



# Marriage, the Gold Standard for Children:

An International Perspective from the Social Sciences

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# The Elite Conventional Wisdom

- The conventional elite wisdom is that marriage does not matter.
- Cornell psychologist Penny Drexler: “The [single-parent] families I studied are legitimate, viable and raising fine boys. It’s not the number or gender of parents in the house [that matters].”
- Hollywood Star Jennifer Aniston: “Women are realizing it more and more knowing that they don’t have to settle with a man just to have that child.”



# Vive La Matrimonia

- Regardless of the elite wisdom, a large and growing body of social science indicates that:
  - Children are most likely to thrive and even survive when they are raised by their own married mother and father;
  - Children long to know and be known by the man and woman who brought them into this world.
    - *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* holds that a child shall have “as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.”

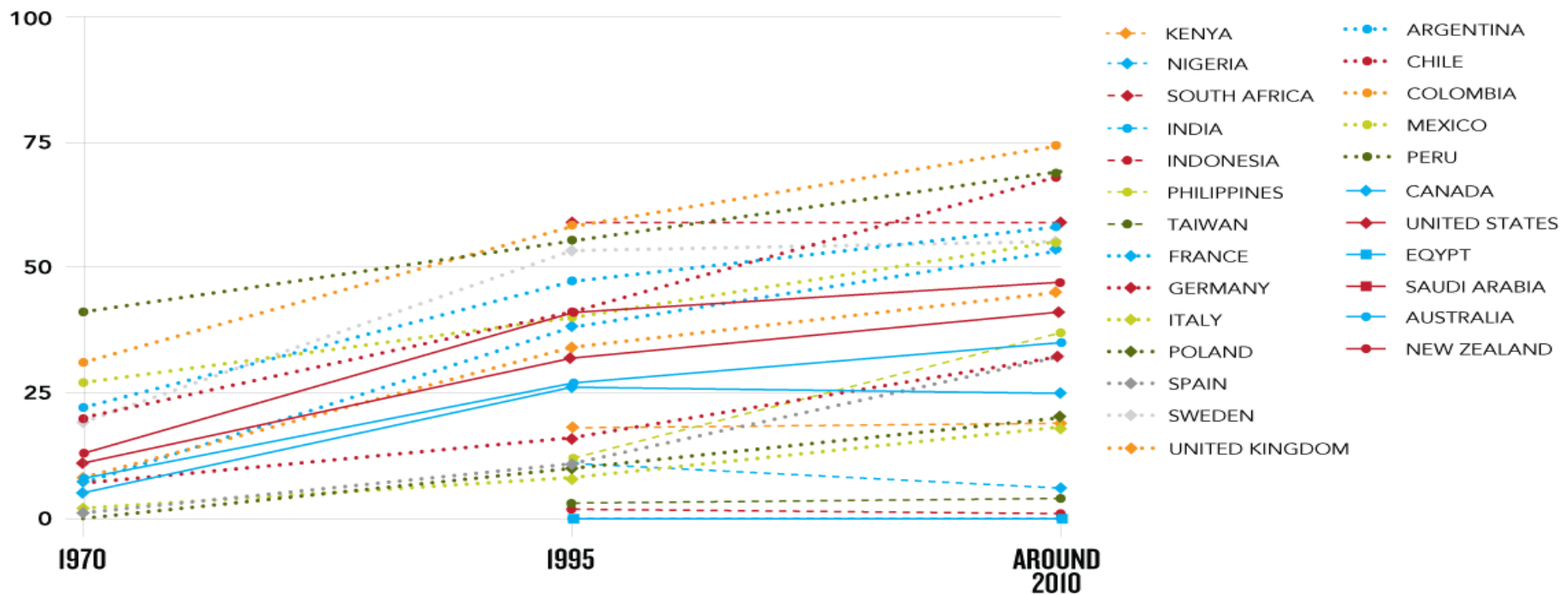
# The Retreat from Marriage



- Last 40 years, the West has witnessed dramatic retreat from marriage.
  - Marked increases in divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing, & single parenthood.
  - Now many of these trends are spreading around the globe.

# Nonmarital Childbearing Rising

## WORLD PERCENT OF BIRTHS OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE



Sources: [www.sustaindemographicdividend.org/e-ppendix/sources](http://www.sustaindemographicdividend.org/e-ppendix/sources)

Sources: Sustainable Demographic Dividend, 2011

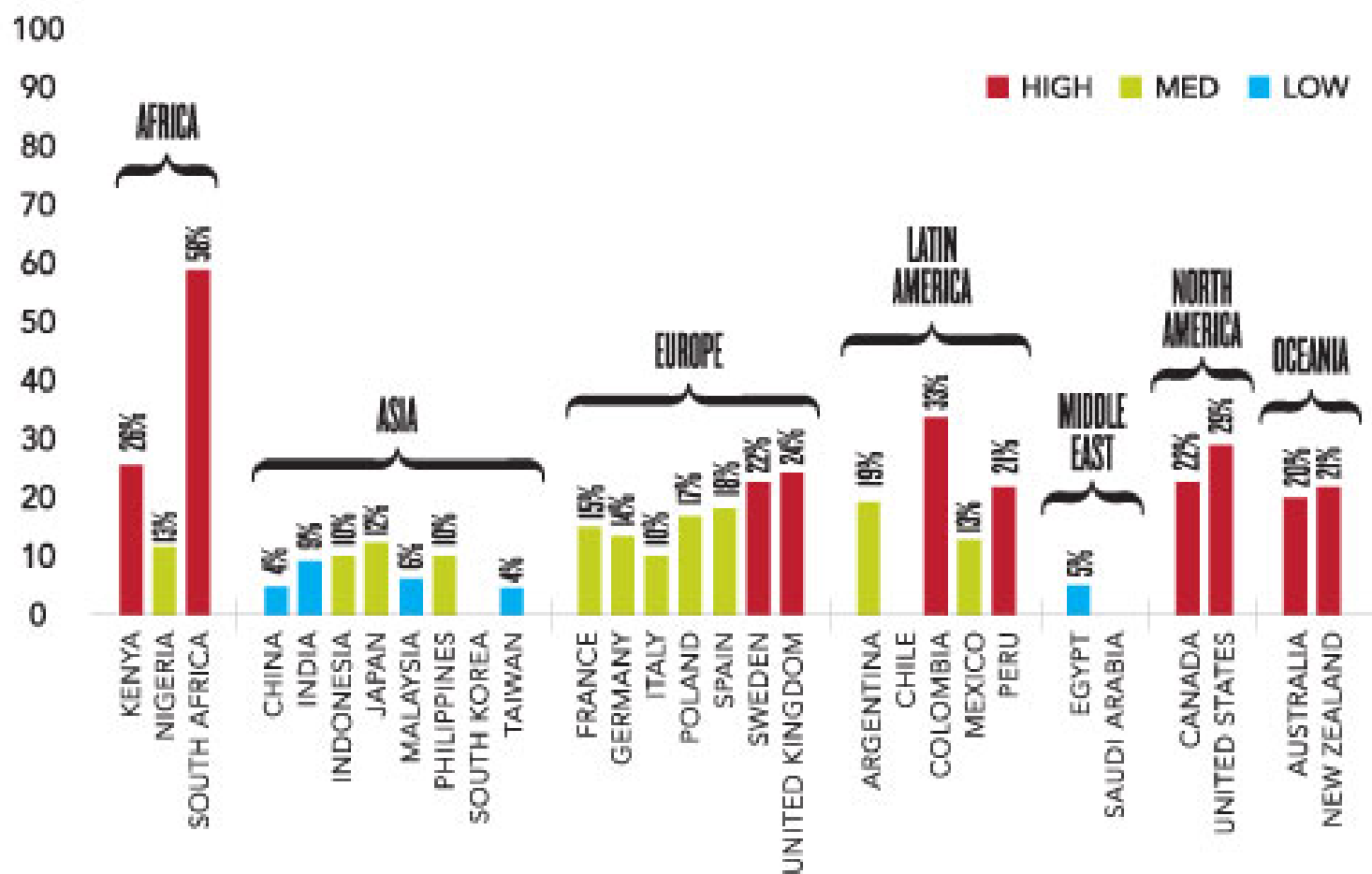
# The Impact on Children

- One consequence of the retreat from marriage is that children are more likely to end up in a single parent family.



# Single Parenthood High in Africa, Americas, Europe, & Oceania

**FIGURE 2**  
% OF CHILDREN  
IN SINGLE PARENT  
HOUSEHOLDS



# Why Should We Care?

- Why should we care that more children are spending time in single-parent homes?
  - Aren't families just changing with the times?





# Two Married Parents are Better than One: Outcomes



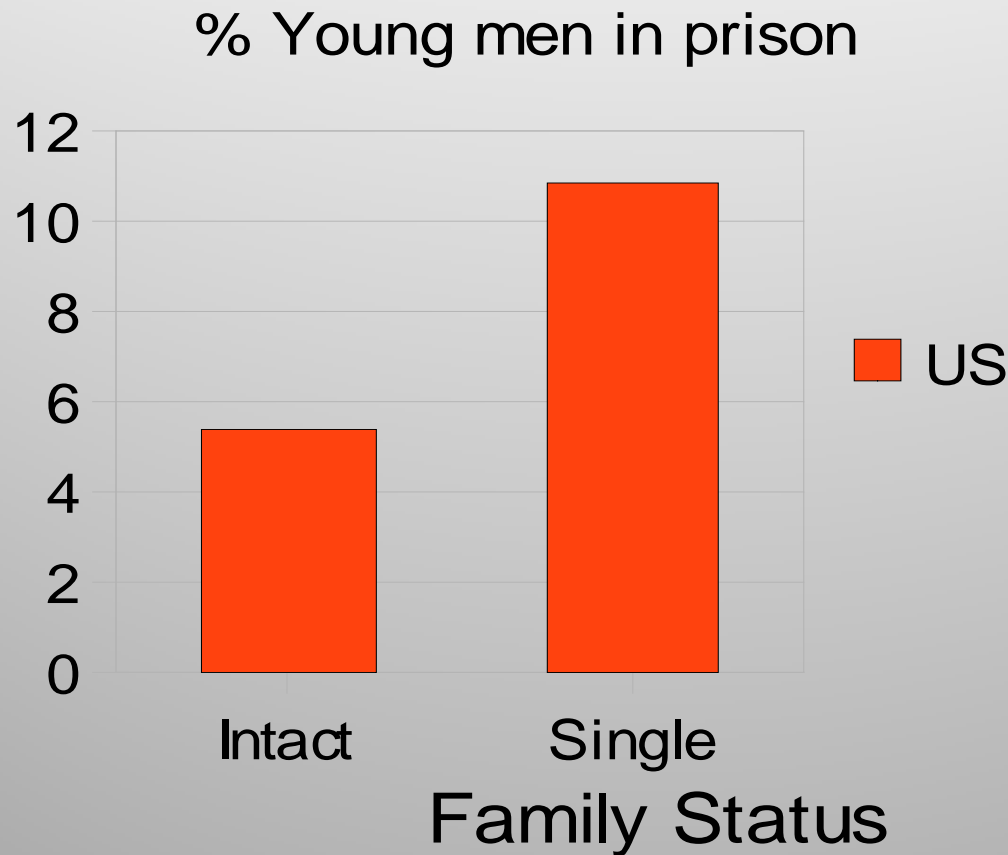
Children reared in single-parent homes in U.S. are two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes:

- About 10% of children in biological married-parent homes experience such outcomes;
- About 25% of children in biological single-parent homes experience such outcomes.

# Findings from around the Globe

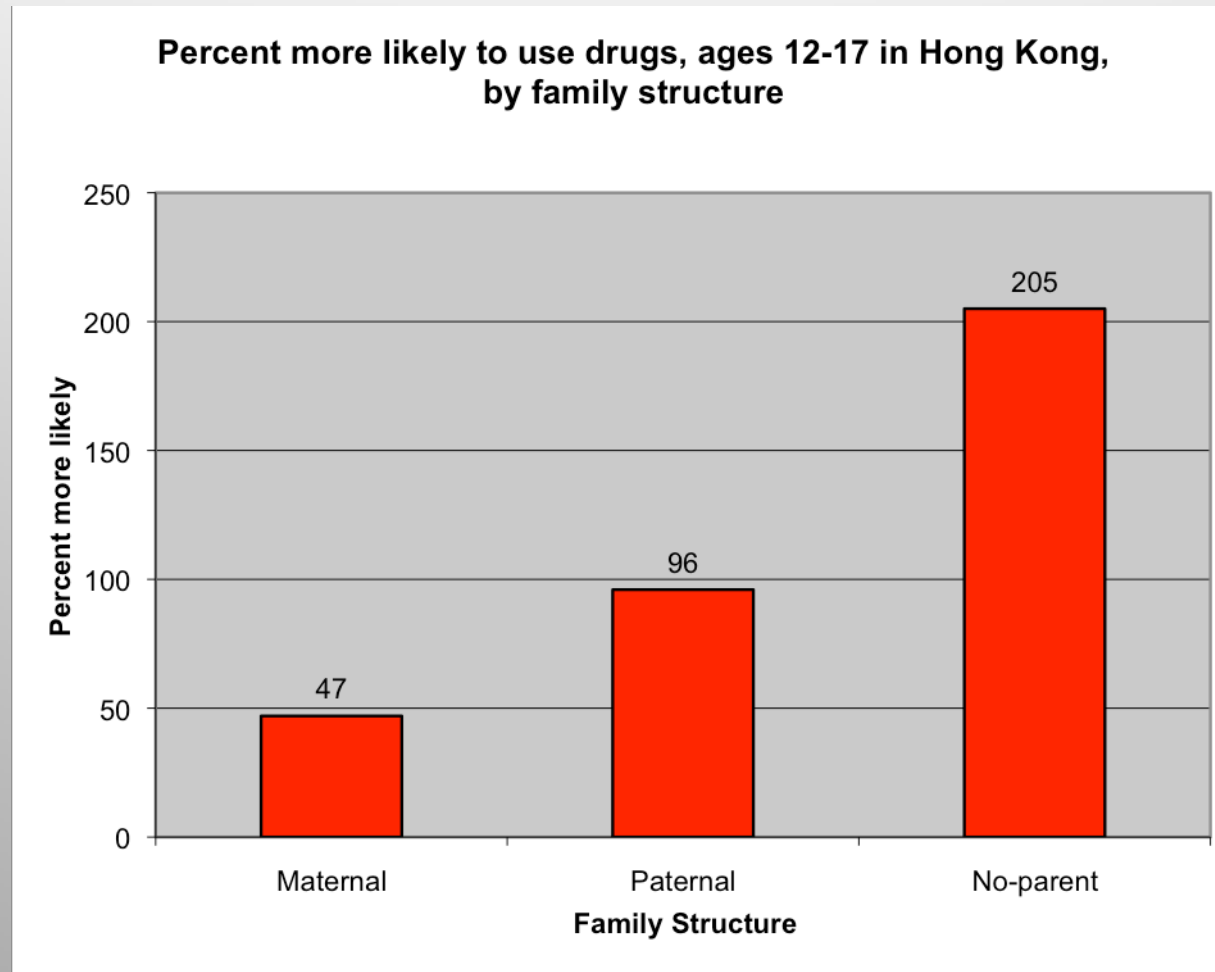
- The consequences of single parenthood for children:
  - Psychological:
    - Suicide, drug abuse, & depression
  - Social:
    - Delinquency, crime, teenage pregnancy, & educational failure
  - Economic:
    - Poverty, & material hardship

# Young Men in Prison – U.S.

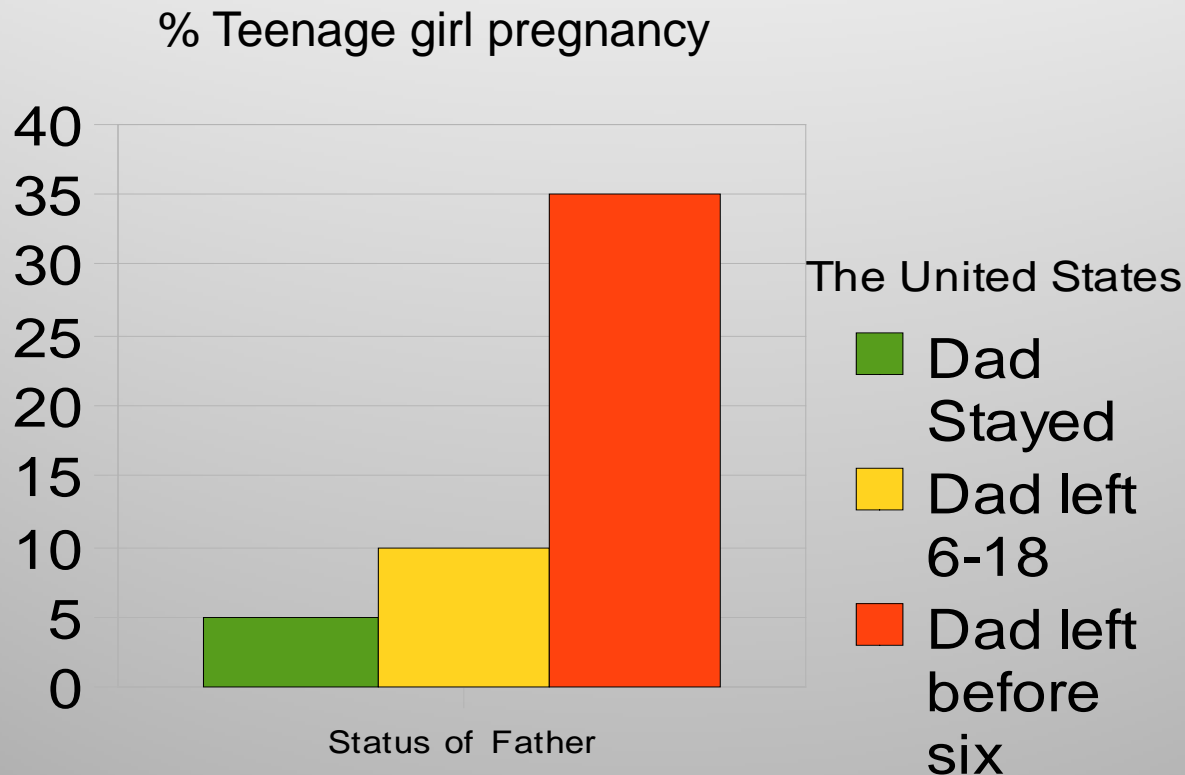


Source: Harper and  
McLanahan 2004

# Substance Use - China



# Teenage Girls Pregnant – U.S.

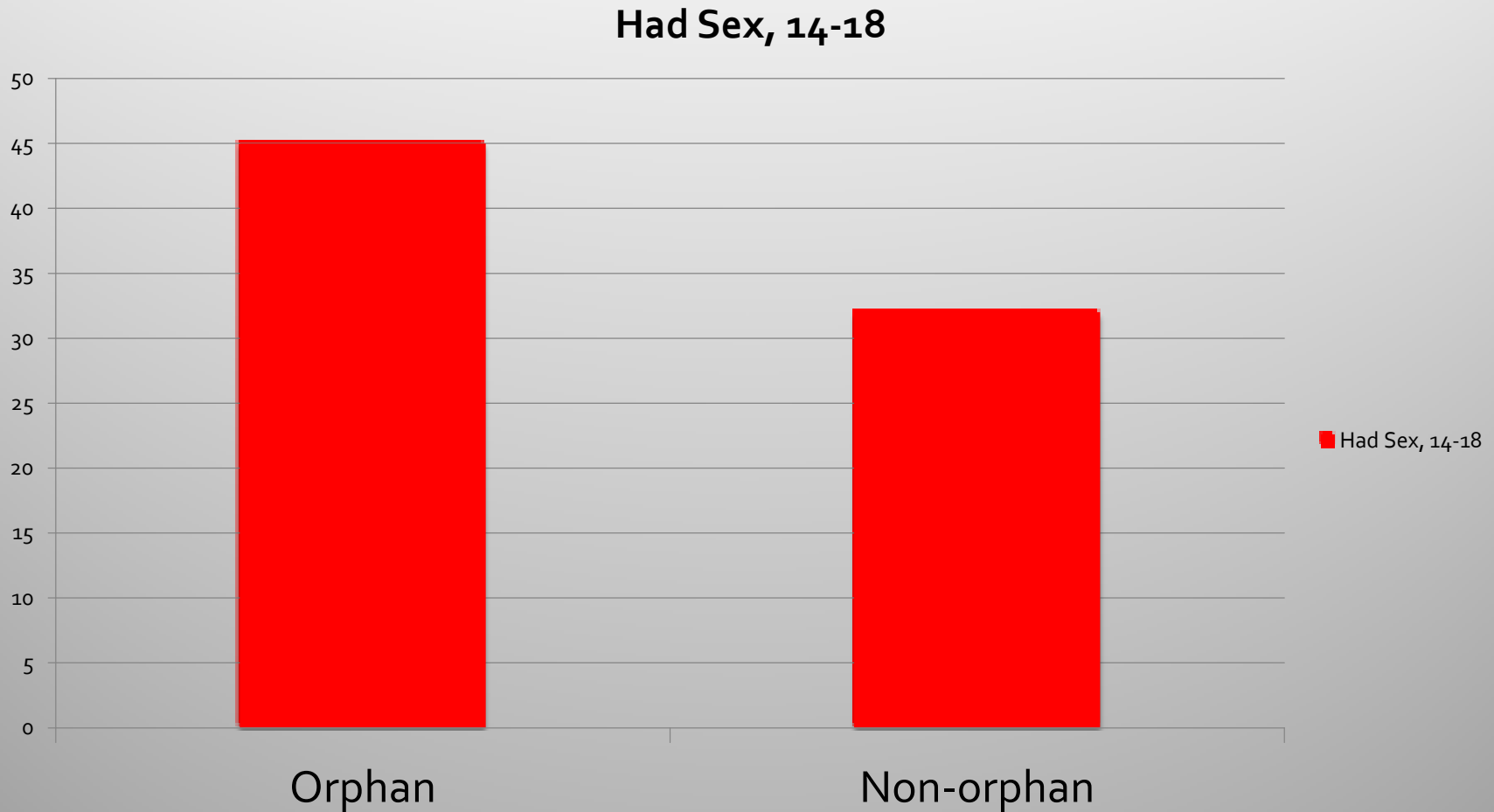


Family Status

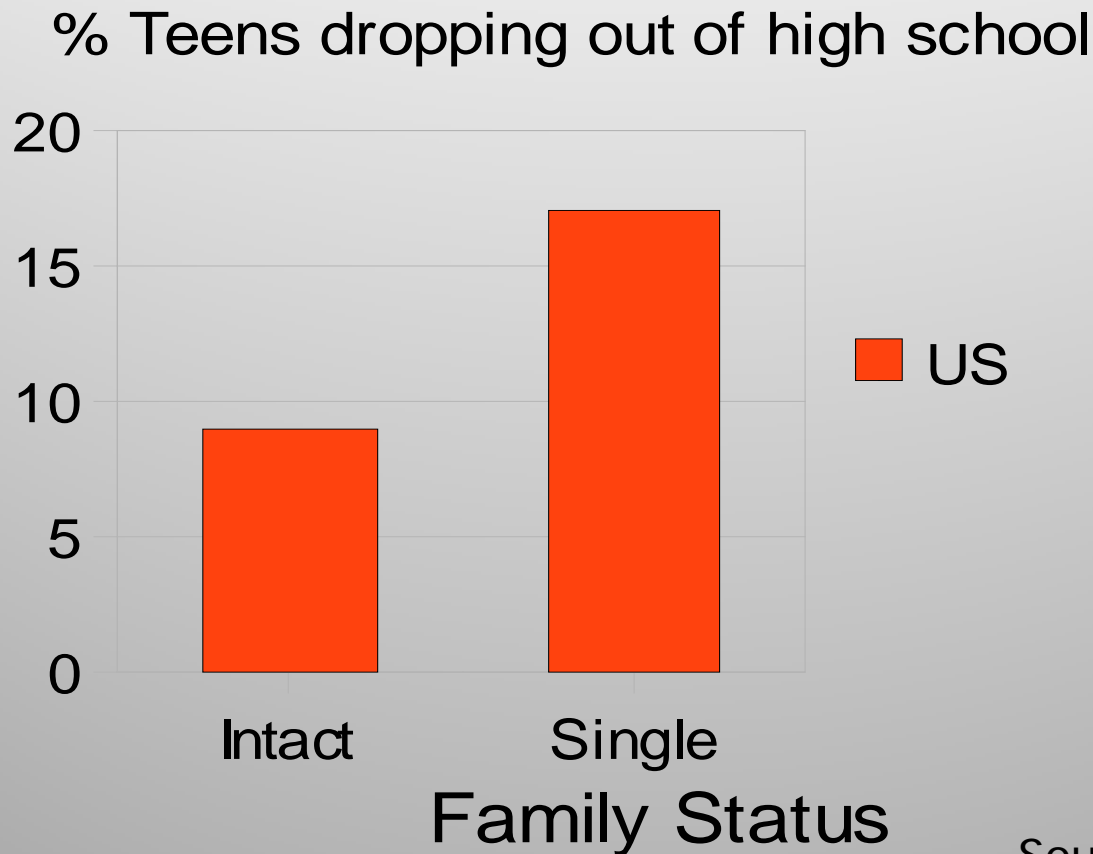
Source: Ellis et al., 2003

# Teen Sex (Girls) – South Africa

(Thurman et al. 2006)

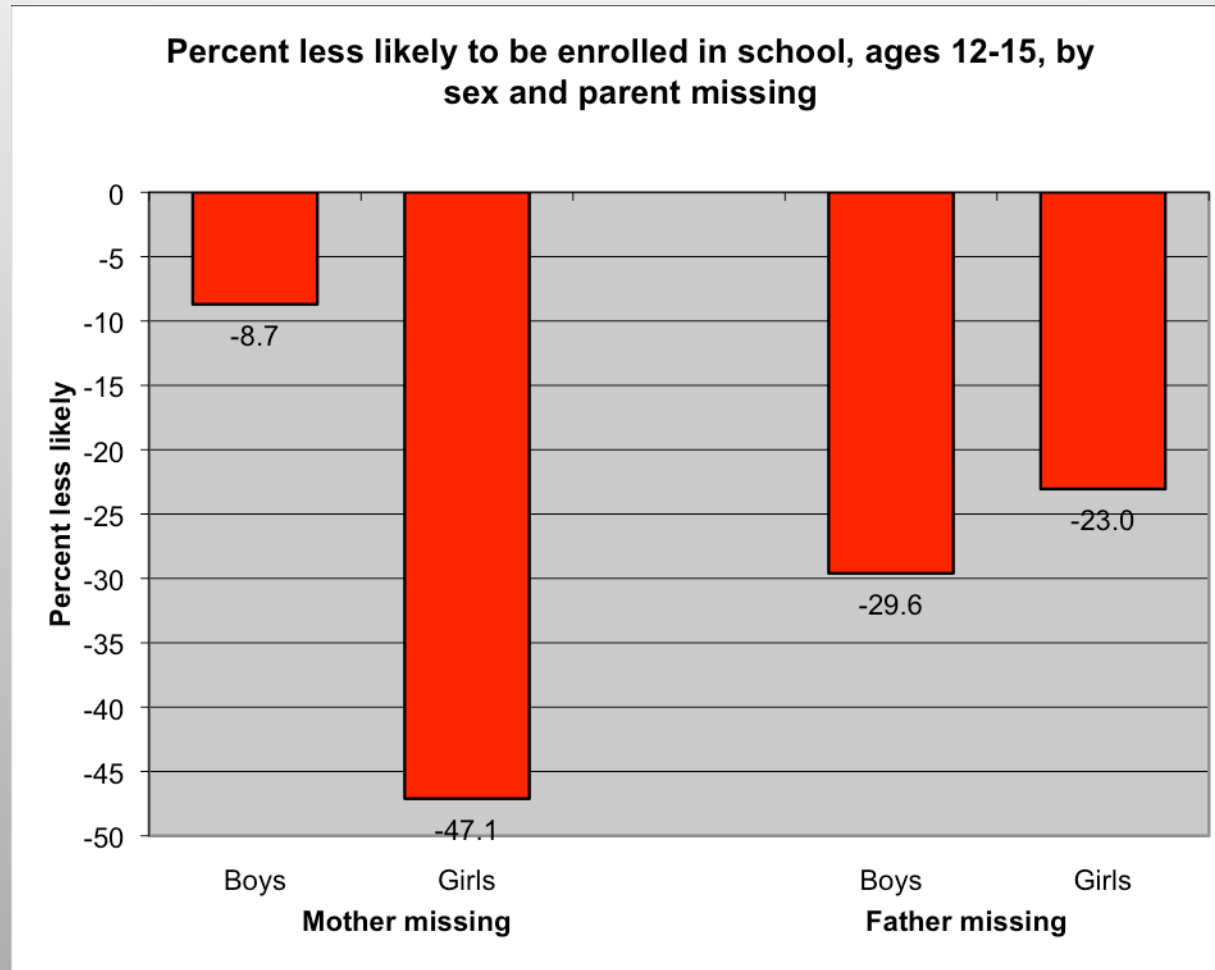


# Dropping Out of High School – U.S.



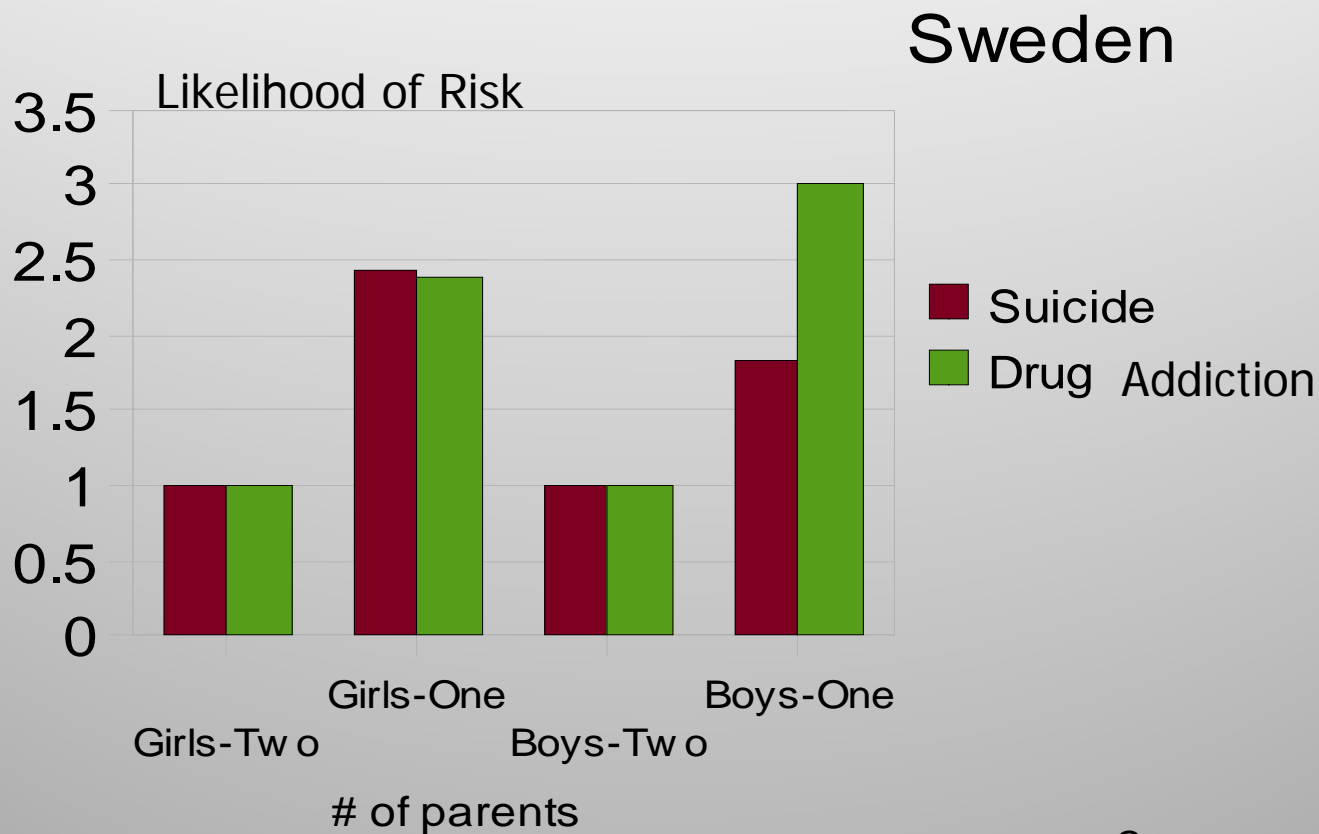
Source: McLanahan  
and Sandefur 1994

# School Enrollment in 5 Arab Countries





# Swedish Children at Risk



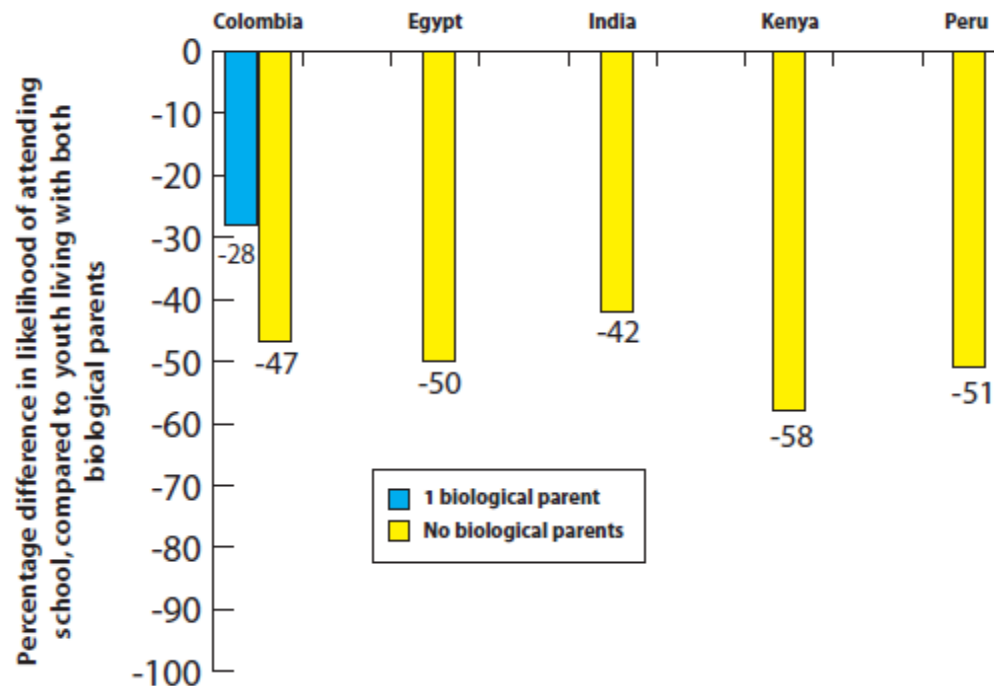
Source:  
Weitoft et al.  
2003

# The Power of Kinship

- Children don't always do better in intact, married homes, compared to single-parent homes.
- Sometimes, societies with strong kinship systems can reduce or eliminate the impact of living outside of an intact, married home.
  - Education outcomes in parts of the non-Western world provide an example of this.

# Secondary School Enrollment as High among Children in 2-Parent and 1-Parent homes in Some Societies with Strong Kinship Networks (Wilcox and Lippman 2009)

**Figure 6. In five of the six countries\*, youth of secondary school age living with neither biological parent are significantly less likely to attend school compared to those living with both parents**



**Notes:**

\*For Egypt, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Peru, enrollment of youth living with one biological parent was not statistically different from that of youth living with both parents; therefore, it is not shown.

\*For Nigeria, enrollment of youth living with neither biological parent was not statistically different from that of youth living with both parents; therefore, it is not shown.

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys, MEASURE DHS+ and MEASURE DHS waves

Age groups: Colombia, Egypt and India: 11-14; Kenya, Nigeria, and Peru: 12-14

Years of data collection: Colombia 2005; Egypt 2000; India 2005-06; Kenya 2003; Nigeria 2003; Peru 2000

Significance level:  $p < .01$ .

# The Public Significance of Marriage

- The primary reason that the state accords a special legal status to marriage is that marriage is *the* cross-cultural institution that best ensures children are supported—financially, socially, and emotionally—by their mother *and* their father.

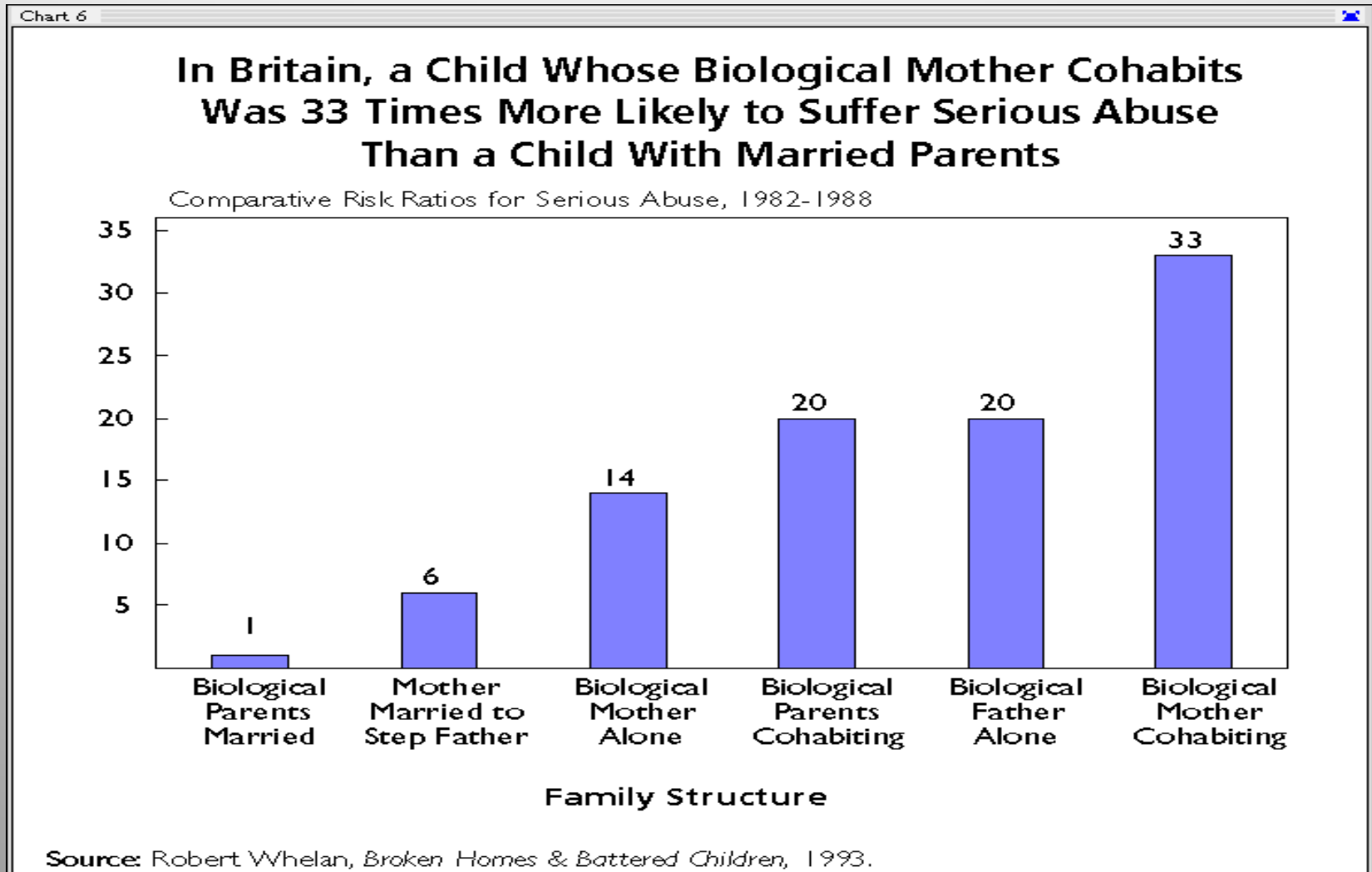
# What about Cohabitation?

- Cohabitation is becoming more common
  - Especially among poor and working class
  - More than 40% of children will spend some time in a cohabiting union in the U.S.
  - Cohabitation is the modal form of childbearing in most of Latin America
  - Cohabitation is the modal form of childbearing in much of Northern Europe
- Are children doing ok in cohabiting households?

# Cohabitation & The Welfare of Children

- Children in cohabiting households do worse than children in intact, married families in U.S.:
  - Educational failure (Raley et al. 2005)
    - 60% less likely to graduate from HS
  - Drug use (Cavanaugh 2008)
    - 116% more likely to smoke marijuana as teens
  - Sexual and physical abuse of children (Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect 2010)

# British Child Abuse Rates



# Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (2010)

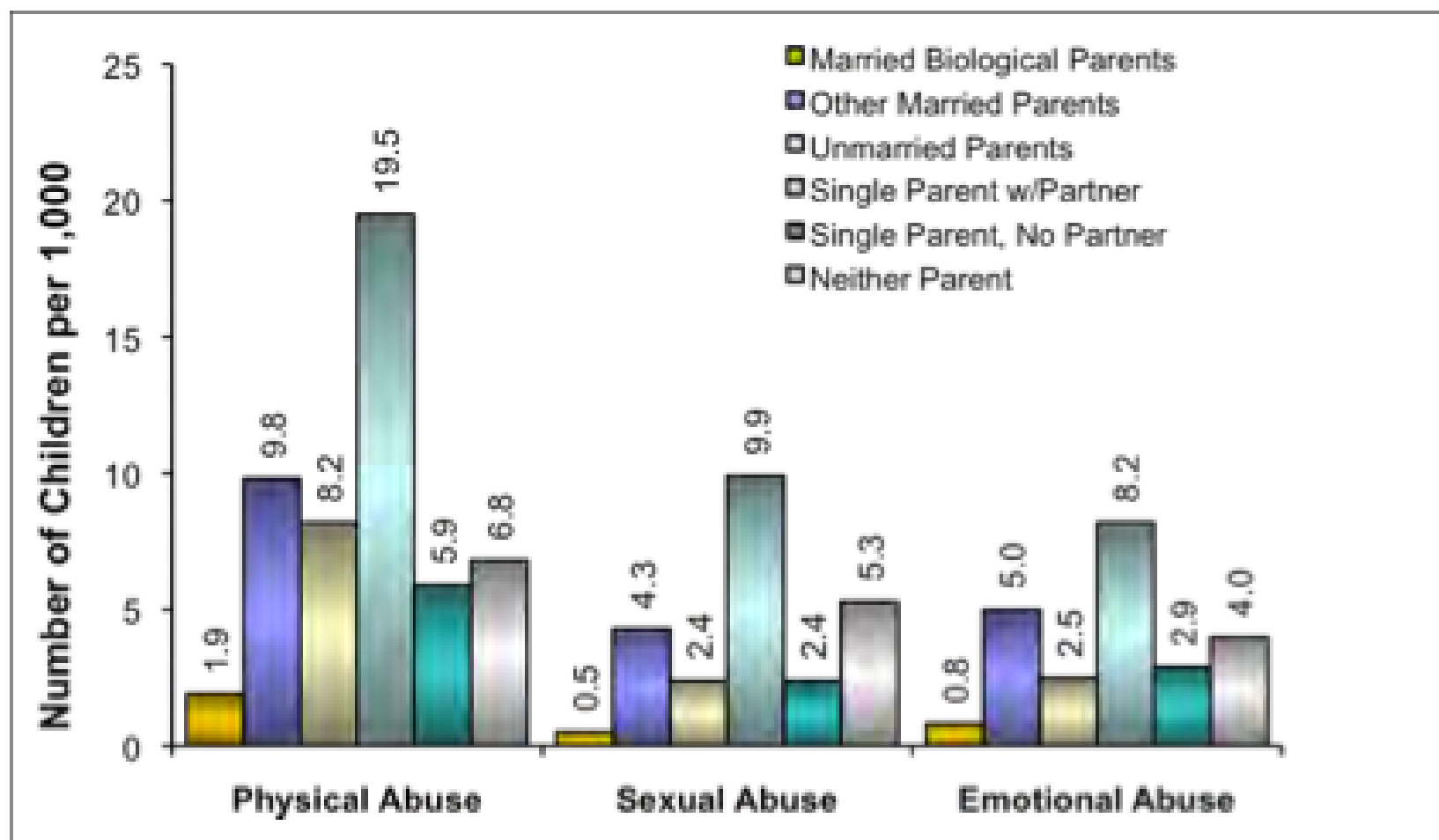
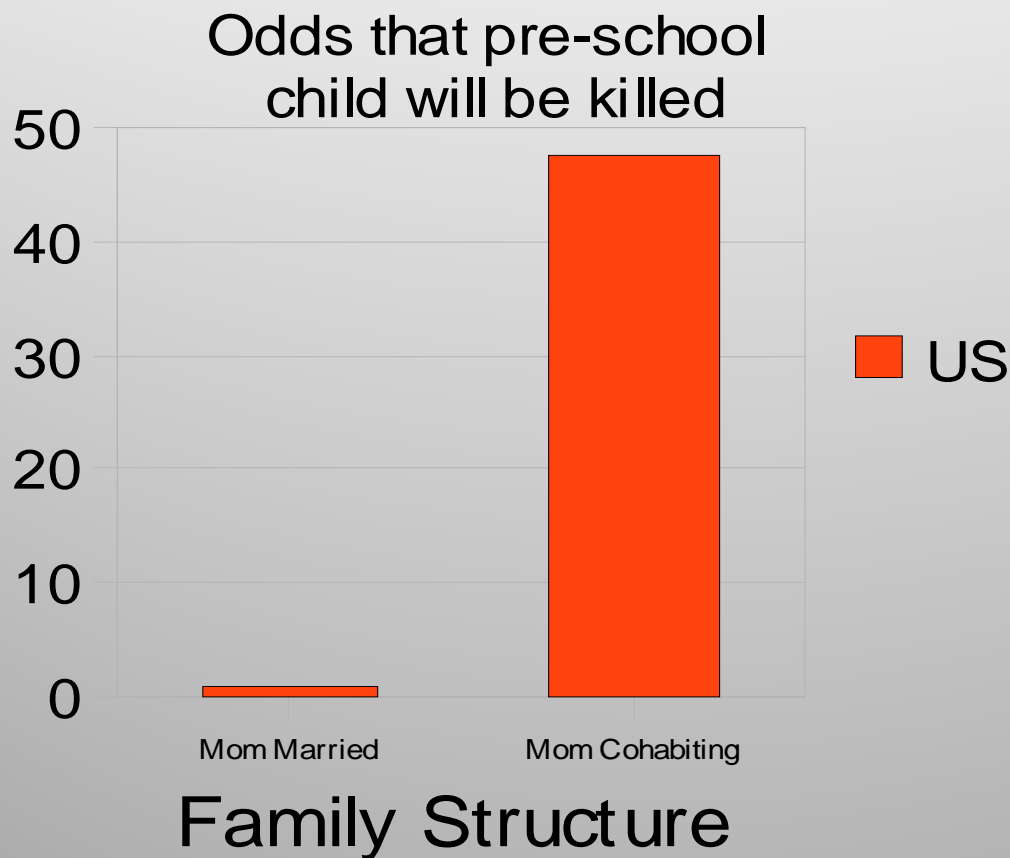


Figure 5–2. Incidence of Harm Standard Abuse by Family Structure and Living Arrangement.



# Preschool Children's Odds of Dying at Hands of Adult in U.S.

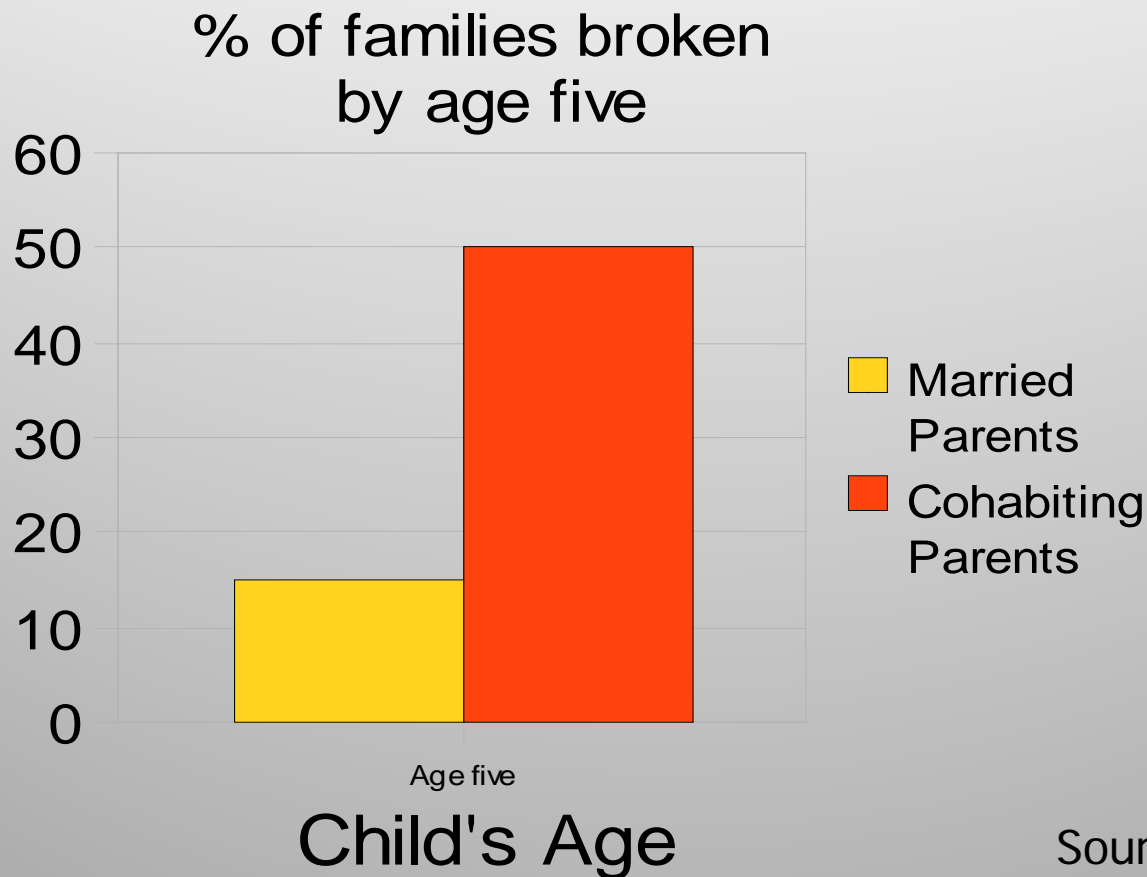


Source: Schnitzer  
and Ewigman 2006

# Why are Cohabiting Unions Risky for Kids?

- Cohabiting unions tend to have less commitment, trust, sexual fidelity, and more violence than married unions.
- They are also much less stable, even when biological kids are involved.
  - Instability is linked to numerous problems for children—from delinquency to sexual abuse—and helps to explain why cohabiting unions are arguably more risky for children than a stable, single parent home.

# Stability for U.S. Children: Married vs. Cohabiting



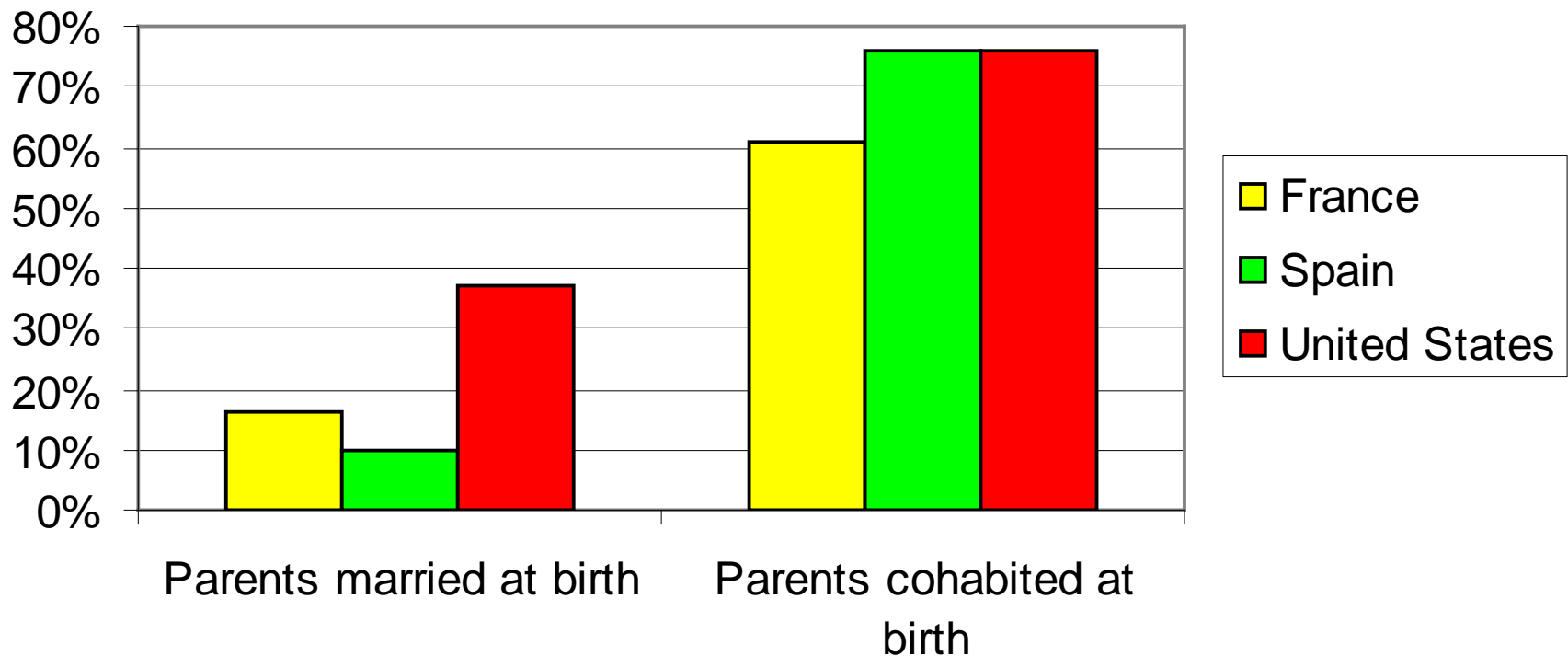
Source: Smock  
and Manning 2004

# Findings from Europe

- But cohabitation is much more common & institutionalized in Europe. Might cohabitation be ok in Europe?
- No.
  - UCLA Demographer Patrick Heuveline: “in most [European] countries children born to cohabiting families are two to four times more likely to see their parents separate than are children in married households.”

# Odds of Parents Breaking Up

**Odds that children see parents break up by age 15**



# Even in Sweden



- Children born to cohabiting parents are 75% more likely to see mom and dad split by age 15, compared to children born to married parents (Kennedy and Thomson 2010)

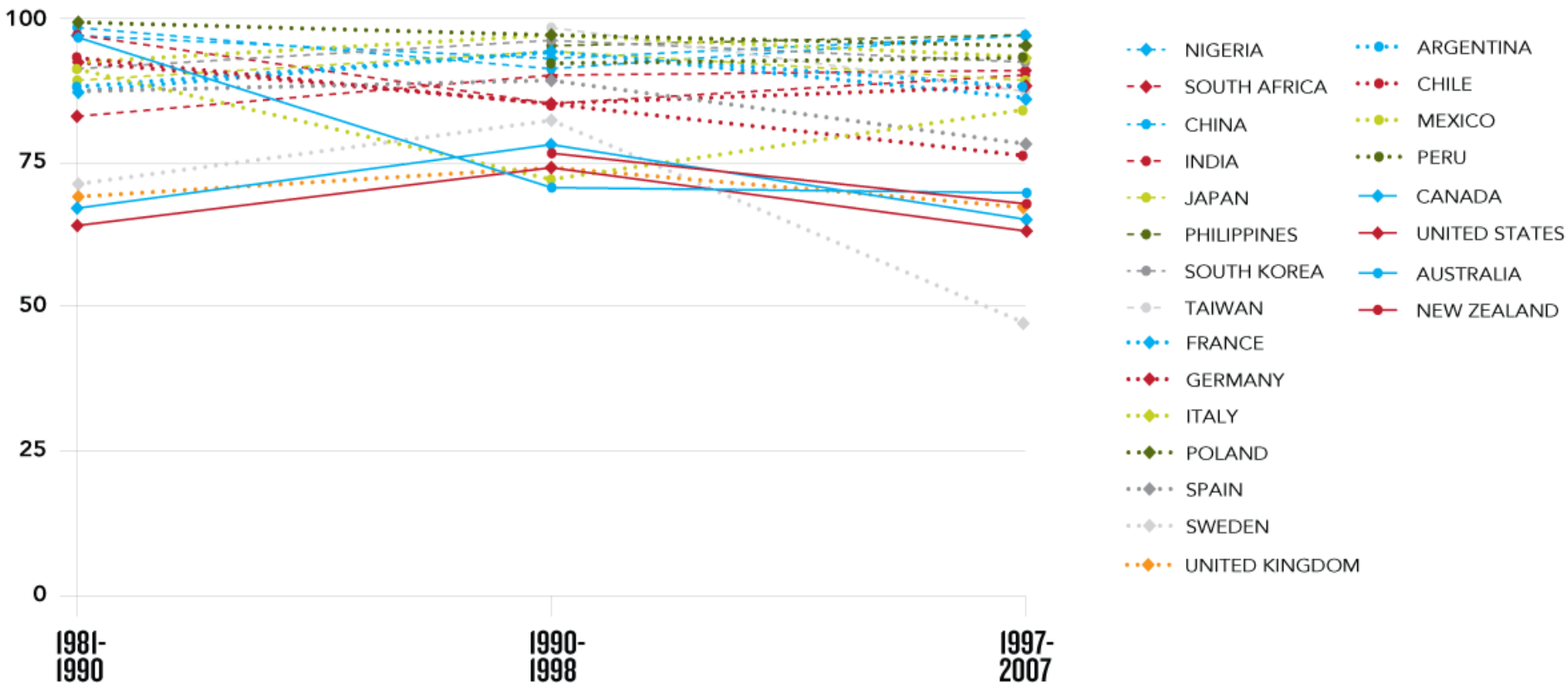
# Social Scientists on Marriage



- “Although it was once possible to believe that ...high rates of ... cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing represented little more than lifestyle alternatives brought about by the freedom to pursue individual fulfillment, many analysts now believe that these individual choices can be damaging to the children who have no say in them and to the society that enables them.”
- - Ron Haskins, Sara McLanahan, and Elizabeth Donahue, *Brookings-Princeton Policy Brief* (2005)

# International Views About Parenthood

## WORLD PERCENT AGREEING THAT CHILDREN NEED "A FATHER AND A MOTHER TO GROW UP HAPPILY"

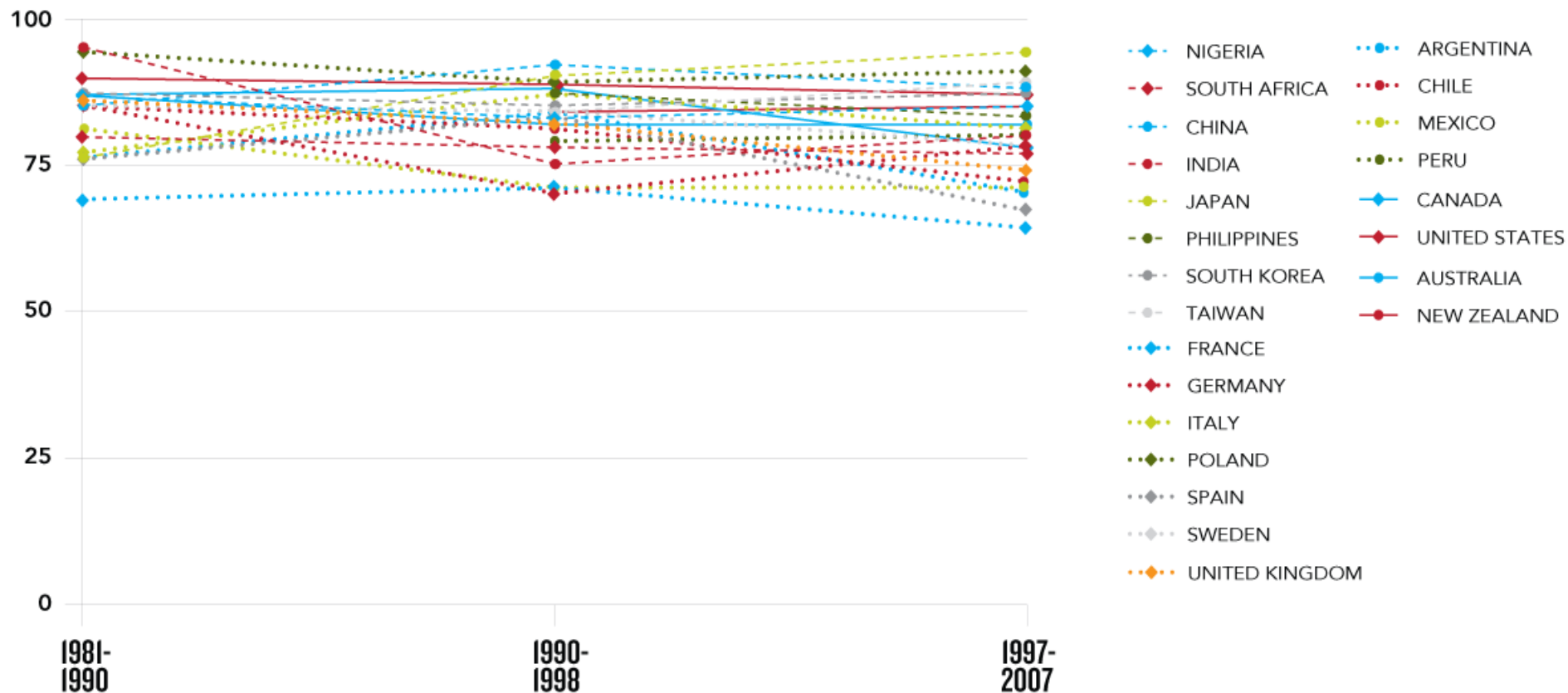


Source: World Values Survey.



# International Views About Marriage

## WORLD PERCENT DISAGREEING THAT MARRIAGE IS AN "OUT-DATED INSTITUTION"



Source: World Values Survey.

# Conclusion

- The elite wisdom about the family is wrong. The social sciences tell us (and many global citizens agree) that in much of the world children are most likely to thrive when they are raised by their own married mother and father.
- We need to renew the cultural, economic, & legal foundations of marriage to ensure that children have the benefit of being in communion with the man and woman who brought them into this world.

