

On Trends in Marriage, I

(This is taken largely from a book by Kay Hymowitz called Marriage and Caste in America.)

Yes, there is much to worry about. Kids with guns and drugs, binge drinking on the college campus, cheating, Ritalin, bullies, gangs, depression and suicide, Internet porn, you name it. Just the appearance of many of the youth is cause for concern. Many of the kids dress like streetwalkers and thugs, they're obese, they don't read, they watch too much television and never play outside, they can't pay attention, etc. But there is some good news too.

The juvenile murder rate has plummeted by 70 per cent since 1993. By 2001 the arrest rate for all violent crime among juveniles was down 44 per cent since its peak in 1994. Juvenile arrests for burglary were also down 66 per cent. School based crimes dropped by fifty per cent.

Illicit teen drug use dropped 11 per cent between 1998 and 2001. A 2003 study found that 56 per cent of teenagers have no friends who drink regularly, up from 52 per cent in 2002, and 68 per cent say they have no friends using marijuana, up from 62 per cent.

Out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy rates have come down 28 per cent from their high in 1990. The teen abortion rate also fell by 30 per cent. Between 1987 and 2001, those who agree with the statement "If two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex if they've know each other for a very short time" fell from 52 per cent to 42 per cent. It seems adults are more skittish about abstinence than kids: almost half the parents interviewed by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy believe it is embarrassing for teens to admit they are virgins, yet only a quarter of teens think so.

Papers like the *Denver Post* are determined to show that policies which they do not approve of – especially welfare reform and abstinence education – do not affect the decline of adolescent child bearing. More and more, teens are fed up with the fallout from the reign of "if it feels good do it", so dominant from the 70's. We are in the midst of a slow change, and for the better.

If Millennials (newspaperspeak for teens) have a problem with authority, it's that they wish they had more of it. Poll after poll indicates that they think their parents are just grand. It seems that this generation coming up is at least as attached to their parents and their values as any generation before. A Harris Interactive survey of college seniors found that 81 per cent planned to marry (12 per cent already had) at a mean age of twenty-eight. Ninety-one percent hope to have children – and get this: on average they'd like to have *three*. The 2001 Monitoring the Future survey found 88 percent of male high school seniors and 93 percent of females believing that it is extremely important to have a good marriage and family life.

The reason these trends are so striking is that they come from people who grew up when the institution of marriage was in tatters. The decades-long trend toward family fragmentation seems to have finally halted, and may even be reversing itself. Overall the proportion of children in married-parent families rose from 68 percent in 1998 to 69 percent in 2002 – a tiny boost to be sure, but the first upward tick in decades.

Americans are even beginning to look at divorce with a more jaded eye. Orthodox newspaper editorial opinion would blather on about how divorce was an opportunity for adult's "personal growth," or about "resilient children" who were "better off when their parents were happy." For the children of divorce who are now in their childbearing years, such sunny talk grates. They saw their mothers forced to move to one-bedroom apartments while their fathers went off with new girlfriends; they found out what it was like when your dad moved from being the object of your love who read to you each night, to a guy who lives across the country whom you get to see once a year. A lot of these damaged young adults are determined to do better. Like Dr. Laura wrote in The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands, "There are many of us who understand that once you have children, certain doors ought to be closed to you forever. That to do right by a child means more than buying the latest bicycle helmet and getting him on the best soccer team...it means investing oneself completely in the marriage that wrought him."

For decades, elites jeered at the assumption that changes in family structures would hurt children; remember the guffaws that greeted Vice President Dan Quayle's pro-marriage *Murphy Brown* Speech in 1992? The stats are in – children in married, two-parent families do better than other kids by every measure of success. Just twenty years ago Nickelodeon children's TV network touted itself as a "parent-free zone." Home Alone was the signature kids movie at the time. I remember returning from the Gulf War on a civilian jet liner, and they showed that awful film as the entertainment. The young married Marines did not laugh. In fact, no one laughed. About 30 minutes into the film, I asked the flight attendants to turn the stupid thing off. The guys wanted to see their families, not a film about how unnecessary parents were.

Just what is the divorce rate in our country? We often hear "50%" as a figure, but is that figure accurate? It's hard to pin down, but consider it this way:

16-20 years old: Women 27.6 %, Men 11.7 %.
20-24 years old: Women 36.6 %, Men 38.8 %.
25-29 years old: Women 16.4 %, Men 22.3 %.
30-34 years old: Women 8.5 %, Men 11.6 %.
35-39 years old: Women 5.1 %, Men 6.5 %.

The divorce rate in America is now roughly 41 % for first marriages, 60% for second marriages, and 73% for third marriages. 66 % of all divorced couples are childless. Divorce rates per capita were 0.47 % in 1991, and 0.38 % in 2002. For 2007 the divorce rate was 0.36 %.