

Unique Aspects of Adolescent and Young Adult Romantic Relationship Attitudes, Experiences, and Quality

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Overview

Romantic relationships form a vital part of social and personal life in the United States. Although dating during adolescence has declined somewhat in recent years, most adolescents and young adults (AYA) continue to form important and consequential romantic relationships, including dating relationships, cohabitation, and less commonly, marriage. These relationships are associated with the health and well-being of AYA, though these associations vary substantially during adolescence and young adulthood.¹⁻³ For example, being in a relationship is linked to more cases of depression for adolescents (primarily for girls), whereas young adults experience fewer cases of depression.^{4,5} Physical intimate partner violence (IPV) is another concern as IPV perpetration increases in adolescence, peaks in the early twenties, and decreases in the late twenties.⁶

In this brief, we summarize what recent peer-reviewed research reveals about adolescents' and young adults' romantic relationships in the United States. We synthesize what is known about (1) AYA attitudes about and expectations of romantic relationships, (2) the extent to which AYA have been involved in different types of relationships, (3) AYA experiences within romantic relationships, and (4) the factors that determine the quality of AYA romantic relationships. The reviewed research, published since 2010, focuses primarily on dating relationships with occasional discussion of cohabiting and married relationships. The findings have important implications for youth-serving healthy marriage and relationship education programs (HMRE), particularly in helping AYA form healthy relationships.

^aBreak-ups can be good in the long-term for psychological well-being, as this research reveals, but can also have negative consequences for well-being, depending on a variety of factors. (See Rhoades et al., 2011).



MAST CENTER RESEARCH

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. This research aims to identify critical research gaps, generate new knowledge, and help programs serve the individuals and families with whom they work. MAST Center research is concentrated in two areas:

- **Relationship Patterns & Trends.** Population-based research to better understand trends, predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of marriage and relationships in the United States.
- **Program Implementation & Evaluation.** Program Implementation & Evaluation. Research that helps build knowledge about what works in HMRE programming, for whom, and in what context.

Highlights

Relationship attitudes

- Although most AYA do not live with a romantic partner, expectations of marriage in the future are high, and the majority expect to cohabit at some point.
- Relationship expectations are linked to the relationship experiences of youth themselves and of their parents.

Relationship involvement

- Adolescent dating has been on a decline in recent decades; however, relationship involvement becomes much more common among young adults in their 20s.
- AYA relationships range from casual/exploratory to long-term/committed, and individuals may fluctuate between these across their relationships.
- A substantial minority of AYA (30% to 38%) are in committed relationships at any one point in time.

Relationship experiences

- Young adult relationships are often fluid and short in duration.
- Breaking up is not always a bad thing; young adults break up with partners who do not meet their needs, allowing them to experience higher quality relationships in the future.

Relationship quality

- Relationship quality is multidimensional in nature. In addition to relationship satisfaction, important dimensions to consider include support (instrumental and emotional), intimate self-disclosure, affection/warmth, coercion, controlling behavior, conflict, interdependence/independence, and trust.
- Use of physical IPV increases during adolescence and peaks in early young adulthood before declining.

Implications

- Future research on AYA relationship experiences and quality needs to move beyond concepts and measures best applied to marriage among adults to focus on factors more common among AYA, such as relationship fluidity.
- Future research needs to expand study populations to incorporate the diversity of today's youth, including individuals with diverse sexual and gender identities.
- HMRE programs should consider the unique aspects of young adult relationships and ensure programming is relevant for them.
- HMRE programs for youth should identify ways to help AYA avoid and/or exit unhealthy relationships and identify approaches to addressing positive and negative aspects of relationships.

KEY TERMS

Adolescents and young adults (AYA). The research we reviewed generally identifies adolescents as ages 15 to 19 years (but occasionally as young as 14). Young adults—sometimes referred to as “emerging adults”—typically include youth ages 18 to 25 years (and occasionally up to age 30).

Transition to adulthood. The transition to adulthood is a process typically begun during late adolescence. The transition to adulthood involves achieving various “markers” of adulthood like completing education, forming an independent household, and establishing a stable career, among other things. The time needed to reach these markers is often linked to romantic relationship decisions.

Relationships. Family scholars often study coresidential relationships such as cohabitation and marriage. However, these types of relationships—especially marriage—are far less common among AYA than among older individuals.⁷ As such, when studying AYA, it is important to examine the relationships of romantic couples who do not live together. These relationships are not as clearly defined as cohabitation and marriage but generally refer to peer relationships with elements of affection and/or sexual behavior—anticipated or experienced.⁸ Importantly, the meaning of dating relationships during AYA has changed over time and can be varied and fluid.^{3,9}

Relationship Attitudes

Social norms surrounding cohabitation and marriage have changed over the past several decades, and, as a result, interest in the attitudes that adolescents and young adults have toward their future partnerships has also increased.¹⁰ Looking at AYA attitudes related to romance and partnerships may help explain whether, how, and why their relationship patterns and behaviors differ from older cohorts. Their attitudes may also reflect confidence or pessimism about the institution of marriage and their views on other romantic and sexual behaviors, such as nonmarital sex and living together outside marriage.



Measuring attitudes

Research examining attitudes toward romantic relationships primarily focuses on three types of attitudes that move from general dispositions (desires) to expectations to specific plans (intentions).

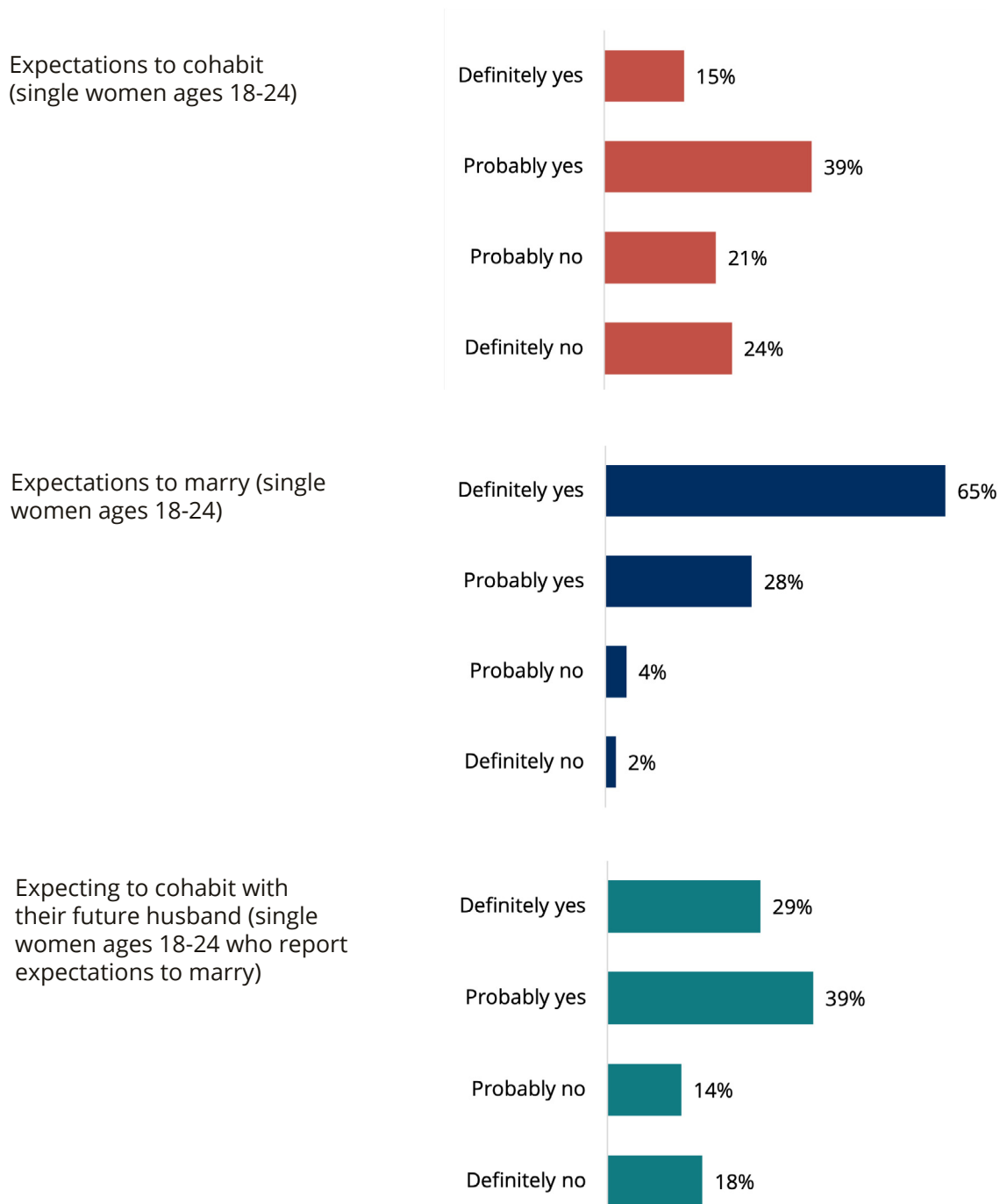
- Desires capture “do you want to ____?” where the blank can be filled in using one of the following: live together without getting married/cohabit, marry, divorce, have children, or other family experiences.
- Expectations capture “do you think it is likely you *will* ___?”
- Intentions ask “do you plan to do this?” when it comes to relationship decisions.

The literature we reviewed speaks mainly to expectations and desires with some limited research on intentions. Decisions regarding marriage and having children are more likely to be made in adulthood than in AYA, but general attitudes towards these decisions in AYA can provide important insights into future behaviors.

Research on relationship attitudes

Recent analyses of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) find that the majority of women ages 18 to 24—more than 9 in 10—expect to marry, with far more expecting to marry than cohabit.¹¹ Of the young women who expect to marry, most also expect to cohabit with their future spouse before marriage. However, a considerable minority (approximately one-third) expect to marry without cohabiting—the “traditional” pathway to forming unions.¹¹

Figure 1. Descriptive statistics for marital and cohabitation expectations



Source: National Survey of Family Growth 2011-2015

AYA expectations about relationships vary by their own experiences. For example, young people currently in relationships are more likely to expect to marry than single young people.¹² However, among young women in their late teens and early 20s who are cohabiting or who have cohabited, the proportion of those who intend to marry has declined over time, especially among those who have cohabited multiple times.¹³ Attitudes toward relationship dissolution (break-ups, divorce, etc.) may also explain some hesitance to partnering among AYA. For example, AYA with higher expectations to eventually divorce tend to delay marriage (even if they do expect to marry) and are more likely to live with a partner first rather than marry.¹⁴

Parents' relationship histories may also impact youths' expectations.^{15,16} For example, AYA whose mothers married at later ages (and were still married at the time of the study) were more likely to desire marriage themselves. Additionally, youth whose mothers ever cohabited after a divorce reported a lower desire to marry.¹⁵ However, recent research shows that parental marital status may not be as important as AYA's own experiences for shaping their relationship expectations.^{12,17}

Socioeconomic status (most often measured by parents' education) is also linked to expectations for some relationships. AYA from more disadvantaged backgrounds have lower expectations to marry but not to cohabit.¹¹ Further, cohabiting women with higher education or whose partners are better educated expect to marry sooner than their counterparts with fewer socioeconomic advantages.¹⁸ Full-time employment, a strong religious identity, and more positive mental and emotional well-being are also linked to higher expectations for marriage.¹²

Of course, expectations do not always predict actual behavior. For example, analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY79) find an imperfect association between expectations to cohabit and subsequent cohabitation. Almost 40 percent of young adults who expected to cohabit actually did so, and 30 percent of those entering a cohabiting union either had not expected to or held low expectations to cohabit.¹⁹ Thus, while attitudinal measures can provide insights into AYA orientation toward family behaviors and trends over time, not all teens will fulfill their family expectations as they grow older.

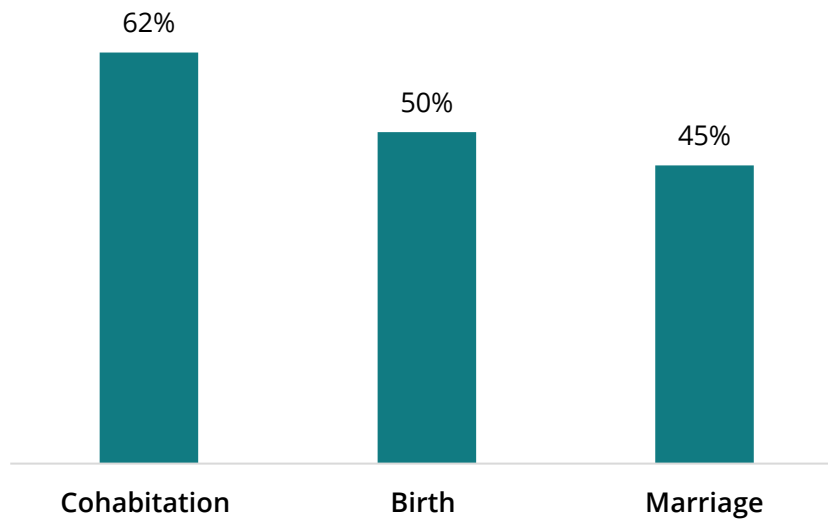
Relationship Involvement

The types of romantic relationships AYA have experienced varies considerably. Adolescent dating has declined in recent decades²⁰ with around half of twelfth graders reporting having never dated in 2017—a sharp increase from 15 percent in 1992. It is important to note that the decrease in AYA dating could be more apparent than real, because the term “dating” as used in surveys does not resonate with today's teens and young adults.²⁰ What would have been considered dating in older generations (i.e., going out on dates) may no longer apply to how current AYA refer to casual relationships and more serious relationships.



Although teen dating is down, involvement in relationships has become much more common for people in their 20s. By age 29, only 32 percent of people are single (i.e., *not* dating, cohabiting, or married).²¹ As shown in the figure below, the majority (62%) of young adults have lived with at least one partner by age 30.²² Other family events are less common by age 30 with just under half (45%) having ever married and half (50%) becoming parents.²²

Figure 2. Percentage of young adults who experienced cohabitation, parenthood, and marriage before age 30



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, rounds 1-7

Not surprisingly, the relationships of teens differ from those of people in their 20s. Adolescent relationships tend to be less clearly defined, and although some adolescents do cohabit, teenage cohabitation is uncommon and is associated with material disadvantage and/or teen parenthood.²³ Broad societal changes, such as those in the educational system, the labor market, and home ownership, are linked to delays in cohabitation and marriage among young adults.^{21,24} However, the factors influencing teens' romantic relationships are more strongly tied to the end of puberty, peer interactions in school, and dynamics within the family. Still, different patterns of romance and dating in adolescence are associated with different levels of aggression, drug use, mental health problems, and study habits into young adulthood.^{25,26} These findings suggest that young adult relationships are connected to and influenced by earlier adolescent partnerships.

Distinct from the above body of work, there is considerably more literature on AYA *sexual* experiences and behavior. Far more surveys and datasets collect information about sexual activity than about romantic relationships. Notably, sexual activity becomes increasingly common during the transition to adulthood. By age 18, two thirds of men and women have engaged in sexual intercourse, with a median age of 17 at first sex.^{27,28} Because the majority of adolescents' first sexual experiences occur within a relationship,²⁹ studying sexual activity can provide some insight into young people's romantic relationships when more detailed information is unavailable (see Olmstead 2020 for an overview of this research).³⁰

Relationship Experiences

In the next sections, we review how teens and young adults experience their relationships. There is considerable fluidity in their relationships, and break-ups are common. Unfortunately, violence is also common in teen and young adult relationships.

Relationship fluidity and break-ups

Young adult relationships are often fluid and short in duration. Much research frames this instability in a negative way. For instance, "sliding versus deciding,"^{31,32} churning (breaking up and getting back together with an ex)^{31,33} and casual sex and hookups³⁰ have been important strands of research on relationships in AYA that tend to depict AYA relationships as fundamentally unstable and breaking up as "bad."

However, fluidity in relationships during AYA is developmentally appropriate. During the transition to adulthood, young people are also developing their identity, finishing school, and starting jobs/careers. They want relationships that work together with these other (and sometimes competing) life goals.^{34,35} As such, romantic relationships at this stage of life are often exploratory and AYA often have several relationship experiences and partners.^{35,36} However, this means multiple breakups and some less-committed ties.



Breaking up is relatively common in young adulthood,³⁷ perhaps because young people are less likely to settle for the *wrong* relationship. Additionally, AYA often feel unsure about their relationship and can be reluctant to bring up issues of commitment.³⁸ Teens and young adults are frequently uncertain about their break-ups, too; research on undergraduate students demonstrates that deciding to end or continue a relationship usually involves a degree of ambivalence.³⁹ Some break-ups are not permanent and lead to “relationship churning” or “cyclical relationships” in which people break up and then get back together with a romantic partner.³³ Although breaking up can be hard, any negative consequences are usually short-term. A break-up can even have a positive impact on personal growth and future relationships.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, a substantial minority of AYA, from 30 percent to 38 percent, are in committed relationships at any one point in time depending on the study.⁴¹⁻⁴³ Evidence from reviews of adolescent dating research reveals that active dating or mutual romantic interest is common in adolescence and lasts longer than previously thought.⁸ Older research has established the importance of romantic involvement for both girls and boys, despite widely held notions of adolescent romance as trivial or incidental.²

In terms of relationship stability, divorce rates among married individuals in their late teens and early twenties have declined, likely because marriage has become more rare among AYA over time, with those who do marry being more selective of their partners than earlier cohorts.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, although AYA relationships may not be as transitory or uncommitted as sometimes believed, they do tend to be less stable, more ambiguous, and more fluid (i.e., changing in nature and not clearly defined) than relationships at later ages.⁴⁵

Intimate partner violence

There is growing research on physical Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) within romantic relationships in AYA—perpetration (initiating IPV), victimization (being subjected to IPV), and the co-occurrence of perpetration and victimization. The Centers for Disease Control⁴⁶ estimate that about 1 in 12 high school students experienced physical dating violence. As noted previously, physical IPV increases during adolescence and peaks in early young adulthood before declining, a pattern that has been found consistently.⁶

Relationship characteristics are linked to the likelihood of physical IPV. Individuals in cohabiting relationships are at increased risk of IPV compared to those in dating relationships,⁴⁷ likely reflecting the fact that more time spent together presents more opportunities for disagreements. Research also suggests that for most AYA, less continuity in relationships was associated with fewer experiences of IPV across relationships, and among those who had reported violence, most did not experience IPV in every relationship.⁴⁸ However, there is an association between getting back together with an ex-partner and IPV.³³ Research also shows that the frequency of disagreements and infidelity is associated with a higher likelihood of IPV.⁶

A range of personal and family factors are also linked to physical IPV in AYA relationships. For example, research finds IPV among youth is associated with depression,⁴⁹ violence in the family of origin, strained (or

damaged) relationship with parents,⁵⁰ and aspects of control *and* anger—contrary to the widely held view that IPV is about power rather than anger.⁵¹ These factors mentioned above are observed largely for young adults rather than adolescents.

Fewer studies focus on non-physical forms of violence⁵² but do suggest that dating violence among young people often includes emotional, psychological, and sexual violence.⁵³ Verbal abuse, like physical conflict, is more common among relationships that break up and get back together (i.e., “churning” relationships) and is more often initiated by girls than boys (though boys had a higher percentage of severe physical aggression) in adolescents.³³ This research also found that adolescent girls report intense anger as the justification for verbal aggression more often than boys, and boys report more “response to aggression” as their justification. However, research identifying gender differences raises concerns over “social desirability bias”—the tendency for survey respondents to report behavior that is more socially accepted. As a result, reports from boys that they are less aggressive than their partners may not be entirely accurate.⁵²

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality—how “good” or “bad” a relationship may be—is a broad concept and multidimensional in nature. That is, many different aspects of a relationship—positive and negative—contribute to individuals’ and couples’ subjective evaluations of their relationships.^{41,54}

Relationship satisfaction has been one of the more frequently used indicators to capture overall relationship quality, although it is often assessed across multiple aspects of a relationship, such as satisfaction in shared everyday activities, in handling money, or in communication and partner support.⁵⁴ All these play important roles in evaluating a relationship, though some are less relevant for AYA than for older individuals.⁵⁵ Recent research identifies other dimensions that should be considered in evaluating AYA relationship quality, such as positive characteristics like support (instrumental and emotional), intimate self-disclosure, and affection/warmth and negative characteristics like coercion, controlling behavior, and conflict.^{43,55}



Adolescence versus young adulthood

There is considerably more research on relationship quality among young adults than adolescents. Adolescent romantic involvement is more difficult to assess because many of the “structural” elements of a relationship (duration, living arrangements, financial decisions, etc.) are not always applicable. As such, some research on adolescent relationship quality focuses instead on communication processes, emotions, power dynamics, and sexual behavior.⁵⁶ For example, adolescents report more apprehension and lower confidence in dating, while young adults associate more with increased emotional rewards and feelings of love.⁵⁷ Research also shows that short relationships in early adulthood tend to provide more social support than short relationships in adolescence. However, although long-term relationships in adolescence have higher levels of social support, they also have more jealousy, control, and conflict compared to short-term relationships.⁵⁸ Similarly, research has linked churning with lower commitment, less perceived validation from a partner, and higher conflict.³³ Notably, these are features of the relationship rather than traits of an individual—young people may be trying to balance having the best relationship they can (leaving when it gets bad) with trying to make it work with someone with whom they have made an emotional investment (getting back together).

Intimacy and interdependence

Many young adults in romantic relationships want intimacy and interdependence, but identity and independence are also important to them. Young adults cite problems meeting or balancing these needs as reasons for breaking up with their partners.⁵⁹ The need for interdependence—where partners can depend on one another—can conflict with a need for autonomy (i.e., being able to act without others controlling you). For young adults, it is not just important to be in a romantic relationship, but to be in the right one, and they will end a relationship if it is not. As young people move from adolescence to young adulthood, their romantic relationships *increased* in both intimacy and interdependence, meaning these qualities become even more central to their lives and identities.⁵⁷

Trust, jealousy, and infidelity

Trust is another commonly studied dimension of the quality of AYA romantic relationships. Trust captures the belief that one's partner is reliable, truthful, and will be faithful to them and the relationship. Qualitative work on adolescent dating couples suggests that lack of trust may be linked to low self-esteem, infidelity on the part of a partner, having been hurt in past relationships, and peer social influence.³⁶ As such, research often focuses on two related aspects of trust: jealousy and infidelity.⁶⁰ In fact, jealousy might be thought of as a form of emotional distress related to the rage, fear, or humiliation⁶¹ that could arise from infidelity. Jealousy can be positive or negative for relationship satisfaction depending on other relationship factors such as attachment (how important the relationship is to an individual).⁶²

Implications for Research and Practice

Implications for research

This brief synthesizes recent research literature on AYA relationship attitudes, involvement, experiences, and key dimensions of relationship quality. In carrying out this review, some ongoing research needs emerged.

Research on the quality of romantic relationships during adolescence and young adulthood should focus on developmentally appropriate quality measures, including relationship dynamics within and across relationships. Measures such as relationship stability are less relevant for this age group than for older groups, because staying together is not necessarily the goal of relationships during the teens and early 20s. Relationships during this stage are often about personal growth and learning how to be a good partner and what one wants from a partner. Moreover, AYA are often navigating competing life goals—establishing autonomy, finding a career path, and forming a relationship. As such, AYA relationships can end for good reasons. More concerning AYA relationship patterns may be better captured by measuring cyclical/churning patterns with specific partners, as these patterns are associated with conflict, violence, and lower commitment.

Research should develop consistent definitions and measures of relationship quality that are relevant to non-marital, romantic relationships. Because marriage is rare during the teens and early 20s, using marriage and its attributes as the benchmark for relationship quality is problematic. Research should examine dimensions of relationship quality that better fit AYA dating relationships, cohabitation, short-term partnerships, and casual relationships. Similarly, research should focus on discrete relationship quality indicators, such as whether the relationship meets individual goals (or needs) for intimacy, support, communication, independence, and interdependence, as these are important in many different types of AYA relationships. Ideally, the field would work toward creating widely accepted and tested measures of AYA relationship quality; our review showed that because so much of the existing work draws on unique sources of data and/or unique measures, it is difficult to draw overarching conclusions.

There is a need to pay more attention to the diversity of teens and young adults. Our review did not describe variation in relationship attitudes, experiences, or quality across important socio-demographic

characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, or religion. Further, the existing body of work largely covers young people who conform to a heteronormative trajectory—relatively little published work exists that considers how LGBTQ+ teens and young adults navigate romantic and sexual relationships.

Implications for practice

Findings from this brief also have important implications for healthy marriage and relationship education programs (HMRE) designed to help AYA develop the skills to form healthy relationships.⁶³ In the following paragraphs we discuss several implications for the content of these youth-serving programs.

HMRE programming should focus on teaching young people how to avoid or exit unhealthy relationships and how to build positive relationship skills. Healthy relationship skills can reflect positive behaviors that build the quality and stability of relationships. However, these same skills can also be valuable for recognizing, avoiding, and/or exiting unhealthy relationships.⁶⁴ Further, among AYA, breaking up and/or having many romantic partners may not be inherently harmful or unhealthy, which are important messages to include in HMRE program lessons to provide a realistic portrayal of AYA relationship expectations and experiences.

Life stage matters for HMRE programs; the relationship attitudes and experiences of adolescents, young adults, and older adults vary. Young adults participating in HMRE programs are often mixed in with adolescent or adult participants, which may result in service gaps for this older group of youth.⁶³ HMRE programs should consider the unique aspects of young adult relationships and ensure programming is relevant for them. For example, most young adults are likely to be in some type of relationship (dating, cohabiting, or married) compared to adolescents, but those relationships are likely to be more short-term than the relationships of adult couples in the program.

Programming should identify approaches for addressing positive and negative aspects of AYA relationships in HMRE, including intimate partner violence. HMRE programs are not typically designed to intervene when IPV occurs without support from appropriate partners such as domestic violence organizations. In addition, many HMRE staff do not have the appropriate qualifications or training to fully respond to IPV. However, these programs have an opportunity to help prevent the behavior that could lead to IPV. A recent report on approaches used by HMRE programs to address IPV, and teen dating violence more specifically, identified several ways in which HMRE programs can respond to participants' experiences with IPV.⁶⁵ For example, they considered the IPV content covered by HMRE curricula, domestic violence response protocols used by programs, staff training, collaborations between HMRE and domestic violence programs, IPV assessments, and the training and technical assistance needed to support HMRE programs in these efforts.

Methods

The information included in this brief is based on a comprehensive review of professional and scientific journal articles, book chapters, and reports published primarily in or after 2010, although we included some seminal pieces published before 2010. Also notable is that some of the studies use data collected before 2010. Because we reviewed published research studies, information is limited to the foci and definitions used by other researchers.

Whenever possible, we highlighted studies using nationally representative data. However, the study populations of these surveys often differed in size and characteristics depending on the purposes and design of the study. Longitudinal surveys, for example, repeatedly interviewed a sample of individuals at multiple points in time. However, they were often limited to a sample of people who met certain criteria, such as being within a particular age range (e.g., the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS) or the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)). Cross-sectional surveys have fewer such restrictions, and thus are representative of a wider range of the population, but only interview respondents once (e.g., the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)). Our review was limited to different-gender relationships due to limited research to date on same-gender relationships using large-scale surveys.

Measurement of AYA relationships. The measurement of AYA relationships in survey data varies widely. For example:

- The Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) uses a broad question to capture AYA relationships and asks youth "... when you like a guy [girl] and he [she] likes you back"²
- The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is more specific and asks if youth are "Involved in a romantic or sexual relationship."

The phrasing of the questions can capture different types of relationships. The TARS question might capture ambiguity in youth who acknowledge mutual attraction, which some might not consider a dating relationship. Add Health, on the other hand, is likely to capture more formal and serious partnerships. These differences are important to keep in mind when examining patterns of dating.

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About the MAST Center

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. The MAST Center is made up of a team of national experts in marriage and relationship research and practice, led by Child Trends in partnership with the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. The MAST Center is supported by grant #90PR0012 from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The MAST Center is solely responsible for the contents of this brief, which do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

