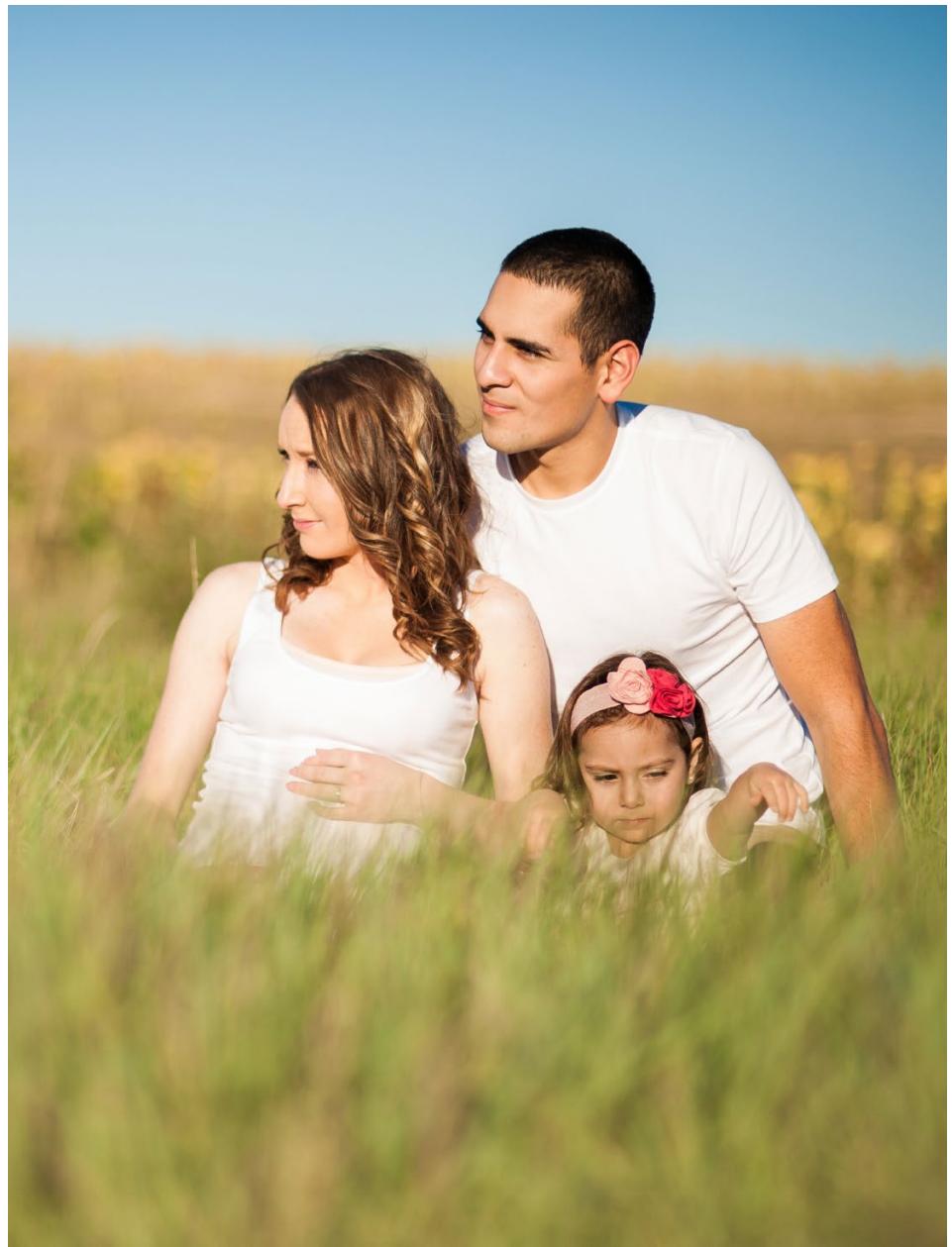


# RENEWING MARRIAGE & THE AMERICAN DREAM

— Georgia Center for Opportunity 2015 / 2016 Baseline Report —





## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>Data and Methods</i>	<b>4</b>
<i>Trends in Marriage and Parenthood in the Three Counties</i>	<b>5</b>
<i>Family and Religious Culture in the Three Cities</i>	<b>8</b>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<b>12</b>

# Introduction

Over the last half century, the United States has witnessed a dramatic retreat from marriage. The marriage rate dropped by more than 50 percent, the divorce rate doubled, nonmarital childbearing rose from 5 percent to 40 percent, and—most importantly—the share of children living in single-parent families rose from 9 percent to 26 percent.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the majority of American children today will spend some time in a household without at least one of their parents. The end result is that marriage is less likely to anchor the lives of American adults and to provide children with the stability and security they need to thrive in today's world.

These changes are not without consequence. The retreat from marriage exacts a toll on children, communities, and the country at large. At the local, state, and national levels, a decline in the prevalence of married families is linked to less economic mobility, lower median family income, and greater inequality.<sup>2</sup> From the vantage point of children, this retreat is unfortunate because, as Princeton sociologist Sara McLanahan and Brookings economist Isabel Sawhill have observed, “most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the research indicates that children from intact, married homes are more likely to flourish in school, to graduate from college, to be gainfully employed, and to steer clear of detours, such as incarceration and teen pregnancy, that can derail their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Given the importance of marriage and family life for the welfare of children, families, and communities, the Institute for Family Studies is evaluating the success of **The Healthy Family Initiative (HFI)**, a new multi-year effort led by the Georgia Center for Opportunity designed to increase the number of healthy relationships, strong marriages, and stable families in two adjoining, fast-growing, suburban Atlanta cities in Gwinnett County, Georgia, Norcross and Peachtree Corners. This baseline report, which describes the demographic and cultural landscape in Gwinnett County and those two cities, is the first step in assessing the success of the HFI in shaping public attitudes and family behaviors among its target population. In this baseline report, IFS will seek to determine the current demographic and cultural trends related to family life in Gwinnett County, as well as Norcross and Peachtree Corners, and to make some relevant comparisons between Gwinnett County and similar counties in North Carolina and Tennessee.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Marquardt, David Blankenhorn, Robert I. Lerman, Linda Malone-Colón, and W. Bradford Wilcox, “The President’s Marriage Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent,” *The State of Our Unions* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project and Institute for American Values, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, “Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014): 1553–1623; Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, *For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America* (Washington, DC: AEI and Institute for Family Studies, 2014); W. Bradford Wilcox, Joseph Price, and Robert I. Lerman, *Strong Families, Prosperous States: Do Healthy Families Affect the Wealth of States?* (Washington, DC: AEI and Institute for Family Studies, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Sara McLanahan and Isabel Sawhill, “Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited: Introducing the Issue,” *Future of Children* 25, no. 2 (2015): 3–9.

## Data and Methods

For this baseline report, we drew on data from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Community Survey to map demographic trends in the percentage of married adults, the marriage rate, the divorce rate, the percentage of families headed by single parents, and the percentage of children born to unmarried parents. We did this for Gwinnett County, as well as two comparison counties: Mecklenburg County (Charlotte, North Carolina) and Davidson County (Nashville, Tennessee). We also drew on data from the Peachtree Relationship Survey, which surveyed 301 18-45 year olds in the HFI target communities of Norcross and Peachtree Corners, Georgia to detail trends in cultural attitudes related to family and religion in these two Atlanta cities.

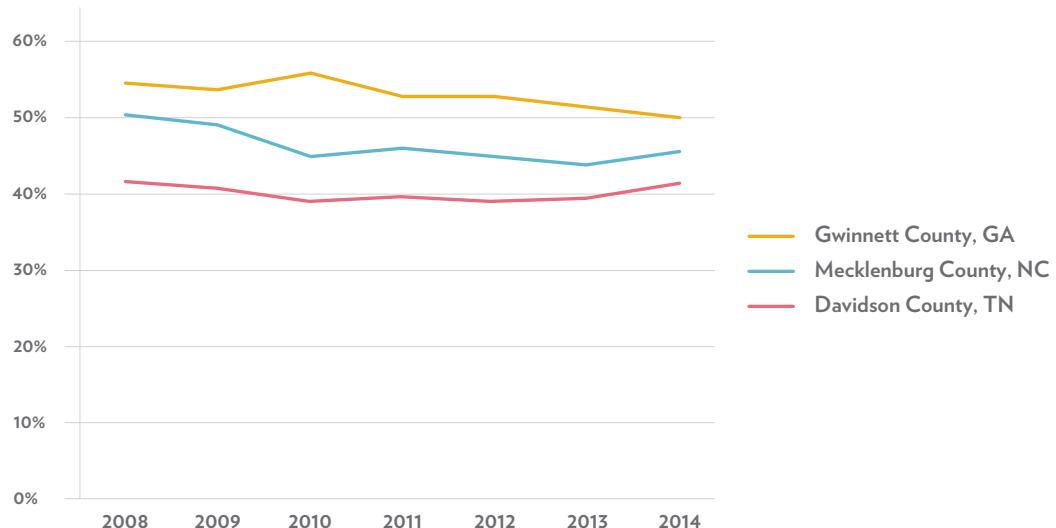


# Trends in Marriage and Parenthood in the Three Counties

In recent years, the share of Americans married has fallen, and that is true for both Gwinnett County (Metropolitan Atlanta) and Mecklenburg County (Charlotte). As **Figure 1** indicates, Gwinnett County's share of married adults dropped from 54.7 percent in 2008 to 50 percent in 2014, and Mecklenburg County dropped from 50.5 percent to 45.6 percent during the same period. Davidson County's (Nashville's) share of married adults remained relatively constant and was the lowest of the three counties: 41.8 percent in 2008 and 41.6 percent in 2014.

**FIGURE 1**

## Share of Population 15+ Currently Married



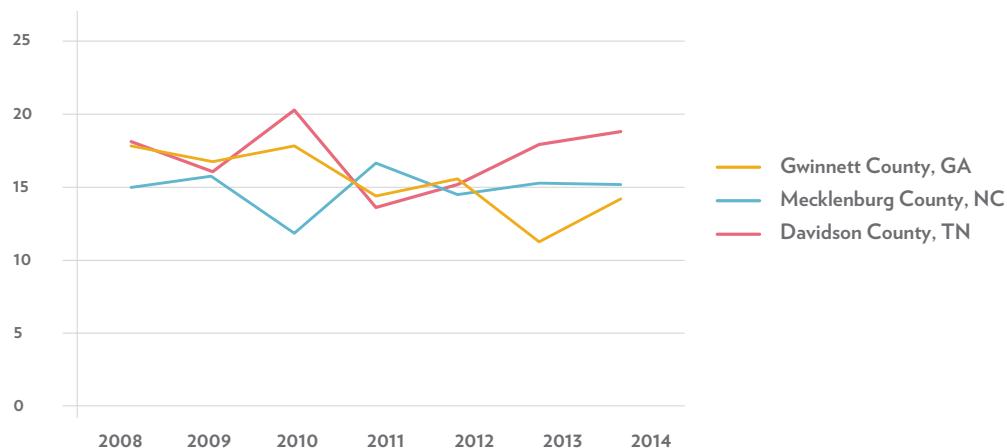
The U.S. marriage rate, after dropping markedly since the 1970s, has been fairly stable in recent years.<sup>5</sup> As **Figure 2** indicates, this pattern of stability holds for the comparison counties of Mecklenburg and Davidson, but not for Gwinnett County, the focal point of this report. Specifically, Gwinnett County's marriage rate declined from about 18 marriages per 1000 residents in 2008 to a little more than 14 per 1,000 residents in 2014. Mecklenburg (15 to 15.2) and Davidson (18.2 to 18.9) experienced slight increases in their marriage rates during the same period.

<sup>4</sup> Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (2005): 75–96; David C. Ribar, "Why Marriage Matters for Child Wellbeing," *Future of Children* 25, no. 2 (2015): 11–27; Lerman and Wilcox, For Richer, For Poorer; W. Bradford Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics System, "National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends," [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage\\_divorce\\_tables.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm).

**FIGURE 2**

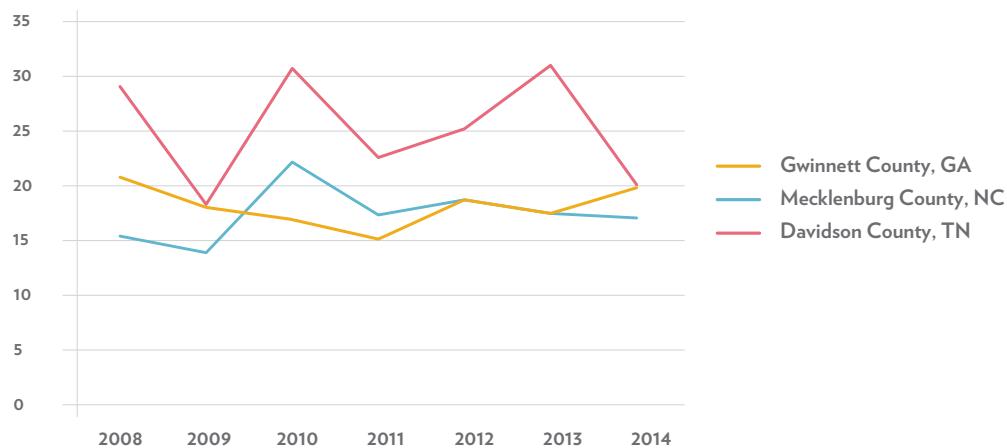
**Individuals Reporting a Marriage in the Past Year per 1000 in Population**



The U.S. divorce rate has also been steady in recent years. **Figure 3** portrays similar stability for Gwinnett County, but two slightly different stories for Mecklenburg and Davidson Counties. In Gwinnett County, the divorce rate was a little less than 21 divorces per 1,000 married residents in 2008 and declined slightly to about 20 per 1,000 married residents in 2014. Davidson's divorce rate declined during the same period (29.3 to 20.1 per 1,000) and Mecklenburg's increased (15.3 to 17 per 1,000). But, overall, the divorce rate for all three counties in the Southeast hovered close to 20 divorces per 1,000 married residents.

**FIGURE 3**

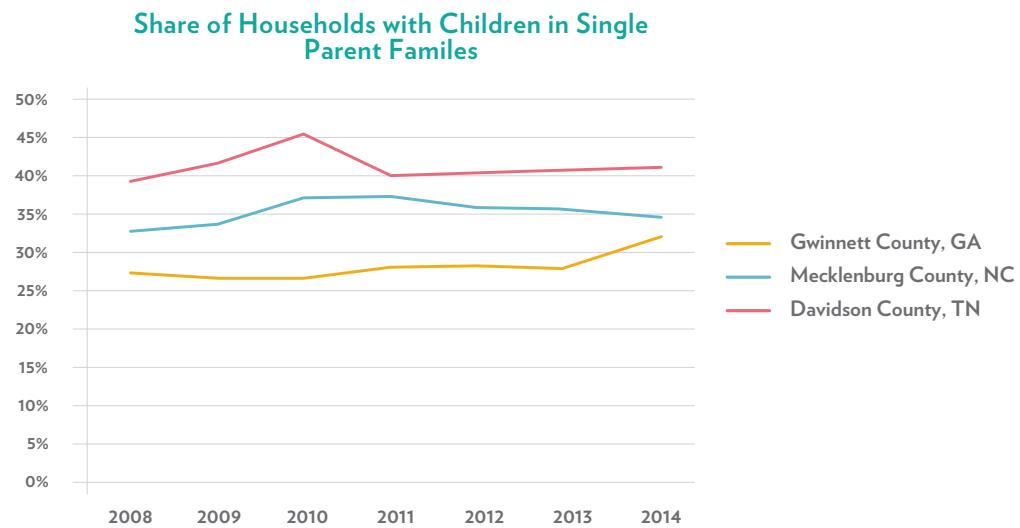
**Individuals Reporting a Divorce in the Past Year per 1000 Married Persons**



The share of children living with single parents nationwide has grown in recent decades, but flattened out in the last decade.<sup>6</sup> This pattern is visible in **Figure 4**, which indicates that the share of households with children headed by single parents in the three counties have all risen from 2008 to 2014, but only modestly so. Gwinnett County's share rose the fastest during the time period, nearly 5 percentage points, from 27.2 percent to 32.1 percent. Both

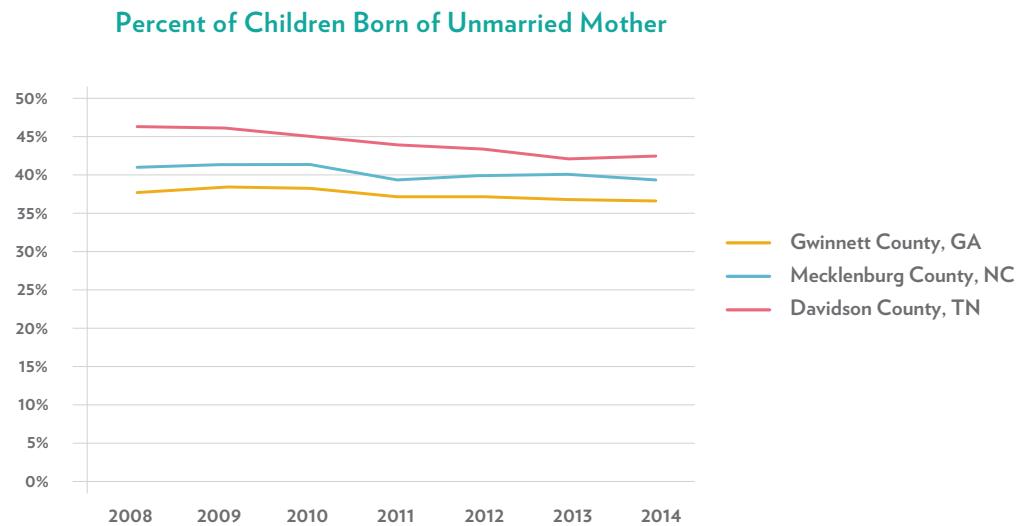
Mecklenburg (39.1 percent to 41.1 percent) and Davidson (32.7 percent to 34.6 percent) had their share of single-parent families increase modestly.

**FIGURE 4**



The share of children born to unmarried mothers in the U.S. has stabilized since 2008 in the nation at large. **Figure 5** shows slight declines in such unwed motherhood in each of our three counties. Gwinnett County proved to have the lowest overall percentage of children born out-of-wedlock in both 2008 (37.7 percent) and 2014 (36.6 percent), a slight decline during the time period. Davidson (46.3 percent to 42.3 percent) and Mecklenburg (40.9 percent to 39.4 percent) also experienced reductions, though each began with higher percentages of out-of-wedlock births.

**FIGURE 5**



<sup>7</sup>Child Trends Databank, "Family Structure," 2015, <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=family-structure>.

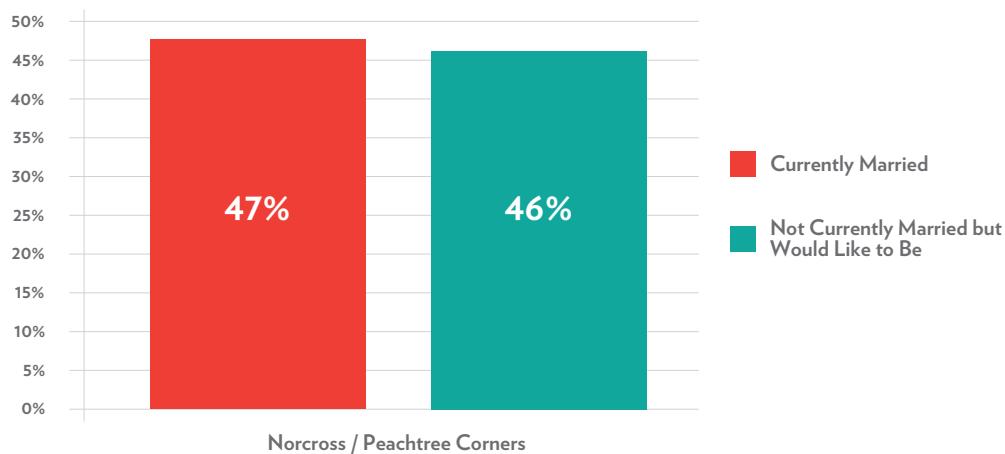
# Family and Religious Culture in the Three Cities

Family change is often preceded and accompanied by cultural changes in family-related attitudes and religiosity. Hence, IFS will also be examining trends in marriage-related attitudes and religious attendance in the targeted communities of Peachtree Corners and Norcross, contiguous communities nested in Gwinnett County, Georgia. We expect shifts in attitudes and attendance to precede or accompany shifts in family behavior in this community.

Data from the recently commissioned 2016 Peachtree Relationship Survey , which surveyed 301 adults in these two communities, indicate that 47 percent of adults age 18-45 are married, and 46 percent are not married, but would like to be so someday, as **Figure 6** indicates. So, overall, 93 percent of young adults in these two communities are married or would like to be married. This suggests that interest in marriage is high in Peachtree Corners and Norcross. The Healthy Family Initiative can build on this support for marriage in its local work in these two cities.

FIGURE 6

Share of Adults Married / Like to be Married

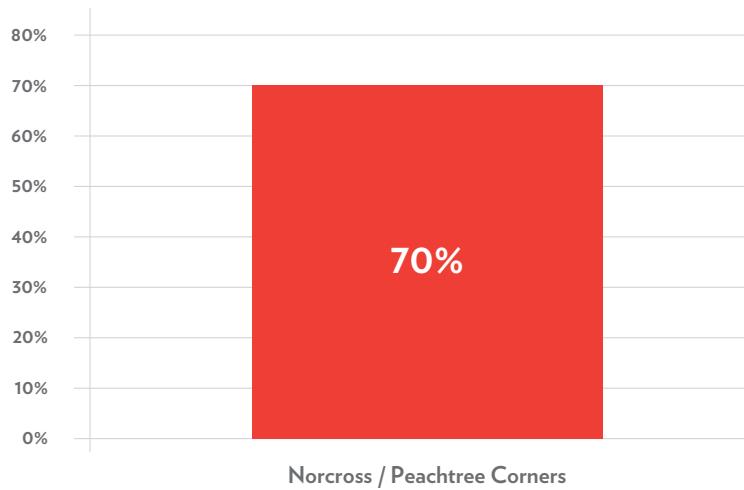


A super-majority of residents in Peachtree Corners/Norcross believe that marriage is “one of the most important things” in life, according to **Figure 7**. Specifically, about 70 percent of the adults aged 18-45 surveyed took this view in 2016. Again, this response indicates support for marriage among a large share of the young adult population in Peachtree Corners/Norcross. We expect that this figure will increase in future years.

FIGURE 7

### Marriage is One of Most Important Things

(Source: Peachtree Relationship Survey, 18-45 year olds)

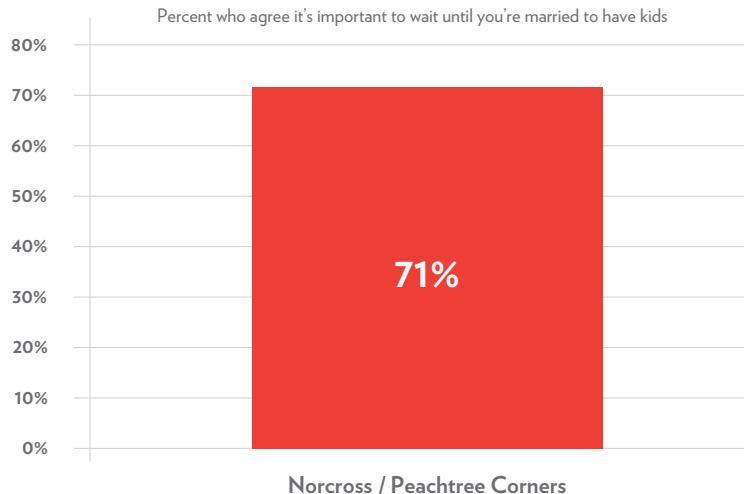


In Peachtree Corners/Norcross, 71 percent of the 18-45 year-old residents believe that it “is important to wait until marriage to have kids,” according to the 2016 Peachtree Relationship Survey (see **Figure 8**). This indicates that most people appreciate the value of grounding childbearing in marriage. IFS expects this view to increase in the wake of the social marketing campaign on behalf of marriage conducted by the HFI.

FIGURE 8

### Important to Wait Till Marriage For Kids

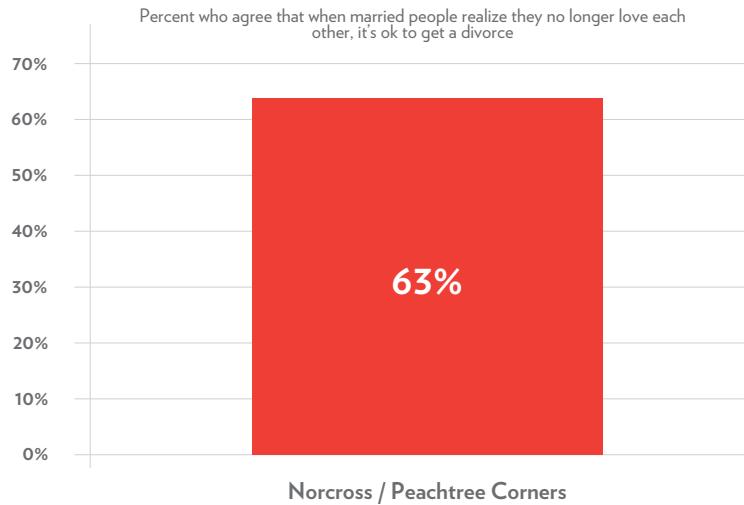
(Source: Peachtree Relationship Survey, 18-45 year olds)



But attitudes toward family life are not uniformly marriage-friendly in Peachtree Corner and Norcross. Young adults hold a relatively accepting view of divorce, for instance. In the Peachtree Relationship Survey, 63 percent of residents said divorce is “okay when you’re no longer in love” (see **Figure 9**). IFS predicts that the share of residents in these two cities who hold to this view will decline in the coming years.

**FIGURE 9**

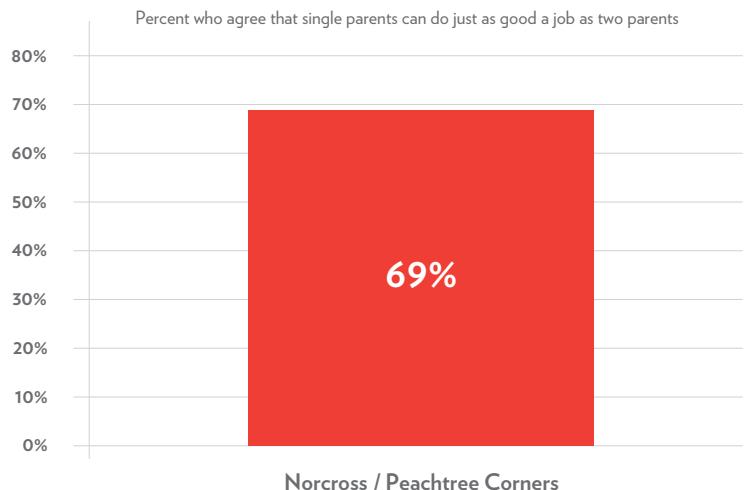
**Divorce OK When No Longer in Love**  
(Source: Peachtree Relationship Survey, 18-45 year olds)



Moreover, a large majority of young adults believe that single parents do as well as two parents when it comes to raising the next generation. Specifically, in **Figure 10**, 69 percent of Peachtree Corners/Norcross 18-45 year olds agree with the proposition that “Single parents do just as good a job as two parents.” This attitude may make the two cities more accepting of women having or raising children on their own. We would expect support for this view to decline in later years, after the Healthy Family Initiative has had an opportunity to shape local attitudes about family life.

**FIGURE 10**

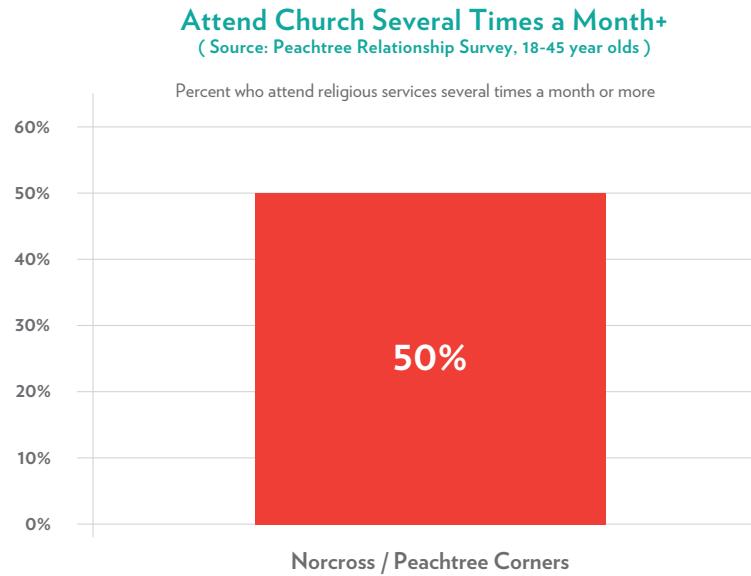
**Single Parents Do Just As Good Job as Two Parents**  
(Source: Peachtree Relationship Survey, 18-45 year olds)



Finally, as **Figure 11** shows, half of 18-45 year-olds in Peachtree Corners/Norcross report attending church several times a month or more in 2016. IFS will track this trend over the life of this initiative to see if a significant increase in church attendance is observed over the

course of the initiative. Among other things, trends in religious attendance are important because Americans who attend church services more frequently are also more likely to enjoy strong and stable marriages and a high-quality family life.

**FIGURE 11**



## Conclusion

Community-level strategies that give more children the benefits of being born into and raised by a two-parent married family will yield significant benefits for children, make communities better places to live, and increase economic opportunity in these communities. Accordingly, further assessments of the ongoing work of the Georgia Healthy Family Initiative on behalf of strong families are merited. Therefore, IFS will be monitoring the initiative's demographic and cultural successes in 2017 and beyond. In particular, the Institute for Family Studies will look for evidence that young adults have taken more marriage-friendly attitudes toward divorce, single parenthood, and having children in marriage, all factors that are related to the strength and stability of family life. IFS will also monitor demographic trends in Gwinnett County to see if they improve, especially in comparison to trends in two comparable Southeast counties, Mecklemburg (Charlotte) and Davidson (Nashville) counties. Any evidence of success in these family domains, in turn, augurs well for the welfare of men, women, and children in Norcross and Peachtree Corners, as well as Gwinnett County, given the benefits that flow to them from strong and stable families.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

W. Bradford Wilcox is a senior fellow of the Institute for Family Studies and director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. His research focuses on marriage, child well-being, and family instability. Dr. Wilcox is the author or coauthor of four books, including *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love & Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos* (Oxford, 2016).

Samuel Sturgeon is president of Demographic Intelligence, a demographic consulting firm based in Charlottesville, Virginia. Dr. Sturgeon holds a doctorate in human development and family studies and demography from Penn State University.