

1 Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Families

During its heyday in the 1950s, the breadwinner-homemaker family with children was described as the singular, preferred family form. Sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales wrote in 1956 that “it goes without saying that the differentiation of the sex roles within the family constitutes not merely a major axis of its structure, but is deeply involved in both of these two central function-complexes of the family and in their application with each other. Indeed we argue that probably the importance of the family and its functions for society constitutes the primary set of reasons why there is a social as distinguished from purely reproductive, differentiation of sex roles.”¹

Even though this American family “ideal” is not reflective of contemporary families, it remains firmly entrenched in our culture, exemplifying “the good old days”: a breadwinning father, a homemaker mother, and their shared children. Typically portrayed in popular culture as white, middle-class, and suburban, we continue to view this family type as the norm and measure other living arrangements against it. In fact, a longer view of the history of families in America reveals that the 1950s, the purported golden age of the family, is actually an aberration. For much of U.S. history, families did not conform to this stereotype.²

Yet when cultural critics and policy makers lament the decline of the family, they are referring to the disappearance of the 1950s ideal of the breadwinner-homemaker married couple and their children. This family type is a relic of the past; only about one-fifth of children reside in this “traditional” family form nowadays.³ In recent decades, the retreat from marriage coupled with the rise in divorce, nonmarital child bearing, and single-mother families have reshaped American families. The ramifications of these changes have generated extensive debate, in both academic circles and the policy arena.⁴ Our collective worry about the future of the family and more specifically the consequences of family change for child development not only inform the popular and political discourse but also drive key policy shifts, such as the sweeping changes to the federal welfare system two decades ago (discussed in chapter 5).⁵ Indeed, modern-day family and child welfare policy shifts are often proscriptive, designed to encourage a return to what some have characterized as the pillar of society: lifelong marriage. Nevertheless, the prominence of marriage in family life is arguably weaker today than at any point in U.S. history.⁶

These fears about family decline are not new. Concern about family change and marital stability stretches back to Puritan times.⁷ Throughout history, family life has shifted in response to broader economic, demographic, and cultural shifts, prompting concerns about the demise of the family. The vulnerabilities of today’s families may differ from those of the past, but families have always faced challenges.

This chapter provides an overview of the social history of family life in the United States, tracing the arc of family change from the seventeenth century to the present. Contrary to the persistent notion that there is a “traditional family” and that its structure and function mirrors that which characterized many families of the 1950s, family change has been a constant throughout U.S. history. According to historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, these changes are largely driven by three factors: the economy, demography, and changing roles of women.⁸ The rise of industrialization spurred the shift from a rural, agrarian economy to an urban, cash-based system that fundamentally altered family life by separating work and home.⁹ Demographic changes, particularly the drop in childbearing and the aging of the population, also are pivotal. As infant and child mortality improved, the emphasis in families shifted from childbearing to childrear-

ing.¹⁰ Childhood was recognized as a distinctive life stage and women were viewed as uniquely suited to provide the moral training children required.¹¹ In addition to lower levels of child mortality, rising standards of living for families allowed them to make greater investments in child quality. Another demographic trend with implications for families is the aging of the population. Lengthening life expectancies meant more married couples experienced an empty nest after launching their children into independence and grandparenthood became a meaningful familial role.¹² Finally, women's roles have been transformed over the past few centuries.¹³ Women went from being producers alongside their husbands, contributing to the family economy, to housewives and mothers confined to a spiritually elevated, separate sphere with an exclusive focus on home and family. In recent decades, women's attachment to domestic roles has diminished as the rate of employment, especially among married mothers, has grown steadily. As women's roles have changed, our conceptualization of what it means to be a wife and mother has shifted. At the same time, the roles of husband and father have been reconfigured, as men increasingly assume what was once considered women's work: household chores and childrearing.¹⁴

EARLY AMERICAN FAMILIES

In the seventeenth century, Puritans were settling in New England. The family was the organizing unit of society and individuals were defined by their family or household membership. Families tended to be nuclear in structure, with about two to three children surviving to adulthood, reflecting high infant and child mortality levels because married women typically bore six or more children. Families often included other unrelated individuals such as servants, boarders, or apprentices. The family was governed by a patriarch, the father and husband, who held the legal and social authority to control not just the family land or property but also the family's members, including his wife and children along with unrelated members. During this time period, the family also performed such functions as education and religious training.¹⁵ The household head was required to teach family members to read, and he held prayer and scriptural readings. The family was a producing unit and all family members,

including women and children, contributed to the family economy through domestic and agrarian labor. Upon marriage, women were legally subsumed under their husbands according to the law of coverture. They could neither buy nor sell property nor represent themselves in a courtroom. Much like their children, wives were dependents of the patriarch. Young children were viewed as the embodiment of sin who required breaking to ensure their readiness to begin to assume some adult roles at the age of seven. Children of all social classes were fostered out to other families to receive the training and discipline that parents were perceived as incapable of providing.¹⁶

Patriarchal authority was predicated on the father's control of his property or his craft. Most fathers did not relinquish their land to their sons until they died, which delayed marriage entry among offspring. Marriage was about forging economic alliances, not a love match. But land can only be divided so many times across the generations and still be of sufficient size to support a family. Over time, partible inheritances divided among all sons made agrarian work impracticable for many young men. At the same time, opportunities were emerging in cities because of industrialization. These trends ultimately reduced patriarchal authority, weakening the involvement of parents in the mate-selection process of their offspring. Daughters began to marry out of order and sons were less likely to wait for their inheritance to start their own families.¹⁷

DEMOCRATIC FAMILIES

As patriarchal authority and wifely obedience waned during the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, the modern democratic family gained prominence among the middle class.¹⁸ Consistent with the Enlightenment period's emphasis on the individual, families during this time period functioned less as a miniature society and more as a retreat from the harsh realities of a capitalist economy. Husbands and wives were companions and friends who were affectionate toward each other. Demarcating the lines between work and family, the roles of husbands and wives became more distinctive. Families were losing their productive roles, as husbands increasingly left the home to earn a wage as breadwinners in

factories, mills, and shops. The rise of industrialization led to gender-specific roles. Wives were homemakers and devoted considerable time to rearing children. Childrearing manuals written for mothers framed childhood as a distinctive life stage for growth and development. The birth rate began to decline as children shifted from economic assets engaged in agrarian production to economic liabilities requiring training and education. In 1800, a married woman bore more than seven children, on average. By 1900, the figure was less than four children.¹⁹ In the nineteenth century, women were viewed as morally superior to men and less susceptible to the pressures of the economy, making them uniquely suited to rear children. The cult of true womanhood praised women's key virtues: piety, submissiveness, purity, and domesticity. These shifts contributed to new family tensions, isolating women in the domestic sphere. Wives and children had lost their productive functions and were secluded within the family.²⁰

It was during the Victorian era that love became the basis for marriage, particularly among the middle class. Until then, marriage had been about forging ties that maximized wealth and property; it had been an economic arrangement. This economic basis of marriage was now replaced by an emphasis on a love match. Individuals viewed falling in love as a necessary precursor to marriage. This new emphasis on emotions, satisfaction, and fulfillment marked the beginning of the modern approach to matrimony. The stakes were high, and many unmarried women feared a "marriage trauma" if they made a poor match.²¹ Widening economic opportunities for women, who attended high school in greater numbers in the nineteenth century and had more access to jobs, enabled many to remain single and avoid marriage altogether. The focus on married love spurred notable changes in family law, such as eased restrictions on divorce, which were followed by an uptick in the divorce rate. The exponential increase in divorce over the course of U.S. history began in the post-Civil War era. Love was a fragile basis for marriage. Historically, children were dependents of their fathers, but the tender-years doctrine meant that children were cared for by their mothers following divorce. And in the mid-nineteenth century, states began passing married women's property acts that allowed married women to control their own earnings and property, another indicator of the diminished influence of patriarchal authority within Victorian marriage.²²

The rise of companionate marriage and the doctrine of separate spheres in the nineteenth century occurred among middle-class whites.²³ In economically disadvantaged families, wives went to work, often in service to middle-class housewives, and earned paltry wages. Children in working-class families contributed up to half of the family's income.²⁴ The breadwinner-homemaker family was an ideal that was unattainable for much of society.

For the working class, many of whom were new immigrants, life often meant long hours working in factories. Schooling was a luxury that had to be forgone, particularly for girls, who were sent to work at an early age so that their brothers could remain in school for a few more years. Unlike middle-class families in which wives lost their productive function, wives in working-class families made significant economic contributions, whether by working outside of the home, taking in boarders, performing piece work (so called because they were paid by the unit completed), or doing laundry in the home. Children also contributed to the family economy, delaying their own family formation until they established their own financial security. Many did not marry until their early thirties, and it was common for one daughter to remain unmarried so she could care for her parents during their old age. Kin ties were essential, particularly for immigrant families, who relied heavily on family networks to navigate American life.²⁵

Families were also integral to African Americans both during and after slavery. Stable, two-parent families were common, with marriages persisting until spousal death. Legal marriage was not available to slaves, and most slave owners allowed couples to dissolve their unions. But usually it was the owners themselves who separated slave couples. One in six marriages was dissolved through sale. Slave children were even more likely than their parents to be sold away. Parents were constrained in their ability to protect their children from the atrocities of slavery. Around age seven, slave children resided separately from their mothers and began working for their master. Rape and sexual violence against slave women was commonplace, and many owners attempted to encourage childbearing among slaves for their own economic gain.²⁶

After the Civil War, African Americans often worked as sharecroppers. Similar to their working-class immigrant counterparts scattered among American cities, many black families had to rely on multiple earners to

make ends meet. Despite talk of a family wage to ensure that fathers could support their families, blacks, immigrants, and the working class found the breadwinner-homemaker ideal elusive. Wages peaked early for young men, whose incomes tended to decline as they aged. This meant they were especially vulnerable economically when they had young children (who could not contribute economically to the household) and in their old age.²⁷

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY FAMILIES

Industrialization, urbanization, and the transformation of women's roles were in full swing by the onset of the twentieth century, and family life was changing in radical ways. The middle class resided in companionate families that were formed and maintained on the basis of romantic and sexual love between husbands and wives. A majority of middle-class couples used birth control to limit their fertility, indicating both that smaller families were increasingly the norm and that sexual relations for pleasure (as opposed to procreation) were deemed appropriate and even desirable by married couples.²⁸ Parent-child relations became less formal as children were allowed to be more expressive and autonomous. Children became more focused on their peer groups.²⁹

The shift to a market economy solidified the separation between work and family. Urbanization weakened extended family ties as family members migrated to geographic locales with greater employment opportunities. The standard of living began to rise for families during the early twentieth century. New inventions like the automobile provided unprecedented privacy and independence for middle-class young adults, spurring a revolution in morals. Women altered their appearance, adopting a boyish form and bobbing their hair. They relinquished bulky undergarments and wore slimmer clothing that required much less fabric. Premarital sexual activity became more common among women during the early decades of the twentieth century.³⁰

The rise in female labor-force participation accelerated during this period, climbing over 150 percent between 1880 and 1920. Women were also pursuing advanced education in greater numbers, and by the early decades of the twentieth century were achieving education levels

comparable to men.³¹ After decades of struggle through the suffrage movement, women finally won the right to vote when the Nineteenth Amendment to the constitution was ratified in 1920. In short, women's economic and political power were growing, and the widening scope of opportunities available to women chipped away at the traditional, gender-based "separate spheres."

The roles of husbands and wives were recast as couples rejected Victorian-era morality and family ideals that characterized marriage as an institution through which pious, pure women could tame men's animalistic nature. Now, companionate families were predicated on sexual fulfillment. Sexual activity was viewed as integral to marital satisfaction.³² Nevertheless, the roles and responsibilities of fathers and mothers remained highly gendered. Unlike their predecessors, companionate fathers took a narrow view of their role, defining it in terms of economic provision as the family breadwinner. Whereas fathers in the past were patriarchs who guided the moral and spiritual development of the family, in companionate families these elements were within the purview of mothers, who were wholly responsible for running the household and rearing the children. Fathers, who spent most of their time working, were physically and morally distant from family life during this era.³³

In the 1920s, sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd first studied the Midwestern town of Muncie, Indiana, and found that nearly all middle-class married couples used some form of birth control, whereas very few in the working class did.³⁴ Margaret Sanger was leading a nationwide campaign to educate couples about birth control and make it more widely available. Several types of birth control were available, including condoms, douches, suppositories, sponges, and diaphragms. Birth-control proponents trumpeted its benefits for marital happiness, women's autonomy, and infant and child health. But part of the initiative was to encourage greater fertility control for certain groups, namely the economically disadvantaged and immigrants. Abortion was outlawed because the birth rates of middle-class white women were deemed to be too low.³⁵

The emphasis of companionate families was on the emotional needs of family members. Married couples expected love and sexual fulfillment from their spouses. By 1920, the divorce rate was fifteen times the rate it was a half-century earlier. Across the nation, 14 percent of marriages

ended in divorce. In some urban areas the levels were considerably higher. The judicial system responded by tightening divorce laws, aiming to make it more difficult for couples to end their marriages. But these efforts were essentially futile as the divorce rate continued its ascent.³⁶

At the forefront of the Progressive movement, which spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was family life. Experts such as social scientists, educators, physicians, and lawyers believed they could improve family functioning by training Americans how to have a successful marriage, run an efficient household, and raise well-adjusted children. Social problems linked to the modern family were remediable by public health and professional interventions. For example, the growing centrality of sexual fulfillment within marriage combined with concerns about the loosening morals of youth spurred the emergence of sex-education and reproduction courses. Marriage-education courses, counseling, and therapy were designed to enhance marital quality and stability. The principles of scientific motherhood were articulated by medical experts to educate mothers on how to raise their children properly.³⁷ It was thought that social ills such as juvenile delinquency and poverty were outcomes of poor parenting. In addition to instructing mothers on how to rear their children, domestic scientists heightened the standards of cleanliness which ultimately ratcheted up women's housework. The availability of domestic workers was declining as women gained opportunities in other job sectors. The market economy delivered new appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners, ostensibly as "labor-saving devices." But women's time spent on housework increased in response to rising expectations for cleanliness.³⁸ The court system introduced family courts to handle divorce cases in a less adversarial fashion and to ensure that decisions about the custody of children were made in the best interests of the child. Juvenile courts were also established during this era, reflecting the growing recognition that children were developmentally different than adults. New legislation banned child labor and made schooling compulsory. The rapid growth in employment among low-income mothers prompted social reformers to launch day nurseries for children, many of whom were receiving minimal supervision while their mothers were at work.³⁹

The beginnings of a modern welfare state first emerged during the early decades of the twentieth century. Several states began providing aid

to mothers with dependent children so that the mothers could stay at home and care for their children. These early initiatives primarily served widowed women, not divorced or never-married mothers. Nevertheless, they were the harbingers for the nationwide programs that offered assistance to needy families (discussed in greater detail in chapter 5), which came on the heels of the Great Depression as part of the Social Security Act of 1935.⁴⁰

MIDCENTURY FAMILY LIFE

The Great Depression revealed the limits of the family for ensuring survival during an economic downturn. Even many middle- and working-class families simply could not make ends meet. Economic disadvantage was fairly widespread in the years immediately preceding the Great Depression. The Brookings Institution estimated that about 60 percent of Americans were living at or below subsistence level. What was remarkable about the Great Depression was that it ensnared groups that had been impervious to economic adversity. As factories were shuttered and banks failed, Americans who had been living comfortably were suddenly without a safety net. About 20 percent of banks closed, wiping out individual savings.⁴¹

Families struggled to maintain their financial footing. According to the 1930 Census, about one in three families relied on more than one wage earner, and in one-quarter of families there were at least three earners.⁴² Labor-force participation among married women rose in response to losses experienced by their husbands. Economic adversity and male unemployment had repercussions for family functioning by undermining paternal authority. In many families, no members could secure regular work due to a lack of available jobs. Americans were dying from starvation, and malnourishment was common among children. The economic situation was so dire that the family was often unable to shield its members from adversity. Americans needed more than local government and charitable support to survive. The enduring legacy of the Great Depression is a reorientation in thinking about the limits of the family in a time of severe economic crisis. There was a growing recognition that families

were suffering in ways that were too substantial to be overcome without federal government intervention.

Indeed, family life was dramatically altered by the Great Depression. Families were dissolving at unprecedented levels. This disruption occurred through desertion, not divorce, which actually declined. People simply left their families and did not come back. Many parents placed their children in orphanages because they could no longer afford to care for them. Families were doubling up to share residences with relatives and pool housing costs. Age at first marriage rose as young adults delayed marriage entry because they were not economically independent. Many married couples who might have divorced under better economic circumstances remained in unhappy, distant marriages. And the birth rate dropped below replacement level for the first time in U.S. history, as couples delayed childbearing because they could not afford it.⁴³

The New Deal provided significant relief for many Americans by creating numerous new programs that supported or protected families. For example, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided employment for the young. The Works Progress Administration created jobs for millions of unemployed Americans. State-sponsored family planning programs gained traction, offering contraceptive education to poor and rural mothers who wanted to control their fertility. In 1935, the Social Security Act established many of the social-welfare programs that persist today. Old-age support through the Social Security Administration alleviated poverty among the aged. Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) gave cash benefits to poor, widowed mothers. Disabled and unemployed persons also gained relief.⁴⁴

To be sure, there were criticisms of various features of the New Deal that sound strikingly similar to the opposition expressed today toward government programs. The Social Security Act of 1935 did not address health insurance. The Social Security retirement system was regressive, disadvantaging those on the bottom, and excluded marginalized classes of workers such as those in farm labor. By creating separate programs for the old and the working age, it pitted these two groups against one another. Social Security is not a means-tested benefit, but this is arguably why it is perhaps the most popular. It has been quite successful in reducing poverty among the elderly. Historians Mintz and Kellogg assert that the Great

Depression is noteworthy, not for a particular program or policy, but rather for the way in which it changed our expectations about what a family can do for its members, bringing to the forefront the limitations of the modern family in the face of a crippling economic crisis.⁴⁵ Government supports became essential to ensuring the welfare of the nation.

World War II was a tremendous economic engine that substantially reduced poverty. Manufacturing was booming and workers were in high demand as men shipped overseas to fight the war. On the home front, families were moving to urban centers for jobs or to areas with military bases to be closer to relatives in the service. These population shifts contributed to housing shortages that were exacerbated by wartime rationing of materials commonly used in construction. The nation's housing shortage persisted after the war.⁴⁶

The surge in the economy coupled with the urgency of the war resulted in a rapid rise in marriage and childbearing during the early 1940s. The marriage rate shot up as couples rushed to wed before sweethearts were sent overseas. Many young couples were eager to experience marital intimacy before long-term separation because of the war. Still others got married to be eligible to receive Allotment Annies, which were government payments to the spouse and children of servicemen. The growth in the marriage rate coincided with a rising rate of childbearing. Only husbands with a dependent child were eligible to avoid the draft.⁴⁷

Roughly sixteen million men were in the military. The industrial war effort faced a critical shortage of workers. Women did their part in the war effort by laboring in factories performing manufacturing jobs that were traditionally done by men. The influx of women into the labor force was particularly noteworthy because the majority of the new entrants were married women with children.⁴⁸ World War II marked the beginning of the long, sustained ascent in married women's employment that unfolded during the twentieth century. Women produced ammunition and built airplanes. The iconic symbol of Rosie the Riveter was created by the federal government to encourage women to join the war effort by working in often strenuous, dirty jobs. Wives of servicemen were especially likely to be working, probably because the Allotment Annies provided by the military were barely adequate to meet basic needs. At the same time, the American housewife was implored to be "a general in her own kitchen,"

and accommodate wartime rationing that severely limited the availability of various food and household items as well as gas, electricity, and water.⁴⁹

With fathers at war and mothers at work, children were less closely monitored and supervised. Teens were leaving school to go to work.⁵⁰ They spent their earnings on entertainment outside of the home. The peer group gained influence as the authority of parents weakened. Public child-care facilities were opened to serve working mothers and their families, but they were underutilized and often poorly run. Mothers were skeptical about institutional care for their children and the costs were prohibitive for many.⁵¹

Postwar adjustment was challenging for families. Husbands and fathers returning from the war had to reintegrate into civilian life. Wives and children who had forged new family routines during the father's absence had to recalibrate their domestic life when the father returned. After gaining independence through wartime employment, women were often reluctant to give it up. The government told them it was their patriotic duty to relinquish their jobs to the men returning from war, who had to reestablish themselves in the labor market.⁵² Many men suffered psychologically and emotionally following the war, which made reintegration into civilian life difficult. These postwar stresses undermined family stability. Many marriages faltered under the strains of postwar adjustment. The divorce rate nearly doubled between 1940 and 1944.⁵³ Some of the marriages that dissolved were quickie marriages formed right before the war. Others were torn apart by infidelity.

After surviving the Great Depression and World War II, Americans were poised to turn inward toward the family.⁵⁴ The family-centered 1950s, marked by early and nearly universal marriage, large family sizes, and low divorce rates, can be viewed as a reaction to the sacrifices and strains so many Americans had struggled with in recent decades. Peacetime and prosperity prevailed and families flocked to the newly built suburbs, isolating themselves from urban employment centers. Historians refer to this era as the golden age of the family, but of course beneath the veneer of the archetypical happy family discontent simmered, particularly over gender roles. The insularity of families in the 1950s ultimately contributed to their unraveling, setting the stage for modern American family life.⁵⁵

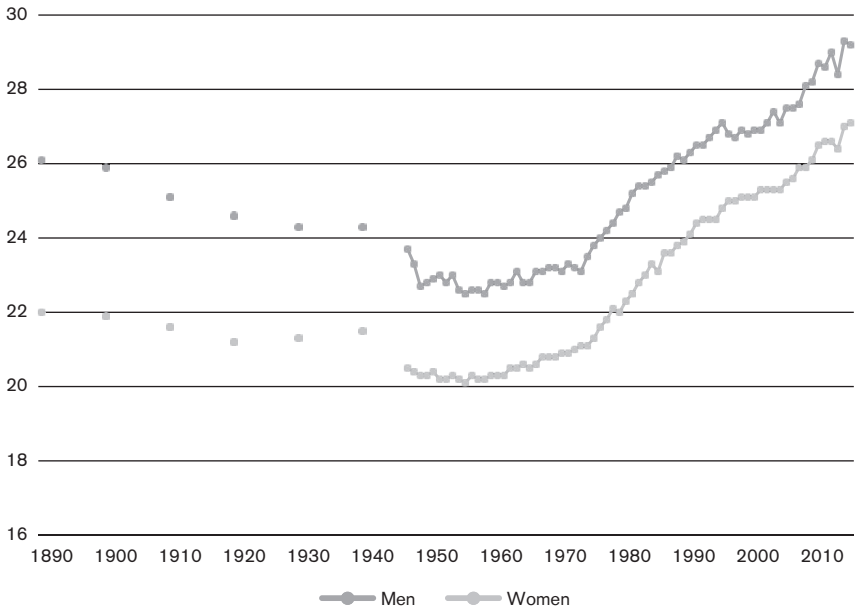


Figure 2. Median Age at First Marriage, 1890–2015.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, table MS-2, Estimated Median Age at First Marriage: 1890 to Present.

Family patterns of the 1950s are often the benchmark for comparison with today's families. The arbitrariness of this benchmark is magnified when we consider that the marriage, childbearing, and divorce trends of the 1950s were a historical oddity.⁵⁶ During this decade, the marriage rate skyrocketed and age at first marriage hit an all-time low of about twenty for women and twenty-two for men. Figure 2 shows the median age at first marriage for women and men from 1890 to 2015. Age at first marriage plummeted during the 1950s and since then it has been steadily rising. Women's fertility rate peaked during the 1950s, as illustrated in figure 3. After more than a century of steady decline that persisted through the Great Depression, the birthrate reversed course and family size expanded, creating the Baby Boom generation (born 1946–64). Families were averaging nearly three children. Almost one in three women experienced a first birth prior to age twenty. The vast majority of these births occurred within marriage. Surprisingly, these early marriages were fairly stable; the

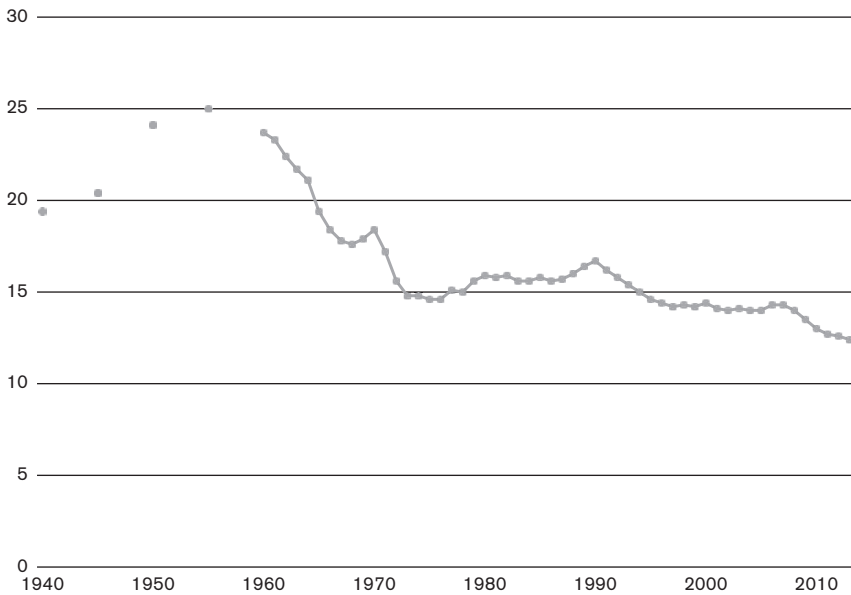


Figure 3. Births per Thousand Women Aged Fifteen to Forty-four, 1940–2013.

Source: Martin et al. 2015, table 1.

divorce rate dropped during the 1950s despite the younger median age at first marriage. Children of the Great Depression were coming of age and eager to start families of their own. The strong economy paved their way to early family formation.⁵⁷

The share of young adults living with their parents declined as they left home to marry and set up independent households. By about age fifty, most parents experienced an empty nest. Meanwhile the proportion of young adults with minor children in their households rose, reflecting the patterns of early marriage and fertility. Married couples typically transitioned to parenthood just a year or two following marriage. Nearly all (90 percent) children lived with both of their parents. Marriages were quite stable during this era. Demographers at the Census Bureau estimated that only about 20 percent of marriages would end through divorce. After divorce, the majority of women and men were predicted to remarry.⁵⁸ Marriage was viewed as a key ingredient for individual happiness. Few Americans believed an unmarried individual could be happy.⁵⁹

The resurgence of marriage and childbearing in the 1950s coincided with the growth in the middle class. The robust economy eased the transition from one's family of origin (i.e., the parental home) to establishing a family of procreation (i.e., marriage and children of one's own). Families increasingly had the means to achieve home ownership and low-interest mortgage loans for veterans enabled additional first-time homebuyers. The pervasive housing shortages of the Great Depression and wartime were alleviated by suburban development. Household sizes shrunk as fewer families had to double up. Demand for housing spurred the suburbanization of America, which opened the door to a new way of life that was profoundly child-centered. Families retreated from crowded cities to newly developed suburban areas, enjoying brand new tract housing with green space and populated almost entirely by married couples with young children.⁶⁰

This flight from the urban core isolated families, who relied on automobiles to navigate suburban sprawl. The expanded distance between work and home meant that fathers were spending much of their time either at work or commuting. Rarely at home, fathers were strangers in their own families as mothers ran the household and reared the children. Patriarchal authority was muted. Childrearing experts expressed concern about how this shift in parental roles was altering children's development, particularly for sons. It was feared that by spending so much time with their mothers, sons would become insufficiently masculine.⁶¹

Women's outsize role in the family did not translate into greater marital power. The companionate family ideal, which trickled down from the upper middle class of the 1920s to the 1950s middle-class suburban family, stipulated that wives and husbands were friends and partners who ideally loved each other, but most wives did not enjoy equality within their marriage.⁶² Wives were responsible for the well-being of their husbands and their children. They were to establish and maintain a smoothly functioning domestic realm to soothe their husband and children in the face of the pressures of the outside world. The Cold War era fostered an inward retreat that placed the family at the pinnacle of society.⁶³ But within many suburban families, women were feeling stymied.

After making significant gains in educational attainment during the earlier part of the century, women traded schooling and economic independence for the security of marriage. Women were expected to derive

fulfillment from their roles as wives and mothers.⁶⁴ They invested a lot of time in domestic tasks, outpacing previous generations of women, but reaped few rewards for their efforts. Childbearing occurred early and births were closely spaced, freeing married mothers for paid labor. Their options were largely constrained to traditional, part-time positions that might help their families with expenses such as a mortgage or children's college tuition. Women were shut out of various sectors of the labor market that had welcomed them during the war effort. In 1960, about one-third of married women were gainfully employed.⁶⁵

The restlessness felt by many suburban housewives was articulated by Betty Friedan in her 1963 blockbuster book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan wrote about "the problem that has no name," the sense of meaninglessness and loss of identity experienced by middle-class married mothers marooned in their ranch tract homes. The isolation of suburban living, she argued, left women to question their own yearnings without input from others. Discontent was widespread, but women were unaware that others shared their same feelings of frustration. Outwardly, other women appeared content with their family lives, leading women who were questioning their own lives to think there must be something wrong with themselves. Friedan debunked the myth of "the happy housewife heroine" and validated the malaise of suburban women.⁶⁶

Seeds of discontent were already evident by the late 1950s when birth rates peaked and began declining. Age at first marriage also bottomed out and resumed its ascent. By the mid-1960s women were earning roughly 40 percent of all bachelors and masters degrees awarded. And their movement into the labor force accelerated.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, teens and young adults were disrupting the status quo by developing their own subculture that largely was defined in opposition to conventional adulthood. As Baby Boom children came of age, they rejected the conventional pathways favored by their parents.⁶⁸ The sedate 1950s gave way to turmoil in the 1960s. Young people called attention to the many forms of oppression facing marginalized groups in society. The women's movement denounced sexism and advocated for equal treatment for women. It questioned the assumption that a woman's place was in the home. For women to achieve equality with men they needed access to the same set of opportunities in the public arena.⁶⁹

The wide availability of the Pill in the 1960s gave women unprecedented control over their fertility, providing them with a nearly foolproof method for avoiding a pregnancy that did not require any involvement from or even the knowledge of their partner. The Pill separated sex and contraception.⁷⁰ For married women, this meant they could more realistically achieve their fertility goals, whether they aimed to remain childless, space the births of their children, or avoid future births because they had attained their desired family size. For unmarried women, it changed the calculus guiding relationships by greatly reducing the potential costs of sexual activity. The Pill made the sexual revolution possible, and is viewed as a critical factor in the acceleration of nonmarital sexual activity.⁷¹

As women sought greater autonomy through the women's rights movement and the sexual revolution, they achieved viable alternatives to the traditional, gendered life pathway of marriage and childbearing. The recognition that they could forgo marriage, pursue a career, or combine work and family fundamentally altered women's life trajectories. Beginning in the 1960s, women gained unprecedented freedom to chart their own lives. An unplanned pregnancy could derail a woman's future plans by disrupting her schooling or employment. According to Kristin Luker, "once [women] had choices about life roles, they came to feel that they had a right to use abortion in order to control their own lives."⁷² Thus, access to legal abortion became a central cause of the women's movement. The guiding slogan was "the personal is the political," underscoring the role of women's rights in the abortion debate. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that a woman's right to privacy under the Fourteenth Amendment included the choice to have an abortion. Since then, women's access to abortion has steadily eroded as abortion opponents have worked at the state level to limit the availability of abortion services. In 2011, the abortion rate was at its lowest level since 1973.⁷³

CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES: DIVERSITY AND CHANGE

The family changes that began emerging in the 1960s and 1970s were harbingers of today's contemporary families. Subsequent chapters in this book detail the trends in U.S. families so for now the goal is to briefly

sketch these recent family changes and then contextualize them by examining the sociopolitical discourse on families, namely the enduring culture wars waged in recent decades about whether the family is in decline. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the second demographic transition theory, which informs our understanding of how these historical changes unfolded and their ramifications for family life in the coming years.

The retreat from marriage has marked the past half-century as the marriage rate in the United States descended in rapid free fall beginning around 1970. This coincided with a rise in the median age at first marriage. Scholars debated whether marriage delayed would translate into marriage forgone. In other words, if an individual did not enter into marriage as a young adult, did the likelihood of marriage essentially become infinitesimal? In 1986, *Newsweek* published a cover story with a headline that a forty-year-old, college-educated, white single woman's chance of getting married was smaller than her chance of being killed by a terrorist. This unleashed a firestorm reaction. The calculations that supported such a dramatic analogy turned out to be erroneous.⁷⁴ But the damage was done. Although the term *spinster* was not invoked, the effect was the same and the message was clear: if a woman had not married by a certain age, she was relegated to a life of singlehood.

Since the 1960s, young men and women have had alternatives to marriage besides singlehood. The share of adults "shacking up" or living together unmarried was modest around 1970, but grew exponentially in the coming decades such that premarital cohabitation is now normative.⁷⁵ Rapid growth in cohabitation was thought to contribute to the delay in marriage entry as couples lived together to test-drive their relationship for marriage. Couples pointed to the ability to gauge their compatibility for marriage as the primary reason for cohabitation.⁷⁶

They had good reason to be skittish about marriage and fearful of divorce. By the early 1980s, the divorce rate reached an all-time high and roughly one in two marriages was ending in divorce.⁷⁷ Divorce was viewed by some as emblematic of the breakdown of the family. But for others, divorce signaled liberation and freedom from the patriarchal institution of marriage. Much of the debate centered on the changing roles of women. As they achieved higher levels of education and became more attached to the labor force, women's bargaining position in marriage shifted. They

could demand greater equality and had the resources to call it quits if the marriage was untenable.

Economists such as Gary Becker argued that the rise in married women's labor-force participation was destabilizing marriage.⁷⁸ Wives were no longer economically dependent on their husbands. With their own incomes, they could support themselves outside of marriage. Marriage was less compulsory. Unlike spouses in traditional marriages in which husbands exchanged their breadwinning for housewifery and childrearing by wives, now spouses were less interdependent. Becker and others insisted that specialization was key to marital stability because it was not only efficient but also encouraged (inter)dependence. According to the independence hypothesis, the growth in women's employment was undermining marriage as an institution by weakening the ties that encouraged couples to stay married. These arguments gained traction as the growth in married women's employment mirrored the rise in divorce during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Other scholars, including sociologist Valerie Oppenheimer, maintained that wives' employment was a rational response to a labor market that was increasingly precarious, especially for men. During the 1970s, men's wages stagnated. Inflation was high. Families kept pace with rising costs by having a second earner: the wife. According to Oppenheimer, the vagaries of the economy necessitated two earners for many families to achieve even a modest standard of living. Moreover, staying in the labor force offered wives a hedge against divorce. If the odds were roughly as likely that a marriage would succeed as it would fail, then dropping out of the labor force to run a household and raise children was a risky proposition for women. A husband's breadwinning enhanced his own human capital and was portable to another marriage. In contrast, a wife's homemaking skills did not pay comparable dividends and children were a liability in the remarriage market for women.⁷⁹

The divorce revolution resulted in the growth of single-mother families. By 1983, about 20 percent of children resided with single mothers and this was the second most common living arrangement for children after the two-biological-married-parent family.⁸⁰ Of course, the rise in single-mother families was not solely due to high levels of divorce but also

to growth in unwed childbearing. The share of births to unmarried women rose from only 5 percent in 1960 to nearly 20 percent in 1980.⁸¹ Single-mother families and their children suffered extremely high poverty and this disadvantage persists today. About one-half of children living with single mothers are poor.⁸² The shaky economic situation of single-mother families was compounded by other factors, such as lack of involvement on the part of many fathers, whether in terms of child-support payments or visitation. These largely absent and uninvolved fathers were labeled “deadbeat dads.” Mothers often carried a heavy burden as solo parents, raising concerns about how children fared in single-mother families. Numerous studies documented small but consistent deficits for children living outside of two-biological-married-parent families and this adversity had enduring effects through adulthood.⁸³

Single motherhood and “deadbeat dads” were at the heart of the political debate over the decline of the American family. A leading critic of the state of contemporary family life, David Popenoe lamented the marginalization of the family, which he maintained was losing functions and authority.⁸⁴ Over time, families had relinquished the traditional functions of religion, education, and work to specialized institutions. These losses, however, according to Popenoe, were not as alarming as the diminished role of the family in childrearing and the provision of emotional support and affection. The downfall of the nuclear family, “the last vestige of the traditional family unit,” according to Popenoe, could be catastrophic.⁸⁵ Essentially, families were disappearing. They were smaller in size, much less stable, and therefore endured for shorter periods of time. Individuals seemed reluctant to make the investments required to ensure family success and stability, instead preferring to invest in themselves. These changes were to the detriment of children, in particular, who increasingly had only one parent to raise and love them, and the dire ramifications of this “‘end-of-the-line’ family decline” could persist for generations to come.⁸⁶ In other words, Popenoe viewed single motherhood as the centerpiece of family decline. Conceding that adults could successfully live outside of traditional families, he asserted that children simply could not. They needed to be raised in a nuclear family to ensure they developed into successful adults.

This dire portrait of the American family was rejected by many social scientists. Sociologist Judith Stacey offered a trenchant critique of Popenoe's assessment of the state of the family, arguing that his premise rested on a faulty definition that reified the traditional breadwinner-homemaker couple and their children. Stacey rejected this prescriptive, narrow view of the family and advocated for conceptualizing the family more ephemerally as "an ideological, symbolic construct" rooted in history and politics.⁸⁷ As noted in the introduction, how the family is defined shapes our assessments of which family configurations are socially valued (and which are not). The definition also informs our evaluation of the family—is it in decline? Stacey and others did not share Popenoe's worries about the demise of the nuclear family.⁸⁸ Instead, they denounced the fundamental basis of the traditional family: gender inequality. Marital instability was a signal that the nuclear family was out of step with egalitarianism. Women were not just demanding equality in the workplace but also on the home front. They were less willing to be subordinate to their husbands and had the resources and power to avoid it if they chose. Divorce provided women a way to escape a hostile marriage. Egalitarian marriages may be difficult to form and sustain. Regardless, public policy could do more to minimize the disadvantage associated with divorce and single motherhood, Stacey maintained, by providing social and economic supports for all families, including mothers and their children.⁸⁹

These culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s were not merely academic debates. As described in detail in chapter 5, concerns about rising levels of nonmarital childbearing and single motherhood shaped sweeping welfare-reform legislation that was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996. The reform was multifaceted, but undergirding the legislation was the broad goal of promoting the formation and maintenance of stable, two-parent married families.

TWO AMERICAS: SOCIAL CLASS AND CONTEMPORARY FAMILY LIFE

As the culture wars rage on, we have seen the emergence of what could be described as "two Americas," in which family life is increasingly bifurcated

by social class. At one end of the spectrum, family life follows the traditional script: marriage rates are high and divorce and nonmarital childbearing are low. This pattern characterizes those with a high level of education, defined as a college degree or more. Those with less education typically experience a different set of family patterns. For this group, marriage is much less common. A sizeable share of children are born to unmarried parents and reared by single mothers whose economic situation is insecure. Many of these single mothers have children with more than one man.

These “diverging destinies,” as sociologist Sara McLanahan has labeled the widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged families, have long-term implications for children.⁹⁰ Children in financially secure married-couple families enjoy unprecedented levels of parental involvement, particularly from fathers. In contrast, children in disadvantaged families often reside with a single mother and receive little financial support from or social interaction with their father. According to McLanahan, “The people with more education tend to have stable family structures with committed, involved fathers. The people with less education are more likely to have complex, unstable situations involving men who come and go.”⁹¹

This bifurcation of family life is a key factor in rising economic inequality. As marriage is increasingly confined to the privileged classes, some estimates indicate that this shift could account for upward of 40 percent of the rise in inequality. Nonmarital childbearing has accelerated most rapidly among white women with lower levels of education. The racial gap in the share of children born outside of marriage has decreased in recent decades. Unwed childbearing trends are converging, particularly for Hispanic and white women with lower levels of education. Although the shares among black women are higher across the education spectrum, the racial gap is closing.⁹²

Nowadays, the educational divide is driving family patterns. In the late 1960s, nearly all (95 percent) children in the upper and middle third of the income distribution lived in two-parent married families. Even 77 percent of the bottom third was in this family form. Today, 88 percent of children in the top third are living in married-parent families, but the levels in the middle and bottom thirds have dropped precipitously, falling to 71 percent for the middle and 41 percent for the bottom third. In short, the

middle now more closely resembles the bottom, according to Bruce Western, evidence of the growing gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged.⁹³

FAMILY CHANGE DURING THE SECOND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION

Contemporary family patterns, such as high levels of cohabitation, a rising age at marriage, widespread divorce, and subreplacement fertility rates, are collectively characterized as emblematic of the second demographic transition (SDT).⁹⁴ Marriage is no longer universal. Individuals can pursue partnerships outside of marriage through cohabitation or living apart together (LAT) relationships, or remain single. Marriages are also less stable these days, with nearly one-half ending through divorce. And fewer divorced people eventually remarry, although increasingly they postmaritally cohabit. Childbearing is no longer confined to marriage. Over 40 percent of U.S. births are nonmarital and more than half of these births occur within cohabitation. Having children is optional. Childlessness is commonplace today and among those who have children family sizes are smaller. The early-1960s marked the end of the Baby Boom and ushered in a downward trajectory in fertility. Now, many developed countries are experiencing subreplacement fertility rates. Immigration is not sufficient to offset population loss due to declining fertility. Indeed, below replacement fertility coupled with lengthening life expectancies translate into population aging.⁹⁵

The SDT is not only affecting the United States, but also has swept across western and eastern Europe and now is entering Asia and South America. Cultural changes have been pivotal in the SDT. Secularization and weakening social cohesion have opened alternative life-course pathways. Individuals now have the opportunity to make choices about their family lives, or to avoid family altogether. They are no longer obligated to follow a singular path, constrained by tradition. Now, autonomy reigns supreme and women and men alike are free to pursue their own individual desires. A rising standard of living, greater gender equality, and the sexual revolution along with waning influence by major social institutions (e.g., religion) have spurred the SDT.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

Throughout U.S. history, marriage has been the basis for organizing families. Initially marriage was an economic alliance between families. By the mid-nineteenth century it began to shift toward companionship and over time the emphasis on a love match took precedence over other factors, including economic ones. Marriage was the setting for childbearing, and children were integral to family life. In recent decades, marriage has become individualized, a union in which couples define their own roles and seek self-fulfillment.⁹⁷ Childbearing is disconnected from marriage. Instead, couples increasingly have children in cohabiting unions or choose to remain childless. It is remarkable how much marriage has receded from the center of family life. As discussed in next chapter, several living arrangement options are available in lieu of marriage, which is increasingly out of reach for many, even though most continue to profess a desire to marry. These changes are redefining family formation, altering long-standing patterns and trends.