



**ADVANCING AMERICAN FREEDOM**  
*FOUNDATION*

# Independence Index

## *Measuring Life, Liberty, and The Pursuit of Happiness*

During Alexis de Tocqueville's immortal expedition across the United States, he noted that Americans possess a "longing to rise." This notion, he offered, was because Americans, in contrast to the rest of the people in the world, were active in their everyday lives and believed they not only could, but should, affect change in their homes and their communities. Tocqueville saw America as a unique opportunity for democracy to experiment and thrive. The diversity of people, climate, and resources not only provided America with the best hope of succeeding in the democratic experiment, but also as a test of the people's virtue. If the people of America, here as compared to anywhere else, could not remain virtuous enough to preserve their freedom, despite all the advantages nature has granted the country, then democracy would not work anywhere. Summarized in a recent National affairs article written by Vice President Mike Pence and Ed Feulner,

"while a well-ordered polity is essential, it cannot endure without a moral and spiritual order that sustains it. A civilization is not maintained by its politics, but by its people. Thus, an ordered polity must be wedded to an ordered soul; or, better yet, the overflow of ordered souls."<sup>1</sup>

On the cusp of America's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, we at Advancing American Freedom are concerned that the culture that Tocqueville observed – our national character that brought "the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" - requires monitoring and attention so that a healthy culture can be handed off to the rising generation.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Pence & Ed Feulner, *Rediscovering Order in an Age of Populism*, No. 64 *National Affairs*, Summer 2025 <http://tiny.cc/0t5p001>

The distinctive American culture, discipline, and virtue of our free people is irreplaceable; history shows once self-governance is lost it is nearly impossible to reclaim. "While it may not be difficult to destroy the spontaneous formations which are the indispensable bases of a free civilization, it may be beyond our power deliberately to reconstruct such a civilization once these foundations are destroyed."<sup>2</sup>

The United States Constitution was designed to ensure freedom by empowering the government to secure the rights of the people while restraining it so that it would not become a threat to those rights. The Constitution is a unifying document not only in American law but in American culture because it reflects our nation's commitment to the vast arena of human life that is independent of, but supported by, government.

Scholars working with Advancing American Freedom Foundation identified indicators of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" which we believe are helpful measures to track the health of our culture, and is a useful toolkit for evaluating legislative proposals, executive actions, and judicial decisions as we work together to move these measures in the right direction.

These indicators are intended to track the fundamental rights contained in the "expression of the American mind" that is the Declaration of Independence.<sup>3</sup> They are timeless principles which spawned the happy and hopeful society of entrepreneurs, artisans, authors, laborers, and reformers that Tocqueville so admired when he toured our Republic: "When peoples are still simple in their mores and firm in their beliefs; when society rests gently upon an old order of things, whose legitimacy is uncontested, you see this instinctive love of country reign."<sup>4</sup>

Almost two hundred years ago in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote, "The morals and intelligence of a democratic people would run no lesser dangers than their trade and industry, if the government came to take the place of associations everywhere."<sup>5</sup> We know that the primary solution to many of the issues listed in this dashboard is not found in government but in the countless small acts found in a healthy seedbed of civil society associations and communities. Strong institutions build strong and free people capable of self-government. We hope and pray to contribute to that.

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<sup>2</sup> Hayek, F.A. *Individualism: True and False*, <http://tiny.cc/m06p001>.

<sup>3</sup> From Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825, <http://tiny.cc/p06p001>.

<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. English Edition. Vol. 1. Liberty Fund, 2012, pp. 385-386. Online Library of Liberty, <http://tiny.cc/u06p00>.

<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. English Edition. Vol. 2. Liberty Fund, 2012. Online Library of Liberty, <http://tiny.cc/w06p001>.

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## I. LIFE

*"The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them."-Thomas Jefferson, 1774<sup>6</sup>*

No other right can exist without the right to life, the most fundamental right of all. Life is a precious gift from God that must always be protected.

### **Birth Rate Below Replacement**

Without the next generation, America has no future. A declining birthrate implies a lack of hope and commitment to carry on the story of our ancestors. We support policies that foster a climate where American families continue to grow and thrive.

- Replacement level fertility is the total fertility rate needed for a population to replace itself; this is typically 2.1 children per woman in developed countries. The fertility rate in the United States is below replacement and has been since 2009. The United States fertility rate is currently 1.79 and has declined by 19% since 2007.
- The total pregnancy rate reached its lowest recorded level in 2020 at 83 pregnancies per 1,000 women aged 15–44.<sup>7</sup>
- The American fertility rate has fallen for 10 out of the last 11 years, reaching a historic low in 2024.<sup>8</sup>

### **Abortion**

Fertility rates partially depend on the widespread appreciation of the miracle of life.<sup>9</sup> A culture that denies the joy children bring to the world will necessarily have less of them. Abortion is the leading cause of death in America, taking the innocent lives of approximately one million babies every year. We call on the federal government and states across America to protect life and support pregnant mothers in difficult situations to empower them to choose life.

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<sup>6</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. 1774, <http://tiny.cc/y06p001>.

<sup>7</sup> Pregnancies, Births and Abortions in the United States, 1973–2020: National and State Trends by Age | Guttmacher Institute, <http://tiny.cc/116p001>.

<sup>8</sup> See "Births: Provisional Data for 2023" | CDC, <http://tiny.cc/416p001>, and U.S. Fertility Rate Drops to Another Historic Low | CDC, <http://tiny.cc/716p001>.

<sup>9</sup> US Abortion Bans and Fertility | JAMA, <http://tiny.cc/a16p001>.

- The number of abortions has increased every year since 2017.<sup>10</sup>
- Chemical abortions accounted for 63% of all abortions in the United States in 2023.<sup>11</sup>
- Birth rates are decreasing while the number of abortions is increasing.<sup>12</sup>
- According to data from the Guttmacher Institute, the number of abortions has decreased from a high of 1.6 million in 1990 to 930,160 in 2020 in that three-decade period. However, abortions have increased by 8% during the three-year period from 2017 to 2020.<sup>13</sup>

## Deaths of Despair

“Deaths of despair” consist of suicides, drug overdoses, and deaths from alcohol use, which often reflect the dire personal situations of the people who die such deaths and typically occur among people in high-unemployment areas. The health of American society depends on reducing such deaths, and we seek to track and reduce the prevalence of the social ills that often cause them.

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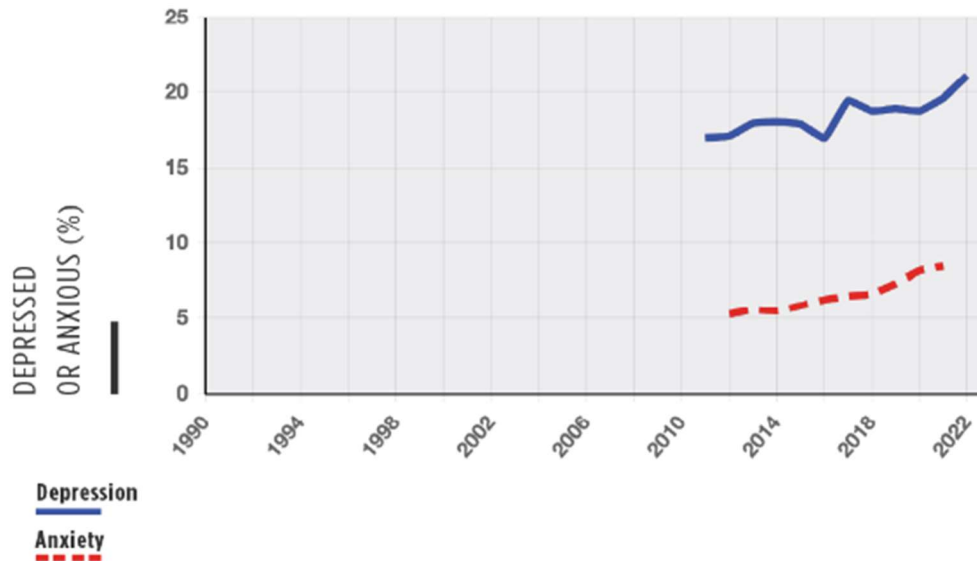
<sup>10</sup> Despite Bans, Number of Abortions in the United States Increased in 2023 | Guttmacher Institute, <http://tiny.cc/b16p001>.

<sup>11</sup> See “Medication Abortions Accounted for 63% of All US Abortions in 2023, an Increase from 53% in 2020” | Guttmacher Institute, <http://tiny.cc/m16p001>; AAF Provides Written Testimony for Senate Hearing on Mifepristone - Advancing American Freedom, <https://advancingamericanfreedom.com/aaf-provides-written-testimony-for-senate-hearing-on-mifepristone/>.

<sup>12</sup> Pregnancies, Births and Abortions in the United States, 1973–2020: National and State Trends by Age | Guttmacher Institute, <http://tiny.cc/t16p001>.

<sup>13</sup> See What the Data Says About Abortion in the U.S. | Pew Research Center, <http://tiny.cc/x16p001> and Monthly Abortion Provision Study | Guttmacher Institute, <http://tiny.cc/u16p001>.

## Depression



Sources: [Centers for Disease Control](#); [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)

- 8.3% of adults in the US have experienced a major depressive episode.<sup>14</sup>
- 21.4% of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression in 2024.<sup>15</sup>

There are many factors that have led to the present increase in depression in the United States. More people felt an increased sense of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Economic strain has also contributed to the rise in depression; economic uncertainty, financial instability, and job losses can worsen individual well-being. Improper use of social media may cause feelings of depression due to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, cyberbullying toward children, addictive patterns of overuse that detract from more fulfilling pursuits, or online harassment.<sup>17</sup> The worsening trend for depression in the United States is a threat to our civic culture because individuals cannot love their country and their fellow countrymen until they love and feel good about themselves and feel as though life is worth living. As Burke admonished, "There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Major Depression | National Institute of Mental Health, <http://tiny.cc/426p001>.

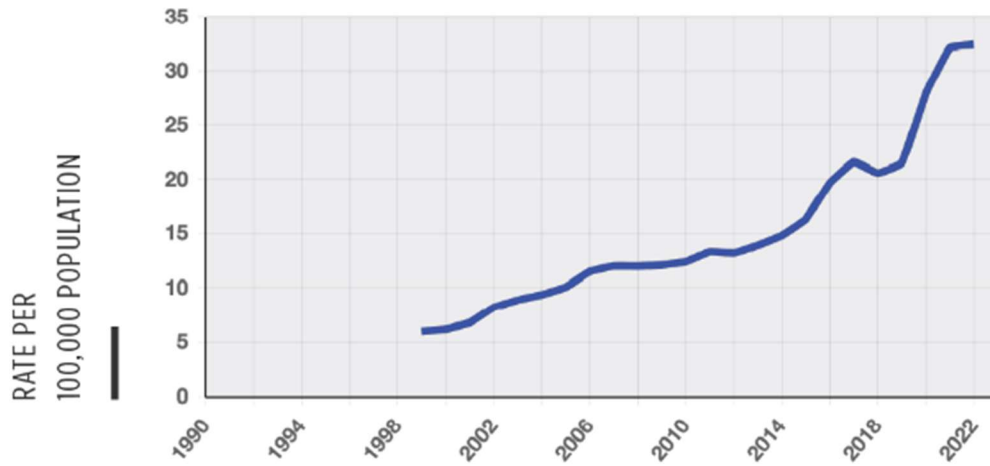
<sup>15</sup> Anxiety and Depression | CDC, <http://tiny.cc/526p001>.

<sup>16</sup> Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Loneliness and Social Isolation: A Multi-Country Study, <http://tiny.cc/726p001>.

<sup>17</sup> Social Media and Youth Mental Health | HHS.gov, <http://tiny.cc/826p001>.

<sup>18</sup> Burke, Edmund. *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2. Liberty Fund, 1790, p. 172.

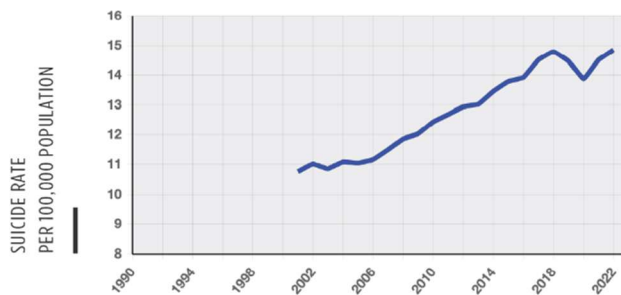
## Fatal Overdoses



Source: [Centers for Disease Control](#).

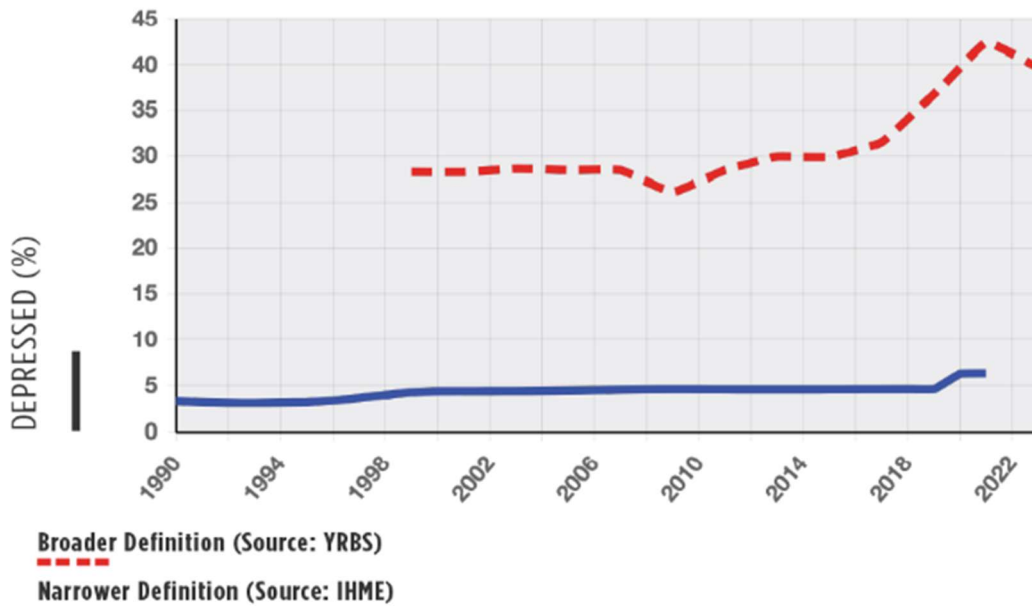
Far too many Americans, seeing a lack of economic opportunity in their communities and an accompanying lack of hope, have turned to destructive drugs that far too often eventually take their lives. Increasing economic opportunity and supporting civil society efforts to help people overcome addiction will be essential to counter this scourge.

## Suicide Rate



Source: [Centers for Disease Control](#)

## Youth Depression



- Sources: [Centers for Disease Control](#); [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#)

Factors mentioned throughout this section, such as increased feelings of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic pressure, and exposure to negative interactions on social media, have led to a spike in youth depression.

## Alcohol Use

- There are more than 178,000 deaths per year attributable to excessive alcohol use
- Deaths involving alcohol among people ages 16 and older increased by 25.5% from 2019 to 2020, and an additional 9.9% from 2020 to 2021
- 21% of people dying from suicides have blood alcohol concentrations of 0.1% or more
- Alcohol results in more ER visits and more deaths than opioids
- Source: [Alcohol-Related Emergencies and Deaths in the United States | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](#)

## Drug Use

- In 2023, the most recent CDC data available, an estimate 74,702 Americans died from fentanyl overdoses. While this is a decrease from the 76,226 fentanyl-related fatalities in 2022, cocaine and psychostimulant-related deaths both increased.<sup>19</sup>
- 13.5% of Americans aged 12 and over used drugs in the last month, a 3.8% increase year-over-year, as of 2020.<sup>20</sup>
- [Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 2002-2022 \(cdc.gov\)](#)

## II. Liberty

Liberty has been a fundamental pillar of American identity, celebrated as both an individual and societal value. The American tradition's conception of liberty is unique, a product of a specific time, people, and place. It is not license, but exists under, and necessarily attached to, law and is inconceivable without it. American liberty holds the individual as a unique being to be valued but does not hold the individual as existing independent of others. American liberty is not abstract and metaphysical; instead it is understood to have been earned and is traceable in its origin.<sup>21</sup> This has made American liberty the longest lasting and most dynamic force for culture, progress, and prosperity in the history of the world. As Tocqueville observed, "...liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith...", highlighting its deep connection to righteousness and religion.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, to fully grasp the current state of America, one must first assess the value and condition of liberty.

### Overregulation

*"A government can no more suffice for maintaining alone and for renewing the circulation of sentiments and ideas among a great people than for conducting all of the industrial enterprises. From the moment it tries to emerge from the political sphere in*

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<sup>19</sup> U.S. Overdose Deaths Decrease in 2023, First Time Since 2018, <http://tiny.cc/c26p001>.

<sup>20</sup> National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, <http://tiny.cc/c26p001>.

<sup>21</sup> See Kirk, Russell. *Concise Guide to Conservatism*. Regnery, 2019, pp. 25-32.

<sup>22</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis. "Introduction." *Democracy in America*, cited in [Tocqueville and Liberty | Online Library of Liberty](#)

*order to throw itself into the new path, it will exercise an unbearable tyranny, even without wanting to do so.”-Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>23</sup>*

- In four years, the Biden administration issued approximately 1,200 regulations with cumulative costs in excess of \$1.8 trillion.<sup>24</sup>
- Forbes: [Biden's 2024 Federal Register Page Count Is Highest Ever](#)

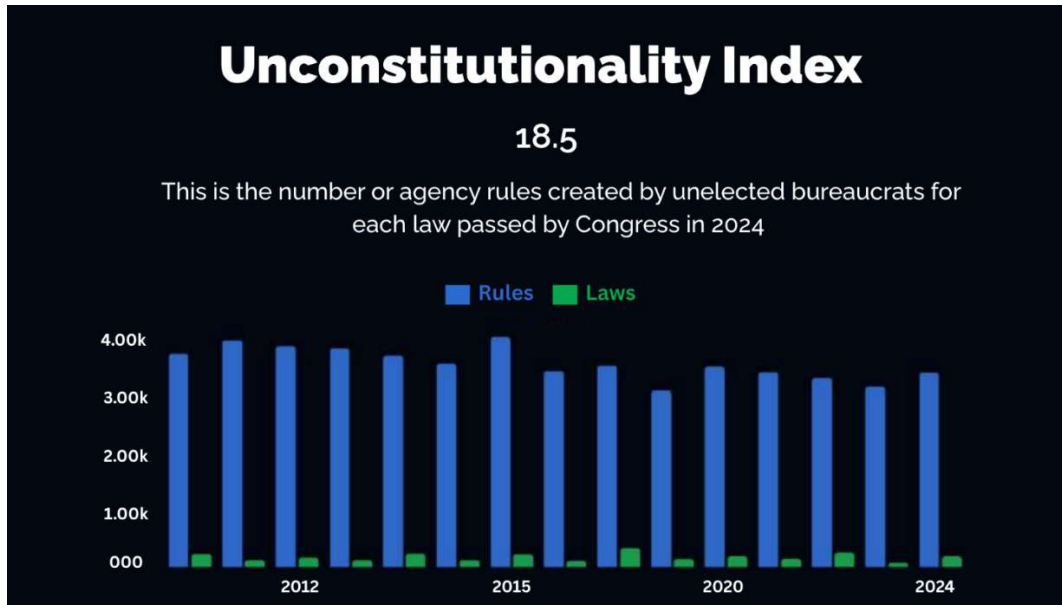
**Federal Register Pages and Number of Rules:  
From Joe Biden to Donald Trump**

<u>2016</u>	<u>95,894</u>	<u>3,853</u>	
2017	61,067	3,280	Trump years
2018	66,778	3,368	
2019	71,726	2,964	
<u>2020</u>	<u>86,356</u>	<u>3,353</u>	
2021	73,771	3,257	Biden years
2022	79,856	3,168	
2023	89,368	3,018	
2024	107,262	3,248	

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<sup>23</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis. Democracy in America. English Edition. Vol. 2.. Liberty Fund, 2012, pp. 901-902. Online Library of Liberty, <http://tiny.cc/i26p001>.

<sup>24</sup> How Excessive Regulation Hurts the Economy | U.S. Chamber of Commerce, <http://tiny.cc/o26p001>.



Source: [Department of Government Efficiency](#)

Overregulation acts as a handcuff on individual liberty and creativity, restricting personal independence and ingenuity rather than allowing it to flourish. Under the Biden Administration, a chronic level of overregulation severely undermined American liberty.

In a positive shift, the current Trump administration has ordered executive departments and agencies to identify 10 regulations to be repealed for every new regulation proposed or promulgated.<sup>25</sup> The future will tell whether this order is effective. Yet, America seems to be on the path of deregulation.

## Educational Freedom

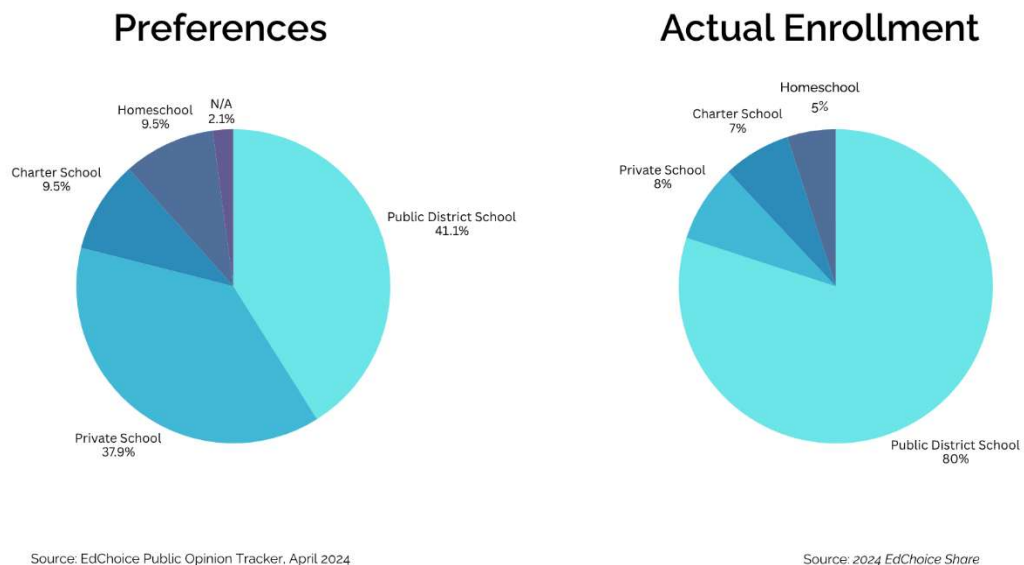
Parents are the first form of government. It is they who first inculcate moral values and strong foundations for a child's success and citizenship. Indeed, it is only natural that they oversee their children's education because the soft heart of the parent is more tender to the needs and concerns of the child in a way government bureaucrats can never be. The laws of nature have implanted in the parent an inclination, bond, and concern that reveals something greater beyond themselves in the well-being of the child.<sup>26</sup> Increasing education opportunities for children, making it easier for America's youth to be prepared for adulthood and financial independence, and reviving a strong

<sup>25</sup> Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation – The White House, <http://tiny.cc/r26p001>.

<sup>26</sup> Locke, John. *The Works of John Locke, vol. 4 Economic Writings and Two Treatises of Government*. Rivington, 1691, p. 374. *Online Library of Liberty*, <http://tiny.cc/t26p001>.

faith-based culture can make help America's youth feel that there is something transcendent in the pressures they face.

- The competition that charter schools provide to public schools has a positive effect on public schools while providing a strong alternative to public schools for those who choose it.<sup>27</sup>
- 40% of students live in areas with educational freedom
- 33 States have school choice programs
- 14 States have universal choice



As shown in the above graphs, the alignment between where parents want to send their kids to school and where their kids go does not match.<sup>28</sup>

- Charter schools can help bridge the gap between parental preferences and actual enrollment. Charter schools offer alternatives for low-income communities that are not satisfied with public education. They have “historically served proportionately more students of color and more students from low-income communities than district schools.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Does competition from charter schools help or hurt traditional public schools? | Thomas B. Fordham Institute, <http://tiny.cc/u26p001>.

<sup>28</sup> 2025 EdChoice Share: Exploring Where America's Students Are Educated - EdChoice, <https://www.edchoice.org/2025-edchoice-share-exploring-where-americas-students-are-educated/>.

<sup>29</sup> 2. Who Attends Charter Schools? - NAPCS - Data Dashboard, <http://tiny.cc/y26p001>.

State	EdChoice Friedman Index Score	<i>All Students</i>	<i>All Dollars</i>	<i>All Options</i>
		% Students Eligible for Choice Programs (With Funding)	Award \$ Per Choice Student / State+Local \$ Per Pupil in Public Schools	Does State Have an ESA Program for Choice Students?
Florida	77	100%	77%	Yes
Arkansas	60	100%	60%	Yes
Alabama	59	100%	59%	Yes
Arizona	59	100%	59%	Yes
Indiana	45	98%	50%	Yes*
Iowa	40	100%	40%	Yes
West Virginia	33	100%	33%	Yes
Ohio	32	100%	37%	No
South Carolina	27	72%	41%	Yes*
Wisconsin	23	40%	70%	No
Alaska	20	100%	25%	No
New Hampshire	12	48%	30%	Yes*
Oklahoma	7	19%	64%	No
Georgia	4	15%	45%	Yes*
Tennessee	4	6%	71%	Yes
Mississippi	3	7%	67%	Yes*
Montana	3	13%	53%	Yes*

State	EdChoice Friedman Index Score	<i>All Students</i>	<i>All Dollars</i>	<i>All Options</i>
		% Students Eligible for Choice Programs (With Funding)	Award \$ Per Choice Student / State+Local \$ Per Pupil in Public Schools	Does State Have an ESA Program for Choice Students?
Utah	2	2%	79%	Yes
Washington, D.C.	1	1%	46%	No
Kansas	1	1%	22%	No
Louisiana	1	1%	46%	Yes
Maine	1	2%	72%	No
Maryland	1	0.31%	16%	No
Minnesota	1	33%	2%	No
Missouri	1	1%	48%	Yes
Nevada	1	0.35%	30%	No
North Carolina	1	5%	66%	Yes*
Pennsylvania	1	10%	11%	No
Rhode Island	1	0.35%	15%	No
South Dakota	1	2%	18%	No
Vermont	1	4%	67%	No
Virginia	1	1%	20%	No
Wyoming	1	4%	31%	Yes

State	EdChoice Friedman Index Score	<i>All Students</i>	<i>All Dollars</i>	<i>All Options</i>
		% Students Eligible for Choice Programs (With Funding)	Award \$ Per Choice Student / State+Local \$ Per Pupil in Public Schools	Does State Have an ESA Program for Choice Students?
California	0	0	0	0
Colorado	0	0	0	0
Connecticut	0	0	0	0
Delaware	0	0	0	0
Hawaii	0	0	0	0
Idaho	0	0	0	0
Illinois	0	0	0	0
Kentucky	0	0	0	0
Massachusetts	0	0	0	0
Michigan	0	0	0	0
Nebraska	0	0	0	0
New Jersey	0	0	0	0
New Mexico	0	0	0	0
New York	0	0	0	0
North Dakota	0	0	0	0
Oregon	0	0	0	0
Texas	0	0	0	0
Washington	0	0	0	0

Source: [2025 EdChoice Friedman Index](#)

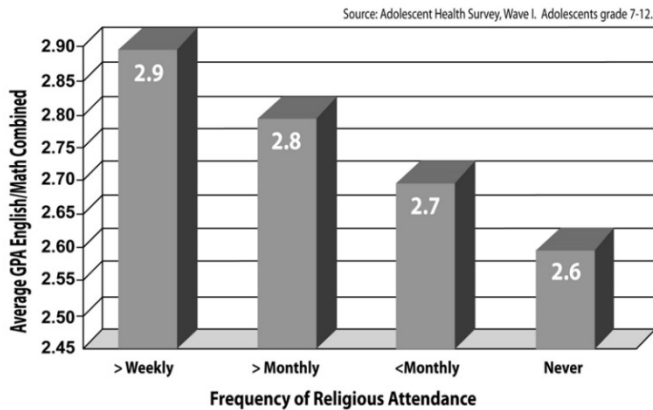
Educational freedom is a cornerstone of individual liberty. It must be safeguarded and given the opportunity to thrive if the students want to be excelled.

### Test Scores

The founders believed an educated populace was critical to the preservation of the government that the founders created. This idea was codified in the Northwest Ordinance: “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”<sup>30</sup> Falling test are flashing lights of warning that the following generation will not rise but fall.

<sup>30</sup> Northwest Ordinance (1787) | National Archives, <http://tiny.cc/036p001>.

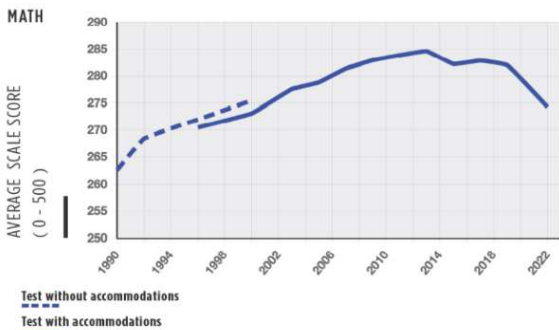
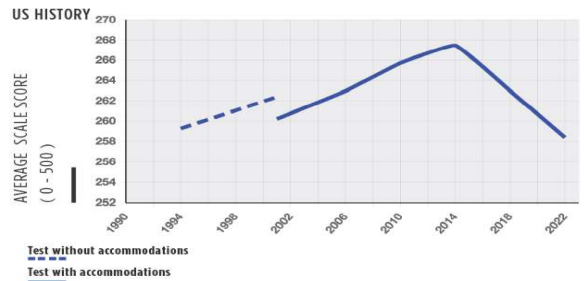
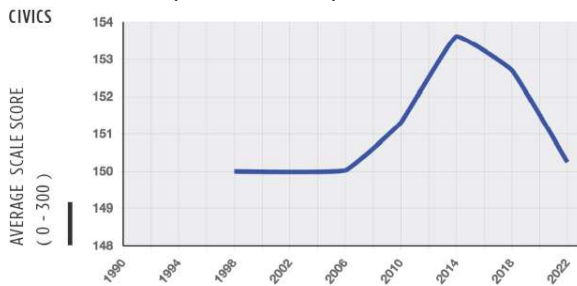
Figure 1 – “GPA English-Math Score”  
by Religious Attendance



- Chronic absenteeism—a term for missing 10% or more of the school year—was at 26% in 2023.<sup>31</sup>

- “According to “The Nation’s Report Card,” scores in reading and math began to decline for U.S. students after 2012, reversing decades of slow but generally steady increase.”<sup>32</sup>

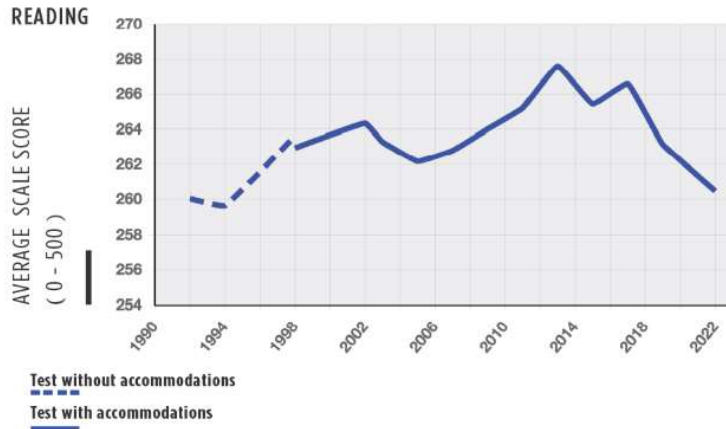
- The competition that charter schools provide to public schools has a positive effect on public schools.<sup>33</sup>



<sup>31</sup> [Chronic Absenteeism: 2017-2024 | Return to Learn Tracker](#)

<sup>32</sup> See Scores decline again for 13-year-old students in reading and mathematics | The Nation's Report Card, <http://tiny.cc/236p001> and End The Phone-Based Childhood Now | The Atlantic, <http://tiny.cc/436p001>.

<sup>33</sup> Does competition from charter schools help or hurt traditional public schools? | Thomas B. Fordham Institute, <http://tiny.cc/536p001>.



Source: [State of the Nation Project](#)

## Gun Ownership

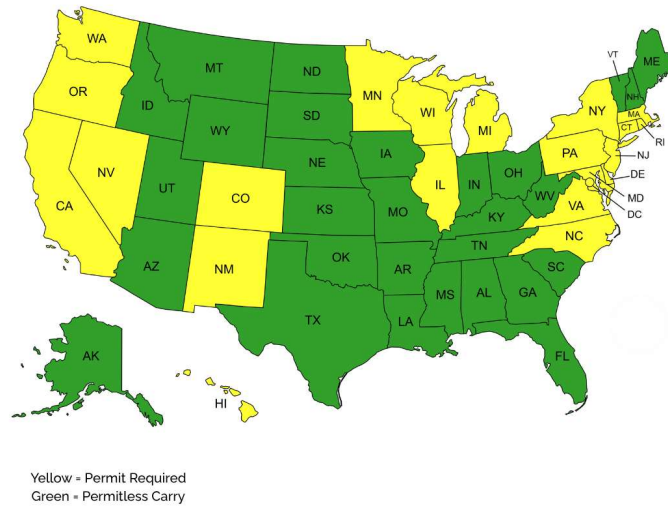
"A strong body makes the mind strong. As to the species of exercise, I advise the gun. While this gives a moderate exercise to the body, it gives boldness, enterprise, and independence to the mind. Games played with the ball and others of that nature, are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind. Let your gun therefore be the constant companion of your walks."-Thomas Jefferson to his nephew, 1785<sup>34</sup>

Firearm ownership is the physical manifestation of the sovereign power of the people. It is a warning to would-be tyrants or usurpers, and is a reminder to the citizen of his political sovereignty, duty of civic responsibility, and individual liberty under the law. The gun owner, a member of the great unorganized militia that is the people, places himself in the stream of history that started with the Founding generation and continues up to today. It is tangible connection to the generation of 1776 and 1787. Therefore, the strength of American civil-political culture in many ways can be represented by firearm ownership.

"However one interprets these silences, it is clear that early Americans owned guns. They owned a lot of them. In 1779, as George Washington was once again lamenting the arrival of unarmed militiamen in his camp, there were "good guns" sitting on the mantles of almost 40,000 Massachusetts militiamen. Most of these guns were probably longer or shorter or wider or thinner than Washington would have liked. Yet they were in all respects similar to the guns that had decimated four British regiments on the slopes of Breed's Hill in 1775. North and east of Philadelphia, these guns were as ubiquitous as they were lethal. It is time to ponder what these guns meant to their owners and how that meaning changed over time" – Robert H. Churchill<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 19 August 1785, <http://tiny.cc/a36p001>.

<sup>35</sup> [Gun Ownership in Early America: A Survey of Manuscript Militia Returns](#)



Gun ownership is a fundamental aspect of American identity and individual liberty. Its decline over time reflects a broader erosion of personal freedoms and shared civic responsibility. "Besides the advantage of being armed, which the Americans possess over the people of almost every other nation, the existence of subordinate governments, to which the people are attached, and by which the militia officers are appointed, forms a barrier against the enterprises of ambition, more insurmountable than any which a simple government of any form can admit of." – Federalist No. 46<sup>36</sup>

### *Percentage of Households with Guns*

- Although gun control advocates before the pandemic argued gun ownership was in decline and that guns were dispersed among a few households, the data shows consistent ownership levels with a spike during the pandemic when lawlessness was permitted to spread in major cities.
  - A 2020 Gallup poll found that 32% of U.S. adults say they personally own a gun and 44% report living in a household with at least one gun<sup>37</sup>
  - Similarly, 2024 PEW data shows that 32% of U.S. adults report personally owning a gun and about 40% of U.S. adults say they live in a household with a gun<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> "Federalist Nos. 41-50 | Library of Congress, <http://tiny.cc/l36p001..>

<sup>37</sup> What Percentage of Americans Own Guns? <http://tiny.cc/n36p001.>

<sup>38</sup> Key facts about Americans and guns | Pew Research Center, <http://tiny.cc/o36p001.>

- A University of Chicago study found that around 18 percent of U.S. households bought firearms during the pandemic.<sup>39</sup>
- However, these recent increases were preceded by a steady long-term decline (the General Social Survey<sup>40</sup> showed a decline from 47% in 1972 to 31% in 2014, while RAND<sup>41</sup> showed a decline from 45% in 1980 to 32% in 2016).
- 29 states allow permitless concealed carry.<sup>42</sup>

### III. Pursuit of Happiness

#### Poverty

*"Slow rises Genius by Poverty and Envy oppressed."-John Adams, 1816<sup>43</sup>*

The pursuit of happiness envisioned by our Founders is one of the most eloquent phrases in human history. It encompasses within it the sweetness of life and the blessings of liberty. Poverty, therefore, stands in the way of an individual's pursuit of it. Yet decades of social spending have shown that the welfare state is not the answer.

"Charles Murray, in his 1984 book on the failure of poverty programs. *Losing Ground*, tried to calculate the grand total of all types of government spending intended to relieve and/or eliminate poverty. Murray added together Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Unemployment Insurance, Medicaid, Medicare, Food Stamps and the principal low-income housing programs and said that total expenditures have amounted to (in 1980 dollars) over \$100 billion a year from the late sixties until the middle seventies and more than \$200 billion a year since. That's \$3,800,000,000,000 — enough to give every poor person in America \$117,000 to start his own war on poverty. And the spending of this truly vast amount of money — an amount equal to the nation's gross national product in 1987 — has left everybody just sitting around slack jawed and dumbstruck, staring into the maw of that most extraordinary paradox: You can't get rid of poverty by giving people money." – PJ O'Rourke, *Parliament of Whores*

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<sup>39</sup> NORC AmeriSpeak OmniBus Survey Spotlight on Public Safety.pdf, <http://tiny.cc/p36p001>.

<sup>40</sup> Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2014 | General Social Survey, <http://tiny.cc/s36p001>.

<sup>41</sup> Gun Ownership in America | RAND, <http://tiny.cc/t36p001>.

<sup>42</sup> Types of Concealed Carry Licensure/Permitting Policies | U.S. Concealed Carry Association, <http://tiny.cc/x36p001>.

<sup>43</sup> From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 2 February 1816, <http://tiny.cc/046p001>.

## Welfare Dependency

"The principal aim of good government has always been to make the citizens more and more able to do without its *help*. That is more useful than the help can be."- Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>44</sup>

For decades the Left pushed the notion that Americans were too helpless, too weak, and too incompetent to take care of themselves. The result was decades of tax and spend policies that redistributed wealth from American businesses to the most unfortunate among us. The promised result was to be less poverty, a stronger middle class, and a more dynamic economy. Instead, money was transferred from its most productive spenders – limiting growth – and transferred to those in poverty, destroying work ethics, family life, and creating dependency. Conservatives pushed back in the nineties, and despite the dire predictions of the Left, welfare reform such as work requirements brought more people into the workforce, created less dependency, and revived civil society, creating a well-remembered decade of prosperity.

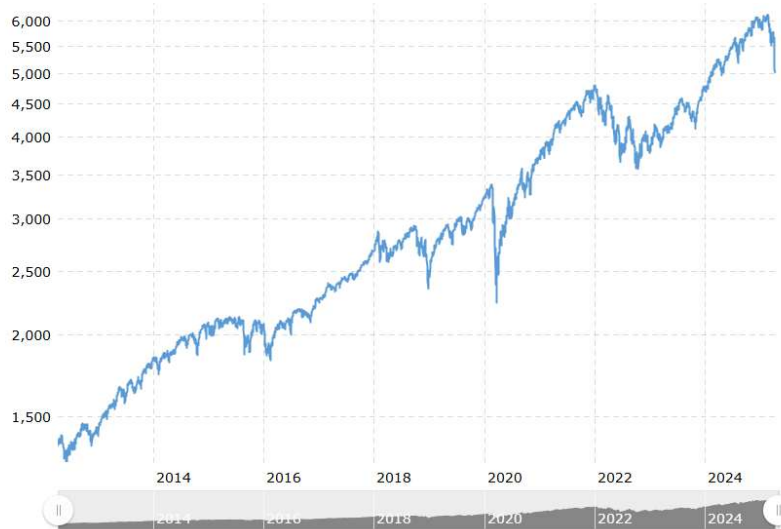
Yet today, the old Left's ideas are being brought back from the past despite them only having the effect of crippling our future. Those who stand opposed to economic dynamism and self-determination see wealth only as money, but this is not the case. Wealth is furniture and cell phones, it is in clothes, and it is also in financial assets.<sup>45</sup> The average American family has more financial assets today than ever before in history. No longer is "Wall Street" the tycoons of banks and industry alone, tens of millions of middle-class Americans have joined its ranks in the ownership economy. Economic policy should be directed towards removing access barriers to partaking in the ownership economy to give all Americans a stake.

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<sup>44</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis. Democracy in America. English Edition. Vol. 2.. Liberty Fund, 2012, pp. 904-905. Online Library of Liberty, <http://tiny.cc/246p001>.

<sup>45</sup> See Hazlitt, Henry. Economics in One Lesson, <http://tiny.cc/446p001>.

## S&P 500 10 Year Daily Chart<sup>46</sup>



## S&P 500 Return Rate over 10 years – 12.8%<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 27.** Participation rates by participant demographics  
Vanguard defined contribution plans permitting employee-elective deferrals

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 estimated
<b>All</b>	77%	78%	71%	72%	77%	78%	81%	82%	82%	82%
<b>Income</b>										
<\$15,000	29%	27%	33%	18%	38%	36%	46%	41%	40%	40%
\$15,000–\$29,999	54%	48%	48%	45%	54%	57%	58%	58%	57%	58%
\$30,000–\$49,999	75%	75%	69%	68%	71%	74%	75%	75%	76%	76%
\$50,000–\$74,999	79%	80%	77%	79%	82%	83%	83%	85%	86%	87%
\$75,000–\$99,999	83%	84%	85%	84%	86%	86%	87%	88%	88%	89%
\$100,000–\$149,999	88%	88%	89%	90%	91%	91%	91%	92%	91%	90%
\$150,000+	92%	92%	92%	94%	94%	95%	96%	96%	95%	95%
<b>Age</b>										
<25	57%	54%	42%	38%	51%	50%	54%	59%	57%	58%
25–34	74%	74%	69%	70%	75%	77%	80%	81%	83%	83%
35–44	79%	79%	75%	76%	80%	81%	83%	85%	86%	86%
45–54	81%	81%	76%	78%	81%	82%	84%	85%	86%	86%
55–64	82%	83%	77%	79%	82%	83%	85%	86%	86%	86%
65+	75%	77%	69%	70%	72%	73%	77%	78%	75%	76%
<b>Gender</b>										
Male	76%	77%	71%	71%	78%	79%	81%	83%	83%	82%
Female	77%	79%	71%	73%	78%	78%	82%	81%	82%	82%
<b>Job tenure (years)</b>										
0–1	67%	64%	56%	56%	63%	65%	67%	71%	73%	73%
2–3	75%	78%	72%	72%	77%	79%	82%	82%	83%	83%
4–6	79%	81%	76%	78%	82%	82%	85%	86%	86%	86%
7–9	79%	81%	76%	80%	83%	83%	85%	87%	88%	89%
10+	84%	85%	80%	80%	84%	85%	86%	87%	88%	88%

Source: Vanguard 2024.

<sup>46</sup> S&P 500 - 10 Year Daily Chart | MacroTrends, <http://tiny.cc/846p001>.

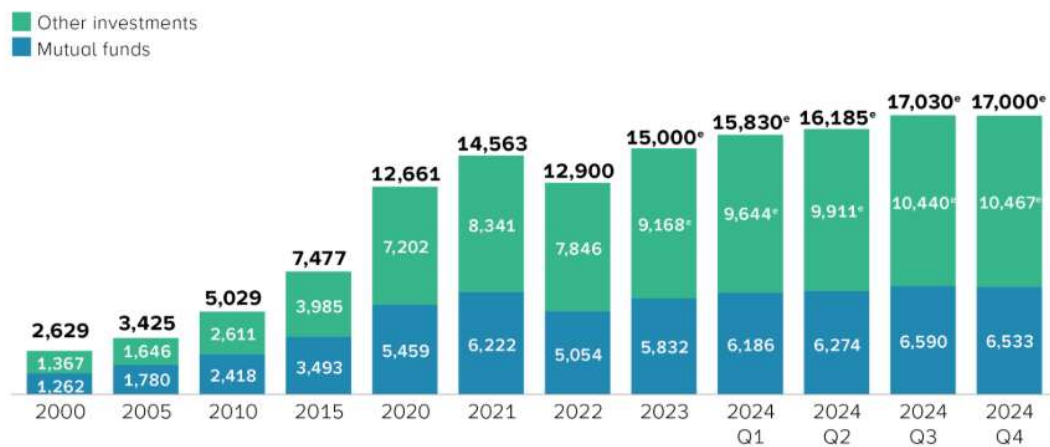
<sup>47</sup> Here's the Average Stock Market Return Over the Last 10 Years, and What Investors Can Expect Over the Next 10 Years | The Motley Fool <http://tiny.cc/946p001>.

## Retirement Independence

- Social Security benefits represent about 31% of the income of people over age 65
- Among Social Security beneficiaries age 65 and older, 39% of men and 44% of women receive 50% or more of their income from Social Security.
- Among Social Security beneficiaries age 65 and older, 12% of men and 15% of women rely on Social Security for 90% or more of their income.
- Source: [Social Security Administration](#)

### IRA Market Assets

Billions of dollars, end-of-period, selected periods



\* Data are estimated.

Note: Components may not add to the total because of rounding.

Sources: Investment Company Institute, Federal Reserve Board, American Council of Life Insurers, and Internal Revenue Service Statistics of Income Division

Source: [Investment Company Institute](#)

Figure 51. Account balances  
Vanguard defined contribution plans



Source: Vanguard 2024.

Source: [Vanguard](#)

## Car Affordability

*"All men have a right[...] in case of intolerable oppression, civil or religious, to leave the society they belong to, and enter into another."*-Samuel Adams, 1772<sup>48</sup>

There is a sense of freedom that comes with owning your own car. Americans can drive across a continent and still find themselves at home. One could drive from Maine to Key West, Chicago to LA, or through the Rockies on I-25. However, you don't need to go far to find tremendous opportunity in America, but as the cost of owning a car increases, the American Dream becomes more difficult for people to realize.

As lawmakers aim to minimize the human impact on the climate, unelected bureaucrats have imposed strict emission standards on automobiles. These emission standards would require overhauling vehicle factories and supply chains and more expensive technology; these costs are never paid for by the corporations, they are offset to the consumer through higher prices. It's all part of a larger plan to ensure that future fleets are entirely electric. Setting an arbitrary date by which all vehicles sold in America must be electric puts tremendous strain on manufacturers and consumers.

Many Americans cannot afford an electric car, and the energy grid is not prepared to meet the demand for electricity that would exist in a country where everyone drives an electric car. The price of cars would go up, and so too would the cost of energy. Between 2002 and 2023, the average total cost of owning and operating a car has gone up from 50 cents per mile to 81 cents per mile. The average American drives roughly 14,000 miles per year; that means the cost of operating a car is about \$11,340 per year, and this is on top of the cost to simply purchase a vehicle. The cost of purchasing a vehicle has also risen and continues to rise. John Bozzella, the head of the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, said tariffs imposed on Canada and Mexico will impact all automakers. "Most anticipate the price of some vehicle models will increase as much as 25% and the negative impact on vehicle price and vehicle availability will be felt almost immediately," he said. These cost increases are always punted to the consumer in the form of higher prices.

Americans trapped in a cycle of poverty may find relief in the endless opportunities that lie just a few miles beyond their home, but when car affordability rises and continues to rise, the sense of personal and economic freedom is hampered. If we want our citizens to realize the American Dream, we must get government out of the driver's seat and hand the keys over to the American people.

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<sup>48</sup> Adams, Samuel. *The Rights of the Colonists*. 1772, <http://tiny.cc/c46p001>.

## The average number of weeks of income it costs for a median-income earner to buy a car

COX AUTOMOTIVE/MOODY'S ANALYTICS VEHICLE AFFORDABILITY INDEX  
FEBRUARY 2023

Weeks of Income Needed to Purchase a New Light Vehicle



- Automobile affordability was relatively stable for most of the last decade (becoming somewhat more affordable over the course of the Trump-Pence administration). However, after the COVID pandemic and Biden's inflationary and regulatory policies took hold, the average number of weeks of income it cost for a median-income earner to buy a car skyrocketed in 2021 and 2022 from 34 to a peak of 45.

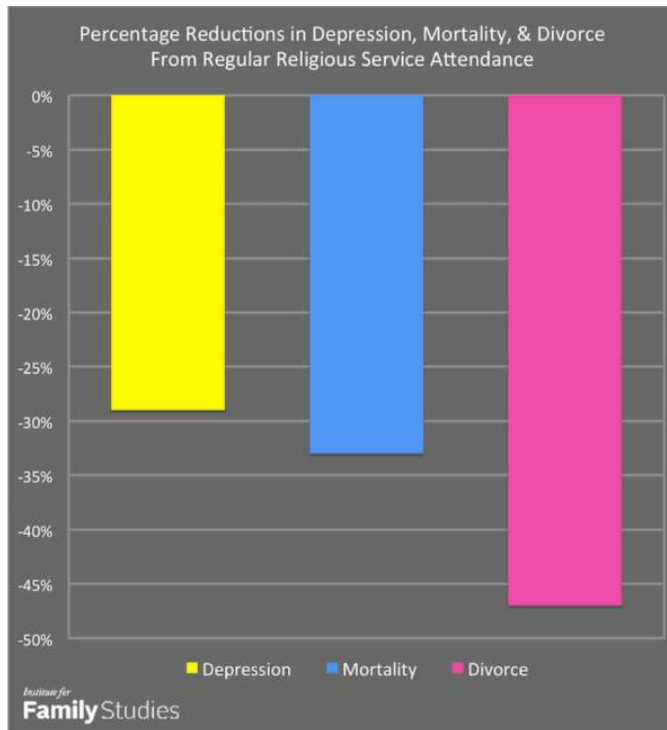
### Religious Attendance

Religion is essential to civic life. John Adams said that "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."<sup>49</sup> It was Edmund Burke who said, "religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort."<sup>50</sup> It is the importance of religion and the issue of declining religious culture in America that may very well serve as the basis for the social ills previously mentioned; declining religious attendance and an increasing proportion of Americans turning away from religion could explain rising abortion rates, declining fertility rates, and rising deaths of despair. A family-friendly culture,

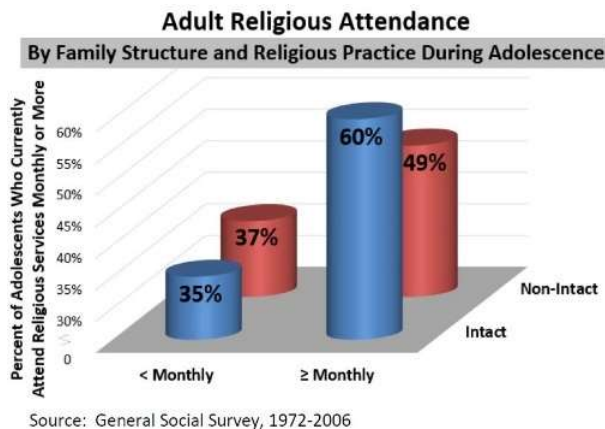
<sup>49</sup> From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798, <http://tiny.cc/e46p001>.

<sup>50</sup> Burke, Edmund. Select Works of Edmund Burke, vol. 2. Liberty Fund, 1790. Online Library of Liberty, <http://tiny.cc/g46p001>.

influenced by vibrant religious culture, can cultivate an environment that compels more people to share in the blessings of marriage and parenthood.



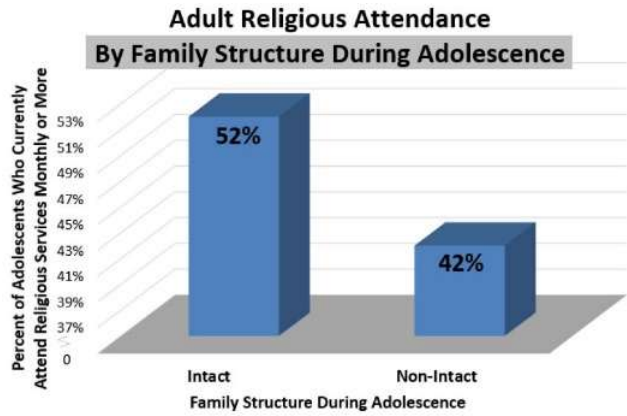
- Church attendance has gone down 12 points since 2000 from 42% to 30% of adults who attend weekly or biweekly<sup>51</sup>
- 49% of adults say they never or rarely attend religious services<sup>52</sup>
- 48% of U.S. adults say there's "a great deal" of or "some" conflict between their religious beliefs and mainstream American culture, up from 42% in 2020.<sup>53</sup>



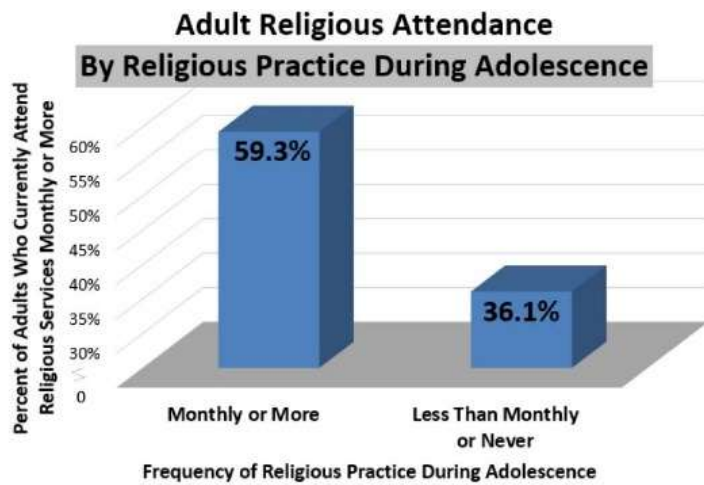
<sup>51</sup> Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups, <http://tiny.cc/j46p001>.

<sup>52</sup> Map: U.S. church, religious services attendance by state, <http://tiny.cc/j46p001>.

<sup>53</sup> Religion is losing influence in public life, 8 in 10 Americans say | Pew Research Center <http://tiny.cc/m46p001>.



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2006

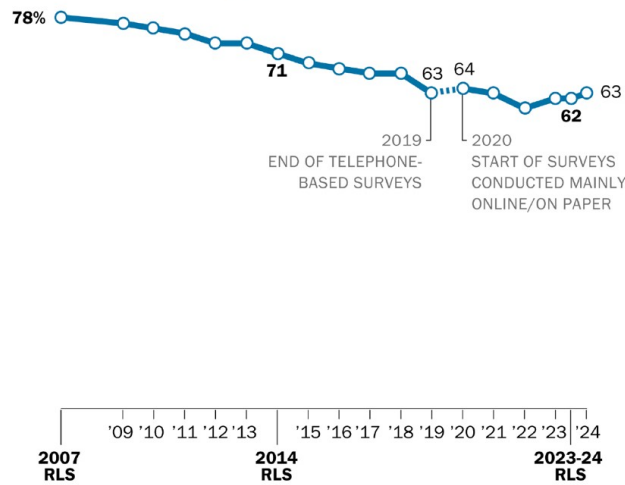


Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2006

Source: [Marriage and Religion Research Institute \(MARRI\)](#)

## After years of decline, the Christian share of the U.S. population stabilizes

% of U.S. adults who identify as Christian



Note: The 2007, 2014 and 2023-24 data comes from Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Studies. Other estimates come from the Center's random-digit-dial telephone surveys (until 2019), and from the Center's annual National Public Opinion Reference Survey (since 2020).

Source: Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023-March 4, 2024.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports... And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion." – Washington's Farewell Address<sup>54</sup>

"Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Northwest Ordinance, 1787

## Reduced Teenage Driving

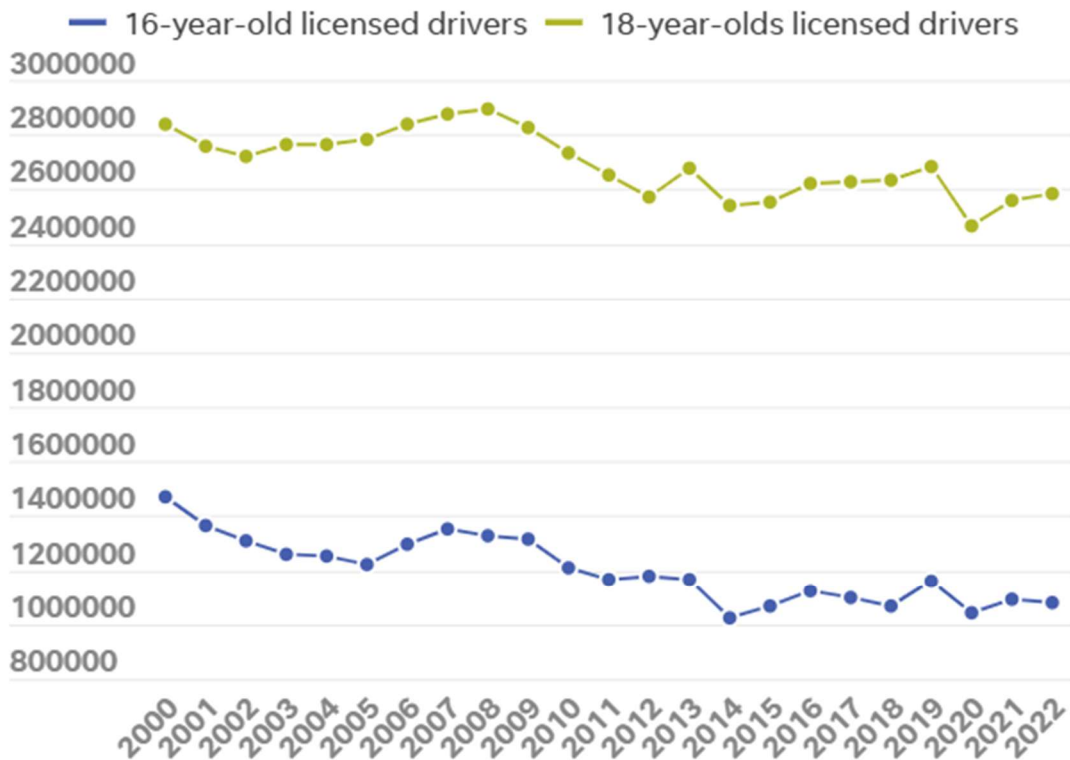
- The number of 16-year-olds with driver's licenses dropped from about 50% to 25% from 1983 to 2022 according to the Department of Transportation<sup>55</sup>
- 18-year-olds with driver's licenses dropped from 80% to 60% from 1983 to 2022<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Washington's Farewell Address, <http://tiny.cc/p46p001>.

<sup>55</sup> Generation Z is less likely to have a driver's license. See charts, <http://tiny.cc/q46p001>.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

## Teenagers are less likely to be licensed compared to past decades



SOURCE: Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration

## Marriage

"For the soul, having a principle of kindness in itself, and being born to love, as well as perceive, think, or remember, inclines and fixes upon some stranger[...]. We must not provide against the loss of wealth by poverty, or of friends by refusing all acquaintance, or of children by having none, but by morality and reason."-Plutarch<sup>57</sup>

Marriage is deeply interwoven into our society and is a testimony to our great capacity to love and be part of something greater than ourselves. The congenial duties of matrimony inculcate responsibility and prudence, and children inspire parental care for the future of one's country for even after the parents themselves are gone. Healthy, strong marriages that last are vital to a civil society, maximizing happiness, and creating a culture where more people seek to start a family. When marriages flourish,

<sup>57</sup> Plutarch, Plutarch. Plutarch's Lives (Dryden trans.) vol. 1. Little, Brown, and Company, 1906. Online Library of Liberty, <http://tiny.cc/mngp001>.

society flourishes. The reality, sadly, is that fewer Americans are getting married, and it is no surprise that as marriages decline more people report that they are unhappy. It is critically important for the survival of our Republic that marriages and the institution of marriage in civic culture survive and that more Americans choose to share in this blessing.

- The General Social Survey shows that a combination of marriage and parenthood is linked to the biggest happiness dividends for women. Among married women with children between the ages of 18 and 55, 40% reported they are “very happy,” compared to 25% of married childless women, and just 22% of unmarried childless women.<sup>58</sup>
- Married couples generate greater family wealth than non-married peers.<sup>59</sup>
- Unmarried mothers are the least likely to be very happy: with just 17% of them indicating they are very happy.<sup>60</sup>
- Married men (ages 18-55) in America are about twice as likely to be very happy, compared to their unmarried peers.<sup>61</sup>

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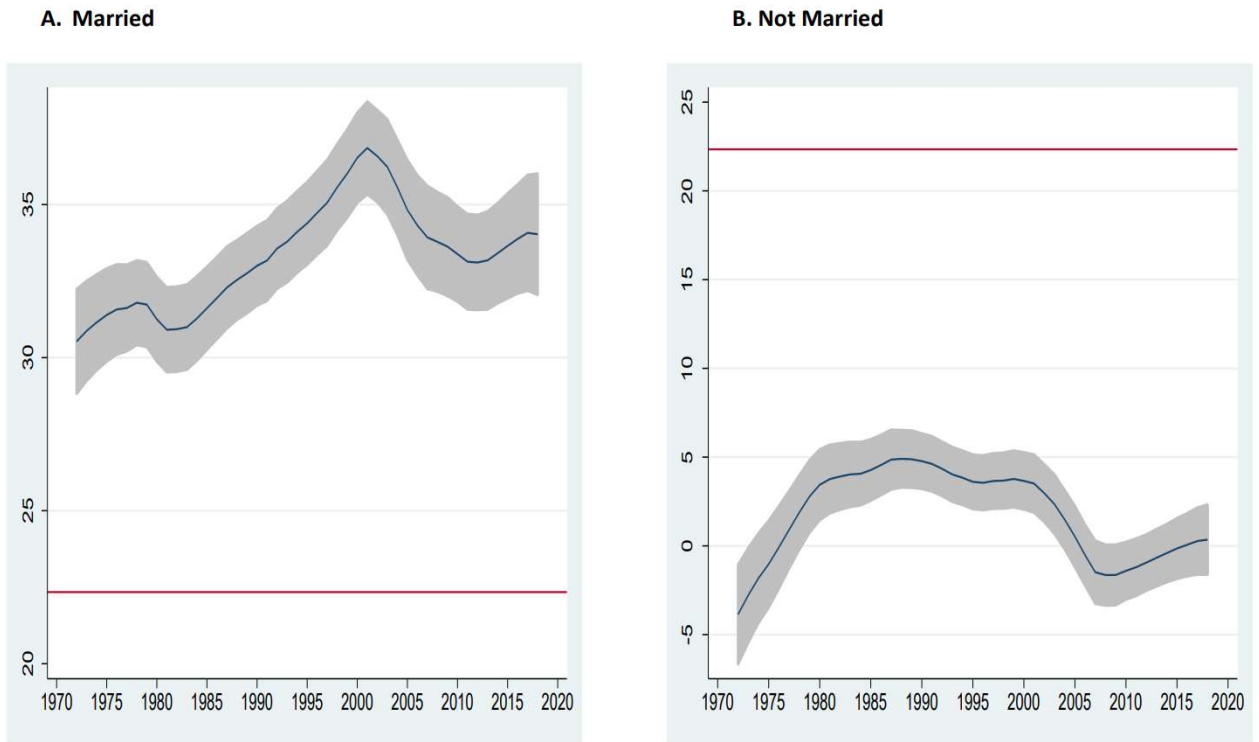
<sup>58</sup> Who Is Happiest? Married Mothers and Fathers, Per the Latest General Social Survey | Institute for Family Studies, <http://tiny.cc/ongp001>.

<sup>59</sup> Two Is Wealthier Than One: Marital Status and Wealth Outcomes Among Preretirement Adults, <http://tiny.cc/pngp001>.

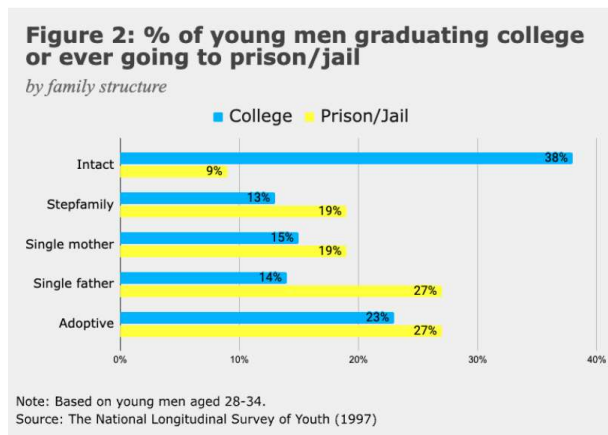
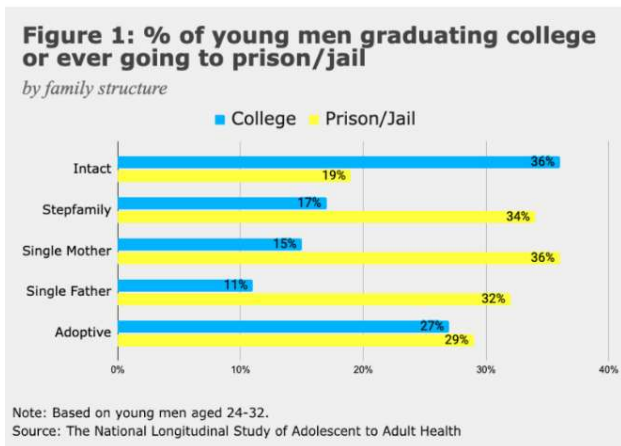
<sup>60</sup> Who Is Happiest? Married Mothers and Fathers, Per the Latest General Social Survey | Institute for Family Studies, <http://tiny.cc/sngp001>.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.*

**Figure 3. Happiness by Marital Status. 1972-2018**



See note to Figure 1



Source: [Institute for Family Studies](https://www.instituteforfamilystudies.org.au)

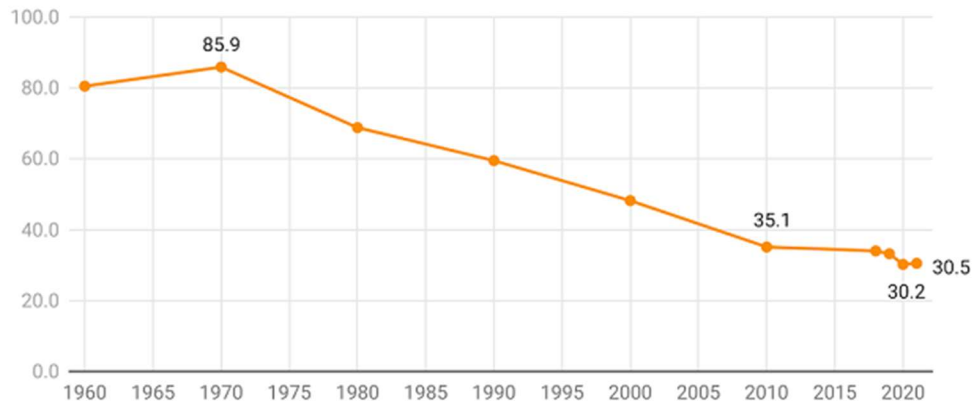
- First, family structure is more strongly associated with incarceration and college graduation than race for young men across both datasets.
- Second, young men who grew up in non-intact family forms are more likely to go to prison than graduate college in both datasets.

## Households Headed by Mother and Father

- Married-couple households made up 47% of all households in 2022, down from 71% in 1970.<sup>62</sup>
- From 1970-2011, the marriage rate declined by almost 60%.<sup>63</sup> The decline has continued since then.<sup>64</sup>

## The U.S. marriage rate was near all-time low in 2021

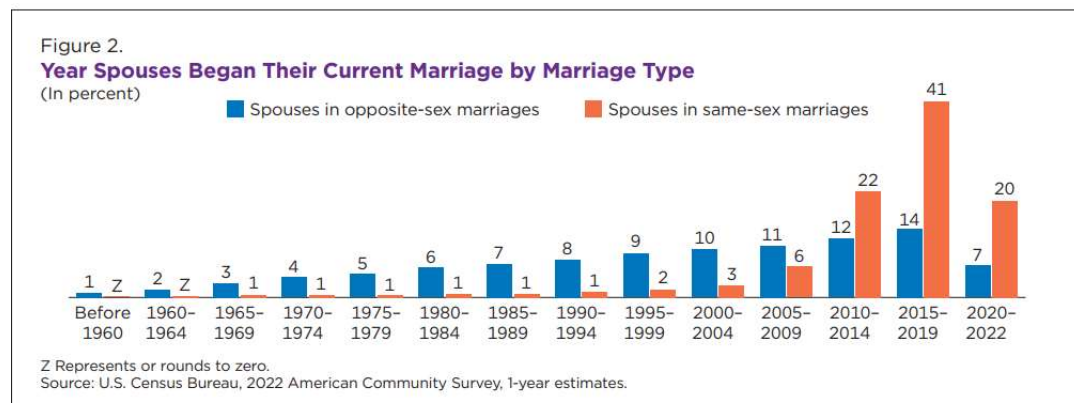
Number of newly married people per 1,000 unmarried population ages 15+



Marriage data prior to 2010 are based on CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics. Unmarried population includes those who have never been married, divorced or widowed. 2020 data used experimental weights to account for the effects of Covid-19 pandemic.

Chart: By Institute for Family Studies • Source: IFS's calculation of a combination of NCHS, Decennial Census, and American Community Survey data (IPUMS & Census data tables). • Created with Datawrapper

Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

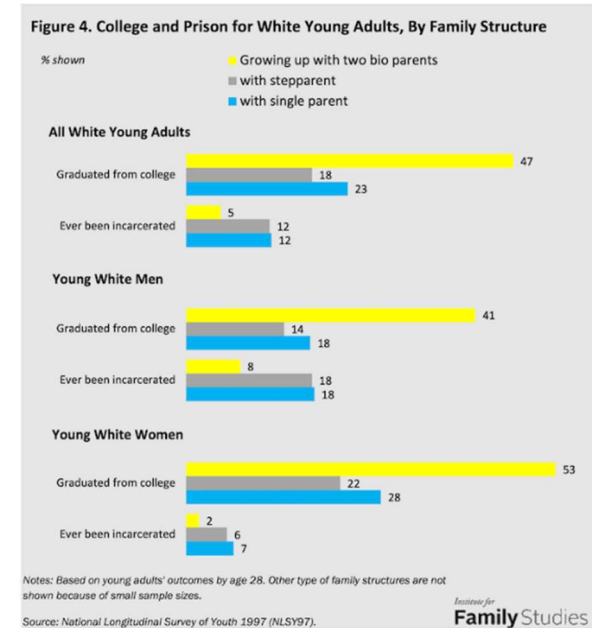
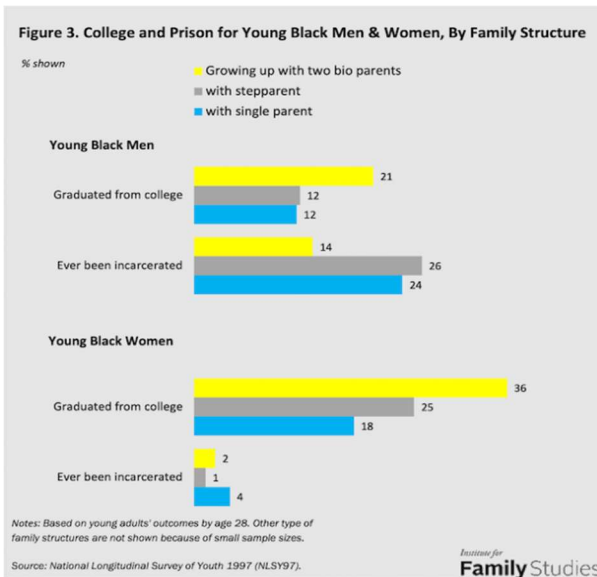
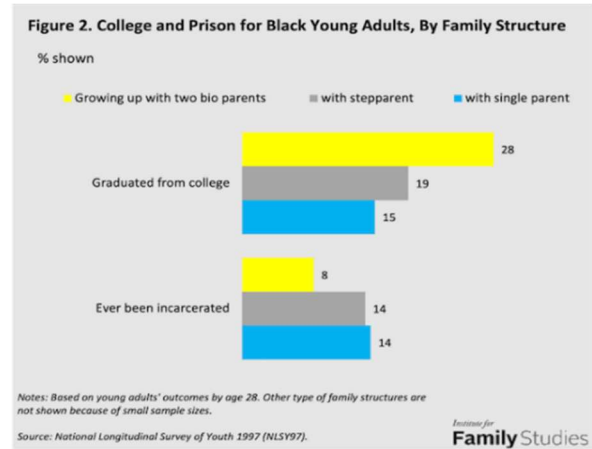
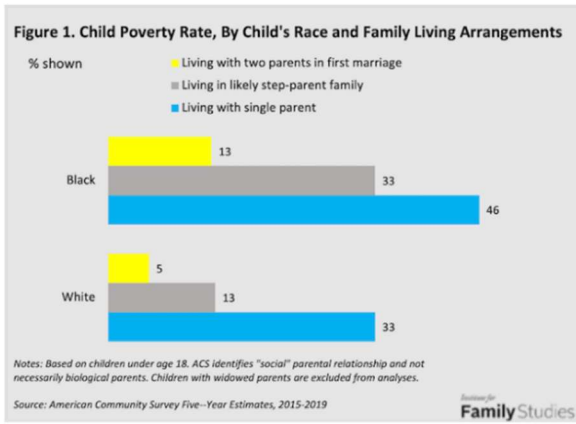


<sup>62</sup> "Census Bureau Releases New Estimates on Families and Living Arrangements" | United States Census Bureau, <http://tiny.cc/ungp001>.

<sup>63</sup> "Marriage: More Than A Century of Change" | National Center for Family & Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University, <http://tiny.cc/vngp001>.

<sup>64</sup> "National Marriage and Divorce Rates Declined From 2011 to 2021" | United States Census Bureau, <http://tiny.cc/wngp001>.

Source: [United States Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov)



Source: [Institute for Family Studies](https://www.instituteforfamilystudies.org)

## Conclusion

As our Republic approaches its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the American people stand at a crossroads. What does America stand for? It is easy enough to state what we stand against; to tear down and denigrate. It is much harder to conserve and build upon.

"Defining oneself by one's adversaries rather than by one's principles is a recipe for intellectual decay and political aimlessness. Such a mindset breeds short-term thinking and risks engendering a culture of resentment rather than one of renewal. It

may feel good in the moment, but it cannot inspire the enduring loyalty and purpose that conservatism has historically brought to our national life."<sup>65</sup>

In 1776 the American Patriots were seemingly faced with the choice of continuation under their traditions of British heritage or starting something new. They rejected both options. The Founders realized that it was only by separation from the Crown and Parliament that they could *conserve* the best of their English liberties and heritage of representative government. This accomplished, the Founders saw how imperfections in that legal heritage had given rise to abuses of power that threatened the whole tradition of liberty.

So, they made new constitutions, conserving the best of the "Great Conversation" among the ideas of Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London, adding new ideas about separation of powers in Philadelphia.<sup>66</sup> They, in effect, held on to timeless principles and expanded them, offering the prospect of a brighter and freer future.

This new American tradition is what conservatives have always defended. We at Advancing American Freedom Foundation offer this Independence Index to continue that tradition.

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<sup>65</sup> Mike Pence & Ed Feulner, *Rediscovering Order in an Age of Populism*, No. 64 *National Affairs*, Summer 2025 <https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/rediscovering-order-age-populism>

<sup>66</sup> Brief for Advancing American Freedom et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, *TikTok v. Garland* No. 24-656, 24-657 (filed December 23, 2024) <https://advancingamericanfreedom.com/tiktok-v-garland/>.