

Attitudes towards Marital Infidelity



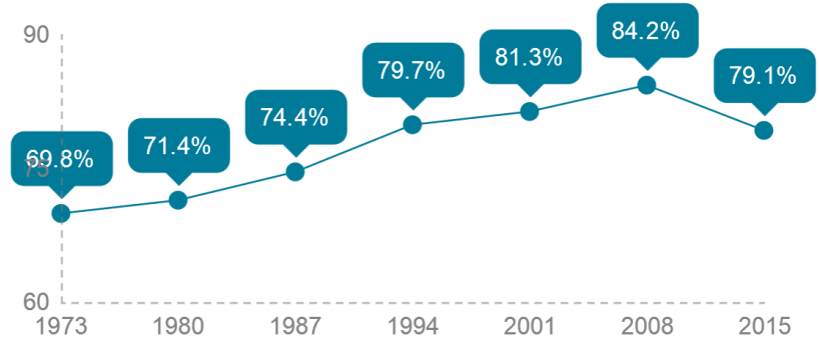
Wedding vows typically include a promise between spouses to remain faithful, as marital infidelity can have serious implications for individuals and relationships. More favorable attitudes towards marital infidelity are associated with an elevated risk of extramarital sex (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Sharpe, Walters, & Goren, 2013). This family profile uses the General Social Survey (GSS) to examine attitudes towards marital infidelity among the current adult population in the United States (18 and older). Views on extramarital sexual relations are considered over time, and across demographic characteristics (gender, race, marital status, age, and educational attainment).

Attitudes Towards Marital Infidelity Over Time

As shown in Figure 1, the U.S. population generally has become more disapproving of marital infidelity over the past 40 years.

- By 2008, over 84% of adults reported it is always wrong for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than their marriage partner. This is a 20% increase since 1973.
- In 2014, however, this proportion decreased to 79%.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who report that marital infidelity is always wrong



Source: General Social Survey, 1973-2014

Attitudes Towards Marital Infidelity by Demographic Characteristics

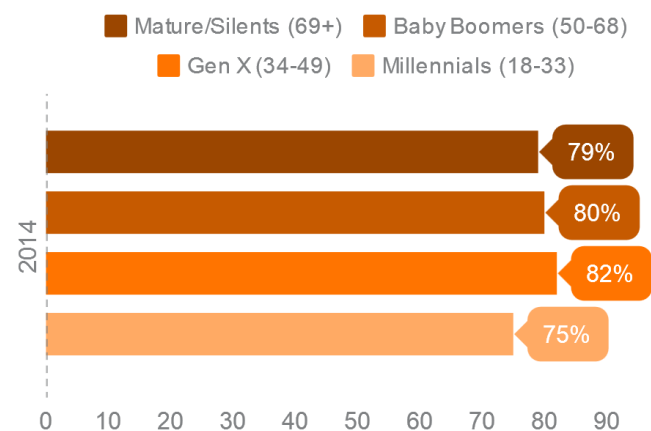
The remainder of this family profile considers differences in attitudes towards extramarital sex in 2014, by demographic characteristics. Women expressed more intolerant attitudes towards marital infidelity, with 82% of women stating that this behavior is always wrong compared to 76% of men (not shown).

Generation

A possible explanation for the recent decrease is a change in the generational composition of the GSS sample—2014 represents one of the first GSS rounds in which Millennials comprised a significant portion of the sample (27%).

- In 2014, about four-fifths of both the Mature/Silent and Baby Boomer generations reported marital infidelity is always wrong.
- Generation X had the highest rate of disapproval regarding marital infidelity (82%).
- Millennials reported the most permissive attitudes regarding marital infidelity, with 75% agreeing extramarital sex is always wrong.

Figure 2: Sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner is always wrong by generation, 2014

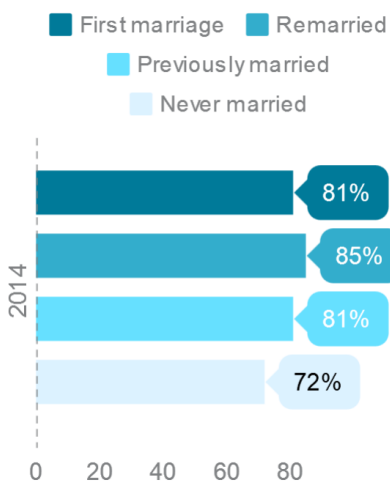


Source: General Social Survey, 2014

Marital Status

- Remarried men and women expressed the most disapproval towards marital infidelity (85%).
- About 81% of individuals in their first marriage or who were previously married reported extramarital sex is always wrong.
- Never married men and women had the lowest levels of disapproval at 72%.

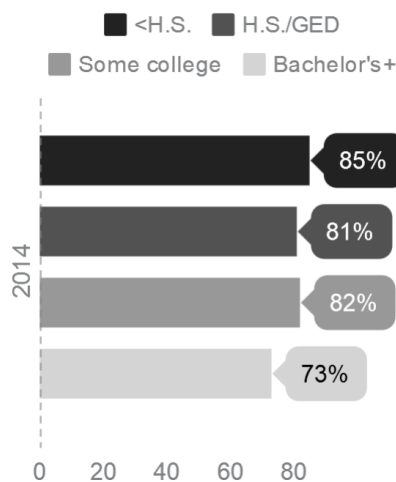
Figure 3: Having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner is always wrong, by marital status, 2014



Educational Attainment

- There is an education gradient with respect to marital infidelity—disapproval is highest among those with less than a high school education (85%) and lowest among those with a Bachelor's degree or more (73%).
- Those with a high school education or some college fall in the middle with 81-82% reporting extramarital sex is always wrong.

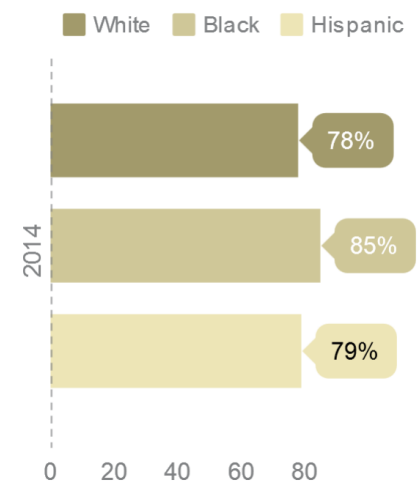
Figure 4: Having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner is always wrong, by education, 2014



Race & Ethnicity

- Whites and Hispanics expressed similar rates of disapproval with about 78-79% of White and Hispanic men and women stating that sexual relations with someone other than a marriage partner is always wrong.
- Black men and women have the highest disapproval rate of extramarital sex (85%) compared to Whites and Hispanics.

Figure 5: Having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner is always wrong, by race, 2014



Source: General Social Survey, 2014

References:

- Blow, A. J. & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships II: A substantive review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 31(2), 217-233. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2005.tb01556.x
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