Two Perspectives on Demographic Change and the Future of the Family

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The States of Change: Demographics and Democracy project is a collaboration of the Center for American Progress, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution. The project began in 2014 and has been generously funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. In year one, States of Change examined the changing demography of the nation and projected the racial and ethnic composition of every state to 2060. The detailed findings, available in this report, were discussed at the project’s February 2015 conference. In year two, the project’s leaders commissioned six papers on the policy implications of the demographic changes, two each from different political perspectives on the significance of the changes for the family, for the economy and workforce, and for the social contract. A second report, which will be released with the papers in February 2016, projects possible presidential election outcomes from 2016 to 2032 using data from the project’s first report.
A New Look at Demographics, Family Stability, and Politics

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In 1960, more than 70 percent of American children lived with their first-time married, heterosexual parents; in 2016, fewer than half do.¹ In 1960, the nonmarital birthrate was 5 percent; today, it is approximately 40 percent.

The marriage and baby boom of the 1950s corresponded to an era of greater economic equality and good jobs for blue-collar male workers when the United States emerged from World War II as the only major industrialized nation with an intact manufacturing infrastructure. This produced a marriage-oriented culture in which most men could find jobs paying a family wage shortly after finishing high school, working-class women could join their middle class sisters as full-time homemakers, and family differences that reflected income and region shrank.

Over the next 40 years, class, racial, and regional differences will likely increase, and changing strategies for family formation both reflect and magnify the growing economic inequality that characterizes the United States. Over the next 40 years, the highly educated upper middle class will likely draw further away from the rest of the population. These families have adopted a new strategy that accepts the changing roles of women and builds on the opportunities for those with desirable skills.

This new arrangement involves investing equally in men’s and women’s earning capacities, postponing family formation until both parents have reached emotional maturity and stable workforce participation, and investing intensively in children. It also involves a much greater degree of assortative mating, in which elites marry similarly well-educated partners, and men and women more carefully choose spouses who will complement their choice of family roles in an era in which two incomes have become increasingly important. This group has become, if anything, more marriage centered in creating families and assuming responsibility for children.

In a more equal era, the country might support the universalization of these new family strategies through greater efforts to ensure employment stability, investment in children, flexibility and support for working parents, family-planning initiatives, and a rebuilt safety net geared toward workers who switch jobs more frequently and families dealing with more complex trade-offs between work and family. Instead, economic changes hollow out the middle of the American workforce, while regional, cultural, and political divisions block agreement on supportive measures that might mitigate the impact of these economic changes. Reliable, well-paying jobs for blue-collar men are disappearing, with the slowest projected employment growth expected in male-dominated jobs that require only a high school education.² Yet unions remain under political assault, and no alternative organizations effectively represent working-class interests.

The groups that produce the most stable families and invest the most in children delay childbearing and carefully time the beginning of family life. Yet the United States has the highest level of unintended pregnancy in the developed world, and regions of the country differ dramatically in their support for comprehensive sex education and ready access to contraception.

Since 1990, unintended pregnancies have fallen by almost half for the best off while increasing substantially for the least well off. These women see little point in committing to unreliable men, who without stable employment, engage in more violence, substance
abuse, and other destructive behaviors. Rather than defer childbearing, mothers do it alone, often in unstable cohabitations. This increases the disparities between the children of the elite and those in the bottom half of the population.

These factors aggravate regional and racial disparities in the United States as well. First, the upper middle class individuals who have most successfully adjusted to the new economic system are overwhelmingly white and Asian. The communities with the least social mobility tend to be economically isolated communities of either rural whites or urban minorities in less prosperous parts of the country. The wealthier parts of the country with better schools and developed infrastructure tend to reflect the policy preferences of successful professionals, and while they are characterized by high inequality, they often offer greater opportunities for social mobility. In contrast, poorer regions have become much more conservative, slashing public funding that might assist those trapped in poverty and adopting punitive policies that further disadvantage the worst off.

Second, in the United States as a whole, as we know with even greater precision from the States of Change data, minority populations are increasing as a percentage of the total population. Black voter turnout is comparable to white voter turnout in presidential elections, but Hispanic voting rates are lower in all elections.

Moreover, party elites tend to be most responsive to their more active constituents, with Republican policies most closely in line with the low-tax, low public-spending preferences of business elites and Democratic policies more in line with the higher public-spending preferences of the professional classes. As a result, neither party effectively represents the economic interests of those at the losing end of these changes.

Third, regional differences compound these effects. For example, tax and spending policies that reduce income taxes and increase sales taxes shift more of the tax burden from the wealthy to the poor. And low-tax, low infrastructure-spending policies compound the effects of community decay, because racial and economic isolation increase with less access to affordable transportation, good schools, nearby employment, health care, and community-based support.

These trends raise profound questions about how we address the needs of children and the growing inequality across regions, socioeconomic classes, and racial and ethnic groups. The United States has traditionally provided for families by supporting the married, two-parent family with measures such as the “family wage.” The changing economy no longer provides sufficient employment for all parents to be able to afford children on a single full-time salary, nor does it provide sufficiently flexible employment for full-time workers to manage child care.

State financial support—which has historically filled many of the gaps created by periods of unemployment and the transitions that arise from childbirth, death, divorce, or illness—exhibits greater regional variation as states have been accorded more control of federal funds. Diverging political approaches also increase the differences among states. In the past, public leadership has helped systematize the change from one economic system to another, with support for measures such as universal compulsory secondary education, phone and postal services in rural areas, and child labor laws. With the transition from the industrial to the information economy, public leadership has, at least to date, played a much less prominent role.

This report suggests that the economy, regional cultures, and family organization are integrally linked. Family-based strategies have overwhelmingly emphasized marriage-promotion policies that treat the family as though it were a cultural matter, independent of economic conditions. While marriage is correlated with better outcomes for children, it is the “higher incomes and the more engaged parenting of married parents [that] count for a good deal.”

In contrast, strengthening the family requires strengthening communities in ways that change the relationship between prospective partners. Both men and women overwhelmingly say that men without jobs, particularly less educated men, are unmarriageable, and the larger the population outside of the marriage equation, the more these communities’ culture encourages women to distrust the reliability of intimate partners and instead look to their own earning capacity and support from extended kin to take care of their children. And if men see women giving up
on them, they too become more distrustful of women. These self-reinforcing social processes, which are reactions to economic inequality, produce a shift away from marriage and from the traits that contribute to more stable relationships.

The result makes the poor poorer and further marginalizes poor and minority communities that write off too many men as incapable of being socially productive. These changes will make the United States a dramatically more unequal, racially stratified, and less productive country. The alternative requires re-enfranchising all social groups, adopting policies that encourage more stable and family-supportive employment, and finding ways to invest in all our children. America’s future depends on it.

**Family Structure and Stability Will Remain Bifurcated**

From 1960 to 2014, the percentage of children living in single-parent families tripled, and the percentage living in married-parent families decreased from 87 percent to 62 percent. But these overall changes mask the increasing role of cohabitation and how family structures differ by socioeconomic class and race. First, we discuss the trends for elite families; then, we discuss those for everyone else.

**Elite Families Are Likely to Remain Stable and Marriage Centered.** At the top of the socioeconomic scale, families tend to be fairly traditional; that is, parents overwhelmingly marry before they have children, divorce rates are relatively low, husbands tend to have higher incomes than their wives, and children are overwhelmingly raised within two-parent families. These trends are likely to continue and could even accelerate.

**High Marriage Rates and Later Childbearing for the Elite.** Marriage rates are correlated with income and education to a much greater degree than they once were. These trends reflect that the biggest economic winners in a more unequal economy have been very well-educated white and (to a lesser degree) Asian men. As the wage gap between college-educated men and women grew after 1990, so too did marriage stability for this group. The only group in American society to see marriage rates increase over the past 40 years has been women in the top 10 percent of the income scale. Everyone else’s marriage rates have declined, with the magnitude of the decline increasing as income decreases.

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The demand for highly compensated, skilled workers, including those in the financial sector, management, tech, and health care, is likely to remain strong, and sharply unequal levels of compensation are likely to benefit men more than women. Studies show that the gender wage gap is highest in positions that require management skills and long hours, and these positions are likely to increase more in the years ahead.

The men with the highest incomes have long been the most likely to marry. What has changed is their identification of an ideal partner; a half century ago, the best-educated women were the least likely to marry. Today, women at the top of the income scale are the most likely to marry, and assortative mating—when partners with similar levels of education marry one another—has increased.

As the group of high-income men grows faster than the comparable group of women, the family stability and marriage orientation of this elite group is likely to remain high. Since the Great Recession, the recovery for men with advanced degrees has been greater than the recovery for women. Similarly, married families at the top of the income scale have recovered more than those further down the income scale. Assortative mating accordingly has increased the disparities among households.

For this elite group, later ages of marriage are also correlated with later ages of childbearing. As a result, young people spend a longer period as singles, and college-educated, single 20-somethings are likely to form a
distinct group in terms of their political participation, housing needs, and group identities. In addition, the average age of first birth for married college graduates is likely to increase further, perhaps with greater variance in different parts of the country.

The greatest increase in births since 2007 has been for women over 30, with teen births and births to women in their early 20s continuing to decline. While the biological clock may eventually cause women’s average age of first birth to level off—at least absent reproductive innovations such as egg freezing—Americans, who still give birth at younger ages than their European peers, are likely to see the average age of childbirth continue to increase.

Divorce Rates for the Most Elite Families Are Likely to Remain Low. The later age of marriage and first birth for the highly educated correlate with lower divorce rates, and this group’s divorce rates have decreased since the 1990s. Divorce rates for those with economic security are likely to remain low, because these couples tend to have more material resources, greater maturity, and more information about each other when they marry.

Nonmarital Birthrates for the Most Elite White Families Will Remain a Minor Factor. The nonmarital birthrates for white college graduates barely changed between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s, and while they have increased slightly since the Great Recession, they remain low and are likely to continue to do so. White college-graduate women have the lowest unplanned birthrate of any major group in American society (although rates for Asians are also low), and their unplanned pregnancy rate has fallen steadily since 1990. In addition, while the group’s abortion rate is low because of the small number of unplanned pregnancies, these individuals are more willing to terminate an unplanned pregnancy than other groups, contributing to the low nonmarital birthrate.

Family Trends for Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. The stable, traditional family patterns that characterize elite white families do not necessarily hold for all ethnic groups. African American elites have historically had similar attitudes toward marriage as whites and, as recently as the 1980s, similar percentages of births within marriage. However, between 1982 and the mid-2000s, the nonmarital birthrate for African American female college graduates has risen from approximately 6 percent to 25 percent.

Continuing these fertility patterns depends on three factors. First, African American male elites have not benefited as much as white and Asian males from the growth in very high-income jobs. Looking at just those under age 35, men outnumber women two-to-one among white college graduates making more than $100,000 per year. Among African Americans, however, about the same number of men and women are in the high-income category. The low ratio of high-income African American men to women compared with the same ratio among other racial groups is likely to make marriage patterns different and has already increased the percentage of nonmarital births and the likelihood of divorce, compared with college-graduate whites.

Second, looking into the future, the percentage of African American males graduating from college may further affect family trends. Since the 1990s, the percentage of men from high-income households attending college has grown, while it has decreased for those from lower-income households. This increase has been particularly high for African Americans in the highest-income households. A sizeable increase in high-income families could increase marriage rates in elite families.

Third, intermarriage rates are important. African American men and women have historically married each other, but today black men are more likely to enter interracial unions, and black women are more likely than men to graduate from college. Perhaps as a result, the rate of assortative mating for black women with college degrees is much lower than that for white women. Black women with college degrees are half as likely as their white counterparts to have a spouse with equal or greater education.

Asians are more likely to marry, less likely to divorce, and less likely to give birth outside of marriage than similarly situated whites, and this is particularly true among college graduates. In addition, Asian American males constitute a higher percentage of Asian American college graduates than males do for other racial groups.
Elite Latinos are between whites and African Americans, but we do not have data that break down the composite trends by income, education, and place of birth. We suspect that the longer Latinos are in the United States, the more likely they are to marry non-Latinos and the more their family patterns may converge with American norms.

**College Graduates May Become a Bifurcated Group.** The emergence of a bifurcated family system accelerated after 1990, and most data track college graduates as a single group, sometimes including race and gender breakdowns. During the 1990s, these data show a widening income gap between college graduates and nongraduates and between college-graduate men and women. Between 2000 and 2008, college-graduate income stagnated, although the gender gap continued to grow. Increases in income, to the extent they occurred, were heavily concentrated among those with advanced degrees, the higher executive ranks, and the financial sector. Without a broader economic recovery, college graduates as a group are unlikely to continue to exhibit elite family patterns for four reasons.

First, since the Great Recession, only workers with an advanced degree (approximately the top 11 percent of the population) or those in the top 20 percent of the population by income have experienced any real income growth. College graduates as a group have shown only a modest recovery since 2011, and they have still not caught up with 2001 wage levels. Overall, increases in the “college-wage premium,” measured by the difference in earnings from having a college degree, have slowed significantly over at least the last decade. This suggests that college graduates may be experiencing the wage stagnation that undermined family stability for high school graduates in the 1980s and 1990s.

Second, college-graduation patterns of men and women differ in ways that affect their marriage prospects. For those in the top 25 percent of families by income, men and women attend college in similar numbers and tend to do so shortly after graduation from high school. The people in this group also tend to marry each other. Students from low- and middle-income families are much more likely to return to school in their 20s rather than directly after high school, and among those students from any background who attend college later in life, women substantially outnumber men. In 2007–08, for example, males constituted 51 percent of the students from families in the highest income quartile who attended college right after high school (although only 48 percent for African Americans and Latinos). For students from the bottom income quartile who attended college at older ages, only 36 percent were male (33 percent for African Americans and Latinos).

These differences occur in part because, for women, income correlates much more strongly with degrees than it does for men. For instance, a woman who has a child or has been working in a dead-end job can advance by retraining to be a physician’s assistant, teacher, or social worker, but all these positions depend on formal degrees. Blue-collar men are more likely to increase their incomes by doing construction in boom times, becoming a manager, or starting a small business, and these positions do not depend to the same extent on formal education.

Because a higher percentage of African Americans and Latinos are from low-income backgrounds and because they are more likely to return to school later than whites, the mismatch between minority men and women increases, with women substantially more likely to attend college than men. Consequently, minority female college graduates are less likely to be able to find minority men with similar levels of education than are white college graduates. A major part of the household-income effect from college attendance comes from marriage, and college-graduate women from low-income backgrounds are less likely to marry at all or marry a man with a similar level of education than women from wealthier households.

Third, disparities in wealth have increased even more than disparities in income, and these disparities disadvantage African American and Latino college graduates more than whites and Asians with similar education. The housing bubble that burst with the Great Recession compounded matters. On the eve of the housing bust, African Americans and Latinos had greater amounts of debt as a percentage of income than whites and Asians. If they owned homes, they were more likely to have purchased them recently (and therefore near the height
of the bubble) and more likely to have bought homes in neighborhoods that have still not fully recovered from the crash. The results wiped out a significant portion of wealth owned by African Americans or Latinos in the United States, increasing wealth inequality even more than income inequality.

African American and Latino college graduates thus lost ground in terms of overall wealth, not just with white and Asian college graduates, but also with high school graduates of their own race. White and Asian college graduates generally fared better than their less-educated counterparts during the recession and have accumulated much more wealth over the long term. On the other hand, Latino and black families headed by someone with a four-year college degree typically fared significantly worse than families of the same race without college degrees.

These disparities characterized not only the Great Recession and its aftermath but also the two-decade span ending in 2013 (the most recent data available). As a result, these minority groups enjoy less of a foundation to help them weather hard times, plan for the future, or invest in their children. Indeed, preliminary research indicates that while unemployment during the Great Recession did not necessarily increase divorce rates, foreclosures did, particularly for college graduates.

To evaluate the extent to which marriage patterns differ among college graduates—and to examine more generally the impact of race, income, and education on predicted marital status at the individual level—we used data from the Current Population Surveys (CPS). Figures 1A–1E depict the joint impact of income and education on the predicted marital status of white women and men. (See the Appendix for the figures and methodology.) As the figures indicate, for men, income more strongly contributes to the likelihood of marriage than does education.

Thus, men in the top 20 percentile of income over the past three decades have witnessed high (predicted) rates of marriage (around 80 percent), whether they are high school dropouts or doctors or lawyers. By 2015, however, an advanced degree substituted for a lower income (middle 60 percent) in generating predicted marriages probabilities upward of 0.80. Thus, there has been some bifurcation for men, such that by 2015 an advanced degree leads to high predicted rates that men will be married, even absent high incomes.

There are three important trends for white women. First, beginning in 1985, income was correlated with marital status, but in the opposite direction as it was for men. Thus, low-income women were the most likely to be married, and high-income women were the least likely to be married. (Note that these data capture women currently married, not income at the time of marriage, and thus include only those who were in the workforce at the time of the inquiry.)

Second, this trend weakens over time, so that by 2005, educated women (those with a B.A., M.A., or other advanced degree)—regardless of income—have predicted marriage rates around 0.80. Third, education and income “interact” in predicting marital status among women, such that income matters more among women without college degrees than among those with a bachelor’s degree or more.

In sum, our analysis of the CPS over three decades suggests that income strongly predicted marital status in opposite ways for white men and women but that the income effect for women (indicating that women with more income were less likely to be married) has been eliminated in the past decade. Moreover, while income has strongly predicted marital status for men throughout the past 30 years, in the most recent survey, men with moderate incomes have achieved marriage parity with their high-income peers if they hold an advanced degree, thus reinforcing the education effect.

The Disappearance of the Center. The story of the American economy—and the American family—over the last 30 years has been the disappearance of
the center. As recently as 1980, high school graduates did not differ radically from college graduates in divorce rates, and nonmarital births for both groups were under 10 percent, at least for whites. Families in the 50th percentile of the income distribution largely resembled the families at the top, the bigger differences being racial.

Since then, the greatest socioeconomic change has been the decline in working-class, white males’ wages, employment, and job stability. In the 1980s, the job-turnover rate for male high school graduates was comparable to that for college graduates; by 2000, the high school graduate rate had become substantially higher. In addition, men who do not attend college have lower wages in real dollar terms than in 1979, and their workforce participation rates have also steadily declined.

As the economy changed, so too did the family. While divorce rates of college graduates leveled off in the 1990s, the divorce rates of the middle group continued to increase. In addition, while white college-graduate nonmarital births stayed about the same between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s, those of high school graduates climbed, so that today they are closer to those of high school dropouts. Johns Hopkins University sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin observed that the story for this middle group is one of increasingly less stable relationships, not just a decline in marriage.

White women who graduate from high school but not college have a higher number of cohabitations with different partners than any other group. They often still marry, divorce at high rates, and repartner. In contrast, college-graduate women have more stable relationships, and poorer and minority women are less likely to be in relationships at all.

For African American high school graduates who do not complete college, the change in family form occurred much earlier. The nonmarital birthrate for this group was close to 50 percent in the 1980s (compared to 5 percent for white high school graduates) and by the mid-2000s had reached 75 percent (compared to 34 percent for whites). For African Americans within this group who do marry, the divorce rates are high. African Americans at all socioeconomic levels depend more on women’s income than other groups, whether in dual-earner or single-parent relationships, and African American women in this middle group are substantially more likely than white women at the same educational level to be raising children on their own, rather than within a married, stepparent, or cohabiting relationship.

In our individual-level analysis of marriage using the CPS, we find that income more strongly predicts marriage rates for black men with less than a B.A. or M.A. than for those with a B.A. or M.A., such that higher income translates into higher marriage rates (see Figures 2A and 2B in the Appendix). Income also matters more for less-educated women, with the income trend reversing such that lower income predicts high marriage rates, as it does in 1985 and 1995 for whites. This income-by-education interaction suggests that if one lacks a college education (and thus, good job prospects), current income acts as a stronger marital fitness cue.

Finally, the patterns for Latinos resemble—to a degree—those for blacks and whites (see Figures 3A and 3B in the Appendix). Like white men, income matters for Latino men across education level. Latinas, by contrast, look similar to black women: income matters more when education is low (versus high).

Looking into the future, this group’s economic prospects are unlikely to improve. Median wages have stagnated since 2000 and, as of 2013, showed no sign of recovering from the financial crisis. Moreover, job projections show declining demand for less-skilled employees, particularly men. Women’s labor market participation and wages, which had been increasing steadily since the middle of the 20th century, appear to have peaked and begun to decline. A further hollowing out of the center is likely.

The Group at the Bottom Will Remain Marginalized. The story of the lack of upward mobility for those trapped at the bottom of American society is a story of communities. Stanford economist Raj Chetty indicates that social mobility overall has not changed that much in the United States, with the increase in inequality and the hollowing out of the center. Instead, he reports dramatic differences among communities. For example, mobility in Bergen County, New Jersey, is dramatically greater than in Baltimore, Maryland, even holding individual factors constant.
mobile communities are characterized by high rates of racial and economic segregation, greater economic inequality, weaker schools, less social capital in the form of religious or civic engagement, and less stable family structure.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Economic disparities among children have become better predictors of cognitive test scores and economic mobility than racial disparities.}

Chetty emphasizes that the largest effects occur at the community level. The children in a single-parent minority family, for example, will do better in a stronger, more integrated, and more prosperous community with better schools, even holding income and family structure constant. Similarly, a white single-parent family will do worse in an economically isolated community with weaker schools, churches, and civic organizations than in a healthier community, and whites in these communities increasingly resemble minority families with greater arrests, less stable families, and less workforce participation.

Nonetheless, family structure is a defining element of communities with the least social mobility. In many of these communities, marriage has effectively disappeared. Unmarried Latinas typically give birth within cohabitating unions, but the poorest women, particularly African Americans, have become less likely to cohabit at the time they give birth than other unmarried women.\textsuperscript{22} In these communities, single mothers often struggle to raise children on their own with fewer community resources, less paternal assistance, and weaker extended-family networks than those in better-off communities. As a result, family structure reinforces the disadvantages children face in already weakened communities.

In conclusion, family form is likely to reinforce the economic bifurcation of American communities, further separating the successful from the less successful. Economic disparities among children have become better predictors of cognitive test scores and economic mobility than racial disparities. Looking at just the first year of life, parental involvement with children in the mid-20th century was about the same for college and high school graduates. Today, college-graduate mothers spend an hour a day more interacting with their children, and college-graduate parents spend substantially more enrichment time with children than parents who only graduated high school.

Even among well-off families, differences have grown. The bottom quintile of families has not increased the amount it spends on children since the 1970s. Every group above the bottom quintile, in contrast, has substantially increased their expenditures on children, which has paid off in test scores, educational achievement, and employment prospects. In 1970, for example, the children of college graduates did better than the children of high school graduates, but there was little difference between the test scores of a child of a college-graduate middle school teacher and a child of a college-graduate executive with four times the salary. Today, the executive’s child would do substantially better than the schoolteacher’s child in ways that reflect that executive’s ability to spend more on his or her children. Community differences multiply the results, because executives and schoolteachers have become less likely to live in the same neighborhoods, and the differences in schools, community organizations, preschools, and after-school opportunities have also grown.

\textbf{Predicting the Future?} The largest question about future projections involves fertility patterns. The average ages of first marriage and first birth increased in tandem for college graduates, but that did not happen for the middle group. While their average age of first marriage did steadily increase, their mean age of first birth leveled off in the early 1990s and did not change substantially between 1990 and the Great Recession. Women continued getting pregnant at about the same age, and the rate of unplanned pregnancies remained high. At the same time, women in the middle group stopped marrying the fathers of their children. They become more likely to cohabit.

With the Great Recession, however, their nonmarital birthrate has declined. The birthrates declined more for minority women—who had much higher fertility
rates—than for whites and more for those who were not cohabiting than for those who were. The decrease in Latino immigration accounts for a substantial portion of the overall fertility decline. Over the next several decades, the net result is likely to be an increase in the average age of first birth, but there is no indication of an increase in marriage rates or relationship stability for this group.

Fertility in the United States Is Stabilizing

The United States has been unusual among industrialized nations in having overall fertility above replacement level over the last several decades. High American fertility is because of a combination of high rates of immigration and relatively low access to contraception, producing much higher unintended birthrates than in the rest of the developed world.

Since the Great Recession, American birthrates have been falling. In 2013, overall American fertility, which had been above replacement before the recession, fell to rates closer to those in Northern Europe. The drop in births had two principal causes: the decline in Latino immigration and the drop in the birthrates of younger women. These trends may affect the composition of the American population in future years.

Births Declined Most for Younger Women. Since 2007, the birthrate for women in their 20s has steadily declined by more than 4 percent a year, while it has increased by 3 percent for women in their 30s and 2 percent for women in their 40s. Even in 2014, when overall births increased, teen births reached all-time lows, and most of the increase was because of births to older women. This shift in the age of first birth lowered the percentage of nonmarital births, because older women are more likely to be married.

The Decline in the Latino Birthrate. The overall decline in the birthrate following the recession was larger for Latinos than for any other group. According to Rob Wile, “Between 2006 and 2013, the Hispanic birth rate plummeted 25 percent. By comparison, the rate for non-Hispanics declined just 5 percent—though the latter was already much lower.” For Americans generally, the biggest decline in births has been among younger women, and that has been particularly true for Latinos. During the 2006–13 period, Latino birthrates declined by 45 percent among 15- to 19-year-olds and by 34 percent among 20- to 24-year-olds. This brings Latino birthrates, which had been much higher than the birthrates for other Americans, closer to overall American patterns and, together with the decline in immigration, has slowed the growth in the Latino percentage of the overall population. Nonetheless, various projections show that Hispanics will constitute more than one-third of the population under the age of 18 by 2060.

The precipitous decline in births almost certainly reflects the decline in construction jobs, which have been particularly important for Latino men and which boomed during the housing bubble in the early 2000s. Latina women have been staying in school longer and delaying pregnancy. In addition, foreign-born Hispanics support teen births more than Hispanics born in the United States do. For instance, in 2009, a Pew Research Center study found that 69 percent of first-generation Hispanic teens called teen pregnancy a bad thing for society, while 86 percent of Hispanic teens who are third-generation and higher gave that response. As immigration declines, Latino family patterns may become more like those of other groups.

These trends, which converge with overall American trends, are likely to continue unless immigration increases. Long term, more employment is likely to be available for men and women with more education and skills, and Latinos, like other families, will perceive the need for two incomes. For low-educated immigrants generally, becoming American involves greater emphasis on education and staying in school. Accordingly, the growth in the Latino population and in the Latino nonmarital birthrate, which is much higher at younger ages, can be expected to slow and perhaps stabilize.

The Nonmarital Birthrate Has Declined for All Women. The rate of nonmarital births to women older than 29 is under 25 percent, compared to 66 percent for women age 20 to 24. With the decline in younger women’s fertility, which is the product of unplanned
pregnancies to a greater degree than older women's fertility, the nonmarital birthrate has been dropping for all racial groups.\textsuperscript{30} Since their highest levels in the late 2000s, nonmarital births have (as noted earlier) declined by 7 percent, while the birthrate for unmarried women has decreased by 14 percent. Marriage and births within marriage have also declined. As a result, the drop in nonmarital births as a percentage of overall births has been modest, falling from a high of 41.0 percent to 40.6 percent in 2013.\textsuperscript{31}

Nonmarital births have declined even more for single mothers than for cohabitating couples, increasing the percentage of nonmarital births that occur to parents who are cohabiting at the time of birth. The net result is greater overall paternal involvement, although cohabitating relationships are less stable than marriage, and the involvement may not last.

The declines in the nonmarital birthrate have occurred for every major group of women. Nonetheless, the largest declines have occurred for unmarried Latina women, who in 2007 had birthrates three times the level of unmarried whites. Unmarried African American women have also experienced a significant decline in fertility. In contrast, Asian Americans and non-Hispanic whites, whose nonmarital birthrates were much lower before the Great Recession, have seen more modest declines.\textsuperscript{32}

These declines in nonmarital fertility reflect somewhat different factors for each group. Between 2007 and 2012, the big change for African American and Latina women in their 20s was a drop in the birthrates of unmarried women, while for whites, the decline in marriage rates contributed more to the overall decline in fertility.\textsuperscript{33} Unintended pregnancy rates are highest among poor and low-income women, women age 18 to 24, cohabiting women, and minority women. The unintended pregnancy rate is thus a much more major factor in both overall fertility and the nonmarital birthrate for these groups than for white, wealthier, and older women.

In terms of the composition of the next generation, the declining fertility of women in their early 20s has enormous impact, because the majority of these women give birth outside of marriage, and women in their early 20s represent a much larger share of all births than teens do. Moreover, these young women, whether married, single, or cohabitating, are typically less prepared to care for a child, financially and emotionally, than older women.

**Unplanned Pregnancies and Births to Younger Women Affect Regional Inequality.** Major factors in regional disparities in the family (discussed more fully later) are differences in the unintended pregnancy rate, the average age of marriage and first birth, and overall fertility. Poorer areas tend to offer less access to contraception and abortion and greater social—if not economic—support for early marriage and higher rates of fertility. In addition, the areas of the country with the least upward social mobility tend to combine high rates of economic and racial isolation with high rates of single-parent families and low access to education, jobs, health care, and contraception.

For example, looking just at teen birthrates in 2013, states vary from less than 20 births per 1,000 women in the entire Northeast, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to double that figure in Arkansas, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and West Virginia.\textsuperscript{34} In 2010 (the latest year for which data are available), the unintended pregnancy rates for all women tended to be lowest in the Northeast, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, although they were also low in Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, and Utah. The states with the highest unintended pregnancy rates included most of the states with high teen birthrates, but also the District of Columbia, New Jersey, and New York.\textsuperscript{35}

**The Decline in Births to Teens and Those in Their Early 20s Is Likely to Continue.** While the most dramatic part of the decline in births to younger women involves Latinos, such births have declined across the board, with the drop in births to African Americans exceeding the drop in births to whites.\textsuperscript{36} This partly reflects the much higher birthrates at young ages to African Americans and poorer women. It also reflects the economy. Overall, the states with the largest drops in fertility have been those with the greatest declines in employment.

There is reason to believe, however, that these trends may continue even with an economic recovery.
Women who once responded to an unplanned pregnancy with a shotgun marriage simply stopped marrying and became more likely to cohabit with the fathers of their children.

With the recession, the drop in births corresponded to increased use of contraception. Indeed, from 2013 to 2014, the largest drops in teen births occurred in Colorado, which adopted a major contraception initiative, and in wealthy states, such as Massachusetts, that have long emphasized access to contraception. As the use of contraception becomes a community norm, there is little reason for that to change, given that there has been little economic recovery for men in their early 20s and that women are reluctant to commit to economically precarious men. It remains to be seen whether the use of contraception will increase further.

The corresponding decline in birthrates for younger teens, such as those age 15 to 17, involves a lower level of sexual activity and greater contraceptive use. The decline in teen births, which is part of a long-term trend, appears to be extending into those in their early 20s. With older teens and women in their 20s, greater contraceptive use explains almost all the decline. The declining birthrates since the Great Recession appear to be part of a cultural shift, with less support for early childbearing. It has had a small compositional effect, slightly reducing the percentage of nonmarital births, as fertility falls for the young, who are overwhelmingly unmarried, and increases for those over 30, who are much more likely to be in stable unions. However, it remains to be seen whether these trends, triggered by the Great Recession, will have longer lasting effects.

**In communities experiencing economic decline, church attendance falls.**

According to the Guttmacher Institute, between 1981 and 2008 the unplanned pregnancy rate fell by about half for the wealthiest part of the population and increased substantially for the poorest. For the better off, the steady drop in unplanned pregnancies may reflect more effective contraceptive methods, including long-lasting contraceptives such as intrauterine devices, the pill, or other hormonal devices. These methods require the assistance of health care professionals and have become more accessible with the Affordable Care Act.

Their use also reflects a shift in cultural attitudes. Better-off teens have become more likely to use contraception before they begin sexual activity, and doctors—as well as WebMD—emphasize the pill's advantages in controlling acne, regularizing menstrual periods, and alleviating cramps. Indeed, more than half of women use the pill for reasons other than preventing pregnancy. Yet, over the same period, contraception has been less available for immigrant groups, particularly the undocumented. Poorer women have not received access to a system routinely available for those with health care benefits.

**Regional Differences in Families Will Increase**

The increase in inequality in the country as a whole has heightened the economic and cultural differences among and within regions. During eras of greater equality, federal policies encouraged regional economic development, limited economic concentration, supported infrastructure that helped keep rural communities viable, and provided support for those on the losing end of economic changes. Today, gridlock in Washington and the concerted effort to reduce the size of government have increased regional disparities.

As economic inequality increases, the cultural differences that influence the family also increase. Wealthy areas such as Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, have become much wealthier, more competitive, and less affordable for families. A fascinating study shows that as male income inequality increases, as it has in these cities, women's marriage rates at age 30 decline. Instead, in these places, couples wait longer to marry, the mismatch between minority men and women increases, and most groups have fewer children as childrearing becomes more expensive.

Religion compounds the effects. Those who attend church once a week or more are a distinct group, even in otherwise religious communities. Church participation provides structure and, particularly if the husband
and wife regularly attend the same church, family stability. However, couples in the same communities who attend church less frequently are often more prone to divorce than similar couples who live in less religious communities. Like their more religious neighbors, they marry at younger ages and divorce more, partly because they married at younger ages.

In communities experiencing economic decline, church attendance falls. Young couples in these communities may not benefit from the structure and support for their relationships that organized religion provides or from the policies in more secular communities that encourage contraceptive use and delayed childbearing.

Regional inequality has always existed, and the South has long been an outlier, particularly between the end of the Civil War and World War II, when it experienced a mix of economic, social, and racial isolation. Remarkably, the current era is reversing a long period of growing regional convergence. In 1940, for example, per capita income in Mississippi was less than one-quarter that of Connecticut. However, during the postwar period of greater economic equality that marked the rise of the middle class, regional differences shrank along with other income differences, and by 1980, per capital income in Mississippi had risen to 58 percent of that in Connecticut. Cleveland, Des Moines, Detroit, and Milwaukee ranked among the nation's wealthiest cities.

Since 1980, regional inequality has once again increased, with income soaring in a relatively small number of cities, such as New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, but with even prosperous cities in other parts of the country losing ground. In addition, housing prices in wealthy cities have outpaced increases in income, adding to the capital acquisition of homeowners in those cities, but making it more difficult to afford to raise children there.

Some attribute these growing regional disparities to the decline in public investment ensuring regional equality (for example, declining spending on infrastructure such as railroads, highways, phone lines, postal service, and federal research and development grants designed to boost regional economies); financial deregulation; concentration of intellectual property rights in the tech sector; and the decline in antitrust enforcement, which has permitted greater economic concentration across the economy. These developments have led to growing depopulation of rural areas, differences in economic opportunities across regions, and differences in family cultures and forms, which in turn have reinforcing effects.

**Entrenched Regional Poverty Affects Children in Communities with Little Social Mobility.** Raj Chetty has found that some communities in the United States offer children social mobility equal to the most mobile countries in the world, while other communities have lower levels of social mobility than any developed country for which data are available. Overall, children's mobility is lowest in the Southeast and highest in the Mountain West and rural Midwest.

Low mobility tends to be associated with the concentration of African Americans in a region, but in those regions whites who begin in low-income families also experience lower upward mobility. The problem is not race as an individual factor, but as a factor entrenching poverty in low-income and racially isolated communities. In looking at the likelihood that a child born into a region with the lowest quintile of parental income will rise to the top income quintile city nationally, San Jose, California, is the top-ranked city, a diverse city in a relatively wealthy region. In contrast, San Jose, California, is the top-ranked city, a diverse city in a relatively wealthy region, where the likelihood of such a rise for a given child is nearly three times that of Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the lowest-ranked cities.

Children from low-income families are often left behind in acquiring the human capital necessary to graduate from college and delay childbearing. Without either greater public spending on economic development that equalizes disparities among regions or greater investment in early childhood, those locked into economically and racially segregated communities are likely to continue to experience little social mobility.

**Regional Differences in Family Form Are Likely to Grow.** In 2013, differences in the median age of first marriage differed for women, for example, from 23.5 in Utah to 29.8 in Washington, DC, and 28.8 in Massachusetts and New York. The average age of first marriage for men ranged from 25.6 in Utah to over 30 in
Similarly, the average age of first birth has been rising in the country as a whole, but more so for some races and regions than others. In 2012, for example, first births to women age 35 to 44 were substantially higher for Asians and Pacific Islanders than for any other group and significantly higher for whites than for African Americans or Latinas. Births at these ages were lowest for Native Americans. In addition, the increase in first births at later ages was much greater in the northern part of the United States. Between 2000 and 2012, the percentage increase in first births to women age 34 to 39 ranged from more than 40 percent in the Dakotas, New York, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming to no change in Arizona, Idaho, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. These figures reflect very different approaches to family formation.

In the wealthiest parts of the country, men and women delay marriage and childbearing significantly more. The women who delay both marriage and childbearing into their late 20s and early 30s bring significantly greater material resources to childrearing. In contrast, high teen birthrates in 2014 tended to be concentrated in the poorest states: Arkansas, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Teen births reflect, among other things, optimism about the future. One study indicated that overall inequality between the top and the bottom of the state does not predict teen births. Instead, holding other factors such as race and religiosity constant, the distance between the middle and the bottom was correlated with teen birthrates. In prosperous states such as California and Massachusetts with very wealthy elites, teen births are lower than in states such as Arkansas and Mississippi where poor teens have little hope of making it into the middle class. Yet even in those states, the teen birthrate has been decreasing.

The larger issue is whether contraceptive use will continue to increase. The states with the highest fertility rates tend to be those that are relatively poor; provide abstinence-only education in public schools, rather than comprehensive sex education; discourage women’s health clinics such as Planned Parenthood; reject Medicaid expansion, which provides health insurance to more women; and do little to systematize the availability of contraception.

The Affordable Care Act has attempted to mandate contraceptive coverage as part of standard packages available through employer-provided insurance or policies available on the health care exchanges and has succeeded in increasing access to free contraception. In addition, the Obama administration has sought to expand state provision of contraceptive services through Medicaid. However, many of the most conservative states have rejected both Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act and the earlier expansion of Medicaid-financed contraception.

**Urban-Rural Differences Are Increasing.** Rural areas in the center of the country are depopulating. The first to leave are the best educated. Urban areas outpace rural areas in the percentage of college graduates, and that gap has increased since 2000. In places such as Kansas, the depopulation and lack of skills have made it harder to maintain services and infrastructure.

Keeping hospitals open in rural areas has been particularly hard in states that rejected Medicaid expansion. Since 2010, 48 rural hospitals have closed, and the rate is accelerating. These hospital closings disproportionately affect the poorest communities and contribute further to these communities’ isolation. At a time of decreasing public and private investment in infrastructure, these changes increase the disparities among different parts of the country.

**Solutions**

Growing societal inequality—and the decline in marriage—is associated with greater inequality in investment in children. Family form contributes to this result. Holding other things constant, two parents have more time and money to invest in children than a single parent. Moreover, adults who are poor to begin with are more likely to raise children in unmarried, unstable cohabitations or as single parents. Single mothers are far more likely to experience unemployment and various types of material hardship, such as food insecurity, than are married or childless women.
These differences also contribute to widening racial disparities. African Americans and Latinos, at least in part because they are poorer, have higher overall fertility and higher nonmarital birth and divorce rates. Moreover, the economic and social policies of the last 30 years—including denial of services to immigrants, welfare reform that not only cuts benefits to children but also has largely eliminated the aid mothers needed to stay in the labor market, the failure to invest in infrastructure that links poor communities to more prosperous ones, and the disinvestment in public education—have aggravated the disparities.

Public education campaigns promoting marriage assume that marriage—in and of itself—produces family stability.

This does not mean, however, that “marriage promotion” is the primary solution to the problem of child poverty or inequality. As an empirical matter, such programs have not worked, and for predictable reasons. The programs assume that unmarried parents have different values about marriage or definitions of what the institution is about. There is little evidence for this assumption; indeed, ethnographic accounts indicate that the desire to marry is close to universal.

Instead, the evidence indicates that those who do not marry do so for good reasons: unmarried mothers attribute breaking up with the fathers of their children to high rates of domestic violence, infidelity, substance abuse, criminality, or imprisonment. In the context of these unstable relationships, a legal commitment to a spouse who runs up credit card bills, deals drugs, or has another relationship on the side makes little sense and may threaten the resources that the more responsible parent has available for the children.

In marriage-oriented communities, women are able to choose from an adequate supply of acceptable men, and men try to win women’s favor. When few men command the stable jobs or good behavior women desire in marriage, women generally become distrustful of men and invest in themselves. Men, in the face of such distrust, play the field.

Simply encouraging two people to marry because they have a child together, without changing anything else, is likely to lead to high rates of divorce. Moreover, given the high rates of inequality, wage stagnation, employment instability, and incarceration, the majority of poor couples who marry are likely to remain poor in an era in which economic distress has become more likely to undermine family stability.

The economic changes that undermined employment prospects of working-class men and expanded opportunities for working-class women have changed the ways that men and women match up. The result has been a cultural shift that encourages women to rely more on their own resources and to be warier of commitment to unreliable men.

Public education campaigns promoting marriage assume that marriage—in and of itself—produces family stability. What these campaigns fail to take into account is that commitment is costly in an unstable world. Ethnographic studies show that married couples are more likely to bail an incarcerated spouse out of jail, share in substance abuse, support an unemployed partner who fritters away family resources, and stay with a second partner who cannot be trusted to pick up children from school on time. The price of doing so, even if the couples’ average household income is higher together than apart, is often a much higher practical and emotional toil on the primary parent.53

Marriage cannot, therefore, be the single-minded answer for growing differentials in investment in children, and, to the extent that marriage-promotion activities draw resources and attentions from economic solutions, they can further stratify family form. To be sure, removing barriers to marriage, such as improving access to the Earned Income Tax Credit for married couples or decreasing the marriage tax penalty for equal-earning partners, may help those families that are able to access those programs. More generally, the primary focus for a new strategy for family formation that produces stability should involve: (1) investment in women, as well as men; (2) delay in family formation until education is complete, employment is secured, and there is some measure of financial stability; and (3) greater opportunities for stable employment, particularly for men.
Well-off couples have clearly embraced this strategy with reinforcing effects: women who delay marriage and childbearing have higher incomes, and couples with higher incomes who marry each other have more stable unions. Less educated women, who saw unintended pregnancies increase from 1990 to 2010, have taken a very different approach. As times have become more difficult and male income less reliable, they have stopped marrying. They have done so in part because marriage as a legal commitment to an unreliable partner is not a good deal, because it makes it easier for fathers to assert custodial rights without necessarily giving the mothers anything in return.

Instead, women have increased their labor force participation and taken a wait-and-see attitude toward relationships. In this period, nonmarital births became more acceptable, and opposition to abortion hardened. Distress about high divorce rates reinforced reluctance to marry at all. The one thing that did not change was the willingness to have children.

With the Great Recession, the sharp class-based differences in reproductive strategies seem to be converging. There is significant further delay in marriage and childbearing and a small uptick in nonmarital births for college graduates. The increase is larger for African Americans and Latinas. However, the recession’s larger effect has been to persuade poorer women to adopt reproductive strategies more like those of elite women. That is, they appear to have become more likely to defer childrearing until they have reached a more stable financial position.

Overall, these strategies involve something of a convergence in approaches to hard times: both the elite and nonelite are deferring childbearing, and neither group insists on marriage as a precondition for family formation. Instead, the emphasis is on investment in men’s and women’s education and job prospects, use of contraception, and acceptance of children who are born along the way.

However, this somewhat greater agreement on cultural approaches to childbearing is not likely to bring about a convergence in family formation practices. Instead, disparities in available employment for elite and working-class men and women and growing regional disparities in employment and educational opportunities ensure a divergence in family formation practices. In this context, the best way to support families is by increasing access to contraception and if necessary abortion, so that childbirth can be a carefully planned choice; providing more early childhood support for all children and their parents; and adopting employment-strengthening economic policies.

Support Women. The difference in family form and family resources largely starts with unintended pregnancies, and unintended pregnancy rates are linked to the availability of contraception and to women’s economic opportunities. It is a truism that the best contraceptive is a promising future; it is also true, however, that recent drops in fertility correspond to hard times.

Improving women’s ability to control their reproduction increases the likelihood that they will stay in school or the labor market. And women who stay in the labor market or in school have lower unintended pregnancy rates. The causal connections between women’s well-being and their reproductive patterns are deeply interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

In addition, women who defer childbearing bring greater material and emotional resources to childrearing, and their children tend to have better outcomes, at least in part because of their parents’ greater well-being. Increasing women’s reproductive autonomy by simply encouraging a culture of family planning has a positive payoff for women and their children.

Several studies have shown that long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) substantially affect the unintended pregnancy and abortion rates. For example, the Colorado Family Planning Initiative found that expanding access to LARCs decreased births to disadvantaged teens by 27 percent and decreased abortions within the same population by 34 percent between 2009 and 2011. The most recent figures show that Colorado continues to enjoy declining teen births. These practices may lower overall fertility, because women who delay fertility tend to have fewer children over their lifetimes; it may also empower poorer women to enjoy the same ability to plan their reproductive lives that better-off women have enjoyed for the last 30 years.
Support Children. Children’s development is profoundly impacted by economic inequality and available levels of private, public, and community support. Improving their futures means focusing on rebuilding the networks that promote children’s well-being from the time of their mothers’ pregnancy and that manage employment, family gaps, and tensions.

Maternal Health and Newborn Assistance. New research indicates that a woman’s malnutrition during pregnancy contributes to adult hypertension, coronary artery disease, and diabetes. Moreover, the mother’s well-being immediately after birth has significant effects on newborn bonding, stimulation, nutrition, and physical and emotional health. Medicaid, which has expanded coverage under the Affordable Care Act, covers some prenatal services, supplies such as vitamins, some prenatal screening, delivery, and 60 days of postpartum care. However, when it comes to other services, including counseling, education, and support for breastfeeding, coverage varies significantly among states.

Important services for pregnant women include supplemental nutritional assistance. The Women, Infants, and Children program has generally, although not uniformly, been effective for families at the greatest risk of poor nutrition. Regular doctors’ visits after the child’s birth help provide instruction for new parents, identify health issues, and guide early interventions. Developmental delays and other problems are often prevented with intensive interventions at ages when the child’s neurological and other systems are still developing. Post-childbirth home visits can assist with support, education, and nutrition for new mothers.

Early Childhood. The quality of early care has a lasting effect on children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development. Among other effects, at-risk children who do not receive early, high-quality childhood education are more likely to become teen parents and to be arrested for violent crimes.

Indeed, investment in high-quality prekindergarten is one of the most effective strategies to raise academic achievement, narrow education gaps, and promote faster and more widely shared economic growth. The most effective programs have better-trained caregivers and low caregiver-to-child ratios, emphasizing cognitive stimulation and attention to the child’s emotional needs and skill development. However, subsidization is essential to ensure that such programs are available to the most at-risk children. Even middle class parents face problems paying for child care.

This is even an initiative with widespread partisan support. While Democrats are overwhelmingly in favor of early childhood initiatives, so are a majority of Republicans. The major objection to such programs is based on studies that indicate that even programs that show large initial gains in student achievement do not necessarily result in lasting differences in test-score results. A second objection is cost. State-funded preschool programs cost approximately $5,000 per child.

The best studies, however, evaluate the effects across several measures, not just test scores, and distinguish between well-designed programs with trained staff and less effective efforts, finding an effect on social and cognitive development that justifies the cost. Even if test scores are flat, Head Start graduates are somewhat more likely to graduate from high school and attend college.

The School System. Public schools provide an opportunity to maximize children’s futures, instilling values and fostering expectations about their future work and family lives. Smaller class sizes in elementary school and intensive college-preparation interventions in high school appear to have some positive effects.

The highest-achieving students in low-income communities act differently from students in high-income communities and are much less likely to apply to selective colleges. Instead, it is students’ class, rather than their academic accomplishments, that determines their choice of postsecondary education. While approximately one-third of high-achieving students in the lowest income quartile apply to selective colleges, almost 80 percent of those in the top income quartile apply.

Postsecondary Education. Even as more people enroll in college, attendance is skewed toward students from higher-income families. While men and women from higher-income families are equally likely to attend college, women from lower-income families are more likely to attend than men, both immediately after graduation
Getting that degree is an important step for economic advancement in a new economy—although this new economy must have jobs that matter. The tools to implement improved support already exist.

Consider community colleges, which enroll approximately eight million students. Community colleges are a much more affordable alternative to four-year institutions. They have open-admission programs, and they are usually geographically accessible. More than half of all Latino and Native American college students and more than 40 percent of all African American students are enrolled in community colleges, although blacks, Latinos, and low-income students are less likely to graduate than their white, higher-income counterparts are.

Many community colleges are developing programs that help all students stay in school and that focus on young mothers. Child care centers in the educational institutions themselves provide an important service for parents. Some community colleges offer classes to help students think through their reproductive health. Improving opportunities means attention to the affordability and flexibility of higher education, in ways that affect both men’s and women’s distinctive needs and life patterns.

Provide Workplace Support for Parents: Work-Family Balance. Most children live in households where all the adults are in the labor force, which means their parents are juggling work and family. Caring for the elderly, which slightly less than one in five employees do each year, is another stress. Half of these employees miss work because they need to care for the elderly.

High-income workers are the most likely to have flexible hours—with high work demands. Low-income workers are the most likely to enjoy some subsidies for child care, preschool, or other benefits, although many of these benefits have been cut during tough budget times. In between, however, many workers enjoy neither. For example, hourly workers in most offices have fixed hours and take time off at their own expense. They have no access to subsidized child care and often have no fallback if a child gets sick or needs emergency attention.

Increase Jobs. The most important area for change is increasing employment. First, raising the minimum wage would provide significant benefits. About half of the increase in the 50/10 measure of inequality can be accounted for by failure to increase the minimum wage. Second, encouraging job creation, particularly for working-class men, would increase the pool of marriageable men, especially given the connection between male income and marriage rates. Third, continuing unemployment insurance, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, and providing other employment-related benefits would help maintain family stability.

Conclusion

Ultimately, family demography is integrally related to employment and inequality, although the relationship is complex. Greater family stability is unlikely to occur without better employment opportunities, and stronger communities cannot exist without greater societal investment in children. “Jobs now” should be the true family values slogan.

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Appendix: Methodology

For Figures 1A–1E, we have two inclusion criteria: respondents must be in the labor force and working full time, and they must be between 30 and 50 years old. The first criterion is meant to exclude those for whom income is not relevant, and the second is intended to exclude individuals who put off marriage in their 20s (for example, to complete their educations).

For each of the three races of respondents—whites, blacks, and Latinos—we conducted a simple logistic regression model, predicting marital status (1 = married; 0 = all other categories) from three factors: income, education, and their interaction. The results are presented graphically in terms of predicted probabilities of being married as a function of (in most cases) three levels of income (lowest 20 percent, middle 60 percent, and highest 20 percent), and five education categories (Ph.D. or professional degree, B.A. or M.A., some college, high school graduate, less than high school graduate).

Figure 1A. Whites, Advanced Degree

Source: Authors’ calculations.
**Figure 1B. Whites, College Degree (B.A./M.A.)**

Source: Authors’ calculations.

**Figure 1C. Whites, Some College**

Source: Authors’ calculations.
Figure 1D. Whites, High School Diploma

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Figure 1E. Whites, Less Than a High School Diploma

Source: Authors’ calculations.
Figure 2A. Blacks, College Degree (B.A./M.A.)

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Figure 2B. Blacks, Less Than a College Degree

Source: Authors’ calculations.
Figure 3A. Latinos, College Degree (B.A./M.A.)

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Figure 3B. Latinos, Less Than a Degree

Source: Authors’ calculations.
Notes


4. These patterns differ sharply across racial and ethnic groups. Large majorities of white (72 percent) and Asian American (82 percent) children are living with two married parents, as are 55 percent of Hispanic children. By contrast, only 31 percent of black children are living with two married parents, while more than half (54 percent) are living in a single-parent household. Moreover, unmarried mothers have become increasingly likely to be living with the fathers of their children, even if the parents do not marry, with the number of nonmarital births within cohabiting unions rising from 41 percent of recent births in 2002 to 58 percent in 2006–10. See Sally Curtain, Stephanie Ventura, and Gladys Martinez, “Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 2014, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db162.pdf. The economic outcomes for these different types of families vary dramatically. In 2014, 31 percent of children living in single-parent households were living below the poverty line, as were 21 percent of children living with two cohabiting parents. By contrast, only 1 in 10 children living with two married parents were in this circumstance. In fact, more than half (57 percent) of those living with married parents were in households with incomes at least 200 percent above the poverty line, compared with just 21 percent of those living in single-parent households. Pew Research Center, “Parenting in America,” December 17, 2015, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/.


7. Heidi Shierholz and Lawrence Mishel, A Decade of Flat Wages: The Key Barrier to Shared Prosperity and a Rising Middle Class, Economic Policy Institute, August 21, 2013, Table 5, http://www.epi.org/publication/a-decade-of-flat-wages-the-key-barrier-to-shared-prosperity-and-a-rising-middle-class/.


10. Shierholz and Mishel, A Decade of Flat Wages.


15. The CPS is a sample household survey of the noninstitutional civilian population in the United States. Its primary task is to produce monthly statistics on unemployment and the labor force, which are published by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in its monthly bulletin in *Employment and Earnings*. The surveys also include information on geographic residence and mobility, school enrollment, marital status, and living arrangements.

16. Casselman, “Marriage Isn’t Dead—Yet.”


18. Shierholz and Mishel, *A Decade of Flat Wages*.


23. Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez, “Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing.”


30. Curtin, Ventura, and Martinez, “Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing.”

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


40. Eric Gould and M. Daniele Paserman, “Waiting for Mr. Right: Rising Inequality and Declining Marriage Rates,” *Journal of*
43. Ibid.
44. Raj Chetty et al., Where Is the Land of Opportunity?
47. Ibid., Figure 4.
Recently I attended and helped to organize a symposium on family law and public policy. About 40 of us—mostly family law professionals, state and local government officials, and family scholars—spent most of one day in a comfortable conference room in a big downtown Chicago law firm discussing the state of American families and how family law in the future might better support them. The presenters were smart and attractive, the conversation was serious, and the ideas flowed freely. The vibes in the room were positive. Everyone’s sincerity was palpable.

But at a gut level, my main reaction to the event was dismay. What upset me was not the answers being offered, but the questions being asked.

For me, the fundamental question is “What is best for families?” because the family as a US social institution is fragile and in crucial ways dysfunctional. An impressive body of research from numerous disciplines and diverse political perspectives suggests that the family is society’s seedbed institution and, therefore, that there is much truth to Margaret Mead’s famous dictum that “as the family goes, so goes the nation.”

To wrestle with the question of what is best for families, I have spent most of my professional life studying marriage and fatherhood and, in doing so, seeking to understand how family structure influences child outcomes. Why the focus on family structure? Because the evidence on families confirms a sociological truism: while process trumps structure, structure guides process.

Consider the role of fathers. Another of Margaret Mead’s family research dicta is that “every known human society rests firmly on the learned nurturing behavior of men.” For the father and for the larger society, what matters most is his behavior toward his child. Is he tender? Does he help her tie her shoes? Does he protect her? These are expressions of the fathering process, and nearly everyone (including me) agrees that these are the treasures we are after.

But the research also shows, as common sense suggests, that the more impersonal questions of structure—Does the father live with the child? Is he married to the child’s mother?—can decisively influence whether he is likely to behave tenderly toward her, protect her, and help her tie her shoes. Mead is far from the only anthropologist to propose that, for most men everywhere, the preconditions for effective fatherhood—the structural social arrangements that permit and reward “learned nurturing behavior”—are co-residency with the child and a stable partnership with the child’s mother, otherwise known in all human groups as “marriage.”

Structure shapes process. Or to put the proposition a bit differently, the process outcomes we want in family life will likely elude us unless we also attend to the structures that fit and encourage them. To me, therefore, and to many of my colleagues and others who study marriage and the family, family structure should be one of family policy’s first and most important concerns. We might even say that family structure is to family policy as the nude is to art—that is, one of its basic disciplines.

Yet in our conference on family policy that day, issues of family well-being generally, and issues of family structure in particular, evoked almost no interest. It was not that the conferees considered and rejected analyzing these topics as much as they simply acted as if these topics do not exist. (The greatest insult is not
ARE WE STILL MARRIED?

DAVID BLANKENHORN

to deny, but to ignore.) For us as a group that day—a group of policy and scholarly elites that struck me as fairly representative—the underlying question was not “What is best for families?” Instead, it seemed to be “What is best for the casualties?”

I am familiar with this way of thinking. For example, it has deeply influenced the field of social work for decades, but among family scholars and policymakers, I have rarely seen it less questioned and therefore more intellectually dominant. We may be approaching a tipping point. Conceptually, what will matter most is no longer the family as an institution, but groups of individuals with increasingly dire needs. Worrying about family structure becomes a waste of time as family policy itself is transformed into something akin to performing triage on a battlefield. What is needed in light of such requirements is not a theory of social institutions, but medicine, bandages, and courage under fire. For everyone involved—from policymakers and program directors to legal professionals and social scientists—the main presumed goal is to do the best one can under terrible conditions to save as many lives as possible.

Consider again the role of fathers. Historically, family policy toward fathers has centrally reflected the idea that biological fathers—even if they do not live with their children or get along with the mothers—can and should invest in their children by acting, to the degree possible, as social and legal fathers. This idea has long seemed valid to scholars and policymakers largely because public policy regarding absent fathers has been understood primarily as responsive to the societal phenomenon of family breakup. Father-sensitive family policies typically presumed, at least implicitly, that the ex-partners had once made meaningful commitments to each other, that a socially affirmed family structure had been created, and that children had been born into it—but that at some point those commitments had been abandoned and that structure had been split apart.

In such a context, the goal of family policy was to make the broken or disrupted family resemble as closely as possible the intact family, particularly regarding the treatment of children. In this way family policy aimed to “undo” at least some of the family’s unraveling and to reunite the fractured moieties to the degree possible. From this premise, certain policy objectives logically followed:

- If the absent father no longer voluntarily supports his child financially, should not public policy require him to maintain at least a certain level of child support payments to the mother?
- If the father no longer resides in the same home as his child, should not public policy permit and encourage him to visit the child as regularly as possible?
- If the father seems no longer willing to cooperate with the mother, should not public policy expect and enforce at least some cooperation?
- If the father no longer views his child’s mother as his spouse and lover, should not public policy create incentives and in some cases requirements for him to view her as a co-parent deserving of recognition and respect?

Today, this way of thinking about absent fathers seems increasingly anachronistic. Increasingly, many observers no longer view these men as even potentially a part of the solution to anything. Today’s paradigmatic social phenomenon regarding absent fathers is no longer family breakup, but the absence of effective family formation—not the old trend of viable family units fragmenting or weakening, but the new trend of them never having been formed in the first place. In short, for large and rapidly growing proportions of US absent fathers today, there has never been much of a family to break up.4

In our recent family policy conference, one could palpably sense that the old father-absence considerations, rooted in breakup, have been largely replaced by new ones, rooted in nonformation:

- Should fathers be presumed to have shared custody and visitation rights, even when the mothers do not want to share custody or encourage visitation? Well, maybe not. What exactly did these
guys do to deserve such a presumption? What good is likely to come of it?

- Should society expect and seek, insofar as possible, to require these fathers to be hands-on, attentive, loving, and protective fathers to their children? Well, maybe not. Few such expectations or requirements have ever been in place, from or for any of the adult parties involved. How can public policy reasonably be expected to protect, maintain, or institutionalize family connections that hardly existed in the first place? What good is likely to come from such efforts? What unintended and potentially harmful consequences for mothers and children might result from such efforts?

This newer way of thinking about absent fathers is only one example of a larger conceptual shift. When pervasive family dysfunction shifts in our thinking from a crisis we should confront to a condition we must realistically accept—from a foreground policy consideration to a background intellectual assumption—many questions of family well-being and nearly all questions of family structure become passé. After all, what can we realistically expect to gain? Is it worth our time to search through the rubble for bits of treasure?

A transformation in the field of family policy in which individuals increasingly replace families as our main objects of concern is a profound change indeed. At our recent family policy conference, many policy reforms were discussed, including a number I favor, but I do not recall a single idea or proposal during the entire conference offered specifically as a strategy for enhancing family well-being, much less strengthening family structure. Mostly, presenters seemed comfortable in their assumption that their favored macro-level policy reforms—in particular, for these presenters, those aiming at more social justice, less institutional racism, more and better jobs and job training, and a less punitive criminal justice system—willy-nilly constitute today’s best strategies for “helping families,” which seem, as best I could tell, little different from saying “helping people.”

To be fair, I agree that genuine economic, civil rights, and social justice improvements in the US, in addition to all the other good things they are likely to do, are likely to enhance family well-being and may help indirectly to strengthen family structure. So I am not disputing the idea that good economic policy, for example, can also be good family policy. On the contrary, I have been a part of several efforts to make just such arguments. But surely “family policy,” if such a way of thinking is to continue at all, must mean more than simply “desirable policy,” even after we all agree that the latter can be a friend of the former. At our family policy conference, I searched for this foundational notion of our work—the notion that meaningful family policy originates from and is animated by an articulated intention to strengthen the family as an institution and that strengthening marriage and family structure are therefore their own worthwhile public policy objectives—but did not find it.

Moreover, in my view, this conference’s intellectual center of gravity is not idiosyncratic or unrepresentative today. On the contrary, what I am calling the new underlying question—What is best for the casualties?—appears now to be thoroughly mainstream and may even be on its way to occupying pride of place in the US family policy debate.

Representative or not, and notwithstanding some of its strengths, I dissent from this way of thinking. In this essay, I contest this view of family policy’s future and offer an alternative. Specifically, I argue for the continuing and even growing importance of family structure as a topic within family policy studies and for the importance in the years ahead, especially in light of current family trends, of establishing the strengthening of family structure in America as a legitimate and important goal of public policy. More broadly, I argue—in light of current trends and in some instances despite them—for

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the possibility and desirability of an emergent trans-partisan cultural familialism as a meaningful cue for public policy reform, particularly regarding marriage and family structure. In this essay, familialism is defined as a cultural value placing a high priority on family identification and commitment, mutual assistance among family members, and sustained investment in family relationships.

Here is a story. It is just pretend:

One day a villager went down to the river and saw a child thrashing in the currents. The villager jumped in and rescued the child. The next day, another villager pulled another child out of the water. The day after that, four children were discovered in the river, three of whom were rescued.

Distressed and alarmed, villagers began taking turns standing watch at the river’s edge. And that was a good idea, because with each passing day, more and more children floated by in distress. As the villagers became better organized and more skilled and determined in their rescue efforts, many children were saved, but many were lost as well. After a while, despite the village-wide effort, and as the numbers of children in the river continued to grow, more were lost each week than were saved.

The villagers held a meeting to decide what to do next. Some wanted to continue their current efforts, only with more energy, resources, and expertise. But others wanted to travel upstream to learn what specifically was putting these children in the river in the first place and what might be done to stop it. They argued that, as a strategy, trying to rescue steadily growing numbers of distressed children as they floated by was absolutely necessary, but certainly not sufficient.

**Ten Trends Likely to Influence the Future of US Families**

In 1963, the highly distinguished family sociologist William J. Goode, examining family patterns worldwide as well as current economic and demographic trends, predicted a global convergence in the coming years based on the model of a “conjugal” married-couple family, a trend that he believed would include stable and perhaps reduced levels of out-of-wedlock childbearing in the US and elsewhere. Goode was a brilliant scholar. But obviously, as regards family structure, he did not foresee what would become arguably the most important family structure trend of the next half century. I say this not to criticize Goode, but to remind us that none of us can predict the future.

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Trends are so tricky. For starters, it is simple and therefore tempting to assume that today’s main trends are somehow locked into place, destined to continue unabated along current lines for as far into the future as we dare to look. Of course, no such assumption is warranted. In most cases, there is nothing permanent or inevitable about a trend, even a familiar one—quite the opposite. In addition, the emergence of new, large, and quite surprising trends that few had predicted or planned for—such as the post–World War II baby boom—is probably the only thing we can count on.

For these reasons, I want to insist, prior to any of my weak attempts at prognostication, that I simply do not know and cannot with any confidence predict what trends will be dominant in American family life two or three or four decades from now. The best any of us can do, I think, is to try to understand the meaning of current trends as clearly as possible, on the grounds that at least some of them may influence some aspects of the future.
Second, we should never assume that the proper stance toward a trend is servility. Treating a trend as a fixed variable is a choice, not a requirement, because trends cannot tell us what to do or why we should do it. They do not carry moral weight or have moral voices. They are certainly not self-justifying. Accordingly, scholars and policymakers have no reason to be submissive before even the most imposing trends. In fact, most of us find ample reason to stand against a trend we believe to be harmful, regardless of what the oddsmakers say. The famous management consultant Peter Drucker—who observed that “trying to predict the future is like trying to drive down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window”\(^1\)—encapsulated this idea nicely when he said that “the best way to predict the future is to create it.”\(^1\)

At the same time, Don Quixote’s tilting at windmills was ultimately an act of inspired madness, rather than effective engagement with the world, because he declined to take certain basic social realities into account. He acted entirely without reference to current trends.

So let us not repeat his mistake. Even though it is true that demography is not destiny and that an “is” cannot be the same as an “ought,” our family choices are importantly conditioned by current societal realities and trends, which means that they can and should inform our thinking about the future of the family. Toward that end, I want to adumbrate the 10 current trends that I believe are most likely to influence both the future of US marriage and family life and the future of the US family policy debate.

1. **Smaller Proportions of Children Growing Up with Their Fathers.** The largest and most pervasive consequence of the family structure trends of our era is the loss of fatherhood. More US men are spending more of their lives estranged from their children and from the mothers of their children, and more US children are spending more of their lives living apart from their fathers and being less likely to receive the psychological, social, spiritual, and economic advantages that come from loving and being loved by a father.

   Six then-and-now family structure comparisons reveal the main story:

   - **Fewer Children in Married-Couple Homes.** In 1980, about 79 percent of US children lived in married-couple homes, and about 61 percent lived with two parents in a first marriage. In 2014, about 64 percent lived in married-couple homes, and about 46 percent—less than half of all children—lived with two parents in a first marriage.\(^1\)

     Comparing family structures other than two parents in a first marriage in 1960 with those in 2014, we discover that the proportion of children in remarried homes remained about the same over this 55-year period (from 14 percent to 15 percent); the proportion living with unmarried cohabiting parents increased from effectively zero to 7 percent; and the proportion living with only one parent (their mothers in about 80 percent of these cases) increased from 9 percent to 26 percent.\(^1\)

   - **More Children Born to Unmarried Women.** The proportion of US children born to unmarried women was 5 percent in 1960, 18 percent in 1980, and 41 percent in 2009—an astonishing 80 percent increase in less than five decades.\(^1\)

     Today, more than half of all births to US women under age 25 are to unmarried mothers.\(^1\)

   - **More Cohabiting Unmarried Parents.** The phenomenon of unwed cohabiting parents was all but nonexistent as late as 1960, but today large and rapidly increasingly proportions of US children spend some of their childhood in this type of family. Remarkably, the demographers Sheela Kennedy and Larry Bumpass estimate that currently in the US more than half of all unmarried mothers who give birth are in a cohabiting relationship and that “almost half of the children in the United States can be expected to spend some time in a cohabiting family.”\(^1\)

     Research suggests that, for children, the fundamental consequence of increasing nonmarital cohabitation is an increase in family instability, as custodial parents (mainly mothers) move in and out of romantic and sexual relationships.\(^1\) For example, Bumpass and Hsieh-Hen Lu report that
US children born to married parents spend about 88 percent of childhood in two-parent families. For those born to cohabiting parents, the number is 74 percent. For those born to unmarried mothers, it is 52 percent. More dramatically, US children born to married parents now spend about 84 percent of childhood in married-couple families. For children born to cohabiting parents, the number is 47 percent. For those born to unmarried mothers, it is 37 percent.¹⁸

**More Family Complexity.** “Family complexity” refers to the presence in family households of half-siblings or step-siblings. Once associated primarily with stepfamilies, family complexity today is increasing in the US across family structures: in mother-headed homes as a result of multipartner fertility, in cohabiting couples and to a lesser extent in married-couple homes as a result of relationship dissolution and re-partnering, and as a result of remarriages creating stepfamilies.

Today an estimated 9 percent of all children are experiencing family complexity, including 8 percent of children in homes headed by the two biological unmarried parents, 9 percent in mother-headed homes, 21 percent in homes headed by one biological parent cohabiting outside of marriage with a partner who is biologically unrelated to the child (think “boyfriend”), and 39 percent in married-couple stepfamilies.¹⁹

Recent research suggest that family complexity is “independently associated with economic disadvantage” for children²⁰ as well as with negative child outcomes in the areas of academic performance and behavioral adjustment.²¹

**Fewer Children Living with Their Biological Fathers.** In 1990, about 70 percent of children under age 18 were living with their biological fathers. By 2013, the figure had dropped to 63 percent.²²

**More Children Separated from Their Fathers for at Least Some of Their Childhood.** Of US children born between 1970 and 1984, about half are estimated to have spent a significant part of their childhoods living apart from their fathers. For US children under age 18, at least 60 percent will likely spend some of their childhoods living apart from their fathers.²³

The six then-and-now family structure snapshots shown here suggest that we may be entering into a new era of US family life—one characterized by the preponderance and cultural importance of a historically new family type that I suggest we call the *unformed family*.

If there is such a thing as an iconography of American family life, we might think of the 1950s as a peak period for the *married family*. It was an era of lots of families forming, familism as an important cultural value, and the middle-class married couple as iconographic.

Similarly, the 1980s might have been the peak for the *divorced family*. It was an era of lots of families breaking up, individualism as an important cultural value, and the upscale recent divorcée starting over as iconographic.

I am suggesting that the 2010s may represent movement toward a peak period for the *unformed family*. It would be an era of lots of families never really forming at all, with ambivalence toward individualism as an important cultural value, and young blue-collar parents looking and looking some more for partners as iconographic.

Let’s attempt a definition. By “unformed family,” I mean a family in which the biological father’s founding and continuing bonds to his child and to the mother of his child are tenuous to the point of being sociologically insignificant. Specifically:

- There is little if any serious or binding commitment to the mother, neither a certificate of marriage nor its informal equivalent;
- There is no enduring coresidency with either the child or the child’s mother;
- There is little, if any, cooperative joining of the two extended families;
There are few if any realistic personal expectations of or surrounding social supports for successful family formation; and

The father’s contributions over time to his child’s well-being are minor to nonexistent, such that measurable child outcomes in such families are essentially the same as the outcomes in mother-headed families.

A child in an unformed family can and likely will experience family life over time in a variety of living arrangements. For example, she could live alone with her mother, with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend or partner, or with her mother and father for a short period of time. Three fundamental traits of unformed families are high levels of partnership dissolution and repartnering, household and family instability, and family complexity.

Particularly important, especially for child well-being, is the fact that, compared with other family types, unformed families tend to experience a high number of “family transitions.” It is well known, for example, that large and growing numbers of US couples are unmarried and cohabiting at the time of their child’s birth. Yet from a child’s vantage point, the more likely way to experience the mother’s cohabitation is after birth, either when she as a single mother begins cohabiting with a partner or when the birth parents split and the mother begins living with a new partner.

A weakness of “unformed family” as an analytic category is that it cannot be used to classify families at any one point in time. For example, the term “single-parent family” means that only one parent is living in the family home at the time of measurement. Similarly, the term “fragile family” means that the child’s parents are unmarried at the time of the child’s birth. The concept of the “unformed family” does not permit such precise, point-in-time demographic snapshots.

But the term’s weakness is also its strength. The category is intended to capture the reality and measure the consequences of family living arrangements over the duration of childhood from a child’s point of view, for a very large and rapidly growing proportion of families...
that have certain defining features in common, the most important of which is structural and pervasive father-absence.

 Particularly in the last several decades, as Bumpass and others have pointed out, the rapidity of change and the growing fluidity of American family structure appear to have overwhelmed the capacity of our existing conceptual tools to measure and understand it. The concept of the “unformed family” may be one way to address this problem.25

How prevalent is the unformed family in the US today? How rapidly is it spreading?

The most important data are presented in Table 1. In 1980, two-thirds of all US children living only with their mothers got there due to divorce or marital separation, while fewer than one in five got there because their parents never married. That year, the children of marital breakdown outnumbered the children of non-marriage in the US by about four to one.

Today, only 34 years later, we live in a remarkably different world, especially from a child’s point of view.

For US children, the change from the era of the divorced family to the era of the unformed family is a change of both degree and kind: there is much more fatherlessness, and the fatherlessness is harmful in more ways. Much More Fatherlessness. In about half of the homes of these children, the mothers are living with the fathers at the time of the child’s birth, which means that about 20 percent of children are born into unmarried cohabiting-couple households.26 In another approximately 30 percent of these homes, the parents are not living together at the time of birth, but have a romantic and sexual relationship.27

In the two to three years following the births of the children, most of these couples break up, including about 40 percent of the cohabiting couples.28 By the children’s fifth birthdays, only about one-third of the couples are living together. About one-third of the fathers have disappeared almost entirely from their children’s lives. Researchers report that “new partnerships and new children are common, leading to high instability and growing complexity in these families.” They also report high levels of distrust of the opposite sex and a widespread belief among the mothers that a single mother can raise a child as well as a married mother.29

One study finds that, by the age of nine, children born to cohabiting parents are more than twice as likely as children born to married parents to experience the breakup of their parents.30 Examining these cohabiting-parent unions, the family sociologist Frank F. Furstenberg concludes: “Typically the cohabiting relationship dissolves before a marriage occurs; they are in effect ‘still-born’ marriages that never see the light of day.”31

To me, “still-born” seems to be another way of suggesting “unformed.” A key trait of these families is frequently changing family relationships. Family sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin describes US family structure

### Table 1. Mother’s Marital Status Among Children in Mother-Only Households, 1980–2014 (percent)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married, Spouse Absent</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married/Single</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

patterns today as a “marriage-go-round”: “The percentage of children experiencing three or more mother’s partners today in the United States is probably higher than in any Western country at any time in the past several centuries.”32 More generally Cherlin concludes that “family life in the United States involves more transitions than anywhere else.”33

*Harmful in More Ways.* Probably the most telling indicator of the degree of fatherlessness in today’s unformed families here is that child outcomes in homes in which unmarried parents are cohabiting appear to be about the same as outcomes for children in mother-only homes. These outcome areas include mother-infant relationships, home environments of children, behavioral and emotional problems, and school performance.34

What explains such findings? Summarizing a large body of evidence, Cherlin tells us that “children who experience a series of transitions” appear to experience more problems than those who do not, including even children in stable one-parent homes, as suggested by some studies.35

So let’s follow the bouncing trend. An overwhelming body of research suggests that the best outcomes for children are associated with married-couple families,36 but what is the rest of the family-structure ranking? Helping to answer that question, here is a widely accepted research finding from the Census Bureau in 1997: “Children living with a divorced parent typically have a big edge over those living with a parent who has never married.”37

That is a divorce-era statement. It is not surprising for such research to show that children of divorced fathers tend to fare better than children of never-married fathers. But as we enter into the era of the unformed family, a very surprising finding is that, when it comes to measuring whether and how a never-married father contributes to his child’s well-being over time, it does not seem to matter much whether he was living with the mother at the time of birth or not. In either case, the father-child bond is usually tenuous at best, and his positive contribution to the family tends to be sociologically trivial.

The unformed family as an important social presence appears to be something new in world history. That fact alone does not prove that this family type is harmful, either to itself or to society, but it does suggest that we should pay attention and at least initially we should be more startled than blasé.

There is a seemingly universal principle of human kinship that anthropologists call bilateral filiation. It seems that all or nearly all human groups clearly favor in both law and custom the principle that the human child should be raised by its mother and father together in a partnership. Many researchers at many times and in many ways have made this fundamental claim about human sexual and family life.

*The unformed family as an important social presence appears to be something new in world history.*

An early and famous statement of it comes from the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who argued that in all known human societies “the group of mother and child is incomplete and the sociological position of the father is regarded universally as indispensable.” Specific features and expressions of bilateral filiation vary from society to society, depending on a range of factors, but through all these variations there runs the rule that the father is indispensable for the full sociological status of the child as well as of its mother, that the group consisting of a woman and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate. The father, in other words, is necessary for the full legal status of the family.38

The influential American sociologist Talcott Parsons similarly concludes that the nuclear family, which is “universal to all known human societies,” contains two core features. The first is a mother raising her child. The second feature is that the mother has “a special relationship to a man outside her descent group who is sociologically the ‘father’ of the child, and that this relationship is the focus of the ‘legitimacy’ of the child, of his referential status in the larger kinship system.”39
Similarly, for the prominent kinship anthropologist Meyer Fortes, the weight of evidence constantly brings us back to the proposition that no one can become a complete social person if he is not presentable as legitimately fathered as well as mothered. He must have a demonstrable *pater*, ideally one who is individually specified as his responsible upbringer, for he must be equipped to relate himself to other persons and to society at large bilaterally, by both matri-kinship and patri-kinship. Lacking either side, he will be handicapped, either in respect of the ritual statuses and moral capacities that every complete person must have . . . or in the political-jural and economic capacities and attributes that are indispensable for conducting himself as a normal right-and-duty bearing person.40

These examples could be multiplied many times. Although belief in the universality of bilateral filiation is not universal among scholars, the consensus is broad and deep enough to be quite impressive, such that the remaining arguments tend to focus more on secondary issues than on its essentials.41 It really does seem that human groups have always been quite serious about fathers being connected to their children and to the mothers of their children.

Until now. The essential feature and consequence of the unformed family—and the main result of the family structure trend of our time—is the evisceration of fatherhood. As Sara McLanahan puts it, years of research suggest that the “first and most important” consequence of current family structure trends in the United States is the “weakening connection between the child and the father.”42 Arguably the two most tragic aspects of this weakening are the child’s loss of trust in the father, which appears to contribute to a loss of trust more generally, including in the possibility of loving and being loved,43 and the diminishment of men’s well-being and life prospects.44

In 2005, Paul Amato called the father-diminishing shifts in US family structure “perhaps the most profound change in the American family over the past four decades.”45 Unless we decide to create some new trends, their continuance will likely be the most profound family change in the coming four decades as well.

2. Two Americas, Increasingly Separate and Unequal, Divided by Family Structure. Recently two of America’s most prominent public intellectuals, one a leading conservative and the other a leading liberal, published much-anticipated books on the American condition and the future of the American dream. The books make the same core argument: We are becoming two nations. About a third of Americans, whom we might call upscale America, are generally thriving and moving ahead, while the rest of us are falling increasingly behind on nearly every measure, such that what used to be the great American middle class is no longer great and no longer secure. Both authors view this new class bifurcation, now at least several decades in the making, as the most important domestic challenge facing the nation.

*The essential feature and consequence of the unformed family—and the main result of the family structure trend of our time—is the evisceration of fatherhood.*

The authors—Charles Murray in *Coming Apart* and Robert Putnam in *Our Kids*—create similar literary devices to tell their stories. Murray provides us with a finely grained, four-decade comparison of two American communities: the upscale world of “Belmont” and the working-class world of “Fishtown.” Putnam similarly frames his inquiry by revisiting Port Clinton, Ohio, the blue-collar town where he graduated from high school in 1959, to tell us with great poignancy what has happened in and to that blue-collar world since the 1950s. Notwithstanding their political differences—when it comes to end-of-the-book policy prescriptions, Putnam is reliably liberal, Murray is consistently libertarian, and therefore neither is particularly surprising—these authors see essentially the same America and offer their fellow citizens the same warning.46

Both authors build their arguments largely on research done by others, and the proposition that America is splitting along class lines into two nations, increasingly separate and increasingly unequal, is not original to either of them.47
This historically recent, class-based bifurcation involving the upscale and rising 30 percent and the downwardly mobile 70 percent is evidenced by many measurements, including education, family structure, income and job security, household debt, physical and mental health and life expectancy, interpersonal and social trust, happiness, faith in the future, the likelihood of experiencing poverty, neighborhood quality and safety, outcomes for children, and many others.

Of these indicators pointing to various domains of life, which indicators appear to be important causes—which are significantly contributing to the growing class divide—and which appear to be mainly results, or manifestations, of the divide? The short answer is that no one knows for sure and that scholars disagree on the answers. Murray and Putnam have apparent disagreements on these questions. At the same time, there is growing agreement among diverse scholars that family structure is not only a result or manifestation of the new class divide, but also an important cause. For example, summarizing a large body of evidence, McLanahan and Christine Percheski conclude that “family structure has become an important mechanism for the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequalities.” In 2015, more than 100 family scholars and leaders of civil society (I was one of them) similarly concluded that “American marriage today is becoming a class-based and class-propagating institution.”

The sheer dimensions of the family-structure gap separating American classes are startling:

- In 2011, the child of a US woman with a bachelor’s degree or higher had a less than 10 percent chance of being born out of wedlock, while the child of a woman with a high school degree or less had a greater than 50 percent chance of being born to a single mother. This gap has been growing steadily over time.

- If we examine, for example, trend lines in the percentages of US women who are unmarried mothers at age 35, we see significant class changes from 1970 to 2010. That proportion rose among all groups of women since 1970, but among the college-educated it rose only slightly, to about 3 percent. Among those with high school or less, it rose to more than one in six.

- Figure 2, which presents data from a 2012 Brookings Institution study, shows the relationship between earnings and marital status for men in 1970 and in 2010. In 1970, socioeconomic status barely affected men’s marital status because the vast majority of men were married, regardless of income level. By 2010, only about half of US men at the 25th earnings percentile were married, compared with 80 percent at the 90th percentile, with a steep gradient in between.

- Among all US men who were between the ages of 45 and 52 in 2010–11, about half of those with high school diplomas but no college were still in their first marriages. Within that same age cohort, about three-quarters of men who had bachelor’s degrees or higher were still in their first marriages.

- In the recent Pew study “The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground,” the researchers describe the hollowing out of the American middle class and growing economic inequality in terms of current “demographic winners and losers.” The report says: “Winners [in the current economy] also included married adults, especially couples where both work. On the flip side, being unmarried is associated with an economic loss. This coincides with a period in which marriage overall is on the decline but is increasingly linked to higher educational attainment.”

- A 1999 study finds that during their 17 years of childhood about 81 percent of all children of unmarried parents experience poverty. For the children of married parents, the figure is
22 percent. These differences are dramatic: “Children in nonmarried households who are 1 year old have exceeded the risk of poverty than children in married households experience during their entire 17 years of childhood.”

- Between 1982 and 2006–08, the percentage of 14-year-old US girls living with both parents did not change for the daughters of college-educated women. For both periods, the percentage was about 80 percent. Yet for 14-year-old girls of mothers who had graduated from high school but not a four-year college, the percentage dropped from 74 to 58. For the daughters of the least-educated mothers, it dropped from 65 to 52.

Similarly, Charles Murray estimates that in white working-class Fishtown, among children whose mothers turned age 40 between 1997 and 2004, about 30 percent or less lived with both of their parents. By contrast, in upper-middle-class Belmont, the figure was about 90 percent—a divergence so large that it, according to Murray, “puts the women of Belmont and Fishtown into different family cultures.” These and similar findings lead Murray to conclude: “Over the last half century, marriage has become the fault line dividing American classes.”

Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution writes: “It used to be that most children were raised by their married parents. For the children of the college-educated elites, that’s still true. But for the rest of America, meaning roughly two-thirds of all children, it’s no longer the case.”

It seems highly likely that these changing correlations over time also imply causation.

June Carbone and Naomi Cahn write: “For the majority of Americans who haven’t graduated from college, marriage rates are low, divorce rates are high, and a first child is more likely to be born to parents who are single than to parents who are married.” The result is that marriage “has emerged as a marker of the new class lines remaking American society. Stable unions have become a hallmark of privilege.”

“The result of these changes is a new elite—an elite
whose dominant position is magnified by the marriage market.”

The trend of two Americas divided by family structure makes everything that I described about the loss of fatherhood both much better and much worse—much better for upscale America, where the presence and impact of these trends are comparatively slight, and much worse for the rest of the country, about two-thirds of us, where the presence and impact of these trends are dramatic indeed.

3. More Assortative Mating. Assortative mating refers to the likelihood of people marrying others like themselves, from within their group. It is the phenomenon of “like marrying like” and is common in human societies. In the United States assortative mating by education—for example, the likelihood of four-year college graduates marrying one another—slowly declined over the course of the first half of the 20th century, then in a broad U-turn reversed direction and began a steady increase, particularly after about 1970. Today in the US, the likelihood of endogamy, or marrying someone within one’s own group, in educational attainment is higher than at any time since the 1940s.

Some research suggests that trends in assortative mating correlate with trends in economic inequality—that is, the two trend lines tend to rise and fall in tandem. There is also some evidence that endogamy in the US is intergenerationally transmitted.

Therefore, high and growing levels of assortative mating in the US also likely contribute to (and reflect) growing economic inequality in the society. They also likely contribute to (and reflect) class segregation and what Christine R. Schwartz and Robert D. Mare call “social closure,” or the tendency of Americans increasingly to separate themselves along economic, educational, and philosophical-cultural lines.

4. Smaller Proportions of Adults Who Are Married. In 1974, about 70 percent of eligible voters in the United States were married. Today that figure is 52 percent.

To partially control for the decline in the proportion of married adults due to delayed first marriages, we can look at the proportion of US adults ages 35–44 who are married. In 1960, that number was about 88 percent. In 2011, it was about 65 percent.

From 1970 to 1995, the proportion of life that Americans spent never married increased for men from 37 percent to 47 percent and for women from 31 percent to 40 percent.

For as long as such numbers have been recorded, more than 90 percent of US women have been married at least once by the age of 45. In 1960, probably an historic high point, the number was 94 percent. For US women born in 1995 and after, the projected figure is about 88 percent. For men, the projected figure is about 82 percent.

These declines have been fairly steady across the decades and fairly consistent across the states.

During their 17 years of childhood about 81 percent of all children of unmarried parents experience poverty.

For the children of married parents, the figure is 22 percent.

5. Smaller Families. Birthrates have been gradually declining for most of US history. They reached a low point during the Great Depression of the 1930s and then suddenly began to increase after World War II. In 1957, at the high point of the postwar baby boom, an American woman gave birth to an average of 3.7 children during the years of her fertility.

About two decades later, in 1976, that number (measuring so-called total or completed fertility) had dropped to about 3 and in 1990 stood at about 2. In 2007, at the onset of the Great Recession, it was about 2.1, and in 2013 was about 1.9, just under the replacement level.

The modest decreases in total US fertility rates during the past decade are likely attributable primarily to short-term responses to economic recession and unemployment, the decline in immigration from Mexico, and declining fertility among both US Latinas and US teens and young adults.

Other factors that may contribute to stable and possibly lower US birthrates in coming years include
improvements in contraception; the weakening of marriage as a social institution; more US women enrolling in and completing college (currently more young women than young men go to college here); and higher women's wages and labor force participation, both absolutely and as compared with men. Both higher women's wages and labor force participation (like higher educational achievement) are associated with delayed childbearing and smaller families.  

These trends have had, and will likely continue to have, important effects on US households and on what might be called American family culture. In the mid-19th century, for example, an estimated three of every four US households contained children under age 18. A century later, in the 1960s, that number was about half, and in 2011, it was only about 32 percent. Similarly, due to both declining fertility and more family breakups, the proportion of an American adult's life spent living with a spouse and children dropped from an estimated 62 percent in 1960, the highest in our history, to an estimated 43 percent in 1985, the lowest in our history to date.  

As late as the mid-1970s, about 40 percent of US women by the end of their childbearing years had given birth to four or more children. Today about 40 percent of US women have a completed fertility rate of about two, and about 14 percent have had four or more children. During these same four decades, the proportion of US women who have had one child has doubled, from 11 percent to 22 percent.  

6. More Older Americans. Decreasing fertility rates, longer life expectancy, and in shorter term the aging of the outsized baby-boom generation (born 1946–64) are producing an aging US population, such that “Don’t trust anyone over 30,” the popular youth slogan from the 1960s, is now well into its dotage and is unlikely to be revived any time soon. As late as 1980, about half of the US population was under age 30, and about 11 percent was over age 65. Today about 40 percent are under age 30 and about 15 percent over age 65.  

Looking ahead, the States of Change project estimates that, between 2015 and 2060, the proportion of Americans under age 18 will decline about 4 percentage points while the proportion age 65 and over will increase by about 8 percentage points. Similarly, the proportion of the US population in the prime working years of ages 25–54, which peaked in the mid-1990s at about 44 percent (thanks largely to the baby boomers), is now at about 40 percent and is projected to stand at about 37 percent in 2060.

Due to both declining fertility and more family breakups, the proportion of an American adult’s life spent living with a spouse and children dropped from an estimated 62 percent in 1960 to an estimated 43 percent in 1985, the lowest in our history to date.

Currently, working-age (ages 18–64) Americans support more children than retirees, but that will change over the next few decades. Today the US old-age dependency ratio (the number of Americans age 65 and older relative to the number of working-age Americans) is about 25, while the youth dependency ratio (the number of Americans under age 18 relative to the number of working-age Americans) is about 38. By about 2033, both ratios will be about 36. By 2060, the old-age ratio will climb to about 42, significantly surpassing the youth ratio, which will be an estimated 35.

7. Less Political Support for Children. As William Galston points out in his essay for this project, compared with many European nations, US social spending has for generations tilted significantly toward support for the aged, compared with support for children. Galston also points to several current US trends that may contribute to even less political support for social spending on children in the coming decades.

One trend is changes in the age structure of the country, as we become a society in which smaller proportions of us are under age 18, smaller proportions live in family households with children, and larger proportions are over age 65. A second trend is differences
by age cohort in degrees of racial and ethnic diversity. In the next few decades, all US age cohorts will become more diverse, but diversity is increasing significantly more rapidly among the young. By 2020, for example, a majority (52 percent) of children will be members of minority groups, whereas the population as a whole will not reach “majority-minority status until about mid-century.” By 2060, an estimated 64 percent of US children will belong to racial and ethnic minorities.

Robert Putnam and others have argued that, while in the long term racial and ethnic diversity tends to benefit societies, in the short term it tends to lower trust, altruism, and community cooperation. Therefore, as Galston puts it, looking at the prospects over the next several decades of effective political support for social spending on children: “Much depends on whether the oldest Americans will be willing to help finance opportunity-enhancing programs for predominantly nonwhite cohorts of children and young adults.”

8. Less Trust. Compared with historical levels dating back to the 1950s, Americans since the beginning of this century have become increasingly less trusting of government. This trend likely has multiple sources, but several scholars have argued that “a primary consequence of [political] polarization is that it undermines citizens’ trust in the capacity of government to solve problems.” It is probably more than coincidental that high levels of polarization in Congress coexist with low levels of public trust in Congress. Relatedly, Americans since 2000 have also been less trusting of numerous other key social institutions, including organized religion, banks, public schools, television news, and newspapers.

Finally and arguably most importantly, especially as regards marriage and family, Americans today compared with earlier generations are considerably less trusting of one another. For example, a 2013 study reports that, since the mid-1980s, trust in others in America has “declined dramatically,” in part due to “generational replacement” as “more trusting generations of Americans have been dying and being replaced by younger, less trusting Americans.”

Summing up these trends, a 2013 study reports: “Trust in others and confidence in institutions, two key indicators of social capital, reached historic lows among Americans in 2012 in two nationally representative surveys that have been administered since the 1970s.”

Looking at trend lines dating back to the 1960s, Putnam describes more than four decades in the US of “declining generalized trust and reciprocity.”

All our instruments agree that trust is a very important thing: the indispenisible social glue that helps make possible the rule of law, effective governmental institutions, a thriving civil society, and economic dynamism. On many key indicators of well-being, high-trust societies do better than low-trust societies.

In particular, trust is important in building what scholars call social capital. In fact, Putnam, arguably our finest scholar on the twin topics of social capital and civil society, succinctly defines social capital as “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness.” Relatedly, the social scientist Robert Sampson points out that mutual trust is a critical component of what he calls “collective efficacy.”

Trends in trust in the United States also appear to correlate at least partially with trends in US family structure. As we have seen, research suggests that the loss of fatherhood connected to the spread of unformed families leads both to a lowering of children’s trust in their fathers as well as to a growing sexual and gender mistrust between mothers and fathers, both of which in turn likely contribute to (as they are also influenced by) the more general decline of trust in the society. More broadly, as Putnam and others have argued, the overall weakening of many institutions of civil society, not just the family, in recent decades—famously described by Putnam in his book Bowling Alone—appears to contribute to the diminishment of trust in the society, which in turn helps to deplete social capital.

Although interpersonal and social trust appear to have been declining since about the mid-1960s and therefore should inform our thinking about family and social policy as we look to the future, we should remind ourselves again that nothing is inevitable or irreversible about this trend or other trends. If US individuals and institutions become more trustworthy in the future, which certainly seems both desirable and possible,
interpersonal and social trust will surely increase. We will have reversed a key trend.

Three decades ago, my friend, the late Richard John Neuhaus, convened a gathering of US thought leaders to discuss whether the United States could properly be called a “secular or secularizing society.” For many participants, including Neuhaus, the answer was “no.” As he put it, drawing in part on a large body of survey data on the depth and breadth of US religiosity, Americans in the 1980s were “as peculiarly religious as they have been thought to be in the past, and probably even more so.”

In 1985, this thesis was controversial but supportable. Today, it seems simply invalid. It seems clear that America in the 2010s, although not a secular society, is a secularizing one:

- In 1984, about 64 percent of Americans said they had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the church or organized religion. In 2015, that number stood at 42 percent.
- In 1984, about 13 percent of Americans said that religion was “not very important” to them. In 2007, that number was 16 percent, and in 2014 it had risen to 22 percent.
- Arguably the single biggest shift in American religiosity in recent decades has been the growing proportion of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated (the so-called “nones”). In a national Election Day survey in 1984, about 99 percent of voters stated a religious affiliation. In 2014, about 23 percent of Americans said that they did not belong to any organized faith.
- Between 2007 and 2014, Christians as a proportion of the US population dropped from 78 to 71 percent. In those same years, the “nones,” rising from 16 to 23 percent of the population, experienced a stronger rate of growth than any US Christian group and any US non-Christian faith group.

Politically, among Democrats and Democratic-leaning adults, “nones” are now more numerous than Catholics, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, or members of historically black Protestant traditions.99 “Nones” are increasing as proportions of all US age cohorts, but the increases are particularly robust among millennials (adults who were born between 1981 and 1996), especially younger millennials. In 2014, about 35 percent of US millennials were “nones,” compared to 17 percent of baby boomers.100

At the same time, among the significant majority of Americans who are religiously affiliated, some evidence—including how often people read scripture, share their faith with others, and participate in small prayer or scripture study groups—suggests modest increases in recent years in US religious observance and devotion.101

In addition, Richard Neuhaus and his colleagues got some important things right in the mid-1980s. Both then and now, religious belief and practice and religious institutions play a far more important role in US society than they do in many other rich countries.102

Today, majorities of Americans say they believe in God (89 percent), identify with a religious faith (77 percent), pray daily (55 percent), and say that their religious beliefs play a very important or important role in their charitable giving (55 percent). About three-quarters of US charitable giving currently goes to religious and religiously affiliated organizations.104 Even among the expanding ranks of the “nones,” there is more going on than atheism. For example, about one-third of “nones” say that religion plays a very or somewhat important role in their lives. Nearly 4 in 10 say that they pray at least monthly, and about 6 in 10 say that they believe in God or a universal spirit.105

It seems that these numbers help explain the intensity and some of the fault lines in today’s culture wars. On the one hand, we see growing secularization and the steady weakening of the role of Christianity in the society, including a declining share of Americans who are Christians, less public confidence in organized religion, and rising numbers of religiously unaffiliated
Americans, such that we can now see an increasingly open contestation of Christianity’s once-dominant role in the shaping of American public life and culture. On the other hand, we see the continuing (and perhaps in some respects intensifying) robustness of American religious faith and commitment.

An unsurprising result of these divergent trends is polarization and political-cultural conflict over issues ranging from marriage rights for same-sex couples to climate change, particularly as Christians lose what Ed Stetzer calls “home-field advantage” in American culture. In this context, recent assertions by some Christian leaders and Republican presidential candidates to the effect that America today is “waging war” on Christianity, while I believe to be defensive and unwarranted, are at least understandable. Cultural conflicts of this type in the US seem likely to continue for a while.

Looking ahead, how might trends in secularization and religious polarization interact with trends in family structure, family well-being, and family policy in the coming decades? First, although the topic is complex and the evidence is mixed, some evidence suggests that healthy marriages, stable families, and good outcomes for children correlate positively with religious faith and (especially) regular participation in houses of worship and other religious organizations.

At least in some respects, then, marriage and religion as social institutions and influences seem to be mutually reinforcing, such that they might tend to gain and lose together. And why not? After all, marriage in nearly all human groups is partly a religious institution, commonly overseen by religious communities, consisting in part of sacred promises, and surrounded by religious symbols and rites seeking to sanction and idealize the marriage relationship. An important American question in the years ahead will be the degree to which secular values and institutions will contribute, perhaps in fresh ways, to the vitality of American marriage and family life.

In recent decades, public support for strengthening family structure in the United States has come disproportionately from evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and other Americans of traditional religious faith and practice. Looking ahead, will the declining influence of these sectors of our society mean a further weakening of familism as a US cultural value and less public support for pro-family structure change?

I do not know. But it certainly seems likely that, to be effective, any public efforts to strengthen marriage and family structure in the next few decades will need to be broadly based, inclusive of liberals as well as conservatives and able to speak convincingly to the nation in both secular and religious accents.

10. More Racial and Ethnic Diversity. In all likelihood, the single most important US population change in the next half-century will be the continuing growth of racial and ethnic diversity. We are headed toward a basic societal turning point. By the middle of this century, a majority of all Americans will be members of minority groups, which will make us a “majority-minority nation” and bring America much closer to becoming, as Ben Wattenberg envisioned in 1990, the world’s “first universal nation.” The numbers in Table 2 tell the basic story.

These changes are quite dramatic.

• In 1965, non-Hispanic whites accounted for 84 percent of the US population. In 1985, it was 77 percent; in 2014, it stood at 62 percent; and by 2060, it will have dropped to an estimated 44 percent.

### Table 2. Estimated Percentage of US Population by Selected Characteristics, 2014–60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2060</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Born</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• By 2060, nearly 30 percent of Americans will be Hispanics.

• The two fastest-growing groups in the coming decades will be persons of two or more races (an increase of 226 percent) and Asians (an increase of 128 percent).111

• By 2060, the proportion of foreign-born Americans (about 19 percent) will be the highest in our history. It reached its current high of about 15 percent in the late 19th century and dropped to its all-time low of about 5 percent in 1965, the year that Congress passed the game-changing US Immigration and Naturalization Act, which opened the country to immigrants from around the world.112

Will this dramatic increase in diversity affect US trends in family structure and family policy? Yes and no. With respect to family structure, in 2013 about 78 percent of Asian children in the United States lived with their biological fathers. So did about 72 percent of non-Hispanic white children, about 60 percent of Hispanic children, and about 33 percent of African American children.113 Clearly, there are significant correlations between race and family structure in the US.

Yet I am not sure exactly what, or how much, to make of these racial differences in family structure. In particular, I have seen no evidence suggesting that, for example, African American children need their fathers any more or less than any other group of children. If the question is what is to be done, it is likely that viewing the problem of US father-absence from a class perspective will be more helpful to policymakers than viewing it from a racial and ethnic perspective.

For example, in 2013, about two-thirds of African American children whose fathers graduated from four-year colleges lived with those fathers. Conversely, of US black children whose fathers did not graduate from college, about one-third lived with their fathers. If we look at white and Asian children whose fathers graduated from college, nearly 9 of 10 children in each group live with their fathers.114 For policymakers, these and similar facts concerning class, education, and privilege would appear to be diagnostic.

More broadly, I would suggest that, when it comes to the future of American family policy, the most important challenge stemming from our society’s growing racial diversity is the challenge of empathy.115 It is a deeply American challenge. Arguably, America’s greatest promise—its largest aspiration—is to be a place where people of many colors, languages, and ways of prayer can live together and try to thrive in conditions of unprecedented freedom as a people united only by a few key ideas about what the country is and should be. One of those key ideas—now reinforced by considerable social science evidence, including from the field of social psychology116—is that our diversity, even when it tests us, is ultimately more of a strength than a weakness. This idea may be what I like best about our country.

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Our diversity, even when it tests us, is ultimately more of a strength than a weakness.

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At the same time, considerable evidence suggests that diversity, including racial and ethnic diversity, can retard the development of empathy, trust, altruism, and cooperation.117 Looking to the future of American families, to what degree will our growing diversity trigger the worse—or give rise to the better—angels of our nature? When we consider policies to strengthen family structure and mobilize public support for such policies, will Americans in 2050 think mostly in terms of my group or my color in relation to other groups and colors? Or will we believe by then that they are all our children and that we are one family?

Family Policy in the Era of the Unformed Family

In light of where we are and where we seem headed, what if anything should we seek to do over the next few decades to improve family functioning by strengthening family structure?118 As far as I can tell, there are four main strategies from which to choose.
The first option is to do nothing. Many people from both sides of the political aisle, for many different reasons, seem to favor this approach, but ultimately in my view it is an illusion. It cannot be done. So much that society already does and is not about to stop doing—levying taxes, providing social services, regulating marriage and divorce, caring for those in need, and much more—establishes rules and incentives and sends cultural messages regarding family formation and structure. For this reason, doing nothing in this area is not really possible. Our only real choice is whether we want to influence family structure intentionally, with certain goals in mind, or unthinkingly.


The problem is that this approach usually depends for its intellectual validity on at least one of two assumptions, both of which are problematic in my view. The first is that good policy is a synonym for good family policy. This conveniently elastic concept may be serviceable as campaign-style political rhetoric, but its shortcomings as serious social analysis seem obvious.

The second and probably more important assumption is that causation in family structure is unidirectional—that is, family form is influenced by outside forces, but outside forces are not meaningfully influenced by family form. That is why, from this perspective, the best and possibly only way to influence family structure is through extra-familial economic, political, and social change.

The underlying view here is that family form is primarily epiphenomenal, a product of external forces, usually assumed to be structural and usually further assumed to be economic. This view has a distinguished lineage, especially on the political and academic left, dating at least back to Marx’s concept of base and superstructure.

Count me as a skeptic. My own assumptions are that family structure is partly autonomous, with causation in family structure going both ways, and that culture and economics interacting together, not just the economic base, drive social change. From this perspective, family structure is not merely “done to” by larger forces. It also does things. It mediates and influences the external ecology, produces as well as absorbs social change, and generates as well as reflects human and social capital.

In 1966, writing about African American families, the distinguished sociologist Nathan Glazer describes “a view of the family in which it is seen as not only the product of social causes, but as itself a significant and dynamic element in the creation of culture, social character, and social structure.” He concludes: “We know that the family makes the social conditions. We know too that social conditions make the family.” This insight, which calls for a more holistic and complex understanding of family structure and family change, strikes me as much closer to the truth than the kind of simple methodological determinism that places most of the real action outside the family itself and very nearly beyond the range of human choice and agency.

This point is more than a quibble about scholarly method. As a practical policy matter, it is encouraging to believe, and likely to be true, that improving America generally will also help to improve family structure. But it seems quite unlikely that we can actually turn the corner on US family structure simply, or even mainly, by improving our economy or our general social condition. While indirect approaches to family structure are likely important, surely they should not become excuses to eschew direct approaches or, even worse, to be agnostic about whether improving family structure is even something we want to do.

A third possible strategy for family policy in the coming decades is to help the casualties. This was the favored strategy of many of the participants in the Chicago family policy conference. As we consider the damages wrought by family dysfunction and the loss of fatherhood in the era of the unformed family, what can we do to ease the pain and help those most affected to recover? There are many ideas. More support for low-income single mothers. Better maternal and infant health care. More and better early childhood education. Big Brother...
and Big Sister programs. Stricter child support requirements for nonresidential fathers. Mandated education for divorcing couples on how to co-parent after divorce. Programs to help incarcerated fathers reconnect with their children. All of these efforts and many other similar ones would likely serve this objective.

As I have tried to make clear, I find much to admire in this strategy, but also much to regret. As a way of thinking about helping families, it is necessary but not sufficient, primarily because it treats symptoms while ignoring causes, which is ultimately a losing battle, like the villagers trying to rescue children from the river as more and more children each day are falling in.

This brings us to the fourth available strategy for family policy in the coming decades: Improve the structure. Let us be a bit more specific. There is no perfect indicator or set of indicators for the vitality of family structure in a society. But I think that many scholars could agree that the following five indicators constitute at least a good place to start:

- The proportion of childhood that children spend living with their two parents.
- The proportion of children living with their two parents.
- The proportion of children living with their two married parents.
- The proportion of intact first marriages.
- The proportion of married adults who are happy with their marriages.\(^{120}\)

Of necessity there is more to the proposal. Improving our society’s score on these indicators—in fact, even developing a consensus that improving family structure is a worthwhile goal—will not happen spontaneously or even as a result of political leaders and intellectuals coming up with clever policy recommendations. Any serious effort to strengthen US family structure in the coming decades will require—to ignite, orient, and sustain it—at least a partial shift in US cultural norms in the direction of familism, by which is meant a cultural value placing a high priority on family commitment and investment in family relationships.\(^{121}\) In short, the prerequisite for getting change on the ground—or getting larger proportions of in-the-home, love-the-mother fathers in our society—is a broader cultural values shift in favor of that change.

All of which, in turn, suggests the need for a US social movement for stronger families—and not just any old social movement. The “pro-family” movement that emerged in the US in the early 1980s and since consisted largely of religious and social conservatives—in which I participated for years—and is not suited to confront the issues and conditions of the coming decades. Only something quite new and different—a social change movement that is much more broadly based and inclusive—will be adequate to the family structure challenges we face.

A family policy strategy centered on strengthening family structure has many possible weaknesses, but also two strengths that to me are dispositive: that it is necessary and that it may be possible.

It is necessary because it is the only strategy of our four possible choices that, to the degree that it works, will actually fix what is broken. The other choices consist of putting our heads in the sand, putting different labels on the same ideas, and committing ourselves to the process of managing family decline. It may not be possible to revitalize American family structure, but in light of the stakes, it seems to me that the greatest failure is not trying.

And revitalizing family structure may be possible because, for the first time in five decades, Americans have an opportunity to think about family form in a way that brings us together rather than drives us apart. What for most of our lives has been a series of polarizing culture wars can now and into the future, just maybe, become a common cause.

During the 50 years from 1965—the year of the “Moynihan Report” on black family structure—to 2015, the year of the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision holding that gay couples have the right to marry, three highly divisive culture wars have largely dominated the US public debate on families and family policy, each following closely on the heels of the other.
Starting in 1965, the issue dividing us on the family was race. Many Americans in those years believed that linking family structure to social problems was largely aimed at marginalizing African Americans or in the famous phrase of that period, “blaming the victim.” Not until the late 1980s did the discussion of US family structure begin to lose its presumed association with racism. A turning point was the 1987 publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, in which the distinguished black sociologist William Julius Wilson reengaged and largely rehabilitated the topic of family structure and race in the academy.

Starting in the mid-1970s, the issue dividing us on the family was gender. Many Americans in those years believed that those who publicly worried about family decline—especially as evidenced in rising rates of divorce and unwed childbearing and more permissive sexual mores—were unfairly blaming single mothers and seeking to turn back the clock (“go back to the 1950s”) on women’s equality. The fundamental underlying conflict seemed to be between personal freedom and civic equality, especially for women, on one hand, and family stability and traditional moral and gender norms on the other. To some degree, this conflict is still with us, but it has diminished greatly in this century, particularly as the principle of women’s equality in both family and society rapidly becomes the new normal across the society.

Starting in the early 2000s, the issue dividing us on the family was gay rights. Only a few years ago, most Americans (including me) opposed marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. Today, it is the law of the land, and most Americans (including me and including large majorities of younger Americans) favor it. Today, now that they can, many lesbian and gay couples are in fact marrying. About 18 percent of all same sex-couples in the US are married, and about one of every five of these married couples is also raising children. Today, gay marriage is . . . marriage. Remarkably, the culture war over this issue is now in our society’s rearview mirror.

With our half century of culture war over the family now largely behind us, something quite new becomes possible. Looking ahead to the next several decades, a much broader and more diverse US pro-family coalition may be within our grasp. A coalition bringing together liberals and conservatives, gays and straights, religious and secular voices, higher- and lower-income Americans. A coalition seeking to expand family opportunity for all, but paying special attention to the two-thirds of America that is experiencing a crisis in family structure.

What policy reforms would such a coalition develop and recommend? There is a cornucopia of ideas. Admittedly, the challenge is huge. But ultimately, the key question is not how we meet it. It is whether we want to.

**About the Author**

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Notes


3. Here I am gratefully borrowing and adapting language from Robin Fox, who writes: “Kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject.” Robin Fox, Kinship and Marriage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 10.

4. These phenomena are carefully and sympathetically explored in Ronald B. Mincy, Monique Jethwani, and Serena Klempin, Failing Our Fathers: Confronting the Crisis of Economically Vulnerable Nonresident Fathers (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Ronald B. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy, Baby Fathers and American Family Formation: Low-Income, Never-Married Parents in Louisiana Before Katrina (New York: Institute for American Values, 2007). Mincy and his colleagues take a different view of absent fathers from the one I describe and criticize in this essay. They believe that nonresidential fathers, if they had more and better support, can and would—even if many today currently do not and cannot—play a distinct and valuable role in their children’s lives. Their criticism, therefore, is not mainly of these men’s failures as fathers, but of society’s effective abandonment of these men and indifference to their situation. I respect and admire this argument—it is pro-father, and it wrestles seriously with issues of family well-being and family structure—even though I am much less optimistic than Mincy and his colleagues about the possibilities of effective fatherhood in the absence of co-residence with children and a cooperative partnership with the mother. Notwithstanding this difference, I find much with which to agree in their policy recommendations, especially regarding child support enforcement and income supplements for low-income workers.


6. Another example of this (I believe) increasingly influential way of thinking about families and family policy can be found in another essay in the States of Change series by Naomi Cahn, June Carbone, and Howard Lavine. These scholars explicitly disavow the idea of “marriage promotion.” They conclude that “those who do not marry tend to do so for good reasons” and that “marriage as a legal commitment to an unreliable partner is not a good deal” and instead propose a “family stability” policy agenda consisting of greater social investments in human capital (better maternal and infant health care, more early childhood education, better schools, and more employer-sponsored child care and flexible work options); greater access to and use of contraception to allow women to prevent unplanned pregnancies; and (most of all) more and higher-paying jobs—“‘Jobs now’ should be the true family values slogan.” Naomi Cahn, June Carbone, and Howard Lavine, “A New Look at Demographics, Family Stability, and Politics,” American Enterprise Institute, February 2016.


9. Albert Einstein in 1939 put it this way: “To be sure, when the number of factors coming into play in a phenomenological complex is too large scientific method in most cases fails. One needs only think of the weather, in which case the prediction even for a few days ahead is impossible.” Albert Einstein, “Science and Religion,” 1939, reprinted in Albert Einstein, Out of My Later Years (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 28.


16. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 2.


24. Kennedy and Bumpass, “Cohabitation and Children’s Living Arrangements.”

25. Discussing the rise of cohabitation, Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu write: “Changing reality has again outstripped the capabilities of existing data, and we must struggle to meet the challenge of this ever changing target.” See Bumpass and Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the United States,” 39. Regarding unformed families, none of the existing terms seem appropriate to describe this family type. Terms such as “broken,” “disrupted,” and “fragmented” inaccurately suggest that a socially viable family has been formed at some point. “Single parent” does not work because large and growing numbers of effectively unformed families involve either cohabiting couples or fathers who have some contact with their children, and “never-married” inaccurately suggests that an unmarried mother heading a household belongs in the same family structure category as an unmarried mother living with the father of her child. The closest existing term for what I am calling unformed families is “fragile families,” a term coined by the family scholar and Ford Foundation leader Ronald Mincy and his colleagues in the early 1990s. A fragile family is one in which the biological parents are unmarried at the time of birth. I appreciate the term and respect the work of the Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative, created and co-led by Dr. Mincy, primarily to study and support young unmarried couples whose children receive public assistance, so perhaps quibbling over terminology is an unnecessary distraction. Yet the concept of the fragile family is based on the parental relationship at the time of the child’s birth, which seems to limit its ability to shed light on the meaning and consequences of family living arrangements over time from the child’s point of view. In addition, to me the term “fragile families” again suggests that a viable, albeit fragile, mother-father family unit has been formed, whereas in reality, that is commonly not really the case. A third and less important quibble is that a small but probably growing number of unmarried couples in the US are not so fragile, with fathers playing a positive and continuing in-the-house family role—a trend that may continue as unwed parenthood continues to spread from low-income America to working- and middle-class America. See Sara

26. Waldfogel et al., “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing,” 88. This number appears to be rising rapidly and today may be closer to 60 than 50 percent: A 2014 study finds that a remarkable 58 percent of all nonmarital births in the US in 2010 occurred to unmarried women in cohabiting unions, up from 41 percent in 2002. See Curtin et al., “Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States.”


33. Ibid., 19.


36. Summary statements from two highly respected family scholars make this point clear. Paul R. Amato states: “Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood. Although it is not possible to demonstrate that family structure is the cause of these differences, studies that have used a variety of sophisticated statistical methods, including controls for genetic factors, suggest that this is the case. This distinction is even stronger if we focus on children growing up with two happily married biological parents.” Paul R. Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 88–89. Sara McLanahan writes: “Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents’ race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the parent remarries.” Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1.


1969), 261–62. Fortes also defines filiation as “the relationship created by the fact of being the legitimate child of one’s parents.” Ibid., 253.


42. McLanahan and Sandefur, 3.


45. Paul R. Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” The Future of Children 15, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 76.


49. See especially Murray, Coming Apart, 247–51.


article/marriage-and-divorce-patterns-by-gender-race-and-educational-attainment.htm. See also Richard Fry, “New Census Data Show More Americans Are Tying the Knot, but Mostly It’s the College-Educated,” Pew Research Center, February 6, 2014. Fry reports that the marriage rate “among college-educated adults increased from 55.3 newlyweds per thousand eligible adults in 2011 to 56.7 newly married in 2012. In contrast, the new marriage rate among adults with some college education and adults with a high school diploma fell further from 2011 to 2012.”


65. Mare, “Educational Assortative Mating in Two Generations.”


Values and the National Marriage Project of the University of Virginia, 2012), 86–88.


76. The slogan appears to have been initially popularized by Jack Weinberg, a young leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, beginning about 1965. See “Don’t Trust Anyone over 30, Unless It’s Jack Weinberg,” Berkeley Daily Planet, April 6, 2000.

77. Teixeira et al., States of Change, 12.


79. Ibid., 10, Figure 8.

80. Ibid., 11, Figure 9.


90. To define social capital, the sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs in 1997 said: “Social capital’ has been used for about 40 years now to describe resources that are neither traditional capital (money or the things that money buys), nor human capital (skills, know-how). Social capital refers, then, to resources stored in human relationships, whether casual or close. It is not ‘civic engagement,’ though engagement in public life helps to generate social capital by usefully connecting people. It is not trust per se, but some of the best ‘goodies’ come from trusting, as opposed to wary, impersonal ties among people. Social capital is the stuff we all draw on all the time, through our connections to a system of human relationships, to accomplish things that matter to us and solve everyday problems. These distinctions in what social capital is, and, just as importantly, in what it is not, turn out to be very important.” Xavier de Souza Briggs, “Social Capital and the Cities: Advice to Change Agents,” paper presented at International Workshop on Community Building, Bellagio, Italy, October 1997. See also Glenn C. Loury, One by One from the Inside Out (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 102–104. See also Putnam, Bowling Alone, 18–24.


95. Neuhaus, Unsecular America, Appendix, Table 3; and. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Still Below Historic Norms.”


102. For example, “more than half (54%) of Americans said religion was very important in their lives, much higher than the share of people in Canada (24%), Australia (21%) and Germany (21%), the next three wealthiest economies we surveyed from 2011 through 2013.” See George Gao, “How Do Americans Stand Out from the Rest of the World?” Pew Research Center, March 12, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/.

103. Pew Research Center, U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious, 2, 5, and 17. See also in Neuhaus, Unsecular America, Appendix, Tables 1–2.

104. Melanie A. McKitrick et al., Connected to Give: Faith Communities (Los Angeles: Jumpstart, 2013), 6 and 21.

105. Pew Research Center, U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious, 15. These 2014 numbers are down, however, since 2007; the trend lines among the “nones” clearly appear to be in the direction of secularization.


109. Colby and Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060,” 1; Pew Research Center, Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065, September 28, 2015, 27, Figure 2.5; Teixeira, Frey, and Griffin, States of Change, 2; and Ben J. Wattenberg, The First Universal Nation (New York: The Free Press, 1990). When exactly is the US likely to become a majority-minority society? The Census Bureau study cited...
here estimates that the turning point will have occurred by 2044, while the Pew study estimates that the turning point will occur between 2045 and 2055.

110. Pew Research Center, *Modern Immigration Wave*, 27, Figure 2.5, and 29, Figure 2.7.
111. Colby and Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population,” 9, Table 2.
112. Ibid., 2, Figure 1; and Pew Research Center, *Modern Immigration Wave*, 6, Figure 1.
113. States of Change project data.
114. Ibid.
115. Empathy refers to the capacity to identify deeply and emotionally with other people's situations and feelings. Discussing the related concept of sympathy in 1759, the great economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith wrote that “it is by changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or be affected by what he feels.” That is also a nice definition of empathy. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, 3rd ed. (London: T. Cadell, 1767), 3.
118. Terms such as “strengthening” or even “functioning” can seem politically or ideologically loaded, as can terms such as “family values,” so perhaps it is a good idea to define them as clearly and objectively as possible. Family sociologists generally agree that the family as social institution is aimed at performing five main social functions, or to put it a bit differently, meeting four basic social needs: producing and effectively rearing and socializing enough children to continue the group; providing care, affection, and companionship to family members; regulating sexual conduct in a pro-social manner; and engaging in economic cooperation and the sharing of economic resources. If families in a society are commonly performing these functions well (e.g., adequately meeting these basic needs), it is reasonable to describe them as strong or thriving. If not, it is reasonable to describe them as at least in part dysfunctional or growing weaker. See Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest*, 4–7.
120. For a similar effort, aimed at establishing indicators for measuring the health of marriage in society, see Institute for American Values and the National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, *The Marriage Index: A Proposal to Establish Leading Marriage Indicators* (New York: Institute for American Values and National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting, 2009).
121. See endnote 7.
mention of fathers or fatherhood is under “Negro children,” and it reads, “myths about effects of fatherless homes on.” Ryan, Blaming the Victim, 346.


125. A recent effort to put together such a coalition is described in Blankenhorn et al., “Can Gay Wedlock Break Political Gridlock?”