

The logo for 'Family Story' features the words 'FAMILY STORY' in a white, hand-drawn, sans-serif font. The text is centered on a solid black rectangular background.

To: Family Story
From: Lake Research Partners
Re: Key Findings: Survey on Today's Women¹

Families and family structures are changing more rapidly than any other time in history, forming and re-forming in a diversity of ways, alongside expanded notions of what constitutes a family. Few of these family arrangements are actually new, but there is a greater diversity of family arrangements across households, and no longer a “typical” American family. Roles within family are being redrawn, and expanded thinking is leading to a re-examination of some basic assumptions about marriage, partnership, parenting, and the multitude of ways familial bonds are formed and sustained.

Family Story partnered with Lake Research Partners on an attitudinal survey in order to explore how unmarried women who are raising children and those who are not, and married women who are raising children and those who are not, are making sense of changing institutions.

Below is a list of key findings from the survey, followed by some more specific details for each finding. Many raise important questions about how family shows up within our cultural narratives, laws and policies.

Key Findings (In Brief)

- Marriage is not for everyone. Over half of unmarried women without children under 18 say they either don't want to be married, don't think they want to be married, or would like a partner but don't feel the need to be legally married.

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- ¹ Methodology: Lake Research Partners designed and administered this nationwide online survey from April 6 – 18, 2017. The sample was drawn from an online panel and respondents were screened to be at least 18 years old.
 - The survey reached a total of 379 unmarried mothers of children under 18 with oversamples of 25 African American women and 25 Latina women. The unmarried mothers of children under 18 data were weighed slightly by region, age, race, and education to reflect attributes of the actual population. The margin of error for the total unmarried mothers of children under 18 sample is +/- 5.2 percent.
 - The survey reached a total of 426 unmarried women who have no children under the age of 18, with oversamples of 55 African American women and 60 Latina women. The unmarried women who have no children under 18 data were weighed slightly by region, age, race, and education to reflect attributes of the actual population. The margin of error for the total unmarried women who have no children under 18 sample is +/- 4.9 percent.
 - The survey reached a total of 253 Married Women with a mix of parental status. The married women data were weighed slightly by Parental status, Party ID, and education to reflect attributes of the actual population. The margin of error for the total married women sample is +/- 6.2 percent.

- Women agree that children do best with multiple adults invested in their well-being, but it's not necessary that those adults include two married parents. They overwhelmingly believe a single parent can do as good a job as two married parents.
- Women would like more ways to raise children with someone who is not a romantic partner, and a solid majority of unmarried mothers say they would consider raising a child with someone who is not a romantic partner.
- Married or unmarried, it takes a village to raise a child. Almost no one raises a child alone, and many people are involved in playing a role in raising children.
- Women say that marriage and children are not always coupled because life does not always work that way, and because marriage is not necessary to have children.
- Unmarried women don't think there is much of a difference between having married parents and having parents who are in a committed relationship.
- Women understand that being a single parent is not always a choice, and that sometimes it is best for children if their parents are not together anymore.
- Women recognize that single mothers are judged more harshly than married mothers and single fathers. They reject stereotypes about single mothers.
- Being in control is a double-edged sword for single parents. Women think the easiest thing about being a single parent is being in control, but having sole responsibility is also the hardest part.

Below, we explain each of the key findings in more detail.

Marriage is not for everyone

- Half (51 percent) of unmarried women with no children younger than 18 say their current relationship status is single or not in a romantic relationship, compared to 39 percent of unmarried mothers. About four-in-ten (42 percent) unmarried mothers are in a serious relationship, compared to a quarter (25 percent) of unmarried women with no children younger than 18.
- About half (51 percent) of unmarried mothers express a desire to be married, compared to 39 percent of unmarried women with no children younger than 18.
- Conversely, about half (52 percent) of unmarried women with no children younger than 18 respond with one of the sentiments about not wanting to be married:
 - I don't want to be married – 18 percent
 - I don't think I want to be married, but I'm open to my feelings changing – 18 percent

- I don't feel the need to be legally married, but I have or would like to have a committed/long-term partner – 16 percent

Two parents are not required, but multiple adults are best

- No matter their marital status, women agree that:
 - A single parent can do just as good of a job as two parents or two adults.
 - Unmarried mothers – 78 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 70 percent agree
 - Married women – 70 percent agree
 - Children do best with multiple adults invested and helping, but two married parents are not necessary.
 - Unmarried mothers – 61 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 65 percent agree
 - Married women – 67 percent agree

Women are interested in raising children with someone who is not a spouse or romantic partner

- Women agree that there should be more ways to raise children with someone who is not a romantic partner.
 - Unmarried mothers – 51 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 53 percent agree
 - Married women – 51 percent agree
- A solid majority of unmarried mothers (58 percent) say they would consider raising a child with someone who is not a spouse or a romantic partner.

It takes a village to raise a child

- Our survey acknowledged a number of adults may play a role in raising or caring for children: a member of her immediate family, the father of their child/children, their current or former romantic partners/spouses, someone in their child/children's father's family, their child/children's siblings, the romantic partner of their child/children's father, or close friends. Mothers responded by characterizing the role that someone plays or played as major or minor or noting if that person does not really play a role in raising or caring for their child/children.
- Unmarried mothers say someone in their immediate family, the father of their children, and their current partner are the most likely to play a major role in raising their children. Someone in their children's father's family and their child's siblings also play a role.
 - Only 1 percent say that all of the people we asked about do not really play a role in raising or caring for their children.
- Married mothers of young children say their spouse plays the most significant role, followed distantly by someone in their immediate family.

- Only 1 percent say that all of the people we asked about do not really play a role in raising or caring for their children.
- Unmarried women with grown children got major support from their families when their children were young, but few say other people played a significant role.
 - Even so, only 2 percent say that all of the people we asked about did not really play a role in caregiving.
- Not only do other adults play a major role in raising or caring for the children of unmarried mothers, a plurality (45 percent) of unmarried mothers say that one other adult provides financial support for their children.

Marriage is not necessary to have children and life does not always work that way

- When asked what the people who think marriage should come before children do not understand in an open-ended question, a full 30 percent of unmarried mothers volunteer that life doesn't always work out that way, by far the top response.
- Nearly one quarter (23 percent) of unmarried women with no children younger than 18 say people who believe a woman should be married first if she wants to have and raise children do not understand that marriage is not necessary for children.
 - Subgroups who feel this way strongly include younger women, Democrats, white women, Latinas, and women with higher household incomes.
 - Unmarried women with no children younger than 18 who think it is fair that there are federal benefits that only cover married people agree that a woman should be married before she has children, while those who think federal benefits are not fair think people do not understand that marriage is not required to have children.
- Married women split between saying they agree that a woman should be married first (24 percent) and marriage is not a requirement for children (21 percent), with a number saying life does not always work out that way (18 percent).
 - Subgroups of married women who say that marriage is not necessary for children include Democrats, Independents, and those who have felt judged.
- When considering becoming a single mother, unmarried women with no children younger than 18 split between saying it would depend on the circumstances (40 percent) and they would not consider it (42 percent).
 - Among women younger than 35 with no children under 18, a plurality (47 percent) say that they would consider becoming a single mother depending on the circumstances, while over half (52 percent) of older unmarried women with no children under 18 say they would not consider becoming a single mother.

Unmarried women value parenting outside of marriage

- Unmarried women say there is not much of a difference between having married parents and having parents who are not married but committed.

- But, married women split between saying it is better to have married parents and saying there is not much of a difference between married parents and parents who are married but not committed.
 - Some married women side with believing there is not much of a difference between having married parents and having parents who are not married but committed. These subgroups include:
 - Married women ages 30-49;
 - Those who do not have any children;
 - Democrats;
 - Liberals and moderates;
 - Suburban women;
 - Midwestern women;
 - Stay at home parents/homemakers; and
 - Women with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000.

Being a single parent is not always a choice

- No matter their marital or parental status, women agree that a lot of people have no choice about being a single parent.
 - Unmarried mothers – 76 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 73 percent agree
 - Married women – 74 percent agree
- They also agree that sometimes it is best for children if their parents are not together anymore, and we may not know the reasons why.
 - Unmarried mothers – 74 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 77 percent agree
 - Married women – 80 percent agree

Women recognize that single mothers are judged more harshly

- Across types of woman, respondents feel that married mothers are not judged as much as single mothers, and single fathers are not judged as much as single mothers.
 - Married mothers not judged as much:
 - Unmarried mothers – 72 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 75 percent agree
 - Married women – 71 percent agree
 - Single fathers not judged as much:
 - Unmarried mothers – 63 percent agree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 62 percent agree
 - Married women – 66 percent agree
- Women of all marital statuses refuse to participate in stereotypes about single motherhood. They overwhelmingly disagree that single mothers who are poor have made bad choices and are responsible for the hardships they face.

- Unmarried mothers – 58 percent disagree (20 percent agree)
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 56 percent disagree (24 percent agree)
 - Married women – 46 percent disagree (34 percent agree)
- They also disagree that it is not ok to be a single mother, even if she can afford to take care of her child.
 - Unmarried mothers – 70 percent disagree
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 70 percent disagree
 - Married women – 64 percent disagree

Unmarried mothers feel judged for a variety of reasons

- Among unmarried mothers, 45 percent say they are negatively judged for being a single mother. The most common ways they are judged are for:
 - Not having enough money;
 - Not picking a better father for their children;
 - Choices that led them to become a single mother;
 - Not being in a romantic relationship with or married to their children's father; and
 - Making parenting mistakes, and for getting pregnant with their children.
- Nearly half of unmarried mothers do not feel judged, and they guess that the top ways single mothers are judged are for having different fathers for their children, followed by not having enough money.
- Married mothers (37 percent) are less likely to feel judged than unmarried mothers (45 percent).
- Among married mothers, 37 percent say they are negatively judged for being a mother. However, when they are judged, it is for decisions they make regarding their children and for making parenting mistakes.
- Among the married mothers who are not judged, they guess other mothers are judged for their children's behavior and for spending too much time at work.

Being in control is a double-edged sword

- Across types of women, respondents believe that the easiest thing about being a single parent rather than a married parent is being in control (34 percent of unmarried mothers, 45 percent of unmarried women with no children under 18, and 38 percent of married mothers).
- But control is a double-edged sword, because some of the hardest things about being a single parent rather than a married parent is having sole responsibility and not having emotional, physical, or financial support.
 - Sole responsibility:
 - Unmarried mothers – 23 percent
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 22 percent
 - Married women – 25 percent

- No support:
 - Unmarried mothers – 22 percent
 - Unmarried women with no children under 18 – 23 percent
 - Married women – 33 percent
- Other studies have shown control and stability are the number one values for women broadly today.