

## **Marriage and Family in America**

Gary Polster, Ph.D.

Ursuline College

*Presented at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, October 3, 2009*

The following paper is based on more than fifteen years of research on marriage and family life in America conducted by the National Marriage Project.

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at Rutgers University in New Jersey. The project is financially supported by the university in cooperation with private foundations.

The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage today in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing. The Project began its research activities in the 1990s and issued its first report on marriage and family life in America in 1999.

The National Marriage Project has five goals:

1. To annually publish *The State of Our Unions*—an index of the health of marriage and marital relationships in America;
2. To investigate and report on younger adults' attitudes toward marriage;
3. To examine the popular media's portrait of marriage;
4. To serve as a clearinghouse resource and expertise on marriage;
5. To bring together marriage and family experts to develop strategies for revitalizing marriage.

The project is co-directed by two nationally prominent family experts, Dr. David Popenoe, a professor of Sociology emeritus and former social and behavioral sciences dean at Rutgers, and the author of many scholarly and popular publications on marriage and family; and Dr. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, an author and social critic who writes extensively on issues of marriage, family, and child wellbeing.

Today in America there can be no doubt that the institution of marriage is continuing to weaken. Whereas marriage was once the dominant and single acceptable form of living arrangement for couples and children, it is no longer. In these first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is more family diversity than ever—fewer adults are married, more are divorced or remaining single and more are living together outside of marriage or living alone. More children are born out of wedlock (almost 4 out of 10), and more are living in stepfamilies, with cohabiting but unmarried adults, or with a single parent. This means that more children each year are not living in families that include their own married, biological parents, which by all available empirical evidence is the gold standard for insuring optimal outcomes in a child's development.

The only major family trend that has actually reversed direction is divorce. After rising steeply, beginning around 1965, the divorce rate has dropped gradually since the early 1980's apparently mainly the result of adults becoming better educated and marrying at a later age. Other reasons for the decreasing divorce rate are the rise of non-marital

cohabitation and a decline in second and subsequent marriages. Divorcees have become more likely to cohabit rather than remarry, thus avoiding remarriages that have always had a disproportionately high risk of divorce.

The weakening of marriage and the resultant growth of family diversity is found much more prominently among those with less education and associated lower incomes. People who have completed college (around 25% of the population) tend to have significantly higher marriage and lower divorce rates compared to those with less education. Most of the recent divorce rate decline has, in fact, been among the college educated; for those with less than a high school education, the divorce rate actually has been rising.

Recent studies indicate that about 85% of Americans are expected to marry sometime in their lives and that about 10% of American couples are living together outside of marriage—and evidence shows that these cohabiting couples break up at a much higher rate than married couples.

Researchers attribute the weakening of marriage in the United States and also in Western Europe to a broad cultural shift away from religion and social traditionalism and toward faith in personal independence and tolerance for diverse lifestyles—otherwise known as “secular individualism.” An established empirical generalization is that the greater the dominance of secular individualism in a culture, the more fragmented the families. A very real possibility exists that America today is becoming increasingly bifurcated into two distinct cultures—the Red States and the Blue States. This Red State/Blue State divide has become a familiar theme in national politics.

Less well known is the fact that the Red and Blue States also differ significantly in family terms.

Red States in recent presidential elections have tended to vote Republican. They consist of the South (Alabama), the lower Midwest (Oklahoma) and the Mountain Region of the West (Montana). Blue states have voted Democratic and they are those of the Northeast (Massachusetts), the upper Midwest (Minnesota) and the West Coast (California).

Red states typically have a more traditional family structure than the Blue states—people in the Red states marry younger and in larger numbers, cohabit outside of marriage less, and have more children. This is in large part because Red States are likely to be more religiously observant and to belong to denominations that profess allegiance to more conservative social values. However, the Red states also have higher divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates than the Blue states. A closer examination, however, shows that this Red/Blue geographic pattern of unwed births is heavily dictated by the racial and ethnic make-up of each state, as well as by educational and income levels.

States such as Mississippi and Louisiana are at the top partly due to the extremely high unwed birth percentages for African Americans (at 77%) and Hispanic Americans (at 50%). The state with the highest overall unwed birth percentage is New Mexico (at 51%), owing mainly to the contribution of its large Hispanic population.

If one removes Blacks and Hispanics from the equation and looks just at unwed births among Whites, a geographic pattern more influenced by family traditionalism emerges. For the White population only, the unwed birth percentage in Mississippi (26%) is lower than for the White population in New Hampshire (27%).

The picture is further complicated by the fact that marriage, cohabitation and unwed birth rates are strongly affected by income and educational levels. In general, people with lower incomes and less education tend to marry less, cohabit more, and have more births out of wedlock. The highest divorce rates are found in the more religiously based Red states such as Arkansas, Oklahoma and West Virginia in striking contrast to the much lower rates in more secular states like Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

Level of educational achievement is the single factor that probably best explains the geographic distribution of divorce. The lower the educational and associated income level, the higher the divorce rate, and educational levels are substantially lower in the Red states than in the Blue states.

The Blue states of the West Coast stand as an exception to this education-based pattern, however, with the divorce rates for highly educated Oregon, Washington and California being above the national average.

In addition to education, therefore, another important causal factor in divorce may be the level of geographic mobility in a state, making the more recently settled and more transient populations of the West Coast and Mountain States more vulnerable to divorce.

Another key finding of marriage researchers is that Americans have become less likely to marry in recent decades. Current data shows that the marriage rate is continuing to decline. This is reflected in a drop of nearly 50% since 1970 in the annual number of marriages per 1000 unmarried adult women. Much of this decline results from the delaying of first marriages until older ages; the median age at first marriage went from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to 26 and 27 respectively today. Other factors accounting for the decline are the growth of unmarried cohabitation and a small decrease in the tendency of divorced people to remarry. The decline also reflects some increase in life-long singlehood.

It is important to note that the decline in marriage does not mean that people are giving up on living together with a sexual partner. On the contrary, with the incidence of unmarried cohabitation increasing rapidly, marriage is giving ground to unwed unions. Most people now live together before they marry for the first time. An even higher percentage of those divorced who subsequently remarry live together first. And a growing number of persons, both young and old, are living together with no plans ever for eventual marriage.

For the college-educated segment of our population, the institution of marriage has gained strength in recent years while for everyone else it continues to weaken. There is a

growing marriage gap in America between those who are well educated and those who are not.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, college-educated women married at a lower rate than their less educated peers. Since around 1980, however, this situation has reversed and college-educated women are now marrying at a higher rate. Not only that, but the divorce rate among these women is relatively low and has been dropping.

Once the leaders of the divorce revolution, college-educated women today hold a much more restrictive view of divorce than less educated women. The out-of-wedlock childbearing of college-educated women has always been well below that of other segments of the population. Now, among those who delay marrying past age 30, this is the only group more likely to have children after marriage rather than before.

And there is more good news! The marriages of the college educated have become more egalitarian than ever, both in the sense that husbands and wives are matched more equally in their education and economic backgrounds and that they hold more egalitarian attitudes about marital gender roles. All of this may add up to greater marital happiness. The percentage of spouses among this group who rate their marriage as “very happy” has remained fairly steady over recent decades whereas for other parts of the population the percentage has dropped significantly.

But there is a serious problem with this group for the future of America. College-educated women are not having enough children to replace themselves. Recent data shows that 24% of women 40 to 44 years of age with a bachelor’s degree were childless compared to only 15% of those without a high school degree.

For the average couple marrying for the first time today, the lifetime probability of divorce or separation is between 40 and 50 percent. The percentage of divorced is higher for females than for males, primarily because divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women. And among those who do remarry, men usually do so sooner than women.

Traditionally large divorce rate differences continue to show between those who marry when they are teenagers compared to those who marry after age 21, high school dropouts vs. college graduates, non-religious compared to the religiously committed and Blacks compared to Whites. Teenagers, high school dropouts, non-religious and African Americans who marry have considerably higher divorce rates.

The number of unmarried couples has increased dramatically over the past four decades and the increase is continuing—unmarried cohabitation commonly precedes marriage. Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by living together compared to virtually none 50 years ago.

For many others cohabitation is simply an alternative to living alone and for a small but growing number, it is considered an alternative to marriage. Living together is more

common among those of lower educational and income levels, those who are less religious, those who have been divorced and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood. Over 40% of cohabiting couple households now contain children.

The belief that living together before marriage is a useful way to find out whether you really get along and thus avoid a bad marriage and an eventual divorce is widespread among young people, but all available data fail to confirm this belief.

In fact, a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage.

There is ample evidence that stable and satisfactory marriages are crucial for the wellbeing of adults and for the proper socialization and overall wellbeing of children. A central purpose of the institution of marriage is to ensure the responsible and long-term involvement of both biological parents in the difficult and time-consuming task of raising the next generation.

The trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends that have affected children and adolescents.

This is because the children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families.

In 1960, only nine percent of all children lived in single-parent families whereas now 28 percent do. The overwhelming majority of single parent families are mother only, although the percentage of father-only families recently has grown to about 18 percent.

Besides divorce and unmarried cohabitation, another growing trend that has greatly affected the dramatic shift in family structure is the tremendous increase in the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers, which suddenly and unexpectedly began to rise rapidly in the 1970's. Since 1960 the percentage of babies born to unwed mothers has increased more than sevenfold from 5.3% to a record high of 38% now. Today more than a third of all births and nearly 80% of African-American births are out of wedlock. More than half of all births to women under 30 are now outside of marriage.

A nationally representative survey of high school seniors conducted annually by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan shows that more than 50 percent accept out-of-wedlock child bearing as a "worthwhile lifestyle." They do not yet seem to grasp the enormous economic, social and personal costs of single parenthood. Economically, the costs of raising children are escalating at an astounding clip. According to the Department of Agriculture's 2007 estimates, it cost \$204,060 for a husband-wife family with an average before tax income of \$61,000 to feed, clothe, house and educate one child from birth to age 17. But this estimate excludes one of the biggest and increasingly most essential child-rearing costs—a college education. And the cost of college is going up at more than double the rate of inflation.

For today's working wives, the cost of children includes the potential loss of income and job opportunities. Many women reduce their workforce participation and thus their income once they become mothers. Even with equal education, equal experience, equal professional levels, and equal career commitment, working mothers earn less than working women without children. And given the high divorce rate, married mothers who leave the workforce for an extended period of time expose themselves to the risks of severe economic loss and disadvantage, should their marriage end in divorce.

Women are not alone in their concerns about the loss of income. Men worry about the financial shock of losing a spouse's income, especially if the couple needs two incomes to sustain their standard of living. Also, since most men see themselves as primary breadwinners, they may be particularly susceptible to fears about the burdens that children impose on their ability to provide.

For many parents today, therefore, the costs of child rearing mean more debt, smaller retirement savings, and greater exposure to economic risks and uncertainties than they would otherwise have. Indeed, if people cared only about their pocketbooks, they would be crazy to have children when they could have a much more lavish lifestyle without children. The escalating dollar costs of launching children—as well as the “opportunity costs” of child rearing, especially for women—contribute to ambivalence and anxiety about the risks and sacrifices involved in having children.

Television, movies and magazines increasingly emphasize an ethos of fun and freedom pitched to the X-rated fantasies and desires of adults. Highly popular shows like *Friends* and *Sex and the City* sexualized and glamorized the life of young urban singles. The characters in these sit-coms hang out with friends, hook up for sex, and spend enormous amounts of free time in restaurants, clubs and coffee bars. In much of popular culture today, family obligations and responsibilities have become more countercultural. Indeed, child-rearing values—sacrifice, stability, dependability, maturity—seem stale and musty by comparison to the “child-free” values. What it takes to raise children is almost the opposite of what popularly defines a satisfying adult life.

To be sure, the media images and market appeals to the growing population of “child-free” adults do not accurately reflect their real life experiences. Life without children is rarely as sexy or liberating as the popular culture suggests. Nonetheless, fantasy can be more powerful than reality in shaping cultural aspirations. And in this case, the fantasy is revealing in what is a major cultural shift, the child-free years are portrayed as more attractive, even superior to, the child-rearing years.

Parenthood today is commonly viewed as a private lifestyle choice that competes with other appealing lifestyle choices. And for those who choose life with children, their private choice is often portrayed in the media as stressful for them and burdensome for others, especially when compared to the joys of life without children. It is hard enough to bring up good children in a society that is committed and organized to support that

essential social task. Consider how much more difficult it becomes when a society is indifferent at best, and hostile at worst, to those who are caring for the next generation. So Americans today are less likely to see children as central to a successful and happy marriage. As recently as 1990, a clear majority—65 percent—of the public said that “children are very important to a successful marriage.” By 2007 according to a Pew survey, only slightly more than 40 percent of respondents agreed with the statement. Indeed, as measures of marital success, children ranked below other couple activities, such as sharing household chores, sexual fulfillment, and mutual interests.

The retreat from child-centeredness within marriage is part of a larger transformation in the meaning and purpose of marriage. Marriage is now defined primarily as a couple relationship dedicated to the fulfillment of each individual’s innermost needs and desires. Today’s couples are looking for what some call a “soul-mate” marriage—an emotionally satisfying “best friends” relationship.

Young adults, in particular, are looking to marriage as a source of personal and emotional rewards. Asked to rank the most important characteristics in a spouse, college students placed companionship, personality development, and emotional security high on the list while “healthy and happy children,” “moral and religious unity,” and “maintenance of the home” fell much lower in the ranking.

However, this new marital ideal is fragile. It takes lavish investments of time, attention, and vigilance for couples to sustain high levels of mutual happiness.

If such personal investments are absent or insufficient, spouses can feel neglected and estranged. They may wonder if they have made a bad mistake in their choice of a mate. And given the very high expectations for happiness and growth, unhappy couples may have reason—some might even say a personal obligation—to find a new and better soul mate.

These soul-mate marriages may contribute to greater dissatisfaction during the child-rearing years. Like babies, soul-mate marriages have to be nurtured and coddled in order to thrive. When a real baby comes along, much of that nurture has to be devoted to the child. This can be especially threatening to parents who expect the same level of time and attention in their relationship to continue after the baby arrives. Their expectations for sustained intimacy may be disappointed—leading some new parents to feel lonely, resentful, and uncared for.

Thus, although this new kind of American marriage is potentially more rewarding for adults, it is demonstrably less secure for children. The high expectations for personal satisfaction in marriage have made marriages harder to sustain.

It is children who are exposed to the risks of parental breakups, residential instability and the likelihood of spending part of their childhood in households with a lone parent, stepparents, and half or stepsiblings. In short, soul-mate marriage is more oriented to

meeting adults' emotional needs for intimacy than to ensuring children's emotional needs for secure and long-lasting attachments.

Raising children used to occupy the greater part of married adults' lives. Couples married in their early 20's had children shortly after marrying and often lived only a few more years after the youngest child had grown up and left home. During the early 1900's, only about four out of 10 people survived to age 65.

Today adults are spending a growing share of their married life in households without children. Women are waiting longer before they have their first child. As recently as 1970, 71% of married women had a first birth within the first three years of marriage. Twenty years later—in 1990—the percentage had fallen to 37. And today an even larger percentage of married women spend a greater number of child-free years before they become mothers. For college-educated married women, the years before children arrive have expanded to a decade or longer.

Likewise, the years of married life after children are growing longer. Americans today are likely to enjoy many more empty-nest years than earlier generations. 82% of the population is expected to live to age 65. And women who turn 65 can expect to live to 85 and men who reach 65 are expected to live to 81.

The married years after children are also healthier. After children leave home, many empty-nesters will have decades of vitality together before they begin to experience debilitating health problems.

A small but growing percentage of women are not having any children. In 1980 one out of ten women in her early 40's was childless compared to one out of five today. Married women who are worried about getting divorced are the most likely to remain childless.

High levels of educational attainment also contribute to childlessness. Women with four-year college degrees or better are more likely to be childless than women with lower levels of education.

Slightly more than 24% of women ages 40 to 44 with a bachelor's degree are childless today compared to only 14.9% of those without a high school degree. Of course, some non-childbearing women are raising stepchildren, adopted children or other children in the household. Still, this increase in childlessness means that a growing percentage of women will not spend any of their adult years in households with children or in the tasks of raising children.

For men it's a different story. High rates of unwed births, divorce and cohabitation have had a devastating effect on men's experience of fatherhood and their involvement in their children's lives. Most profoundly affected are African-American fathers and their children. As we've already said, close to 80% of African-American children are born outside of marriage and this high rate of unwed childbearing has resulted in men's absence from their biological children's households and often from their children's lives.

But father absence is not limited to just one group. It is a commonplace feature in a society where marriage and parenthood are splitting apart.

The proportion of children living apart from their biological fathers has increased sharply from 17% in 1960 to 34% today. Young men are delaying marriage but they are not putting off sex until marriage and these casual sexual relationships that are now a regular part of single life may contribute to young men's greater ambivalence about children.

A recent National Marriage Project study of never-married men found that a significant number viewed children negatively, as a source of burdensome child support, conflict, or even "trickery" by women. They worried that a "one-night" stand might lead to an unwed pregnancy and a long-lasting parental relationship with a woman they did not care about and would not marry. Yet most men express a desire to marry and have children sometimes in their lives—but they are in no hurry. They enjoy their single life and they experience few of the traditional pressures from church, employers, or the society that once encouraged men to marry. Moreover, the sexual revolution and the trend toward cohabitation offer them some of the benefits of marriage without its obligations.

The ten major reasons why many men won't commit to marriage are:

1. They can get sex without marriage more easily than in times past;
2. They can enjoy the benefits of having a wife by cohabiting instead of marrying;
3. They want to avoid divorce and its financial risks;
4. They want to wait until they are older to have children;
5. They are afraid that marriage will require too many changes and compromises;
6. They are waiting for the perfect soul mate and she hasn't yet appeared
7. They face few social pressures to marry
8. They are reluctant to marry a woman who already has children
9. They want to own a house before they get a wife;
10. They want to enjoy single life as long as they can.

Another significant trend now is the growing polarization by marriage and education that exists among the child-rearing population. They are divided by their life circumstances and child-rearing styles. Married, well-educated parents tend to focus on encouraging early learning and achievement. For them, a smart and high-performing child is the new ideal. To achieve this ideal, advantaged parents adopt a child-rearing style that inculcates the strenuous performance values of the professional workplace. This style is characterized by the jam-packed scheduling of children's activities, a focus on precocious technological mastery, a relentless emphasis on skills and learning, restricted television watching, high levels of reading together, many educational enrichment experiences, and pervasive anxiety about their child's competitive ranking among peers.

Less well-educated parents, and especially the lone parents, are stuck with the harsher demands of basic survival. They struggle to do the best they can to keep their kids in school and out of trouble, often amid the isolation, violence and chaos in their blocks and neighborhoods. And compared to better educated married parents, parents in these

households face much greater economic stresses and spend less time reading to children, sharing mealtimes, and encouraging aspirations for a college education.

This “nurture gap” is likely to widen in the future as a growing share of American children are born to single mothers or cohabiting couples. Already the family condition of Hispanics—our most rapidly growing immigrant population—exhibits steeply climbing rates of cohabitation and unwed childbearing. According to a recent study, families with highly educated mothers and families with less educated mothers are clearly moving in the opposite directions and the disadvantaged group is doing much worse. Research on early brain development demonstrates the advantages of intensive parental nurture in the first three years of life and the difficulties of making up for the lack of such nurture later on.

In this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are in the midst of a profound change in traditional child-centered family life. Demographically, socially and culturally, the nation is shifting from a society of child-rearing families to a society of child-free adults. The repercussions of this change are apparent in nearly every domain of American life. With children less present in American households, the conduct of everyday life changes.

Paid work and career achievement assume an even larger share of adult time, energy, and identity. Leisure time and activities also increase—according to a Department of Labor study in 2008, adults without children in the household have over 500 extra hours of leisure time per year compared to adults with children in the household.

## Conclusions

To reverse this trend of marriage and family decline would take a cultural transformation of some kind, and it is interesting to consider and evaluate what this might look like and what could bring it about.

One potential source of change would be a significant expansion in influence and authority of today's orthodox, anti-individualist religions. But there is no evidence of that happening to date in America—in fact quite the opposite is occurring—the U.S. is becoming more secular than ever before. The National Cultural Values Survey in 2007 found that regular churchgoing has dipped below 50% and that only 30% believe “people should live by God's principles” and concluded that “America no longer enjoys cultural consensus on God, religion and what constitutes right and wrong.”

Powerful indicators of future trends are the beliefs and attitudes of today's young people, which are unmistakably more secular and individualist than those of their elders. A Pew Foundation 2007 national survey found that 20% of today's young people ages 18-24 say they have no religious affiliation or are atheist or agnostic, nearly double the percentage of the non-religious found in that age group less than 20 years ago.

In the same time period the percentage of young people who did not agree that they had “old fashioned values about family and marriage” jumped from 17 percent to 31 percent.

The prediction of the continued growth of secular individualism within modern cultures rests on some powerful facts. So far in the Western experience, the dominant sociological factors associated with secular individualism are that the higher the educational and income levels of a population, and the more urbanized it is, the greater the degree of secular individualism.

Is it likely that any time in the near future that educational, income, and urbanization levels in America will drop? They have been increasing for three centuries so a turnabout would most likely occur only in the event of some catastrophe, either natural or man-made. Absent such a catastrophe (which certainly cannot be ruled out in today's world), the most likely future scenario is that secular individualism will increasingly dominate the U.S.

The best prospects for cultural change, therefore, rest on the possibility that at some time in the future, new generations of secular individualists themselves will undergo a change of heart. One way this might occur is through the growth of new, non-orthodox religious ideologies that remained compatible with secular individualism but take it in new directions. Unfortunately, the new religious strains that have emerged in recent decades, so-called New Age religions, have been profoundly individualistic. None has shown any interest in preserving marriage and family solidarity.

Any widely accepted “new morality” that might change family behavior would probably have to be compatible with secular individualism’s motivating force—rational self-interest.

The self-interest of today’s young people still includes the desire to have strong intimate relationships and to want to do best by their children. And there is every reason to believe that these interests will continue into the future because they are, in fact, an intrinsic part of being human.

The task that lies ahead then, is to help young people to see the importance of marriage and strong families as the best way to achieve these interests, to help them realize that a better and more meaningful way of life, both for themselves and for their children, involves a strong commitment to long-term marriage.

The institution of marriage needs to be promoted by all levels of society, particularly the families, the schools, the media, the churches, the non-profit sector, and the government. Young people need to be made continually aware of the many benefits married life brings, both for themselves and for their children. We, as a society, have all too often become virtually silent about the value and importance of marriage. And this silence is extremely damaging to the promotion of a pro-marriage culture.

Americans need to pull back from the more dominant threat of secular individualism and realize that our personal happiness and sense of well-being over the long course of life are less affected by the amount of independence, choice, bodily pleasure, and wealth we are able to obtain, than by the number of stable, long term, and meaningful relationships we have with others. We need to have a greater recognition of the fact that short-term adult interests are in conflict with the long-term health and well-being of children, and that our children’s welfare has everything to do with the future of our nation.

Gary E. Polster, Ph.D.  
Professor & Chair  
Department of Sociology  
Ursuline College

Reference: The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University,  
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/>