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Why Monogamy Matters

By **ROSS DOUTHAT**

Social conservatives can seem like the perennial pessimists of American politics — more comfortable with resignation than with hope, perpetually touting evidence of family breakdown, social disintegration and civilizational decline.

But even doomsayers get the occasional dose of good news. And so it was last week, when a [study](#) from the Centers for Disease Control revealed that American teens and 20-somethings are waiting longer to have sex.

In 2002, the study reported, 22 percent of Americans aged 15 to 24 were still virgins. By 2008, that number was up to 28 percent. Other research suggests that this trend may date back decades, and that young Americans have been growing more sexually conservative since the late 1980s.

Why is this good news? Not, it should be emphasized, because it suggests the dawn of some sort of traditionalist utopia, where the only sex is married sex. No such society has ever existed, or ever could: not in 1950s America (where, as the feminist writer Dana Goldstein [noted](#) last week, the vast majority of men and women had sex before they married), and not even in Mormon Utah (where Brigham Young University recently [suspended a star basketball player](#) for sleeping with his girlfriend).

But there are different kinds of premarital sex. There's sex that's actually *pre*-marital, in the sense that it involves monogamous couples on a path that might lead to matrimony one day. Then there's sex that's casual and promiscuous, or just premature and ill considered.

This distinction is crucial to understanding what's changed in American life since the sexual revolution. Yes, in 1950 as in 2011, most people didn't go virgins to their marriage beds. But earlier generations of Americans waited longer to have sex, took fewer sexual partners across their lifetimes, and were more likely to see sleeping together as a way station on the road to wedlock.

And they may have been happier for it. That's the conclusion suggested by two sociologists, Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, in their recent book, "[Premarital Sex in America](#)." Their research, which looks at sexual behavior among contemporary young adults, finds a significant correlation between sexual restraint and emotional well-being, between monogamy and happiness — and between promiscuity and depression.

This correlation is much stronger for women than for men. Female emotional well-being seems to be tightly bound to sexual stability — which may help explain why overall [female happiness](#) has actually drifted downward since the sexual revolution.

Among the young people Regnerus and Uecker studied, the happiest women were those with a current sexual partner and only one or two partners in their lifetime. Virgins were almost as happy, though not quite, and then a young woman's likelihood of depression rose steadily as her number of partners climbed and the present stability of her sex life diminished.

When social conservatives talk about restoring the link between sex, monogamy and marriage, they often have these kinds of realities in mind. The point isn't that we should aspire to some Arcadia of perfect chastity. Rather, it's that a high sexual ideal can shape how quickly and casually people pair off, even when they aren't living up to its exacting demands. The ultimate goal is a sexual culture that makes it easier for young people to achieve romantic happiness — by encouraging them to wait a little longer, choose more carefully and judge their sex lives against a strong moral standard.

This is what's at stake, for instance, in debates over abstinence-based sex education. Successful abstinence-based programs (yes, [they do exist](#)) don't necessarily make their teenage participants more likely to save themselves for marriage. But they make them more likely to save themselves for *somebody*, which in turn increases the odds that their adult sexual lives will be a source of joy rather than sorrow.

It's also what's at stake in the ongoing battle over whether the federal government should be subsidizing Planned Parenthood. Obviously, social conservatives don't like seeing their tax dollars flow to an organization that performs roughly 300,000 abortions every year. But they also see Planned Parenthood's larger worldview — in which teen sexual activity is taken for granted, and the most important judgment to be made about a sexual encounter is whether it's clinically "safe" — as the enemy of the kind of sexual idealism they're trying to restore.

Liberals argue, not unreasonably, that Planned Parenthood's approach is tailored to the gritty

realities of teenage sexuality. But realism can blur into cynicism, and a jaded attitude can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Social conservatives look at the contemporary sexual landscape and remember that it wasn't always thus, and they look at current trends and hope that it doesn't have to be this way forever.

In this sense, despite their instinctive gloominess, they're actually the optimists in the debate.