universal access. Even among the states that make every K–12 student eligible for education choice, only a handful tie their programs to the state funding formula to ensure that every eligible student has access to a scholarship or education savings account.

Every child should have access to the learning environment that best meets his or her individual needs. States should enact education choice policies that not only make every K–12 student eligible to participate, but also ensure that every eligible child is funded through the state's education funding formula or a similar funding mechanism. As more states adopt universal education choice policies and more families learn about them, participation rates will likely continue to climb rapidly for the foreseeable future.[133]

Real Average Student Loan Debt

AVERAGE LOAN BALANCE IN CONSTANT 2024 Q4 U.S. DOLLARS



NOTE: Figures are total outstanding balances, both principal and interest, as of the last day of the federal fiscal year (September 30).
SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For full citation, see appendix.

Student Loan Debt

Madison Marino Doan

Today, 42.7 million Americans owe approximately $1.7 trillion in student loan debt. How did we get here?

Rising college costs, fueled in large part by overly generous federal lending policies, have encouraged more students to take on unsustainable levels of student loan debt. There was a time when a part-time job and modest savings could cover the cost of a college degree; by the early 2000s, the cost of attendance, including tuition, fees, room, and board, already outpaced the annual earnings of full-time minimum-wage workers.[134]

With costs soaring, students increasingly are turning to loans to finance their college education. The federal government now originates about 90 percent of all student loans and has effectively crowded out private lenders. In the 2018–2019 academic year alone, federal subsidies for higher education totaled $150 billion.[135] Federal spending on student loans has increased dramatically by 328 percent over the past three decades.[136]

According to the "Bennett Hypothesis," first proposed by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, increased federal aid enables colleges to raise tuition. A Federal Reserve Bank of New York study confirmed this effect, finding that each additional dollar in subsidized federal loans results in a 60-cent increase in tuition.[137] Colleges have little incentive to rein in costs when students and families can borrow heavily from the government to foot the bill.

Recent research reinforces this view. Heritage Foundation research, for example, has found that tuition and fees for in-state students at four-year universities have nearly tripled in real terms since 1990, and inflation-adjusted tuition at both public and private institutions has increased fivefold since 1970.[138] Some argue that net price—what students pay after aid—is a more accurate measure, but former Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity scholar Preston Cooper has found that even net prices have risen by thousands of dollars in real terms.[139] Despite massive taxpayer subsidies, students are paying more than ever to attend college.[140] This trend is depicted in the chart above, which shows that over the past decade, the average student loan debt per borrower has increased by nearly $15,000.

Recent reforms in the so-called One Big Beautiful Bill Act have attempted to rein in these excesses. This bill imposes new caps on graduate borrowing under the Direct Loan program, ends the inflationary Graduate PLUS loan program, and limits Parent PLUS borrowing.[141] These changes, along with a new earnings test for institutional eligibility, may help to curb tuition inflation and create space for more private lending, but still more needs to be done to reduce overreliance on federal financing.

Other trends are compounding the problem. Degree inflation, commonly known as overcredentialism, means that more graduates are taking jobs that don't require a college degree. For example, just 9 percent of executive assistants held a bachelor's degree in 1990; in 2023, that figure had jumped to 33 percent.[142] At the same time, many students fail to graduate on time. Federal data show that just 49.1 percent of those who entered college in 2017 graduated within four years, and only 64.6 percent of those who entered in 2016 graduated within six years.[143] The longer students remain in school, the more debt they are likely to accrue.

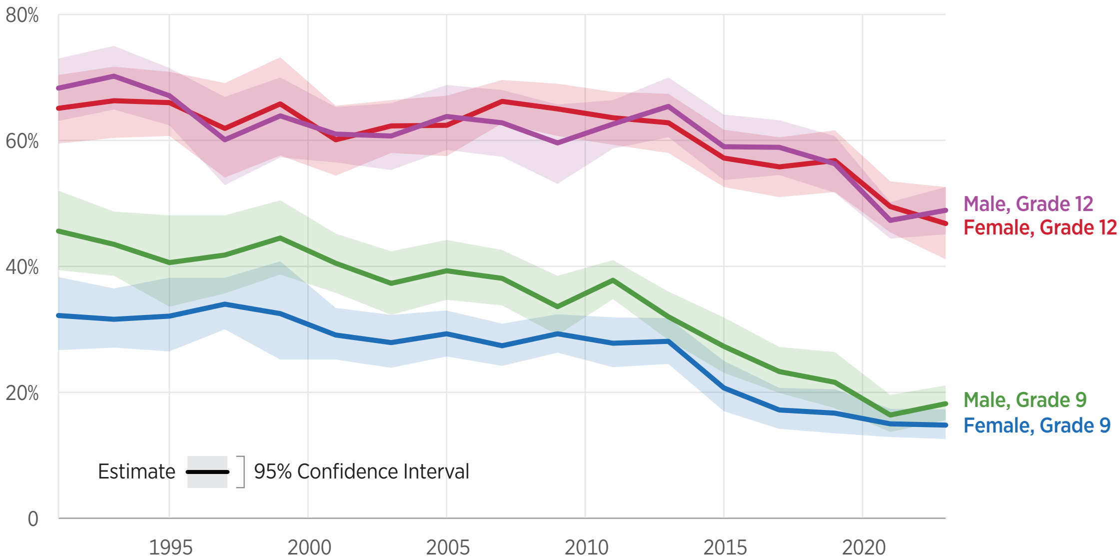
Meanwhile, the Biden Administration pursued a series of unlawful student loan cancellation efforts, one of which was ultimately blocked by the Supreme Court of the United States.[144] These sweeping forgiveness proposals not only shifted more than $138 billion in student debt onto taxpayers,[145] two-thirds of whom either did not attend college or already had paid off their loans, but also encouraged the misguided belief that debt would simply vanish. That message may well have compounded the crisis by further incentivizing excessive borrowing.

Alongside its loan cancellation proposals, the Biden Administration extended the pandemic-era pause on student loan payments six times until October 2023 when Congress forced the Administration to restart loan payments.[146] Additionally, the Administration announced in June 2023 that the Department of Education was "instituting a 12-month 'on-ramp' to repayment, running from October 1, 2023 to September 30, 2024, so that financially vulnerable borrowers who miss monthly payments during this period are not considered delinquent, reported to credit bureaus, placed in default, or referred to debt collection agencies."[147] The Biden Administration's efforts to extend the student loan payment pause cost taxpayers approximately $258 billion.[148]

Debts never truly go away; they simply get transferred. As long as federal policy continues to subsidize skyrocketing costs without increased accountability, American taxpayers will be responsible for paying those debts.

Section 6:
Youth Development

Percentage of Adolescents Who Ever Had Sexual Intercourse by 9th and 12th Grade



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Youth Risk Behavior Survey*. For full citation, see appendix.

The Decline in Teen Sexual Activity: A Warning Sign

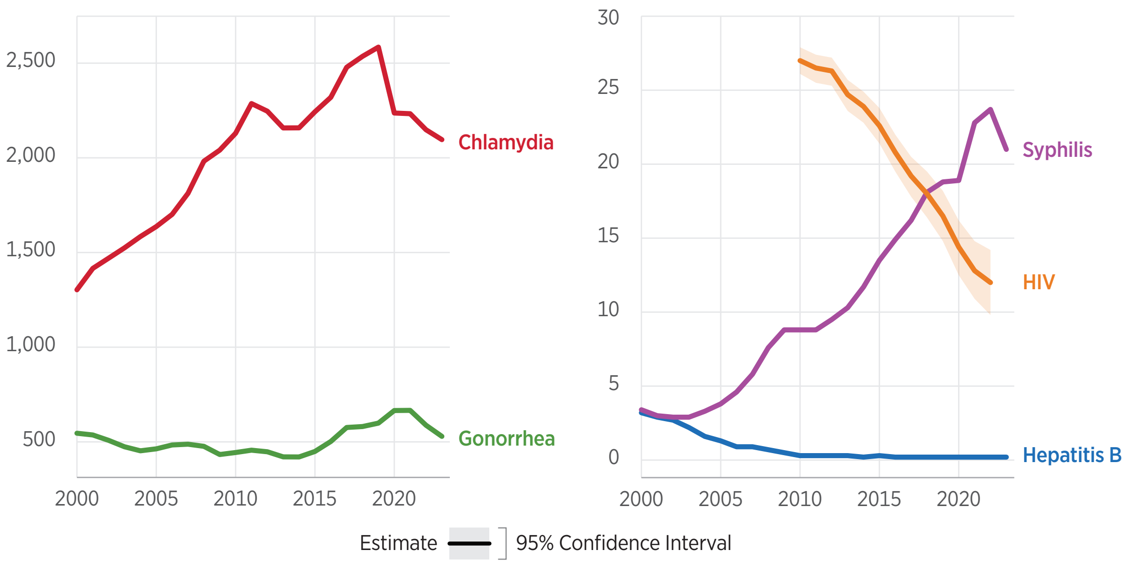
Emma Waters

This chart from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) illustrates the declining trend in the percentage of adolescents who have ever had sexual intercourse, categorized by sex (male and female) and grade level (9th and 12th) from 1991 to 2023. Over the past three decades, the share of sexually experienced adolescents has steadily decreased, with the most notable declines occurring after 2017. While 12th graders (both male and female) historically reported higher rates than 9th graders, all groups have seen significant reductions, with 2023 figures showing fewer than 50 percent of 12th graders and under 20 percent of 9th graders who ever had sexual intercourse.

The declining rates of sexual activity among teenagers reflect a shift away from the hypersexualized youth culture of previous decades. On the surface, this would appear to be a positive development: fewer teen pregnancies, fewer abortions, fewer sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and potentially stronger marriages in the future. This shift could reflect cultural and policy efforts that emphasize family values, access to contraception, and relational health. However, while the decline in sexual behavior is encouraging, the digitalization and isolation that characterize modern life may push teenagers to other behaviors that are equally unhealthy.

Teens today are not just abstaining from sex; they are disengaging from relationships altogether. Fewer young people are dating,[149] and in-person social interactions have plummeted

Incidence Rates for Sexually Transmitted Infections per 100,000 Teens and Young Adults



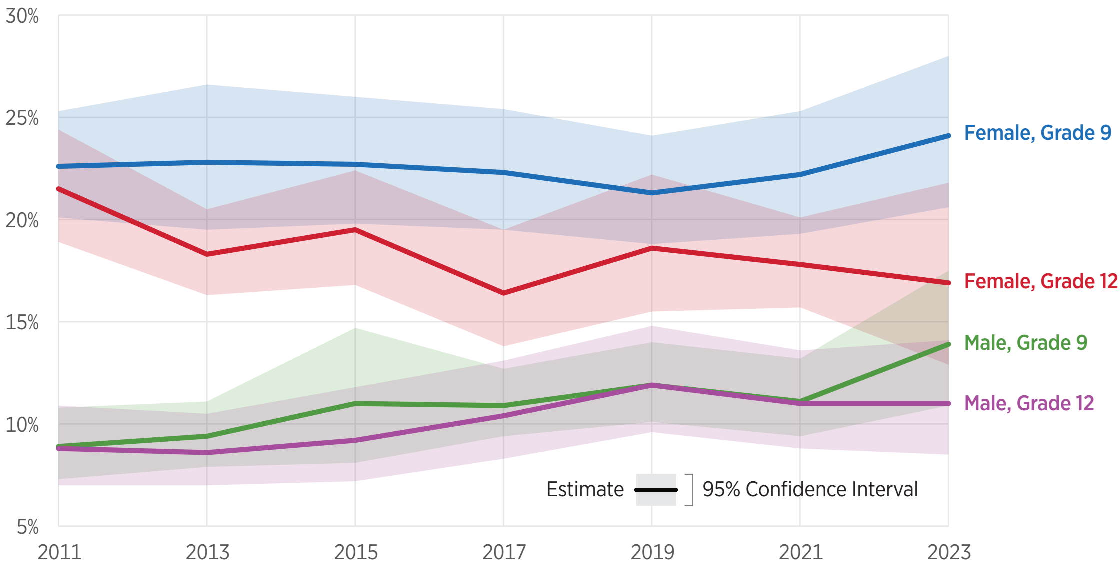
SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and Tuberculosis Prevention, *NCHHSTP AtlasPlus*. For full citation, see appendix.

by as much as 45 percent.[150] Instead, many teenagers are retreating into digital spaces, spending hours on social media,[151] relying on sexting rather than real-life intimacy,[152] dealing with pornography addictions,[153] and even forming relationships with AI-driven "girlfriends" and "boyfriends."[154] Taking all these trends together, the decline in teen sexual activity, instead of being a sign of a healthier society, is symptomatic of a broader crisis in which genuine emotional vulnerability and in-person relationships are supplanted by artificial and dehumanizing options.

Moreover, other factors may be in play, including the widespread use of Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) and hormonal birth control, which can reduce sexual desire and alter attraction patterns. As Dr. Sarah E. Hill explores in *This Is Your Brain on Birth Control*, the influence of these medications extends beyond a woman's fertility or mood and influences her mental health, attraction, and stress response.[155] While some may view this as a trivial side effect, this trend is not just about sex; it is about human flourishing through meaningful relationships and marriage. As birth rates continue to decline[156] and more young adults report feelings of loneliness and isolation,[157] we must recognize that the decline in teen sexual activity is a warning sign that, despite all of its undeniable benefits, modern technology is currently being used in ways that jeopardize future family formation.

The solution is not to return to a hypersexualized culture but to restore balance. Young people need real-life interactions, strong communities, and the ability to develop the social and emotional skills necessary for healthy relationships, marriage, and family life. The decline in teen sexual activity is "good" only if it reflects healthier choices—not if it signals a retreat from real relationships into a world of screens, pornography, and AI companions.

Percentage of Adolescents Who Were Bullied via Social Media or Text in the Past 12 Months



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Youth Risk Behavior Survey*. For full citation, see appendix.

Cyberbullying: Younger Teens Are Most at Risk

Annie Chestnut Tutor

Cyberbullying among freshmen in high school has increased during the past decade and generally is more prevalent than cyberbullying among senior high school students. This trend suggests that cyberbullying decreases with age, brain development, and maturity. Younger teens are more vulnerable to cyberbullying and thus need greater protection from these harms. Parents and policymakers should tailor rules, oversight, and policies accordingly.

For girls, bullying was consistently higher in 9th grade than in 12th grade between 2011 and 2023. For boys, bullying occurred the same or more in 9th grade compared to 12th grade throughout the 12-year period.

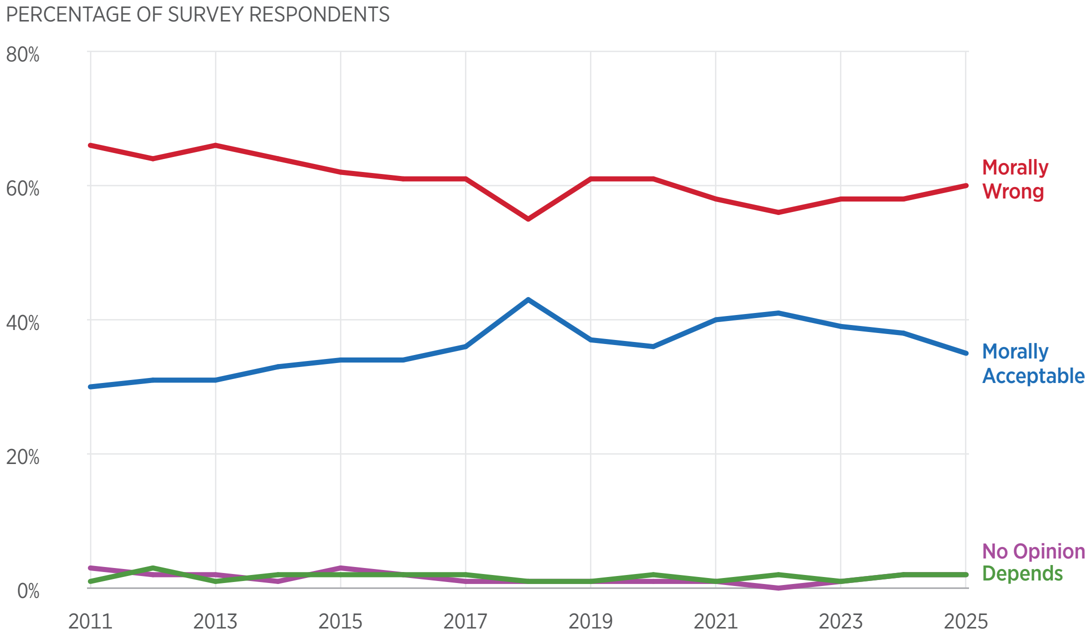
Overall, bullying for 9th grade girls rose from 23 percent in 2011 to 24 percent in 2023, but in 12th grade it decreased from 22 percent in 2011 to 17 percent in 2023. The overall trend for boys showed an increase in bullying for 9th graders and 12th graders from 2011 to 2023. Bullying among 9th grade boys rose from 9 percent in 2011 to 14 percent in 2023, and bullying among 12th grade boys rose from 9 percent in 2011 to 11 percent in 2023.

High school freshmen are typically 14–15 years old, and high school seniors are typically 17–18 years old. These findings support raising the minimum age for social media from 13 to 16 as suggested previously by The Heritage Foundation.[158] They also support providing more parental tools and oversight through the Kids Online Safety Act[159] and the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act.[160]

Cyberbullying comes in many forms, but the rise of deepfake images generated by artificial intelligence (98 percent of which are pornographic) is particularly damaging for victims.[161] Current federal legislation would criminalize publishing or threatening to publish non-consensual intimate images (real or fake) and require platforms to remove the images within 48 hours of a request from the individual in or depicted in the image.[162]

As technology advances, methods and opportunities for cyberbullying also advance. Teens—especially younger teens—need more oversight and other protections to mitigate cyberbullying.

Americans' Views on the Morality of Pornography



SOURCE: Gallup, *Gallup Poll Social Series*. For full citation, see appendix.

Changing Attitudes Toward Pornography—Except When It Comes to Children

Delano Squires

Attitudes about sex and sexuality have changed significantly in the past half-century. This includes how Americans view the legality—and morality—of pornography. In 1980, 40 percent of Americans believed pornography should be illegal for people of any age; by 2021, support for complete prohibition had dropped by more than 15 percentage points.[163] It is worth noting, however, that close to 65 percent of Americans support banning pornography for children under 18—an increase of more than 15 percentage points since 1980. The general acceptance of adults consuming sexually explicit material is reflected in the chart above, which shows that slightly less than 60 percent of Americans believe pornography is morally wrong and that close to 40 percent say it is morally acceptable.

These trends reflect the reality of living in a digitally connected world. In decades past, accessing sexually explicit material required intentional effort. Today, pornography is easy to access online, including on social media sites that allow access by minors. It is no surprise that adults, including parents, support restricting access to pornography for anyone under 18 when one considers that 95 percent of U.S. teens have access to a smartphone, 90 percent have access to a desktop or laptop, and 80 percent have access to a gaming console.[164]

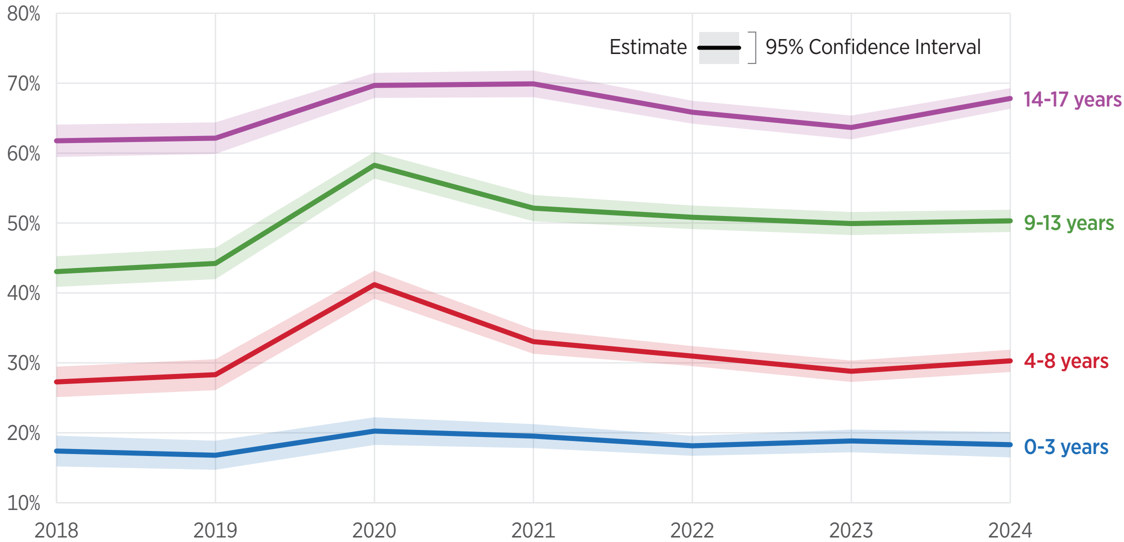
Nor are concerns about the effects of pornography restricted to children and teens. According to analysis from the Institute for Family Studies, men who frequently consume pornography report the highest rates of loneliness: Sixty percent of men who watched pornography in the preceding 24 hours said they felt lonely or isolated during the preceding week.[165] By contrast, 38 percent of men who never watched pornography reported feeling lonely within the previous week.[166] Moreover, loneliness is not the only issue associated with pornography consumption. Research also suggests that it rewires the brain and can lead to addiction, dependence, relationship issues, and unhealthy sexual behaviors.[167]

The explosion of the "vice economy" makes these trends particularly troubling. For example, content creators on OnlyFans keep 80 percent of the revenue they generate from paid subscribers with the rest going to the platform. This model is financially attractive to creators, including young women who post adult content. It is also profitable for the company. In 2023, OnlyFans generated more revenue per employee than tech giants Apple, Google, and Microsoft generated.[168]

But profitability does not change the fact that pornography makes a commodity of the human body. Ubiquitous access, social acceptance, and mental health effects all contribute to the increasing prevalence of pornography, which is why anyone concerned about the protection of children and the future of family formation must confront the consequences of its effects on America's social life.

Screen Time Usage Among Children Ages 0–17

PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION SPENDING 3+ HOURS DAILY IN FRONT OF A TV, COMPUTER, CELLPHONE, OR OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICE



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau and Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, *National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)*. For full citation, see appendix.

Screen Time Among Children: Still Elevated Three Years After the Pandemic

Annie Chestnut Tutor

As our phones, tablets, and computers become constant companions, the line between healthy digital engagement and harmful overuse is vanishing faster than we realize. Most alarmingly, the percentage of children who spend more than three hours daily behind screens as they get older has increased since 2018. Three hours daily exceeds the limits for all age groups—no screen time for babies under two years old, no more than one hour for children 2–5 years old, and no more than two hours for older children—recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.[169]

Data from the National Survey of Children's Health, which is conducted by the Census Bureau in the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, show a clear age-related progression in heavy screen use among children 0–17 years old throughout 2018 and 2023. More than 17 percent of babies and toddlers (0–3 years old), more than 25 percent of young children (4–8 years old), and more than 40 percent of children 9–13 years old spent more than three hours daily behind screens throughout this six-year period. Teenagers (14–17 years old) consistently exhibited the highest rates of excessive screen time at more than 60 percent. This progression among age groups remained constant.

In addition, all age groups experienced a notable spike in heavy screen time usage in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic began early in 2020, and state and local governments issued mandatory lockdowns. Schools replaced in-person instruction with virtual, remote learning, and many sports and extracurricular activities ceased. During this period, approximately 70 percent of teenagers aged 14–17 reached peak usage levels of three or more hours daily spent on screens, the 9–13 age group climbed to 58 percent, the 4–8 age group reached 41 percent, and infants and toddlers reached just over 20 percent. This universal increase across age groups suggests that pandemic-related school closures, remote learning, and social distancing measures led directly to increased screen time for children.

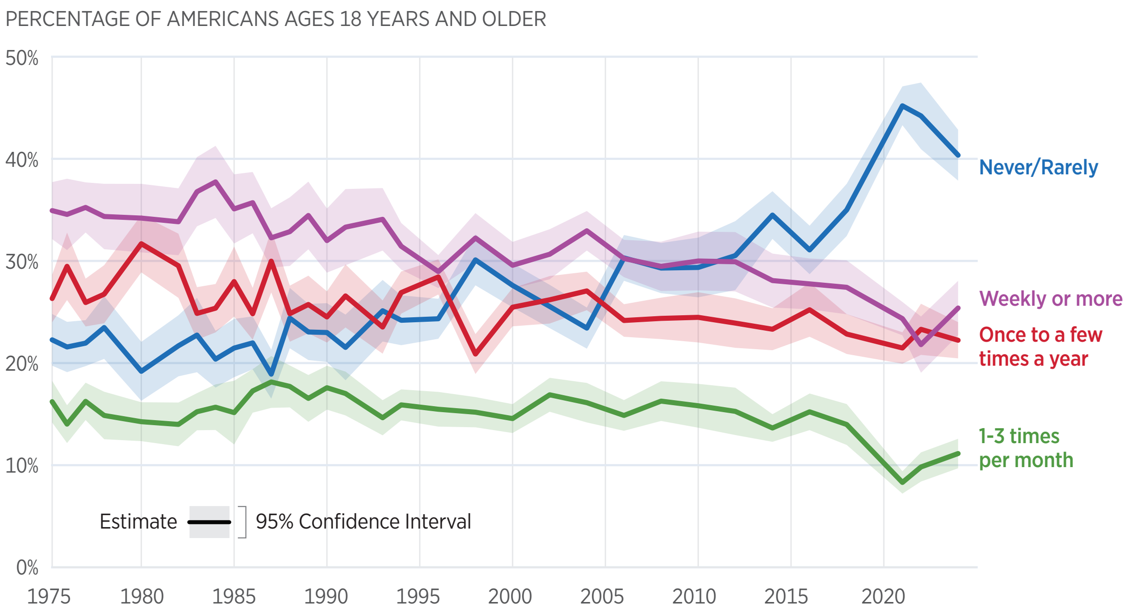
The data for the years after 2020 show a gradual decline in heavy screen usage across most age groups through 2023, except for a slight increase for infants and toddlers between 2022 and 2023. Teenagers aged 14–17 maintained the same level with 70 percent spending three hours or more behind screens through 2021 before usage began to decrease. Infants and toddlers fell to 18 percent in 2022 but rose to 19 percent in 2023. The other two age groups saw a more significant decrease in percentages between 2020 and 2021. Children aged 9–13 fell from 58 percent to 52 percent, and 4-year-olds through 8-year-olds dropped to 33 percent from 41 percent.

The percentages of children who used screens more than three hours daily did not decline to pre-pandemic levels even by 2023. Despite the lifting of pandemic restrictions and resumption of in-person education and activities, the data suggest that some behavioral changes in 2020 were not temporary and led to more lasting changes for children. This shift raises questions regarding children's dependence on screens, their ability to decrease screen use, and the long-term effects of increased screen exposure throughout their development.

Section 7:

Religious and Civic Participation

Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: NORC at the University of Chicago, *General Social Survey (GSS)*. For full citation, see appendix.

Attendance at Religious Services

Jonathan Abbamonte

Attendance at religious services across the United States has long been in a state of gradual decline. The chart above shows the percentage of Americans over time who attended religious services weekly or more, one to three times a month, one to a few times a year, or rarely or never. Between 1975 and 2024, the percentage of Americans who attend religious services at least once a week fell from 35 percent to 25 percent. The percentage of Americans who attend one to three times per month has dropped from 16 percent to 11 percent. Meanwhile, the share of Americans who rarely or never attend has nearly doubled from 22 percent to 40 percent.

Nor is attendance at religious services declining only in the aggregate. Attendance rates have fallen for both men and women, for both married and never-married adults, and among African Americans, Caucasians, and Hispanics.[170] Moreover, despite the publicity that declining attendance at religious services among young adults receives both in the media and from the pulpit, attendance has been declining among *all* age groups, including those who are 60 years of age and older.[171]

These trends are alarming. Faith is the bedrock of culture and the foundation of the principles and values that govern society. Without religious adherence and commitment, secular ideologies will inevitably fill the void.

In addition to the spiritual benefits of religious observances and the fulfillment of filial duty to the Creator, there are countless temporal benefits that individuals, families, and society at large derive from frequent (weekly or more) attendance at religious services. People who attend religious services frequently, for example, are more likely to live longer,[172] have lower mortality rates,[173] have better mental health,[174] and have a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life.[175] They also are happier in their marriages[176] and give more of their time and wealth to those who are in need.[177] Adolescents who attend religious services frequently are less likely to commit a crime,[178] engage in illicit drug use, and have sex at an early age[179] and more likely to have higher standardized test scores and higher educational aspirations.[180]

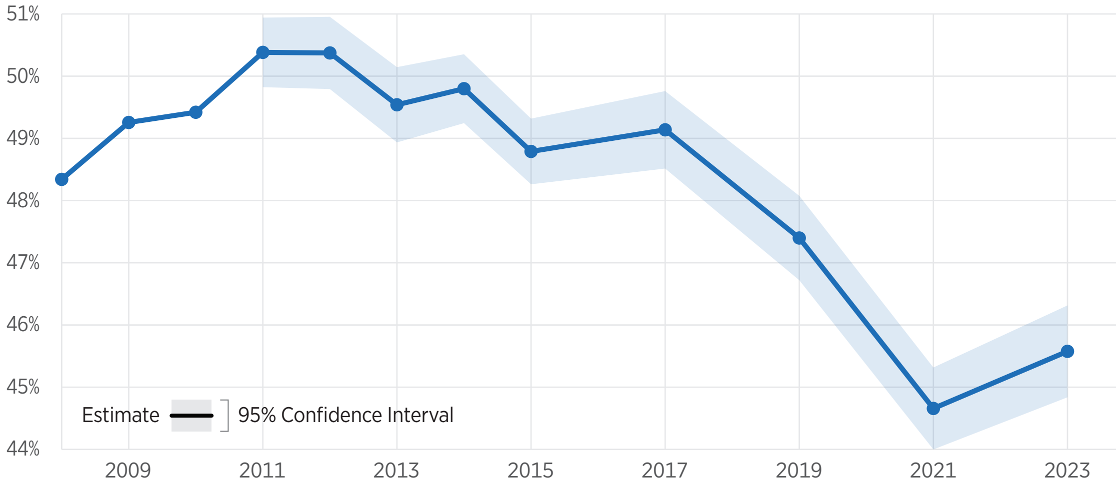
The reasons for the decline in attendance at religious services are complex and multifaceted. For one, seismic shifts in culture have moved toward values and behavioral norms that are antagonistic to religious values and teachings. Many have fallen away from organized religion because their secular values and life choices conflict with religious values. Many have fallen away from religious practices because of doubts or skepticism about religious teachings.[181] Many others have fallen away because they have become choked by the busyness of work, home, and family life; and as American culture has increasingly placed importance on money,[182] status, achievements, and childrearing,[183] religious observances have often been pushed down the list of priorities. Others have turned away as a result of the rise in scandals among religious leaders or negative interactions with religious adherents.[184]

Moreover, contemporary society—from the public education system to our universities to the workplace—enforces a rigid secularism, making it difficult for people of faith to live out their faith in the public square and "sanitizing" society of religious practices and beliefs. When people as a society do not practice religion, its importance diminishes. Also, perhaps many have become too comfortable in their lives and financial security to turn to their faith. Countries with higher life expectancy and greater per capita wealth often have lower rates of weekly attendance at religious services.[185]

Whatever the cause or mix of causes, the importance that Americans place on religion is declining[186] as are, along with it, the observance of religious practices like prayer[187] and attendance at religious services. Society has much to lose when religious observance diminishes. Let us hope that more Americans can once again recognize the importance that frequent attendance at religious services has for themselves, for their families, and for our nation.

Charitable Giving Rate

PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO GAVE MORE THAN $25 IN MONEY OR POSSESSIONS TO A CHARITY, SCHOOL, OR RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



NOTES: Data for 2008–2015 include persons ages 15 years and older. Data for 2017–2023 include persons ages 16 years and older.
SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement*, and IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota, https://www.ipums.org. For full citation, see appendix.

Charitable Giving: A Strong Commitment to Faith and Personal Responsibility

Emma Waters

This chart depicts the share of Americans ages 15 and older who have donated $25 or more in money, assets, or property to a charitable or religious organization in the past year, covering a period from 2008 to 2021. The trend indicates that charitable giving has remained generally stable over this period of time, hovering around 50 percent. From 2009 to 2013, charitable giving saw a slight increase. In 2017, it declined by approximately 5 percent before slowly increasing since then, returning to 2008 levels.

Charitable giving has long been a defining characteristic of American civic life. Although philanthropy is often associated with the wealthy, the data consistently show that individual generosity—particularly among religiously affiliated Americans—drives the bulk of charitable donations.[188] The correlation between attendance at religious services and charitable behavior is strong and underscores how faith communities encourage care for "the least of these."[189]

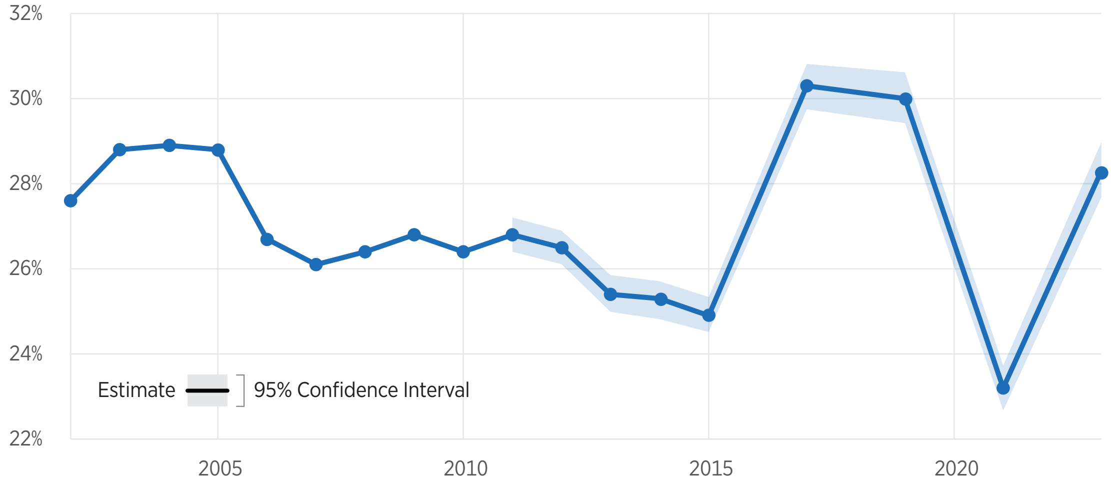
Between 2008 and 2021, the proportion of Americans aged 15 and older who donated at least $25 to charity remained remarkably stable at approximately 50 percent. This period included the aftermath of the 2007 stock market crash and the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring America's ongoing commitment to generosity. The role of marriage is also notable. Married individuals were the most likely to donate, with 54 percent contributing compared to 29 percent of those who had never married.[190] Moreover, married couples without children donated slightly more (56 percent) than those with children under 18 (54 percent), suggesting that fewer financial responsibilities may enable couples to donate or tithe more.[191]

Beyond marriage and family, religious affiliation is one of the strongest predictors of charitable giving.[192] Americans who regularly attend religious services are more likely to donate to their place of worship and other charities.[193] This generosity is part of a broader cultural trend: Americans donate at per capita rates that are significantly higher than those of Europeans and even Canadians, partly because of a national tradition of aid and a sense of personal responsibility to support their communities instead of relying solely on state or federal help.[194]

Large foundations and corporations play a significant role in philanthropy, but individual giving remains the backbone of charitable donations in the United States. In 2023, total giving reached $557.16 billion with the majority coming from individuals.[195] Weekly tithing and a culture of financial discipline encourage many Americans to prioritize charitable giving as part of their monthly budget. Giving patterns in America also reflect a cultural belief that small donations can have a major impact.[196]

Volunteering Rate

PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO VOLUNTEERED WITH AN ORGANIZATION, ASSOCIATION, OR SCHOOL IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



NOTES: Figures for 2002–2015 include respondents ages 15 and older. Figures for 2017–2023 include respondents ages 16 years and older.
SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement*, and IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota, https://www.ipums.org. For full citation, see appendix.

Volunteering: Americans Are Here and Ready to Help

Emma Waters

The chart depicts the share of Americans ages 15 and older who have volunteered at some point during the past year, covering a period from approximately 2000 to 2021. The trend indicates a general decline in volunteerism from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, followed by a notable increase around 2016–2019, a sharp drop in 2020 (likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic), and a partial recovery thereafter.

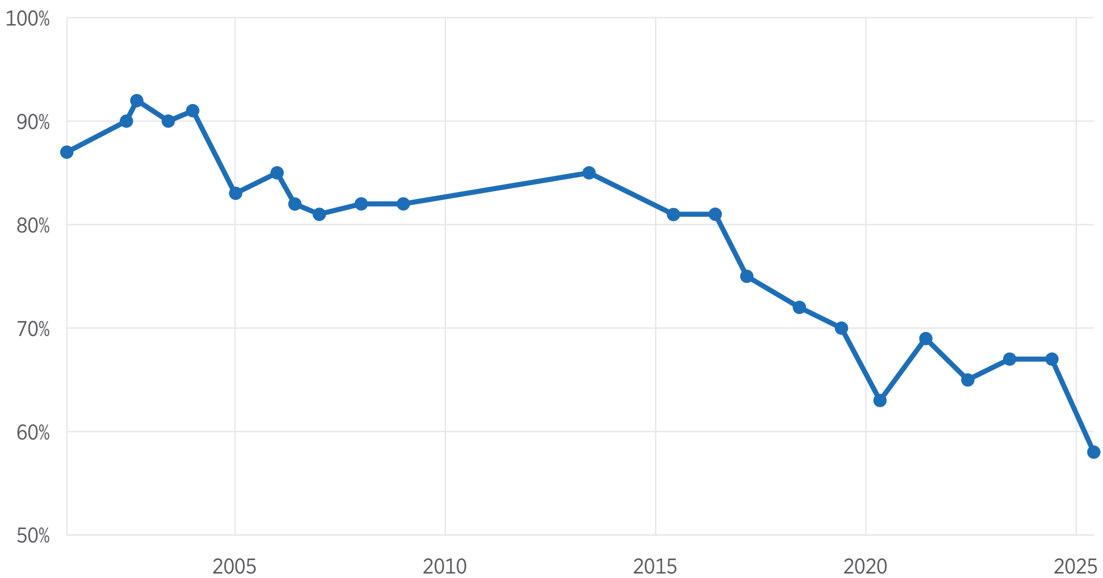
In 2024, as devastating floods and tornadoes tore through North Carolina, Americans did not wait for government intervention. Thousands of volunteers mobilized—through churches, nonprofits, and grassroots efforts—to deliver supplies, rebuild homes, and support displaced families. The disaster exposed federal failings, but it also highlighted a defining characteristic of American life: an enduring culture of volunteerism. Whether responding to crises or engaging in ongoing community service, Americans consistently demonstrate a deep sense of personal responsibility and civic duty that sustains some of the world's highest rates of volunteerism.[197]

Despite declines in other forms of social engagement since the 1970s, volunteerism in the U.S. has remained remarkably stable with participation rates between 25 percent and 30 percent since 2001.[198] However, trends over the years reveal interesting patterns. Volunteer rates declined between 2008 and 2015 and then increased sharply between 2016 and 2019. This surge coincided with economic growth, optimism, and a renewed sense of personal agency that reflected how national morale and economic confidence can influence civic engagement.[199] Though participation fell sharply in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the partial recovery in 2021 suggests that volunteering is a deeply ingrained aspect of American life, not just a pastime.

The data further reveal that those who are most engaged in volunteer work—married individuals, parents, and religiously involved people—tend to have stronger connections to their local communities. Married individuals volunteer at a rate of 27 percent compared to 18 percent for those who have never married, and those with children under 18 participate at even higher rates.[200] Among married parents, 33 percent volunteer compared to 25 percent of married individuals without children. Even when accounting for all parents with children under 18—whether married or not—participation remains high at 30 percent.[201] Religious affiliation also plays a significant role, as those who regularly attend services are more likely to volunteer, often through church-organized efforts that extend into the broader community.[202] These patterns suggest that volunteerism flourishes when people feel a personal investment in their surroundings.

My experiences volunteering with my family through church programs, community service projects, and local food drives instilled in me a lifelong understanding that purpose is found in serving others. As many teenagers and young adults face challenges related to depression, anxiety, and digital isolation, a possible solution lies in encouraging greater volunteer participation.[203] The nature of volunteerism suggests that increasing volunteer opportunities will create a positive feedback loop that benefits both individuals and their broader communities.

Percentage of Adults Extremely or Very Proud to Be an American



NOTES: The margin of error for the sample in the survey was +/– 3% at the 95% confidence level before 2008 and +/– 4% at the 95% confidence level for 2008–2025.
SOURCE: Gallup, *Gallup Poll Social Series*. For full citation, see appendix.

Patriotism in Decline: Trends and Implications for Civic Engagement and National Cohesion

Christos A. Makridis, PhD

In the early 2000s, American patriotism was nearly universal: In January 2001, 87 percent of U.S. adults surveyed by Gallup said they were "extremely" or "very" proud to be American; "[a]fter the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the figure increased to 90%, and it held at that level or higher between 2002 and 2004."[204] By 2017, however, the share of respondents who said they were proud to be American had fallen to 75 percent, and it deteriorated further amid political and social turmoil. In June 2025, Gallup recorded a new low of just 58 percent of Americans expressing high pride in their nationality. This downward trajectory has been especially steep since the mid-2010s and reflects a significant shift in Americans' collective self-perception.

Today, national pride varies widely across demographic and political groups. What was once a near consensus has splintered along partisan lines: In 2025, only 36 percent of Democrats expressed pride in their country, whereas about 92 percent of Republicans still profess being extremely or very proud. A similar pattern is exhibited by younger generations when compared to their elders: On average, from 2021–2025, only 41 percent of Generation Z adults said they were extremely or very proud to be American, compared with 58 percent of Millennials and more than 70 percent of Baby Boomers.

All age cohorts have seen some decline in pride since the early 2000s, but these declines have been most pronounced since 2015–2016, especially among younger Americans and those on the political Left. What was once a unifying sentiment has weakened with differences by age and party that were far less evident a generation ago.

One explanation for the drop in patriotic sentiment is the rise in political polarization and partisan distrust. The increasing politicization of American life has had profound implications for social harmony and national unity. Bitter partisanship has made shared symbols and national identity into battlegrounds. Surveys document growing ideological divides and intense partisan rancor in recent years. Even in the workplace, some survey evidence suggests that 42 percent of employees have withheld their opinions to protect their professional futures, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has reported a 73 percent rise in religiously based discrimination charges between 1992 and 2020.[205]

Many Americans now view their political opponents with deep suspicion or even as threats to the country's values. In such an environment, expressions of patriotism can become politicized—seen as a marker of one faction or another rather than as a unifying civic bond. The collapse of a broadly shared civic narrative and its replacement by hyperpartisan identity have likely dampened Americans' willingness to feel proud of their nation across party lines.

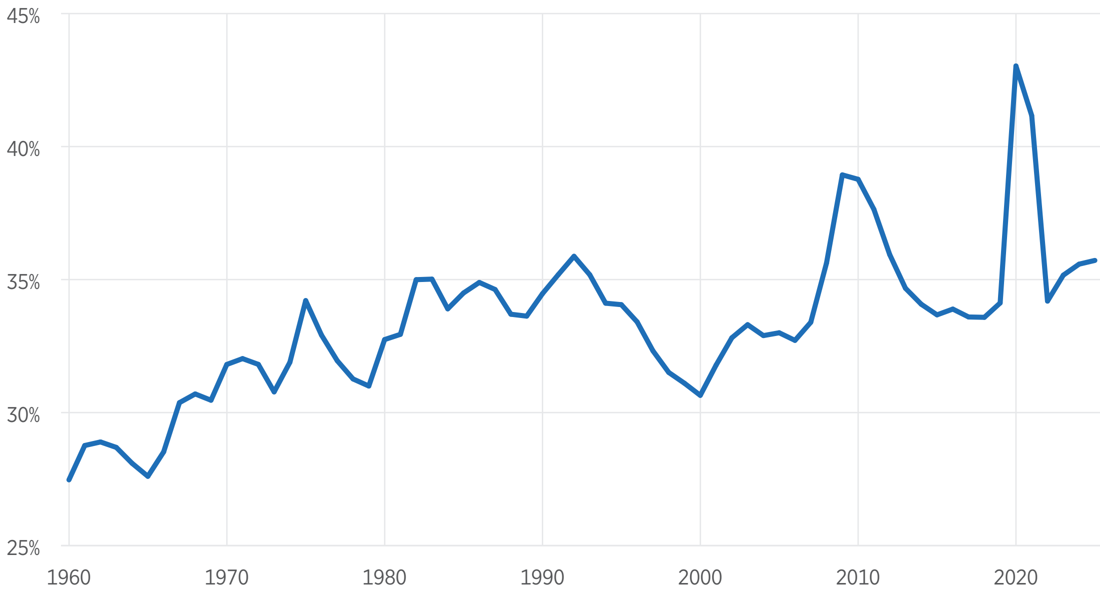
The long-term decline in patriotism has coincided with a collapse of public trust in institutions, from government and media to churches and corporations, that traditionally undergird national identity. Confidence in major U.S. institutions remains at or near historic lows after a steady decades-long decline. As of 2023, the average share of Americans expressing even a "fair amount" of confidence in 14 core institutions was just 26 percent, roughly half the level of the late 1970s.[206] Scandals, political dysfunction, and perceived failures by leaders have fed a cynicism that blunts pride in the nation's direction. Social trust among Americans has also eroded.

Another structural force behind waning patriotism is the fragmentation of American society, which weakens social ties and civic engagement and leaves individuals less connected to any common national project. Sociological research has long documented a decline in "social capital" in the United States. Robert Putnam famously observed that for most of the 20th century, Americans were drawn into ever-deeper community engagement,[207] but that trend reversed in the 1970s, and in the ensuing decades, community activities that once fostered local pride and belonging, from club memberships to shared cultural rituals, became less common as civic participation and networks quietly unraveled. By many measures—political involvement, religious participation, neighborhood groups, even trust in neighbors—social capital has eroded steadily over the past two generations.[208]

Section 8:

Freedom and Opportunity

Total Federal, State, and Local Government Expenditures as a Percentage of GDP



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. For full citation, see appendix.

The Real Tax Burden: It's All in the Spending

Preston Brashers

The chart above depicts total federal, state, and local government spending as a percentage of GDP, which captures the size of government in the broader context of the nation's economic output.

Governments and businesses operate very differently from one another because they face very different constraints. A business, for example, can stay afloat only if it produces goods or services that customers will voluntarily purchase at prices that at least cover its costs.

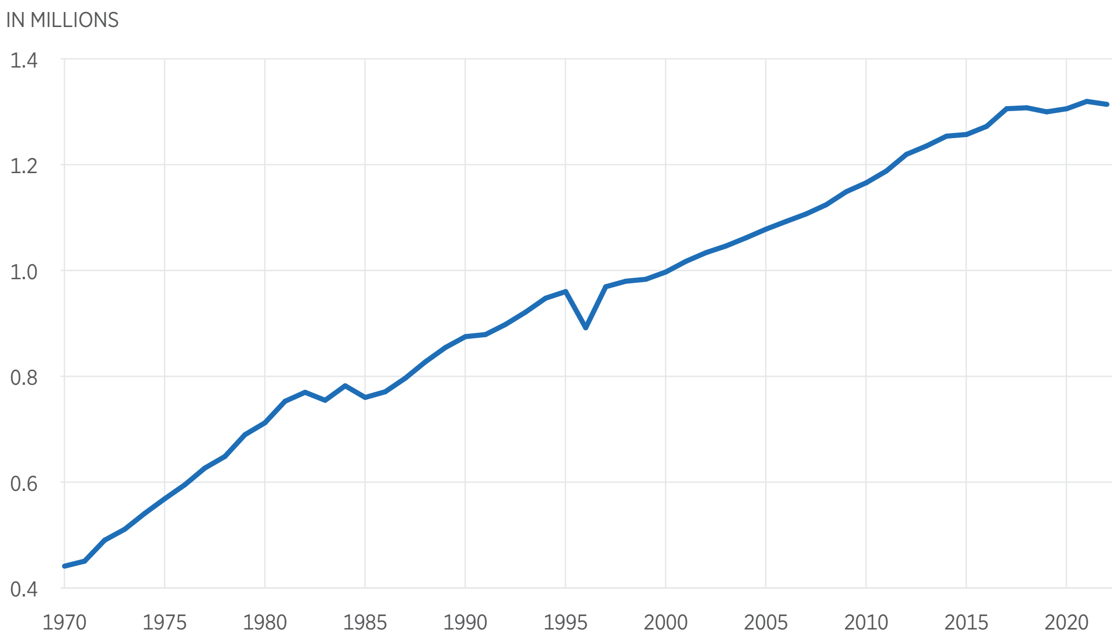
Unlike a business, a government does not depend on voluntary payments from customers; it has the power to compel taxpayers to pay for its activities without regard for the willingness of individual taxpayers to pay for the services it is rendering. The constraint faced by a government is therefore very different from the constraint faced by a business: Spending is limited to what a government can raise by levying taxes, borrowing (future taxes), or simply creating new money (the root of inflation).

One way or another, however, Americans must pay the full price of government. As Milton Friedman once said, "Keep your eye on one thing and one thing only: how much government is spending. Because that's the true tax." Spending reflects the full burden of the cost of government; current taxes may reflect only part of that burden.

As the chart above illustrates, the total size of government has risen dramatically since 1960, but growth in the *relative* burden of government expenditures (as a share of the economy) has risen less consistently, with private economic growth occasionally outstripping the expansion of government. Federal, state, and local government expenditures accounted for 27.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1960. By 1982, government expenditures had grown to 35.0 percent of GDP. There were significant reductions in government's share of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the latter half of the 1990s. After the implementation of the 1994 "Contract with America" legislative agenda (led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich), total government expenditures fell from 34.1 percent of GDP to 30.6 percent of GDP by 2000. However, government spending has ratcheted up with each successive recession since 2000. During recessions, government's share of the economy spikes; during economic recoveries, government's share declines from the peaks of the recession but tends to settle above pre-recession levels. As of 2023, total government expenditures were at 35.1 percent of GDP, down from a peak of 43.0 percent during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2008–2009 recession but still very high by America's historical standards.[209]

America's aging population will continue to put upward pressure on the size of the government in the coming decades. The Congressional Budget Office projects that rising federal spending will be driven primarily by Social Security, Medicare, and interest on the debt.[210]

Number of Restrictions in the Code of Federal Regulations



SOURCE: QuantGov, RegData United States 5.0. For full citation, see appendix.

Easing the Regulatory Burden on Entrepreneurs and Small Businesses

Parker Sheppard

Starting and running a business in America is not just about hard work. More and more, success in business requires navigating the complexities of an ever-growing rulebook of federal regulations. From labor rules and environmental requirements to finance and consumer protection statutes, these regulations define what companies can and cannot do. Although each rule is intended to advance some public goal, the cumulative burden on businesses can be substantial, especially for small firms that lack the resources to hire dedicated compliance staff or specialized legal counsel.

Over time, the volume of these federal rules has grown at a remarkable pace. According to the Mercatus Center at George Mason University's RegData—a data set that counts the restrictions published in the *Code of Federal Regulations*—the number of explicit restrictions has grown 7.75 percent over the past 10 years of data. (See chart above.) The first Trump Administration was able to slow the growth but was unable to reverse the trend to any meaningful extent.

This continued growth in regulations signals a steady expansion of the government's reach into how enterprises operate. Each new rule adds requirements for paperwork, training, and administration, raising costs and complexity for existing businesses, and that complexity can function as a barrier that protects incumbents and potentially discourages new businesses from entering the market and driving down prices.

Simultaneously, measures of business dynamism have declined.[211] As the burden of federal regulation has risen, the rates at which new establishments and jobs are created have declined. Scholars and policymakers increasingly highlight the relationship between regulatory overhead and stifled entrepreneurship. When regulatory compliance costs are large, smaller or younger firms are often less able to absorb the compliance burden, and this in turn makes it harder for them to compete with larger, established players.[212]

A healthy entrepreneurial society is one in which new ideas, products, and services can flourish. That type of environment demands a degree of regulatory clarity and flexibility that allows businesses to innovate and grow without disproportionate barriers. In many respects, the current surge in rules and restrictions challenges that principle, creating a climate in which caution supersedes risk-taking and growth is tempered by concerns over compliance rather than buoyed by the promise of invention.

Median Homeownership Cost as a Percentage of Median Income

NOTE: Home affordability threshold is set to 30 percent share of median household income following U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development standards.
SOURCE: Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, *Home Ownership Affordability Monitor (HOAM)*. For full citation, see appendix.

How to Make Housing Affordable: Build More Homes

Parker Sheppard

A home of your own—a place to lay down roots and start a family—is the classic American dream. Increasingly, however, many newlyweds looking for a home find it unaffordable and out of reach.

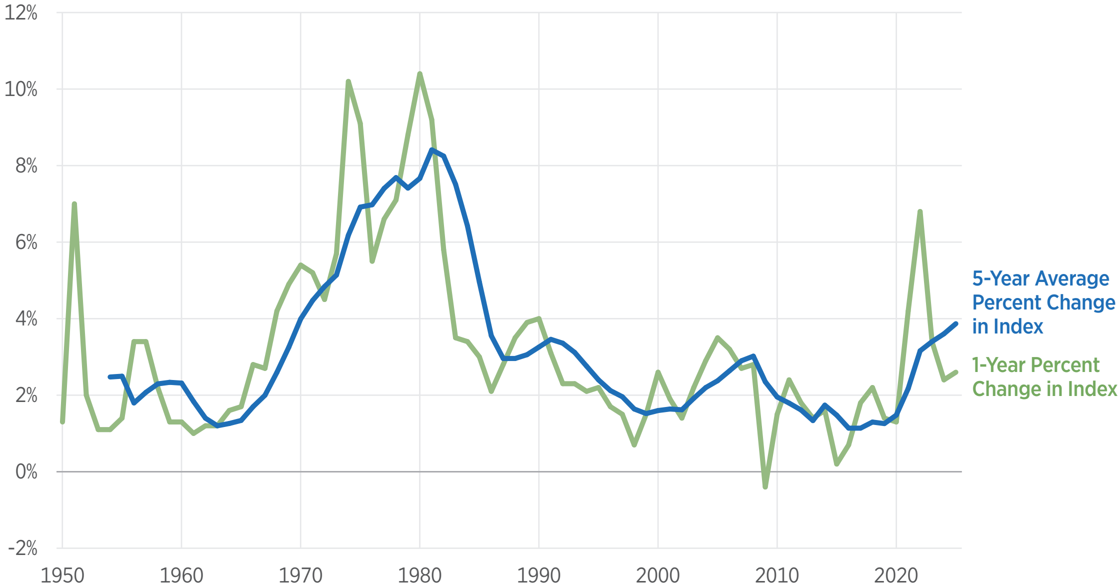
The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta tracks a measure of housing affordability by comparing the median house price to the median income. Keeping that ratio below 30 percent is their target for affordability. By that measure, housing has been unaffordable nationally since early 2021 and over half the time since the start of 2005. (See chart above.)

Many current policies attempt to help aspiring homeowners through subsidies. These demand-side policies, which include federal loan guarantees, special tax treatment for borrowers, and down payment assistance or tax credits for first-time homebuyers, serve only to push up prices on existing houses and provide limited incentive to increase new construction.

The key to making houses affordable again is the implementation of supply-side policies that put more housing units on the market. These supply-side policies include (among others) both relaxing zoning rules to allow for more construction and streamlining building permits to reduce costs for homebuilders. By making it easier and less costly to build, these reforms would increase the overall supply of homes and make the American dream of homeownership affordable for young families.

Gross Domestic Purchases Price Index

PERCENT CHANGE IN PRICES FOR GROSS DOMESTIC PURCHASES



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. For full citation, see appendix.

A Sound Currency to Protect Families and Strengthen the Economy

Parker Sheppard

Stable prices are the foundation of a strong economy. A sound currency maintains the link between past and present, preserving the value of work and savings across generations. Rapidly rising prices undermine that connection by eroding people's hard-earned wealth and making it more difficult for families to leave a meaningful inheritance to their children.

Inflation also creates arbitrary redistributions of wealth by transferring purchasing power from lenders to borrowers. Those who live paycheck to paycheck, especially households in the bottom 40 percent, suffer the most because they primarily hold liquid assets that lose value rapidly.[213] Predictable prices are essential for long-term financial planning—whether saving for retirement, buying a home, or launching a business.

High inflation typically follows unchecked government spending. During the COVID pandemic period, Congress authorized more than $4 trillion in new outlays without offsetting cuts. Consequently, the Gross Domestic Purchases Price Index grew by 4.2 percent in 2021 and 6.9 percent in 2022. (See chart above.) The post-pandemic inflation is a breakout from the otherwise low and stable inflation that has prevailed since the 1990s.

The government does not have a revenue problem that can be solved by raising tax rates: Federal receipts as a share of GDP are already on par with historical highs, including periods when the top marginal tax rate exceeded

90 percent.[214] Rather, responsible budgeting and disciplined spending are critical to avoid imposing the hidden tax of inflation on hard-working families.

Non-Farm Business Labor Productivity Growth Rate, 10-Year Rolling Average

10-YEAR COMPOUND ANNUAL GROWTH RATE FOR LABOR PRODUCTIVITY (OUTPUT PER HOUR), INDEXED TO 2017

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For full citation, see appendix.

Productivity Growth: The Path to Prosperity

Parker Sheppard

Time is the bottleneck that holds back production. Population and the capital stock have grown throughout history, but there still are only 24 hours in a day and 365 days in a year. Thus, rising prosperity in the United States depends on Americans being able to produce more and more valuable goods and services in the time available to them.

Labor productivity measures the growth in output relative to the number of hours worked. The chart above shows 10-year average growth rates in labor productivity for the nonfarm business sector, a broad measure of the trend in productivity growth.

The average annual growth rate in the whole series is 2.2 percent per year, and the 10-year trends alternate between long periods of growth above and below this average. Productivity growth was high in the 1950s and 1960s, languished in the 1970s and 1980s, and resumed in the 1990s with the information revolution before bottoming out again in the wake of the global financial crisis. Changes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged a brief increase in productivity growth, but the trend is still below the average.

There is a massive difference between the benefits derived from sustained productivity growth of 1 percent and the benefits yielded by sustained productivity growth of 2 percent or 3 percent. Over 30 years, 1 percent growth will raise output by a total of 34 percent; 2 percent growth, by a total of 81 percent; and 3 percent growth, by 142 percent. In other words, the next generation could enjoy a standard of living that is more than twice as high as today's if the economy can sustain productivity growth of 3 percent or nearly 3 percent.

The key drivers of productivity growth are new research and new technology. Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and remote work could herald a return to above-average productivity growth—if policymakers can stay out of the way and let the development of new technologies flourish.

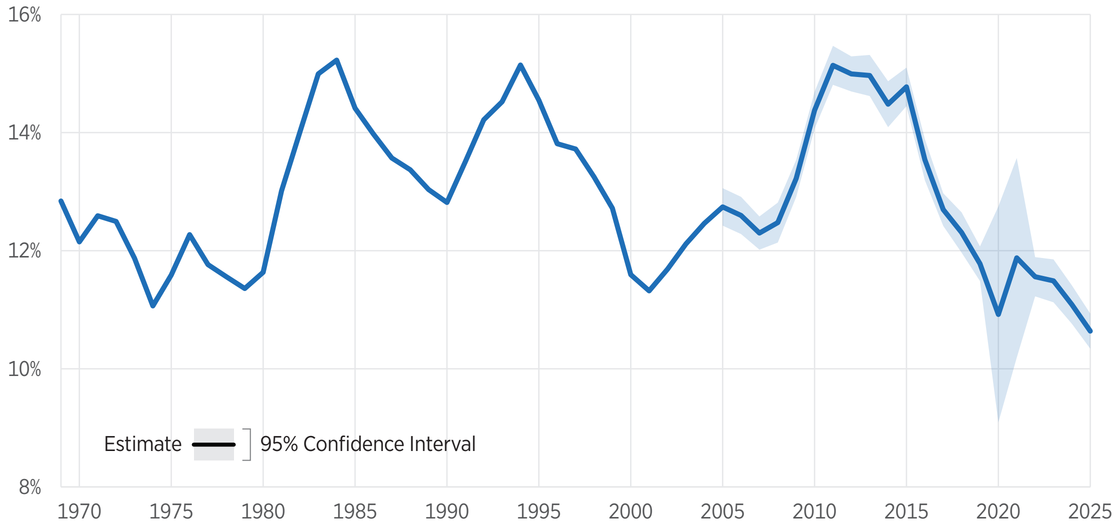
Section 9:

Poverty and Dependence

Poverty Rate

Official Poverty Measure

PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS LIVING BELOW THE POVERTY LINE



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement* as distributed by IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota, https://www.ipums.org. For full citation, see appendix.

Poverty in America: A Misleading Metric and a Better Approach

Rachel Sheffield

As can be seen in the chart above, for the past 60 years, the poverty rate in the U.S. has fluctuated between approximately 11 percent and 15 percent. Poverty rates typically increase most when the economy is struggling and decline when the economy improves.

The government's official poverty measure, however, tells us very little about a household's actual material living conditions: It uses household income to calculate poverty but excludes nearly all government means-tested welfare assistance that a household receives.[215] This is a significant exclusion when one considers that the government spends more than $1 trillion annually on means-tested welfare programs.[216] Another problem with the official poverty measure is that the Census Bureau undercounts earnings of the poor by about 40 percent.[217]

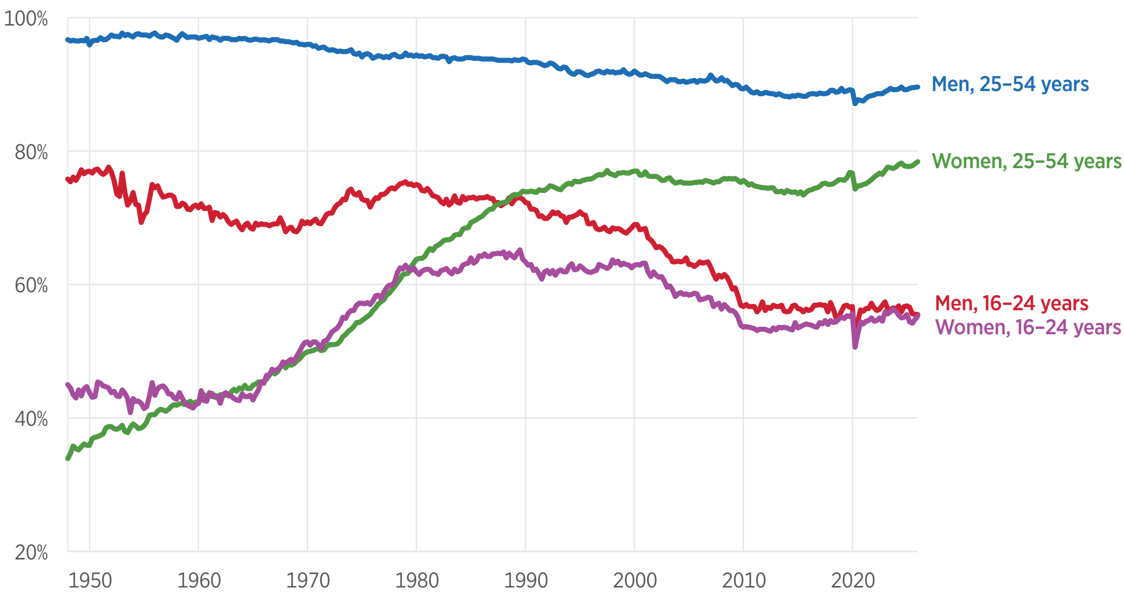
A more accurate way to describe the current U.S. poverty measure would be to call it a measure of self-sufficiency. Instead of measuring a household's material living conditions, it measures the share of Americans who are unable to get by without government welfare assistance. Sadly, the government has poured more and more money into the welfare system for six decades—and during those six decades, self-sufficiency has not improved.

Our welfare system needs many reforms, and one of the most important is a more accurate assessment of poverty. A poverty measure that looks at household spending rather than income provides a better assessment of household resources. Bruce Meyer of the University of Chicago, for example, has a well-developed "consumption poverty measure."[218] Government data regularly show that low-income households spend about two dollars for every dollar of money income they report.[219] When poverty is measured by household expenditures rather than income, the poverty rate declines by about half.[220]

Understanding what the poverty measure is really measuring enables us to assess the extent of poverty in the United States more accurately and then, based on that assessment, increase the effectiveness of the nation's anti-poverty policy. Policymakers should acknowledge the reasons for the welfare system's decades of failure and reform anti-poverty programs in a way that both improves self-sufficiency rates and promotes true upward mobility.

Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate

Men and Women, Ages 16–24 and 25–54, Quarterly, Seasonally Adjusted



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For full citation, see appendix.

How Young Americans' Declining Labor Force Participation Affects the Culture

Rachel Greszler

Along with faith, family, and friends, work is a primary source of personal contentment and meaning and a necessary component of human flourishing. Yet labor force participation is declining, and it is particularly troubling that this decline has occurred primarily among young men.[221] A lack of work not only causes lower incomes, but also contributes to fewer marriages and less family formation.[222]

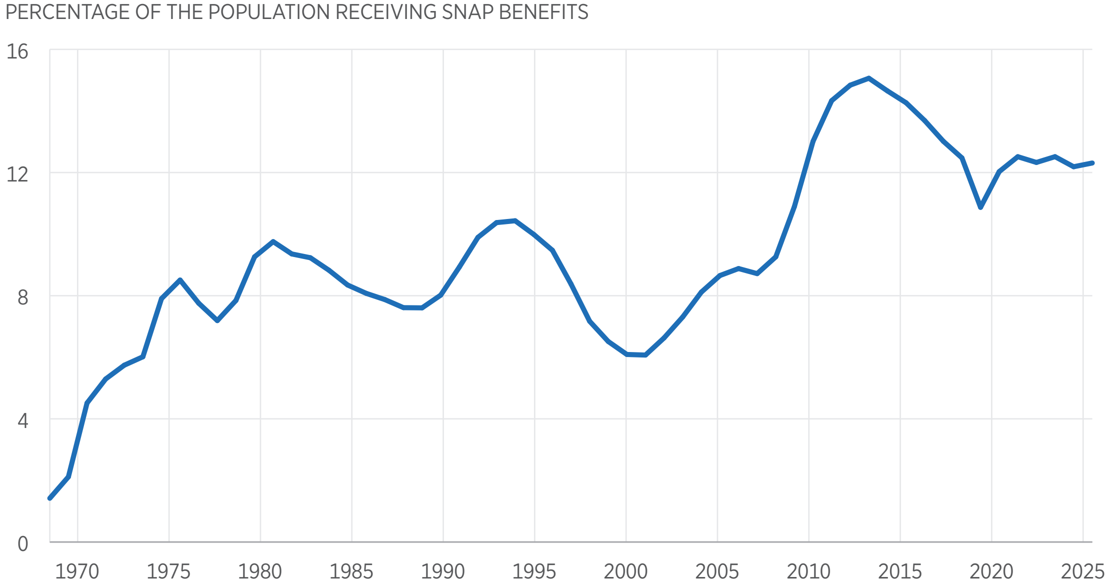
The entry of more women into the workforce caused labor force participation to rise from the 1960s up until a peak in 2000. The prime-age labor force participation rate of individuals 25 to 54 years old is only 1.0 percentage point below its peak in 2000.[223] This includes a 0.9 percentage point increase in the labor force participation rate of prime-age women and a 3.9 percentage point decline among prime-age men.[224]

Younger Americans' (ages 16–24) labor force participation rate, on the other hand, is 9.7 percentage points lower than its peak in 2000.[225] This includes a 7.9 percentage point decline in labor force participation among young women and an 11.5 percentage point decline among young men.[226] These declines are beyond what can be explained by educational enrollment, which has also declined. Working at younger ages provides valuable experience and builds a work ethic that can contribute to higher future earnings, more stable work, and increased family formation.

Compared to peak employment in 2000, there were 4.9 million fewer people under age

55 working in 2024 than would have been the case if the employment-to-population ratio had held steady.[227] Most of that decline—4.1 million—was among individuals under age 35, and 3.2 million was among men under age 35.[228] While cultural changes such as a decline in religion and family formation are almost certainly contributing to the decline in labor force participation among younger Americans, a massive expansion in welfare without work has made it easier for younger people to get by with little or no work. This decline in labor force participation has a predictably negative effect on individual potential and societal flourishing.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation Rate



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Agriculture and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. For full citation, see appendix.

The Ballooning SNAP Budget and the Need for Work-Centered Welfare Reform

Rachel Sheffield

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), more commonly known as the food stamps program, is one of the largest of the federal government's approximately 90 means-tested welfare programs. As of 2023, almost 42.2 million people—13 percent of the U.S. population—were receiving SNAP benefits.[229]

As can be seen in the chart above, SNAP has grown substantially through the years, typically surging during a recession but then rarely returning to pre-recession levels. Most recently, program participation grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, and spending soared.[230] The cost of the food stamps program is projected to remain well above pre-pandemic levels for at least the next 10 years as a result of massive benefit increases made by the Biden Administration.[231] This executive overreach under Biden led to an increase of 23 percent—the single largest benefit increase in the program's history.[232]

SNAP has been ripe for reform for years. As is the case with most government welfare programs, SNAP undermines work by providing benefits without a work requirement. The vast majority of able-bodied adults receiving SNAP benefits are not required to work, participate in job training, or even look for work as a condition for receiving benefits. Although SNAP has a limited work requirement for childless, non-elderly adults, states are often able to take advantage of loopholes in the law to waive even that limited requirement.[233] (Elderly is defined as more than 55 years old as of 2023 and before 2023 was defined as more than 49 years old.)

Moreover, SNAP is just one part of the government's welfare system, which, as noted, is comprised of approximately 90 means-tested programs that provide cash, food, housing, medical care, and social services to poor and lower-income Americans.[234] This web of programs costs more than $1 trillion annually.[235]

Helping people to free themselves from poverty should be the goal of welfare. Unfortunately, SNAP and nearly all other means-tested assistance programs stand in the way of upward mobility. Reforming SNAP to promote work should be among policymakers' highest priorities as they work to reform anti-poverty programs.

Endnotes

American Marriage: From “Early and Often” to “Less and Later”

Delano Squires

1. Table HH-1, “Households by Type: 1940 to Present,” in U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, “Historical Households Tables,” December 2025, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/households.html (accessed April 1, 2026).
2. Chart, “Amid Changes in Marriage and Cohabitation, Wide Acceptance of Cohabitation, Even as Many Americans See Societal Benefits in Marriage,” in Juliana Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, *Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.*, Pew Research Center, November 2019, p. 4, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/11/PSDT_11.06.19_marriage_cohabitation_FULL.final_.pdf (accessed April 1, 2026).
3. Table MS-2, “Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to Present,” in U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, “Historical Marital Status Tables,” December 2025, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html (accessed April 1, 2026).
4. Ibid.
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The Abortion Ratio

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Rachel Sheffield

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Avoiding the Drug Addiction Trap

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From Wall to Wave: The Unmaking of Border Security

Alexander Frei

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The Adults Are Not Okay: America's Mental Health Decline

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Obesity: America's New Epidemic

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