The Changing American Family

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For all the changes in fertility and mortality that Americans have experienced from the colonial period until today, there has been surprisingly little change in the structure of the family until the past quarter century. Until that point, the age of marriage changed from time to time, but only a minority of women never married and births outside marriage were traditionally less than 10 percent of all births.

But this fundamental social institution has changed profoundly since 1980. In fact, if one were to define the most original demographic feature in the post-1980 period in the United States, it would be the changes that were occurring in both families and households for all sections of the national population. The traditional American family has been undergoing profound transformations for all ages, all races, and all ethnic groups. Every aspect of the American family is experiencing change.

The proportion of persons over 15 years of age who had never married reached historic levels in 2000 when a third of the men and a quarter of the women were listed as never having married. By 2000, 22 percent of adult white women and 42 percent of adult black women had never married. This rise in the ratio of persons never married is also reflected in historical changes in the relation between families and households. Non-family households had always existed as a small share of the total households in the United States, usually made up of elderly persons with no families left. But now they are formed by young adults, many of whom never married, or by older persons who no longer reside with children. Also, the proportion of two-parent households, even in family households with children, is on the decline, as single-parent-plus-children households are on the rise. As late as 1960, at the height of the Baby Boom, married families made up almost three-quarters of all households; but by the census of 2000 they accounted for just 53 percent of them, a decline that seems to have continued in the past few years. Non-family households now account for 31 percent of households, and families headed by a single parent with children account for the rest, making up to 27 percent of all such families with children. Black families experienced the fastest decline of dual-parent households but no group was immune to this rising trend of single-parent households.

More older people than ever before are also living alone. Older people can financially live alone and are generally healthier and live longer than in earlier periods. A change in cultural values during the second half of the twentieth century seems to have increased the value of privacy among older adults. In 1910, for example, most widows over 65 years of age lived with their children; only 12 percent lived alone. By 1990, almost 70 percent of such widows were living alone. There were also more couples surviving into old age than ever before, so that by 2000 more than half of the adults over 65 who resided in independent households lived with their spouses. With better health and more income, more elderly persons have the ability and the desire to “buy” their privacy as never before.

Not only have family households been on the decline, but even women giving birth are now having far fewer children, are spacing them further apart, and are ending their fertility at earlier ages than ever before. In the colonial period the average woman produced more than seven children during the course of her lifetime. The national fertility total currently barely reaches its replacement level; fluctuated between 2.0 and 2.1 children per woman over the past quarter century. Only the Hispanic women, at a total fertility rate of 2.5 children, are above the replacement level.

Although the U.S. fertility rate has declined, single women now make up an increased percentage of those having children. Whereas in 1950 extramarital births accounted for only 4 percent of all births, by 2000 they accounted for a third of births, and that is rising. Although some have thought this to be a temporary aberration in historic patterns, the increasing illegitimacy rates in Europe suggest that North America is following modern advanced Western European trends.

In the 1970s, it was the teenagers who had the highest rates of births outside marriage. But by the end of the century older women’s rates of illegitimacy were highest and rising; those for teenage girls were falling in both relative and absolute numbers. Other wealthy countries have also experienced this trend. The factors influencing these trends everywhere in the modern industrial world seem to be the same—late marriages, women increasing their participation in the workforce and thus having higher incomes, and changing beliefs in the importance and necessity of marriage. These changes seem to be affecting all Europe and North America at approximately the same time.

This trend is also reflected in the changing role of women in households with children. The traditional family with a single male breadwinner working alone to sustain the family is no longer the norm. By the end of the century, only one in five married couples had just a single male breadwinner working outside the home. Among married couples with children under six years of age, only 36 percent had the mother staying at home with the children and not working, and in families where women had given birth to a child during the previous year, the majority of these mothers at the end of the year were working outside the home—more than half of them in 2000 compared to just under one third in 1967. Not only were more women in the workforce—a ratio that was constantly on the rise through the second half of the century—but the vast majority of married mothers with young children were working outside the home by 2000.

Not only is formal marriage no longer the exclusive arbiter of fertility, but more and more women are reducing the number of children they have. This is not due to women forgoing children. This decline in fertility is due to the fact that women are deliberately deciding to have fewer children. They are marrying later, thus reducing their marital fertility, they are beginning childbearing at ever later ages, they are spacing their children farther apart, and they are terminating their fertility at earlier ages.

Clearly the American family, like all families in the Western industrial countries, is now profoundly different from what it had been in the recorded past. It typically is a household with few children, with both parents working, and with mothers producing their children at ever older ages. At the same time, more adults than ever before are living alone or with unmarried companions and more women than ever before are giving birth out of wedlock. These trends have profoundly changed the American family and are unlikely to be reversed any time soon.