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Chapter Three

FAMILY CHANGE AND ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING: A REEXAMINATION OF U.S. TRENDS

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.
Gretchen A. Condran

Concerns about a decline in the authority of the family and the well-being of American youth are not new. Family historians document that in the seventeenth century, religious and community leaders worried about the "failures of the family to produce the right kind of habits and beliefs in its young" (Scott and Wishy 1982, p.137; see also Demos and Demos 1969). Joseph Kett, tracing the changing role of youth throughout American history, cautions against romanticizing the past by conjuring up "a kind of Golden Age in intergenerational relations" (Kett 1974, p.17). He argues that nineteenth century unrest among youth rivaled twentieth century manifestations (Kett 1977).

In the 1950s, now remembered as an era of domestic stability and tranquillity, both the popular and professional literature described the shrinking authority of parents and the precarious situation of youth. Sociologists worried that high delinquency and school drop-out rates reflected the alienation and isolation of the young. Edgar Friedenberg's *The Vanishing Adolescent* (1959) linked the troubles of youth to the loss of parental authority and elaborated an earlier thesis, presented by David Riesman and his colleagues in *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), that children, deprived of character-building chores, had lost meaning in their lives.

In comparison with the decades that followed, the 1950s seem like a benign time for young people, and, in retrospect, family life appears to have been relatively stable. Drawing a contrast to that period of domestic tranquillity, many authorities regard the problem behavior of recent teenagers as having reached unparalleled levels due in large measure to the disarray of the family (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Shorter 1975). A new set of writings on the family have set forth a gloomy portrayal of family life in the 1980s and an even gloomier prognosis for its future if present trends continue (Lasch 1977; Davis 1985).

The previous chapter mentioned Peter Uhlenberg and David Eggebeen's widely cited article (1986) which assembled data from a variety of demographic and social surveys to support their thesis that the circumstances of youth, specifically those of 16- and 17-year-olds, have steadily worsened in recent decades, and that the decline in the well-being of youth can be linked to the loss of parental controls associated with rising rates of divorce and maternal employment.

The importance of the Uhlenberg and Eggebeen article lies in its claim to provide the empirical data to support ideas that have been expressed by many others in both the popular and academic presses (Winn 1983). In this chapter we review their evidence on changing patterns of teenage behavior and the link between that behavior and rates of divorce and maternal employment. Using more extensive data than Uhlenberg and Eggebeen have used, we show that trends in various indicators of adolescent behavior are less uniform than they suggest and that the causal link to divorce and maternal employment is not supported by the evidence.

THE UHLENBERG–EGGEBEEN THESIS

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen offer three separate premises for which they present supporting empirical data from a variety of sources. First, they contend that several aspects of adolescents' social environment thought to be important for their well-being have been steadily improving since the 1960s. In particular, parental economic and educational status and family size have become more favorable. Moreover, expenditures for education and welfare programs targeted for youth increased during the past two decades. As they put it, "If the creation of programs to assist the young is a measure of public concern, then the last several decades demonstrate an unparalleled commitment." (p. 30)

Second, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen describe patterns of youth behavior from 1960 to 1980 as heading in the "wrong direction." Drawing statistics from a variety of secondary sources, they provide an overview of changes in educational and intellectual performance, moral character, and physical health. Using a wide range of indicators—Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, rates of school dropout, delinquency, substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy and childbearing, and mortality—they point to "a uniform and serious decline

in the well-being of adolescents between 1960 and 1980." They conclude, "There may be some good news somewhere, but we could not locate it in any of the available statistics." (p.34)

Third, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen provide an explanation for the decline in well-being of youth. Having ruled out changes in the economic circumstances of families or in the resources available to young people, and drawing on several public opinion surveys, they identify the waning commitment of individual parents to child rearing as the source of the decline in adolescent well-being. They conclude that the rising rates of maternal employment and marital instability represent "an erosion of the bond between parent and child—one characterized by parental commitment and willingness to sacrifice self-interest." That erosion is, in turn, a "significant cause of the declining well-being of adolescents after 1960." (p.38)

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen support their contention that the well-being of youth has declined by comparing a number of behaviors at three points in time: 1960, 1970, and 1980. We will focus on these same (or similar) behavioral trends but depart from Uhlenberg and Eggebeen in our interpretation and analysis of these trends. First and most important, we do not assume that all the behaviors examined are indicators of one dependent variable, adolescent well-being. Education, crime, mortality, and sexuality are disparate phenomena: they are certainly related, but do not necessarily have a common cause or one-dimensional explanation. In addition, these behaviors are not universally accepted indicators of well-being. The definition of well-being and an assessment of its decline necessarily involve value judgments. Most people would agree that rising suicide rates represent a decline in well-being; there might be less agreement that increasing abortion rates, and even less that increasing motor vehicle death rates, are appropriate indicators. However, for the task of assessing Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's causal model, we will not take issue either with their choice of indicators or with their premise that changes in these behaviors are tantamount to a decline in well-being.

Our data differ from Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's in a number of respects (see annex). First, we have constructed annual series rather than relying on data for only three dates. Second, our data cover a longer period of time than Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's; whenever possible, the time series has been extended both backward (to 1940 or 1950) and forward (through the early 1980s). Finally, data have been collected for a number of age groups and, whenever possible, for blacks and whites separately. How much we were able to extend

the information on each variable depended on the availability of data. We have occasionally supplemented Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's measures with an alternative one because theirs could not be extended back in time or because an additional measure seemed more appropriate to tap a particular area of youth behavior. Of course, some of the data are not available before 1960 or, in the case of substance abuse and abortion, before the 1970s. For most indicators we can fill in the picture only as far as 1984 or 1985, but the recent figures are quite informative.

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's comparison points, presumably selected to match the dates of the decennial censuses conducted during the period under review, indicate an almost uniform pattern of deterioration across time in all the behaviors that purport to measure well-being. However, a comparison of only three points in time simplifies what is, on closer inspection, a more complex pattern of change. Because Uhlenberg and Eggebeen limit their discussion to white youth, we begin our discussion with an examination of the trends for white youth using data that are separately available by race.

Trends in academic achievement are shown in figures 3.1 and 3.2, which contain SAT scores and the number of high school graduates related to the number of 18-year-olds, the two indicators used by Uhlenberg and Eggebeen. In figure 3.3 we have added another measure, the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who are high school graduates, a more appropriate measure of educational attainment than the one Uhlenberg and Eggebeen used, because not all adolescents graduate high school at 18 even when they remain at grade level.

The annual series of SAT scores shows a decline starting in 1963. According to the evaluation by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the decline between 1963 and 1970 is largely compositional: that is, explained by the increase in the number of students taking the exam. After 1970, the decline shows up in every category of test taker. Only about a quarter of the change can be attributed to changes in the number and the composition of those taking the exam. ETS collected no data relevant to the independent variables that we will be examining later, namely, mother's labor force participation or marital stability, but in general ETS related the decline in SAT scores to changes in pedagogy and school requirements (College Entrance Examination Board 1977; also, Congressional Budget Office, 1987). The important point for our argument, however, is that SAT scores began to rise again after 1980.

The percentage of whites between the ages of 18 and 24 who are

high school graduates declined slightly between 1976 and 1980 but has since returned to only 0.2 percent lower than its high point. Moreover, as shown in the previous chapter, scores from a reading test administered to a national sample of 7-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, a measure with less selection bias than SAT scores, did not decline at all during the period for which data are available. A recent analysis undertaken by the Congressional Budget Office (1987) reveals a general upward trend in test scores beginning in the mid-1970s. Finally, high school graduates as a percentage of 18-year-olds declined in the late 1970s, leveled off, and then rose again. (See also U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, no. 426, 1988.) The positive trend after 1980 is a prominent feature in figures 3.4 through 3.10, containing trends in a number of other teenage behaviors. Although data on drug and alcohol use (figures 3.4 and 3.5) are available only for fairly wide age groups and for limited years, a rise during the 1970s is clear; but so is the decline starting in 1979 and continuing through 1984, the last year for which we have data. The drop in marijuana use is especially evident. As seen in figure 3.5, cocaine use rose for some time but has remained fairly constant since 1979.

The rate of delinquency (figure 3.6) shows a similar trend. It began to rise among 10- to 17-year-olds between 1961 and 1962 and rose quite sharply until 1980 when it turned down.

The death rates for three causes among 15- to 19-year-olds also show a rise followed by a leveling off or decline in the most recent years. Homicide rates (figure 3.7) began to rise gradually in the early 1960s and at a faster rate during the late 1960s and early 1970s, before dropping off sharply. Motor vehicle death rates (figure 3.8) rose sharply in the early 1960s showed large fluctuations but no trend in the 1970s, and dropped off steeply after 1980. Suicide rates (figure 3.9) began to rise earlier (about 1955) than either motor vehicle or homicide death rates and have leveled off since 1980 but have declined less sharply than the youth mortality rates.

Abortion ratios (figure 3.10) are available only since 1972. They rose sharply until 1978, then rose more slowly, and leveled off after 1980. The final indicator, rates of birth to unmarried white women ages 15 to 19 (figure 3.11), is an exception to the pattern of reversing trends after 1980; it rose in the 1950s and even before, and rose more steeply until the last available date, 1983, with no sign of a downturn. These series suggest three main points:

- First, annual figures show that the patterns of change over time are less uniform than is suggested by data for three points in time.

For example, the death rates among teenagers from motor vehicle accidents look quite different from other indicators, although they, too, peak in 1980 and decline thereafter.

□ For all indicators except out-of-wedlock birthrates and possibly suicide, deterioration in the condition of youth is followed by a rise in well-being as measured by these indicators in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

□ Although it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusion because of the limitations of the available data, some indicators evidently were changing adversely in the decades before the 1960s. Out-of-wedlock birthrates began their upward trend for white youths in the 1940s. Suicide, homicide, and motor vehicle death rates all showed some rise in the 1950s, while the other indicators for which we have data before 1960 generally show no decline in well-being until the 1960s or 1970s. The limited available data before 1960 again point to the fact that all indicators are not alike; and some of the behaviors started to change before the period of family change that, according to Uhlenberg and Eggebeen, caused the trends in teen behavior.

EVALUATING THE UHLENBERG–EGGEBEEN HYPOTHESIS

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen assert that parental commitment has been waning and that the strength of the parent–child bond has weakened over the past two decades. Erosion in the willingness of parents to sacrifice for their children is evident, they say, in rising levels of divorce and maternal employment since the mid-1960s. But Uhlenberg and Eggebeen do not specifically describe the link between family deterioration and problem behavior. Presumably, structural changes in the family—marital instability and two-earner families—are both causes and consequences of a lessened commitment to child-rearing responsibilities. Apparently, as the family in recent years has offered less protection and security, teenagers have become more vulnerable to problem behavior than those raised in an era of lower divorce and maternal employment—when parents had a greater commitment to their offspring.

If Uhlenberg and Eggebeen are right and the trends in youth behavior are caused by waning levels of parental commitment as measured by divorce rates and women's labor force participation, what empirical results would support their thesis?

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen deliberately confined their analysis to white youth. But a look at blacks should be revealing, for if their explanation is correct, we might expect that rates of problem behavior among black youths should have risen sharply between 1960 and 1985. Throughout this period, the rates of labor force participation have been much higher—and the rise, steeper—for black mothers with young children than for white mothers of young children. The reverse is true for mothers of older children; whites increased their labor force participation more than blacks. For both groups, however, the rates rose throughout the early 1980s (see figures 3.12 and 3.13). Rates of marital disruption and single-parenthood also have risen more sharply for blacks than whites.

Blacks and whites can be compared on five of the indicators that we have used, and the results are not uniform. Suicide, motor vehicle accident, and homicide death rates rose in the late 1960s for blacks as they did for whites but began to decline much earlier for blacks (figures 3.7, 3.8, and 3.9). Out-of-wedlock births among black teenagers began a steep rise in the 1940s, leveled off in the 1960s, rose again in the early 1970s and then declined from 1975 to 1983, while both divorce rates and mothers' labor force participation rates were rising. This pattern is quite different from the pattern for white teenagers of a slow steady rise early on and an acceleration in the 1970s (figure 3.11). The proportion of 18- to 24-year- olds who are high school graduates rose much more for blacks than for whites during the period when their family conditions were deteriorating (figure 3.3). Overall, even less correspondence exists between family change and the indicators of well-being for blacks than for whites.

Even more important than the differential by race, the Uhlenberg–Eggebeen hypothesis would lead us to expect the trends in the indicators for young people to be different from those for older people who presumably did not experience the weakening of parental involvement that caused the trends. Uhlenberg and Eggebeen singled out adolescents and presented evidence on the trends in their well-being, ignoring the behavior of older adults. This decision seems reasonable enough because youth are the subject of their analysis, but we asked whether the changes in these indicators were the same for people in other age groups as for youth. Data showing similar patterns of change for older age groups would cast some doubt on attributing the changes in indicators to a decline of parental commitment to young people.

Figures 3.14 through 3.20 contain the available data on the set of behaviors examined earlier, but this time for people 20 to 24, 25 to

29, and 35 to 39 as well as for 15- to 19-year-olds. For adults, as for teenagers, the 1960s and early 1970s represented a period of declining well-being as defined by these indicators. Indeed, the trends for adults and youth bear an uncanny resemblance. For all age groups, the rates for suicide and homicide, substance abuse, and abortion rose precipitously. For most behaviors except abortion, the rise for young people was usually steeper than for adults. Consistent with the pattern we detected among the teenage population, adult rates indicate an end to the decline or an improvement in well-being shortly before or just after 1980. The timing of this reversal is strikingly similar for all age groups under age 45, although the slope of the trends varies somewhat.

One indicator, birthrates to unmarried women (figure 3.20), is an exception to the general pattern of similarity between adult and teenage behavior. Until the mid-1960s the pattern of change in out-of-wedlock childbearing was similar for women of all ages, but from 1965 to 1980, the rate declined for older women and continued to rise for teens. After 1980, older women's nonmarital fertility reversed course again and showed the same upward trend as in the adolescent population.

Thus, neither the decline in well-being from 1960 to 1980 that Uhlenberg and Eggebeen reported nor the general improvement in well-being after 1980 that we observed was unique to youth. Whatever accounted for the trends in youth behavior affected adults as well, at least those adults not yet middle-aged. Because these adults grew up during the post-World-War II period of unusual family stability, their rising rates of problem behavior cannot be explained by changing family environments. If it is difficult to fit the facts to Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's thesis for youth, it is impossible to reconcile them with trends in the behavior of younger adults.

Furthermore, the patterns of change in the presumed causal variables—divorce rates and labor market participation of women—cast further doubt on Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's interpretation. If they are right, we ought to see a reversal in divorce rates and labor force participation preceding the improvements in well-being in the 1980s. The trends in divorce rates and women's labor force participation by family status are shown in figures 3.12 and 3.13. The labor force participation rates of married, spouse present, women with children have risen continuously since 1947 and were continuing to rise through the latest year for which data are available.

Divorce rates (figure 3.21), however, do decline slightly in the 1980s and therefore, at first glance, seem like a possible explanation

for at least those indicators that show "improvement" after 1980: suicide, homicide, and motor vehicle death rates, abortion ratios, drug and alcohol use, and SAT scores. However, this line of reasoning is undercut by a closer examination of the data on divorce trends. First, although rates have leveled off or declined in recent years, this change has occurred too recently to affect teenagers who were growing up in an era when divorce rates reached peak levels. The cumulative risk of divorce has continued to rise for birth cohorts who reached their teens during the early 1980s. In other words, a 16-year-old in 1985 was significantly more likely to have experienced a divorce during childhood than a 16-year-old in 1980 or 1975. Even if divorce rates continue to decline, it will take another 10 years or so before the cumulative rate of divorce begins to drop off for the teenage population.

It might be argued that divorce during the teen years is the relevant predictor of problem behavior among adolescents. But, as we will discuss later, evidence generally suggests that the divorce of parents has stronger and more persistent negative effects on young children than on older children (Emery 1988).

In examining the effects of divorce on problem behavior, it makes sense to correlate behavior with a divorce rate lagged 10 years or so. Figure 3.22 contains the 10-year-lagged divorce rates, the labor force participation rates for women with children under age 6 and two indicators of well-being, annual rates of marijuana and alcohol use. Lagging the divorce rates puts their downturn far too late to explain the improvements in the drug-use variable. In fact, divorce rates have the same timing of change as the teen behaviors, suggesting that a common explanation of both may be appropriate.

In summary, when we extend the time frame and look at the data for older age groups and blacks, the evidence on the behavior of adolescents differs from the evidence presented by Uhlenberg and Eggebeen. The picture of change is not nearly so uniform, so continuous, or so confined to the period of family change as data for white teenagers at three points in time would imply. This more complex picture of change casts serious doubt on Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's explanation of the trends. The dependent variables selected as measures of the well-being of youth do not consistently vary when changes occur in the presumed explanations of the behavior—divorce and mothers' labor force participation. Uhlenberg and Eggebeen may still be correct that waning parental commitment is the underlying cause of the trends in the behavior of teenagers. Perhaps parental commitment is simply not well measured by

divorce rates and women's labor force participation. Indeed, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen present evidence from two separate sources—a mid-1970s survey conducted by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White and opinion data for 1957 and 1976 from a study done by Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981)—to show that parents are less willing to make sacrifices for their children today than previously.

According to Uhlenberg and Eggebeen, a majority of Americans agreed with the statement, "It is important for parents to lead their own lives even if it means spending less time with their children," an attitude measured in the Yankelovich survey. However, the majority supporting this statement was obtained by combining respondents who were reported in the original study as strongly agreeing and partially agreeing with the statement, and contrasting them with the residual category of those who disagreed. Of course, those who partially agree also partially disagree, and therefore it is equally correct to say that a majority disagreed with the statement. In fact, more respondents in the survey disagreed with the statement than agreed with it (32 percent vs. 22 percent), if the middle category of those with mixed feelings are excluded. More important, data from a single point in time do not provide evidence of a decline in the willingness of parents to sacrifice for their children.

The Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka study (1981) contains data on Americans' attitudes about parenthood from surveys taken in 1957 and 1976. Americans expressed more reservations and ambivalence about parenthood in 1976 than in 1957. The proportion of parents who report that they have at sometime felt inadequate as parents and who have experienced problems in relating to their children also increased slightly. Yet, these responses do not necessarily indicate that parents have devalued their role. Parents assigned a much higher importance to their family roles—marriage and parenthood—as sources of value fulfillment and social validity than to work or leisure-time activities in 1976. Unfortunately, trends in these attitudes cannot be traced because the question was new to the 1976 survey. Today's parents are probably more likely to view parenthood as voluntary, and therefore may be more cognizant of the trade-offs or personal costs in having a family. But there is no evidence from the survey data that parents today are less committed to rearing children once they have decided to have them than were parents in the past. According to Veroff et.al., parenthood may have become more demanding, especially for men, but any shifts in the recent past appear to be minor.

A final weakness in the Uhlenberg and Eggebeen argument is its

failure to refer to the large literature linking family conditions—maternal employment and marital instability—and the well-being of children on an individual level. They maintain that the social scientific evidence on the links is unclear. In fact, the evidence on the consequences of maternal employment on children's well-being is about as consistent as any set of findings on child development. In general, children of employed mothers are no more likely to experience developmental difficulties or behavioral disorders than children whose mothers do not work (Bronfenbrenner and Crouter 1982). In 1983, a select panel of the National Academy of Sciences which reviewed the research on the consequences of maternal employment on children's well-being concluded, "There is no compelling evidence to suggest that mothers' or fathers' labor force participation has only good or only bad consequences for all children in all social, economic, and cultural circumstances." (Kamerman and Hayes 1982, pp. 311–12.)

Research on the consequences of marital disruption for children has produced more ambiguous results, partly because it is difficult to separate the effects of family instability from conditions surrounding marital dissolution—particularly parental conflict preceding separation and economic deprivation following divorce.

Clinical studies of children and theories of child development have suggested that the disruption of their parents' marriage should have severe negative consequences for the well-being of children. However, empirical research using large, nationally representative samples of children has failed to document persistent and pervasive differences. Separation and divorce have moderate negative effects on a number of aspects of children's behavior, such as performance in school or reports of problem behavior at home or at school, but the expected powerful relationship between marital disruption and problem behavior has not been found as yet (Furstenberg, Morgan and Allison 1987). In addition, a number of studies suggest that high-conflict but intact marriages produce the same negative effects on children as disruption (Emery 1988).

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS OF THE TRENDS IN YOUTH BEHAVIOR

If changes in the family as measured by divorce and mothers' labor force participation do not explain patterns of adolescent problem

behavior from 1960 to 1985, what does? As we noted earlier, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen dismiss for lack of evidence several other possible explanations of the observed trends. They contend that the social environment of teenagers has been steadily improving since the 1960s. Family size and the number of siblings with whom teenagers have to compete has declined over time, although the decline has been less steady than Uhlenberg and Eggebeen imply (Blake 1981). In addition, parents' education has risen. But we agree with Uhlenberg and Eggebeen that trends in teen behavior cannot be explained by these kinds of population changes, which would generally have produced patterns quite different from those which we observed.

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen are also correct that the resources directed toward children have grown over the past two decades, although the United States has had relatively low public expenditures for youth compared with those of most West European countries (Kamerman and Kahn 1981). The lion's share of the increase in expenditures in the 1960s and early 1970s was channeled into education. The growth of educational expenditures may, however, have been inadequate to meet the demands made on the public school system when baby boom children reached school age (Coleman 1974). Preston (1984), among others, has argued that increases in expenditures went to maintaining aging buildings and paying higher administrative and energy costs rather than improving the quality of education, which probably deteriorated as the real income of teachers declined during this period. He claims that children have fared poorly in both relative and absolute terms, in the competition for resources with the elderly, and he contends that some adverse trends in youth behavior might be attributed to the quantity and quality of supportive services for youthful dependents. (See also, Bane and Ellwood 1983.)

Finally, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's assertion that poverty has declined for 16- and 17-year-olds is true for the 1960s and early 1970s, although the proportion of teenagers living in poverty has increased since the late 1970s. Still, the economic status of youth does not seem to explain in any direct way, changes in teenage behavior.

We have no explanation for the trends in the behavior of youth. Rather, our empirical work suggests several important considerations in seeking explanations. A plausible account of the trends described in this chapter must apply not only to youth but to young adults as well. There are striking similarities in the trends in the behavior of

young people and adults at least to age 35 or 40. Although many of the variables have similar trends, the patterns of change are not identical, suggesting that a one-dimensional explanation for the changes in all these behaviors may be inappropriate. For many of the behaviors, the explanation must fit with a reversal of trends after 1980.

These empirical facts suggest that specific historical conditions in the 1960s and the early 1970s that might have been powerful enough to produce sudden and fairly dramatic changes in a variety of behaviors. Without going into a detailed review of recent U.S. history, we can say that the Vietnam War precipitated a cultural crisis that sent shock waves through a number of institutions (Flacks 1971). Public opinion polls document a growing skepticism of authority and an increasing tolerance for so-called countercultural lifestyles (Yankelovich 1974). During these years public support for liberalizing prohibitions against drug use, certain sexual behaviors, and divorce. Youth were certainly in the forefront of many of these cultural changes, although young adults and even some people in their middle years also embraced the changes. To be sure, the family was affected by these trends, but so were schools, religious institutions, voluntary associations, and government. Thus, it is tempting to attribute at least some of the changes in behavior to a relaxation in social control during the historical period stretching from the Vietnam War through the Watergate scandal.

Even a cursory look at trends during the same period in Europe however, shows remarkably similar, if somewhat attenuated, changes in some of the behaviors catalogued by Uhlenberg and Eggebeen. Thus, although the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a turbulent time throughout much of Europe as well, explanations of the trends in the United States must also account for parallel changes throughout the West and therefore extend beyond specific cultural conditions in the United States.

One explanation put forth by demographers and sociologists is that sharp imbalances in the size of cohorts can create radical shifts in the availability of actual and perceived opportunities (c.f. Easterlin 1980; Ryder 1974). As the baby boom generation came of age in both the United States and Western Europe, there was considerable competition for scarce resources. In 1974, Ryder observed that the potential for generational conflict and youth alienation is exacerbated when large cohorts of youth must be absorbed into productive positions. If parents and teachers are, in effect, temporarily outnumbered by the huge size of the youthful cohort, "a disproportionate

share in the process of socialization will be assumed by the contemporaries themselves" (Ryder 1974).

Easterlin (1978; 1980), drawing some of the same conclusions, contends that the restriction of objective opportunities caused by cohort crowding is further aggravated by the perception of young people that they are likely to be worse off than their parents were at a similar stage in life. In a recent analysis of economic trends in the period from 1950 to 1980, Levy (1987) argues that young adults did indeed lose out financially relative to their elders. This explanation, attributing changes in behavior to the entrance of large cohorts into the teenage years, would account for the similarity of changes in the United States and other Western nations that also faced less severe but still substantial demographic imbalances in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, reversals in trends after the late 1970s can be explained by the cohort-crowding hypothesis.

Simultaneous trends in behavior among a large number of age groups and the lack of a clear cohort pattern of change are harder to explain. It is possible that the behavior of the baby boom cohorts influenced the behavior of other age groups by influencing norms more generally. Thus, a period change in behavior affecting a large number of age groups may have been triggered by the arrival at teenage of the baby boom cohorts.

An adequate test of this explanation for the changing trends in problem behavior is beyond the scope of this paper and requires much more empirical work. For example, it would be useful to compare trends in the behavior of teenagers and young adults among countries with varying baby boom experiences. A more refined analysis of the differing trends in behavior across age groups also would be instructive. A direct examination of normative changes by age and their relationship to trends in behavior would help establish whether there is any evidence for the diffusion of normative change across age groups or even across national boundaries.

A final comment can be made on Uhlenberg and Eggebeen's thesis which this chapter has questioned. While we take issue with their depiction and interpretation of trends in adolescent problem behavior, we do not necessarily disagree with their contention that the situation of youth today is far from ideal. Even if indicators of adolescent well-being continue to improve somewhat in the next decade, as we suspect that they might, rates of problem behavior are likely to remain high. Moreover, the proportion of children living below or near the poverty line is a distressing symptom of our country's questionable commitment to the well-being of the next generation.

However, a call for greater sacrifice on the part of individual parents, while rhetorically appealing in a politically conservative era, appears to us to offer little promise for improving the situation of youth. In the unlikely event that parents heeded this appeal and restored the "traditional family," we seriously doubt that levels of drug use, alcohol consumption, or crime would return to the levels of the 1950s. The circumstances facing youth today are quite different from a generation ago, and it is difficult for us to imagine a return to the status quo ante.

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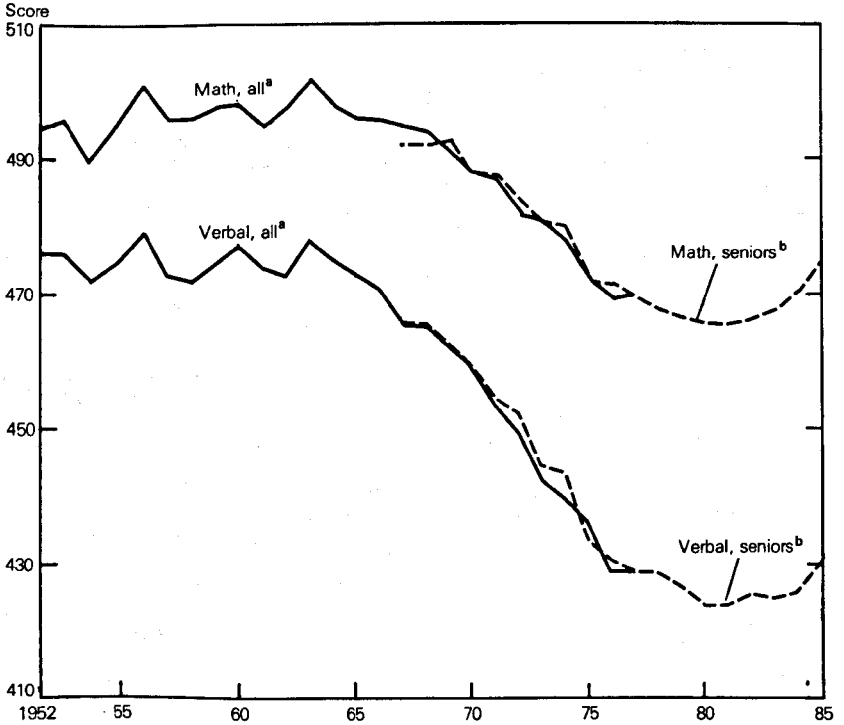
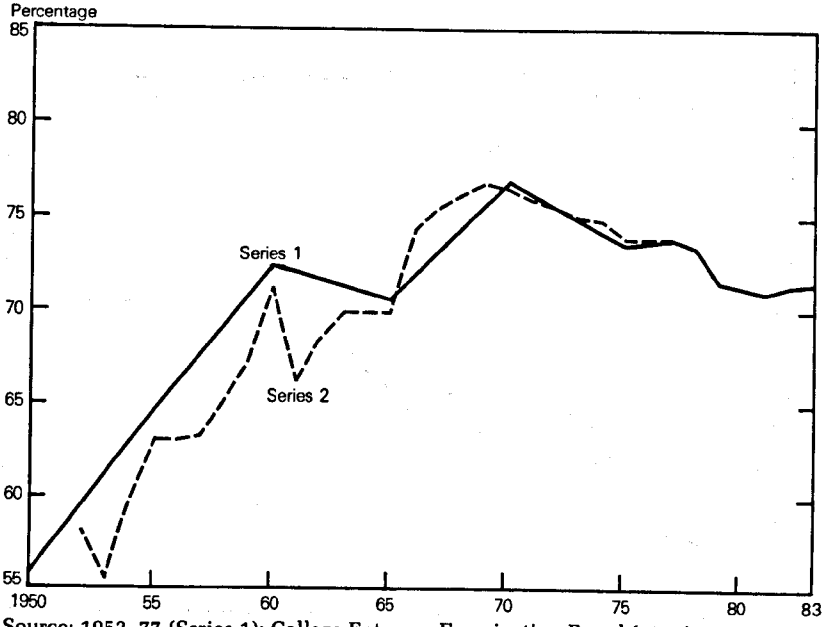
Annex: Chapter Figures

Figure 3.1 SCHOLASTIC APTITUDE TEST SCORES



Source: 1951–76: College Entrance Examination Board (1977), p. 6. 1977–84: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1986*, p. 147.

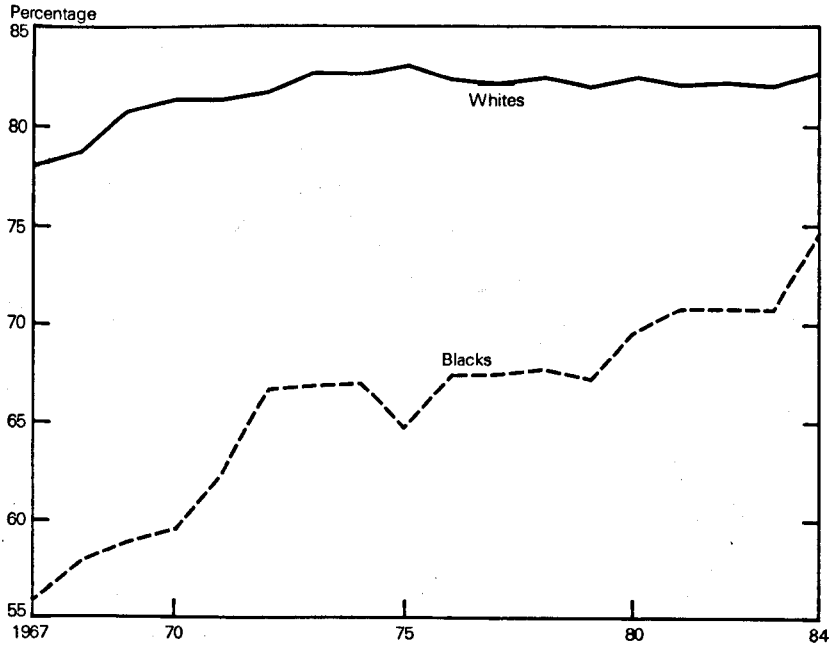
Figure 3.2 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AMONG 18-YEAR-OLDS



Source: 1952–77 (Series 1): College Entrance Examination Board (1977), p. 4. 1953–83 (Series 2): U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1986*, p. 149.

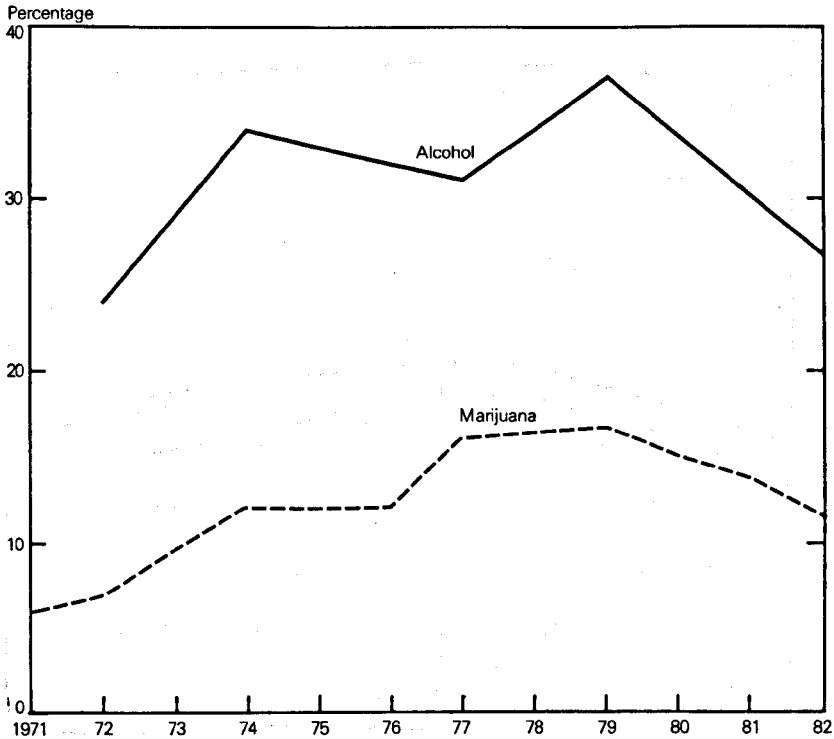
Note: The two lines represent different sources that varied in their estimated number of 18-year-olds.

Figure 3.3 COMPLETERS OF 12 YEARS OF SCHOOLING, AGES 18 TO 24



Source: 1967–84, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1985).

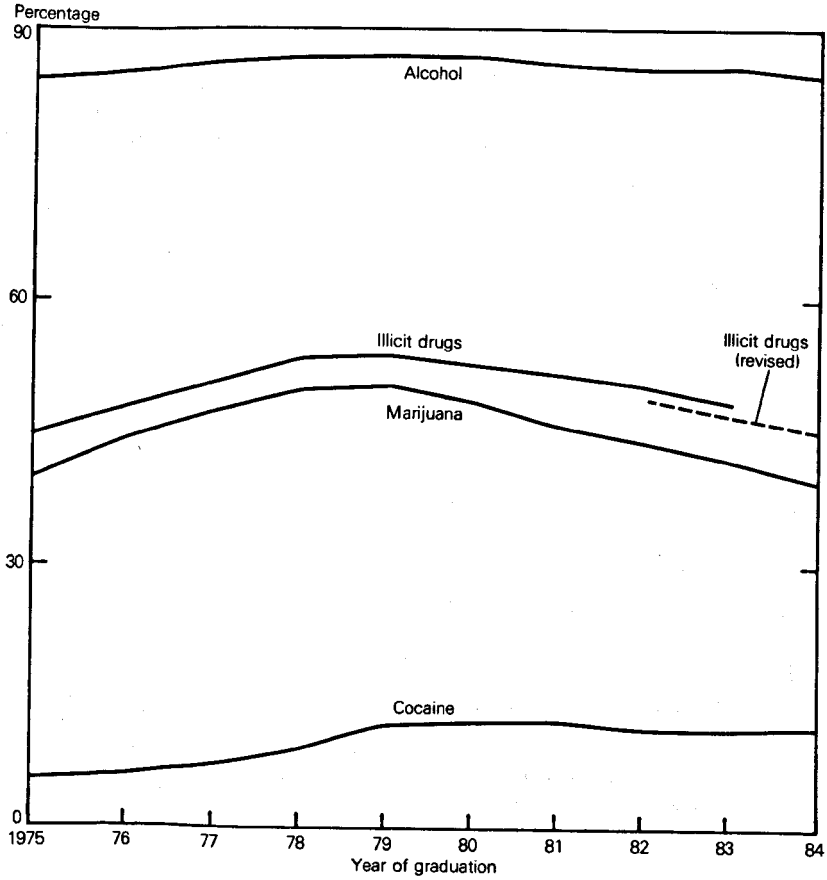
Figure 3.4 MARIJUANA AND ALCOHOL USE[a] AMONG 12- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS



Source: 1972–74: 1976, 1979, 1982, U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1986*, p. 118. 1971, 1977: U.S. Bureau of the Census (varous years [f]) and *Statistical Abstract: 1980*, p. 129.

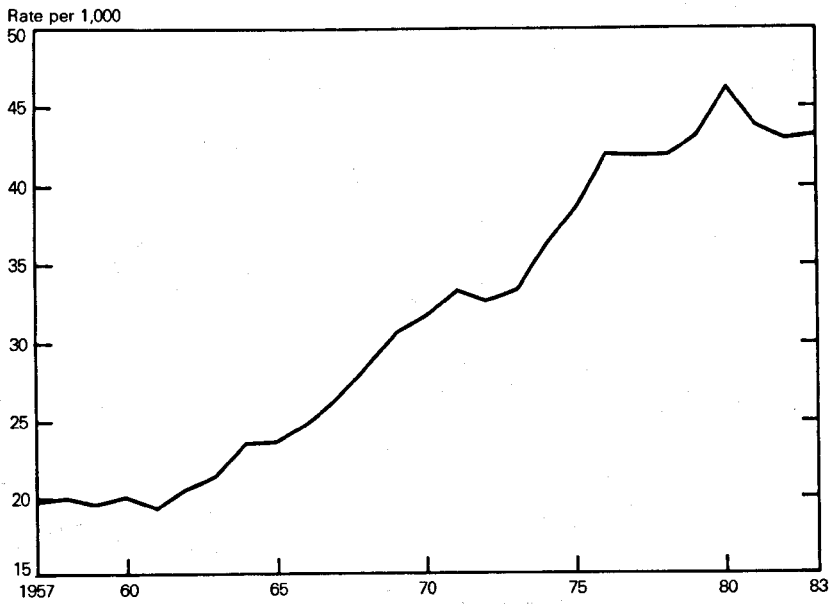
a. In month prior to the study.

Figure 3.5 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS USING ILLICIT DRUGS AND ALCOHOL



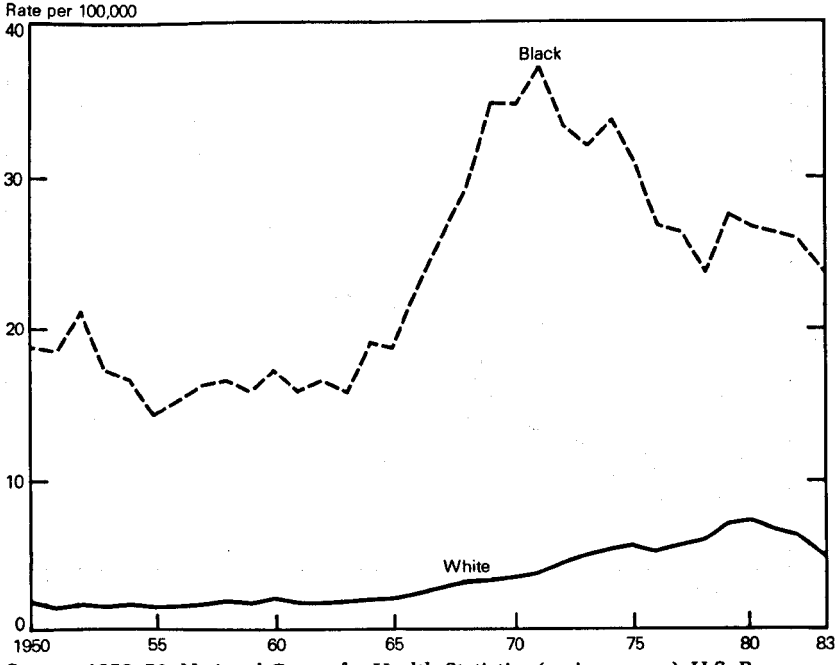
Source: National Institute of Drug Abuse (1985).

Figure 3.6 DELINQUENCY CASE DISPOSITIONS, 10- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS



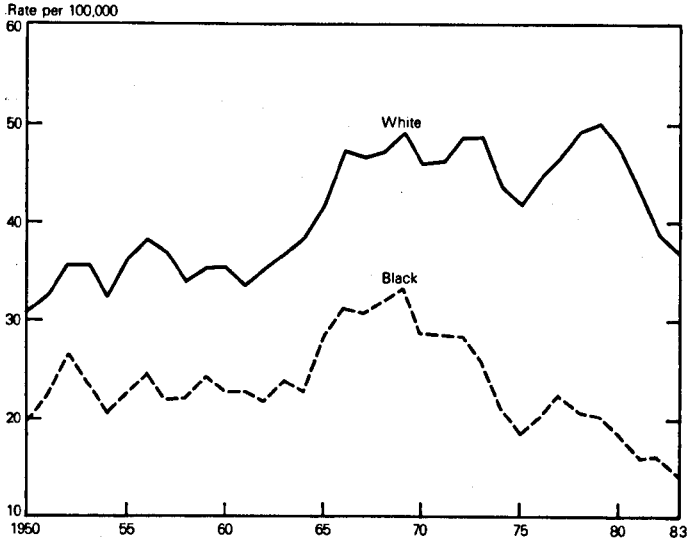
Source: 1957–82, Nimick et al. (1985); 1983, Snyder (1986).

Figure 3.7 HOMICIDE DEATH RATES, AGES 15 TO 19



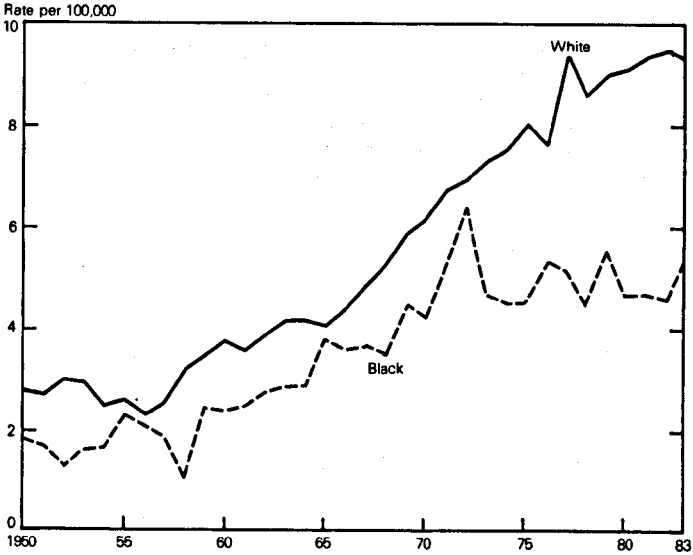
Source: 1950–59: National Center for Health Statistics (various years); U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [b] and [c]).
1960–80: National Center for Health Statistics (various years).
1981–82: National Center for Health Statistics (1986b).

Figure 3.8 MOTOR VEHICLE DEATH RATES, AGES 15 TO 19



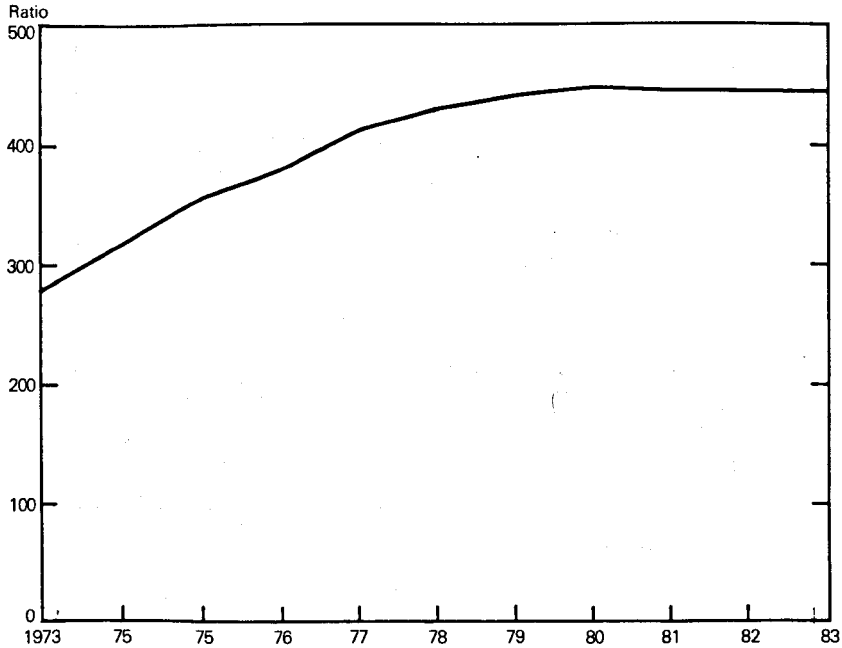
Source: See figure 3.7.

Figure 3.9 SUICIDE DEATH RATES, AGES 15 TO 19



Source: See figure 3.7.

Figure 3.10 ABORTION RATES,[a] AGES 15 TO 19



Source: 1973, 1980, 1981: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1985.*

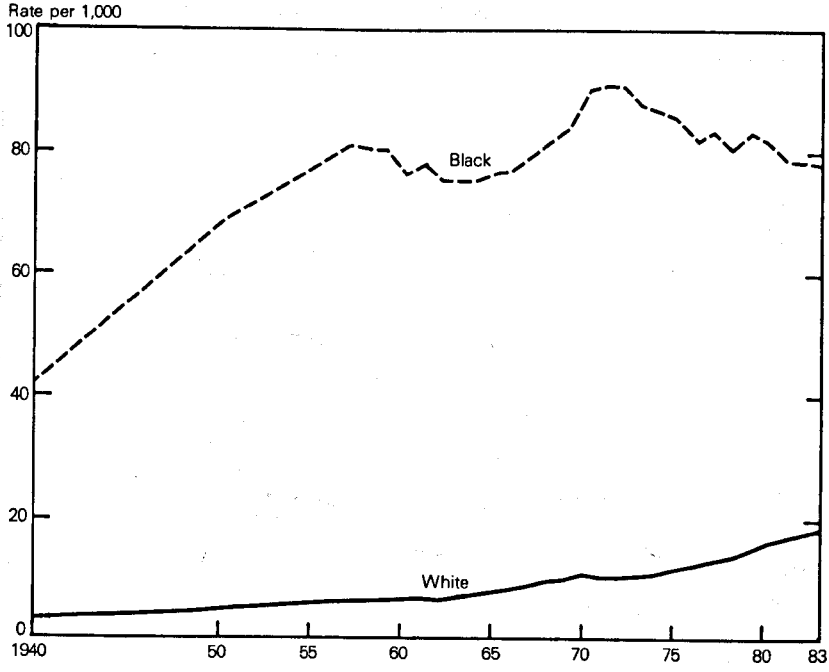
1974–77: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1984;* National Center for Health Statistics (various years).

1978: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1980.*

1979: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract 1982–83.*

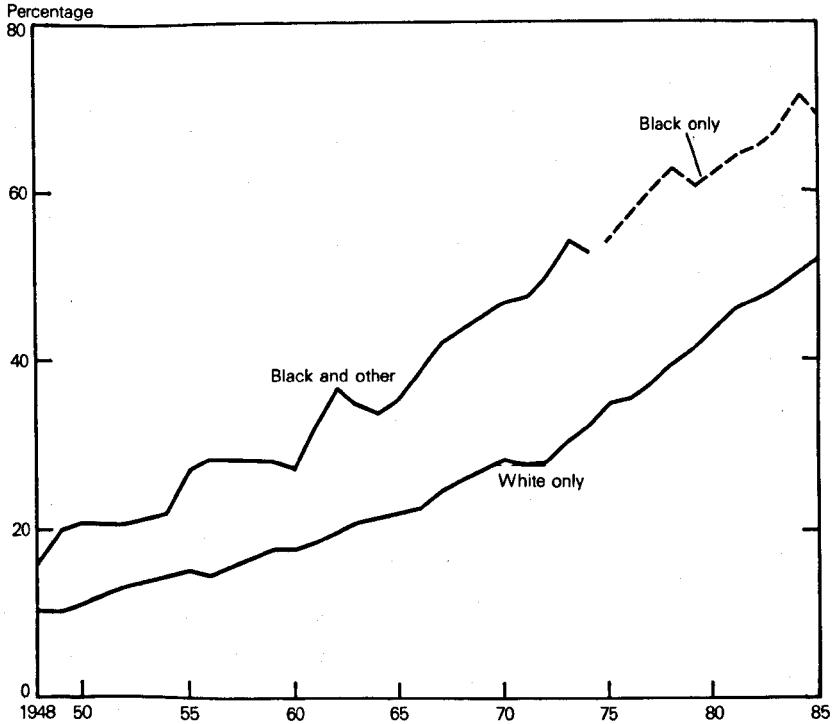
1982–84: Henshaw (1986); U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1987.*

Figure 3.11 UNMARRIED BIRTH RATES, WOMEN, AGES 15 TO 19



Source: 1940, 1950, 1960–80: National Center for Health Statistics (various years); 1981–83: National Center for Health Statistics (1985a).
Note: Two points in 1980 based on different definitions; after 1980 the new definition is used.

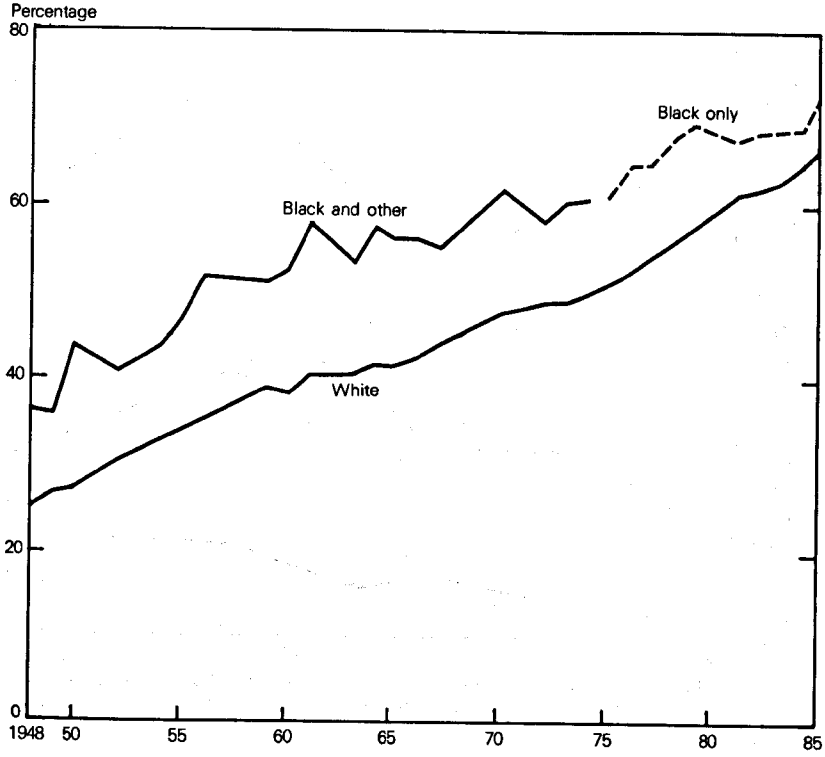
Figure 3.12 LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES, MARRIED, SPOUSE PRESENT, MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6



Source: All races, 1948–84: U.S. Department of Labor (1985).

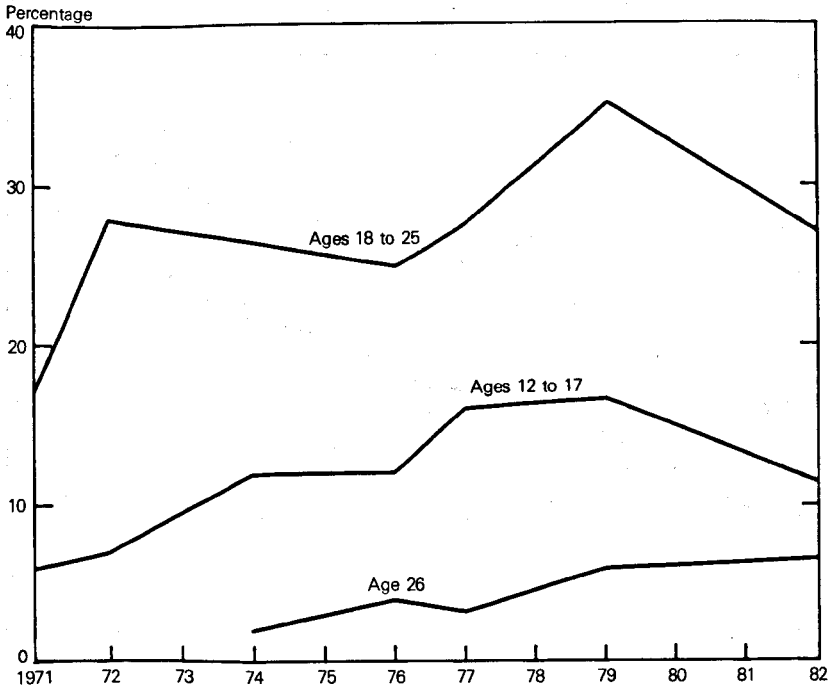
Whites, blacks, and other races, 1948–56: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [b]); 1959, U.S. Department of Labor (1960); 1960–79, U.S. Department of Labor (various years); 1981, U.S. Department of Labor (1983); 1982/85, U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [d]); 1986, U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]) and *Statistical Abstract:1987*.

Figure 3.13 LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES, MARRIED, SPOUSE PRESENT, MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN AGES 6 TO 17



Source: See figure 3.12.

Figure 3.14 USE[a] OF MARIJUANA, BY AGE



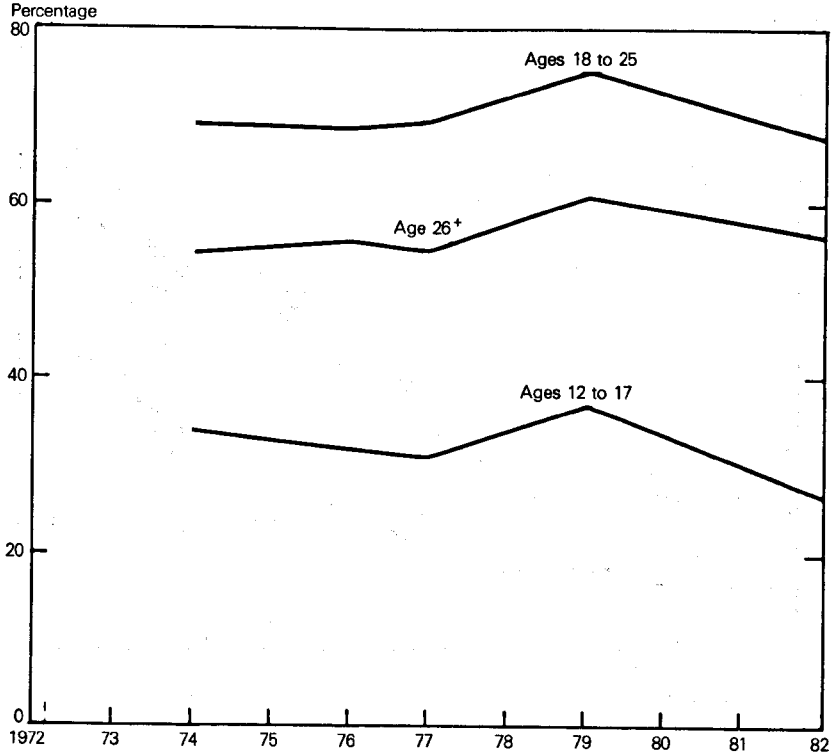
Source: 12 to 17 age group, 1972–74, 1976, 1979, 1982; 18 to 25 age group, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1982; 26 age group, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1982: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]); *Statistical Abstract: 1986*, p. 118.

12 to 17 age group, 1971, 1977; 18 to 25 age group, 1977; 26+ age group, 1977: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f] and *Statistical Abstract: 1980*, p. 129.

18 to 25 age group, 1971: U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [f]) and *Statistical Abstract: 1979*, p. 125.

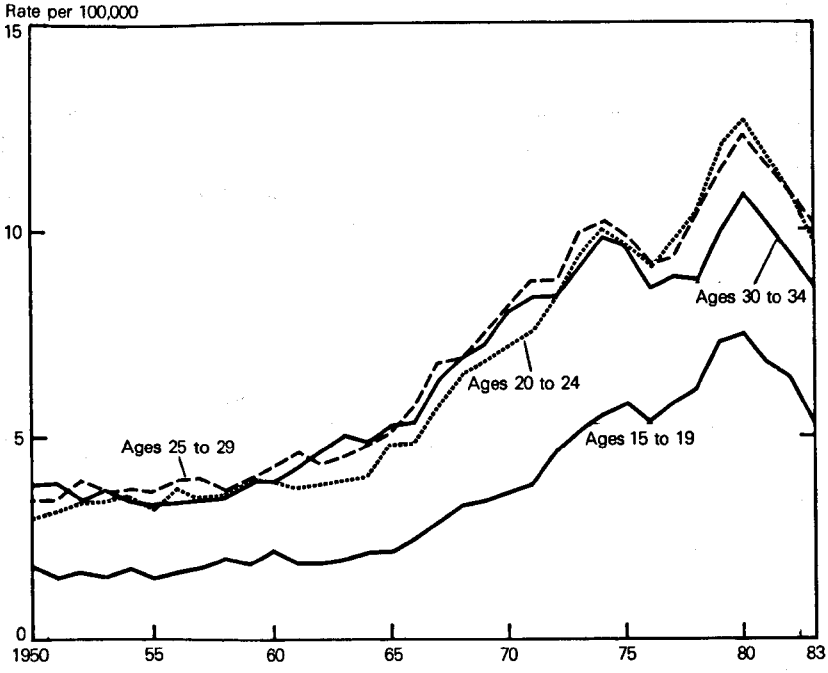
a. In the month prior to the study.

Figure 3.15 ALCOHOL USE,[a] BY AGE



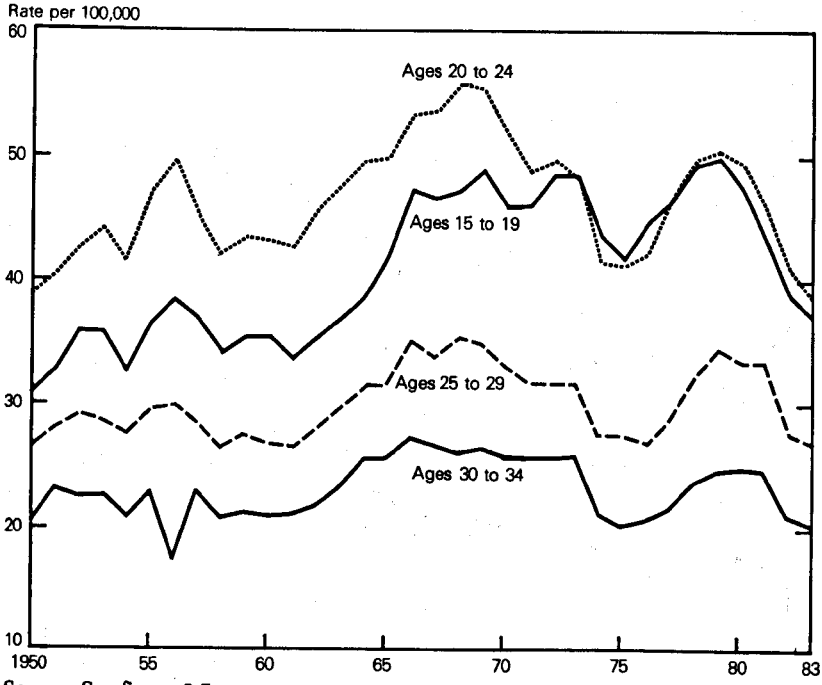
Source: See figure 3.14.
a. In the month prior to the study.

Figure 3.16 HOMICIDE DEATH RATES, WHITES



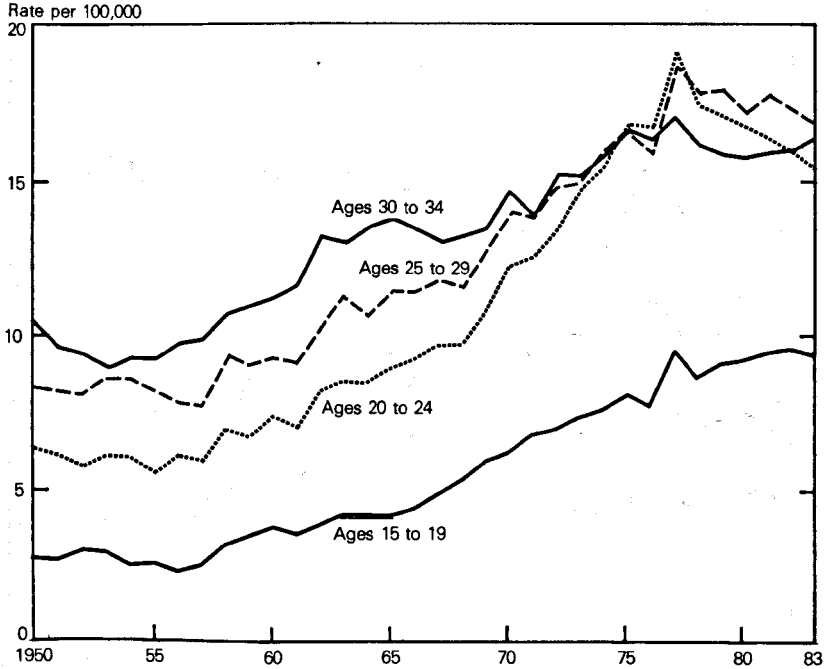
Source: See figure 3.7.

Figure 3.17 MOTOR VEHICLE DEATH RATES, WHITES



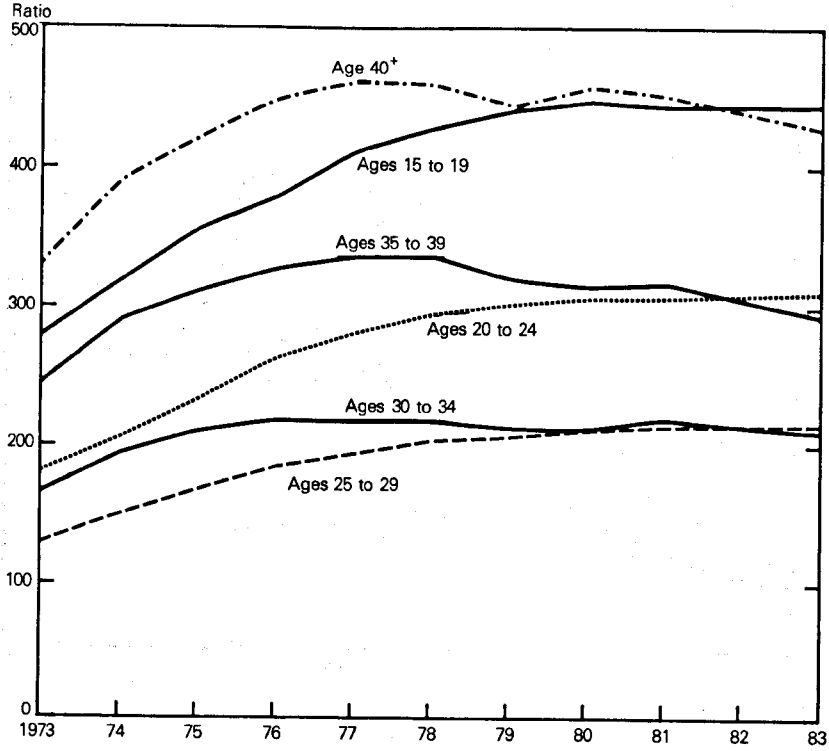
Source: See figure 3.7.

Figure 3.18 SUICIDE DEATH RATES, WHITES



Source: See figure 3.7.

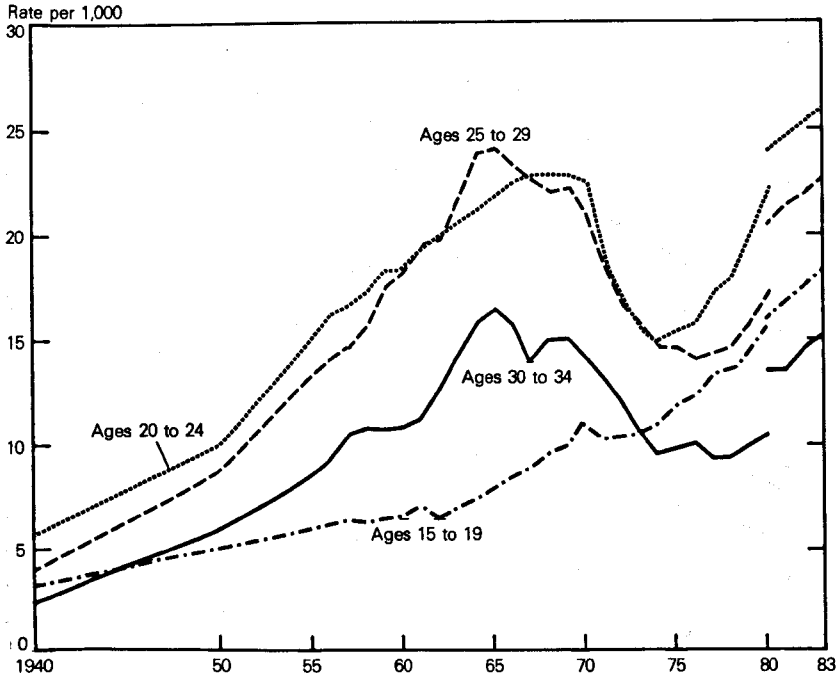
Figure 3.19 ABORTION RATIOS[a]



Source: See figure 3.10.

a. Abortions divided by live births plus abortions.

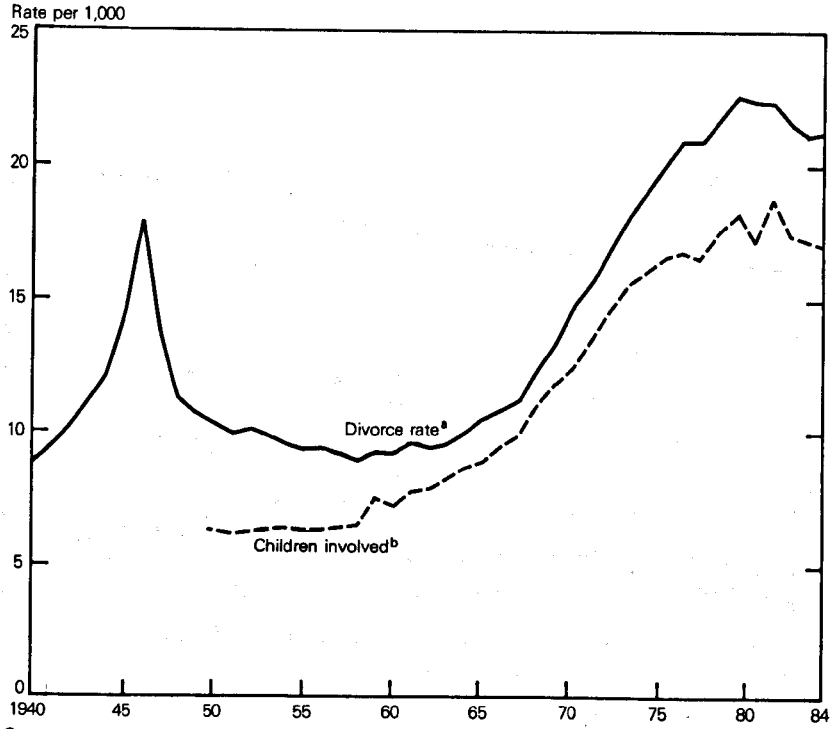
Figure 3.20 UNMARRIED BIRTH RATES, WHITES



Source: See figure 3.11

Note: Two points for 1980 are based on different definitions; after 1980 the new definition is used.

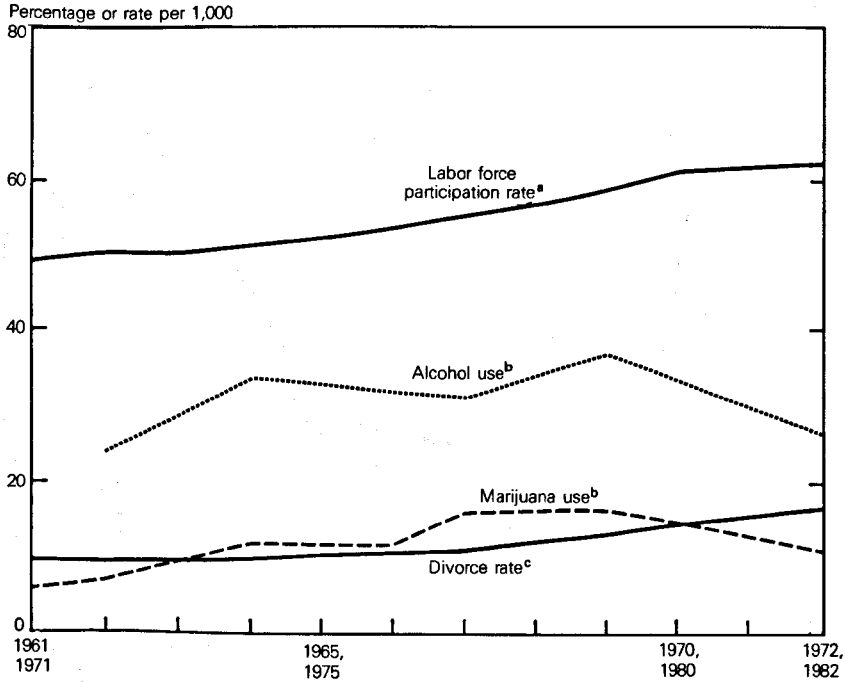
Figure 3.21 DIVORCE AND CHILDREN



Source: Divorce rate, 1930–81, National Center for Health Statistics (1985b); 1982–84, National Center for Health Statistics (1986a).

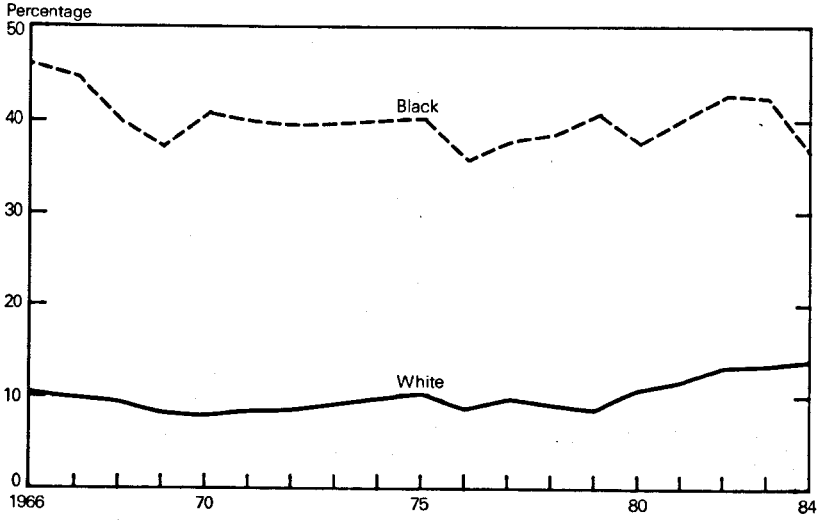
Children under age 18 involved in divorce, 1950–84, National Center for Health Statistics (1986a).

Figure 3.22 WORKING MOTHERS, ADOLESCENT DRUG USE, AND DIVORCE



Source: See figures 3.4, 3.12, and 3.21.
Note: Percentage of 12- to 17-year-olds reporting marijuana and alcohol use, labor force participation rate per 1,000 mothers of children ages 6 to 17, and lagged divorce rates per 1,000 married women.

Figure 3.23 WHITE AND BLACK 16- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS LIVING BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL



Source: 1966–72, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1974b); 1973, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1974a); 1974–78, U.S. Bureau of the Census (various years [a]; 1979–84, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1980 and various years [e]).

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