

The Real Story of the American Family

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Two new books explain how rising inequality shattered the working-class family of the mid-20th century.

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During the culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s, conservative crusaders worried about threats to “traditional” families stemming from both the top and the bottom of the social ladder. In the name of “family values,” they denounced educated elites for denigrating marriage, endorsing premarital sex and cohabitation, and refusing to get judgmental about divorce and unwed motherhood. The “do-your-own-thing” individualism of such people, they claimed, was bad enough for spoiled middle-class children, but threatened disaster when it seeped down to the “underclass.”

That “underclass,” need it be said, was assumed to be black ghetto dwellers. Their unstable sexual and familial lives, the crusaders argued, were a legacy of slavery, which had created generations of absent fathers and single-mother families, resulting in ever-escalating crime, poverty, and welfare dependency. Pundits worried that via rap music, acceptance of such behaviors was creeping up the social ladder, undermining the efforts of ordinary Americans to imbue their children with a commitment to deferred gratification, hard work, and marriage.

In contrast, the (mostly white) male-breadwinner families of middle-income America epitomized the “moral majority.” The men in this America married soon after graduating from high school, found steady work in factories or shops, and took pride in supporting their wives and children. The women might work as secretaries or clerks before marriage or after the children were in school, but their greatest fulfillment lay in becoming wives and mothers. Sons followed in their fathers’ occupational footsteps. Daughters reliably produced grandchildren, but only after they found a husband. Indeed, from 1960 through 1980, according to sociologist

Philip Cohen, men and women with a high school degree were more likely to marry than individuals with either more or fewer years of education.

Since 1970, marriage rates have fallen and births to unwed mothers have risen among all Americans, though at different rates depending on educational level. In a reversal of the past, people with less than a high school degree now have the lowest rates of marriage, while highly educated people have the highest. But since 1980, the most dramatic drop in family stability, Andrew Cherlin argues in his new book, *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*, has taken place among the high-school-educated.

Sociologists and ethnographers such as William Julius Wilson, Elijah Anderson, Kathryn Edin, and Alford Young have done excellent work dispelling myths and stereotypes about our least-educated and most impoverished citizens, a disproportionate percentage of whom are black. The two books under review here do not ignore race, but their primary focus is the collapse of the family system of the moderately educated, white working class. Richly researched and compellingly argued, these books show how, in just a few decades, falling wages and increasing job insecurity overturned the family patterns of the archetypical representatives of “traditional family values”—people without any “legacy of slavery” or generational history of family instability. In doing so, the authors demonstrate that current trends in marriage and unwed childbearing are more consequence than cause of America’s increasing economic insecurity and inequality.

The subtitle of Cherlin’s book reminds us that the working-class, male-breadwinner family was neither traditional nor a natural outgrowth of the free enterprise system. Indeed, the expansion of laissez-faire capitalism initially created grinding poverty and insecurity for the industrial working class, forcing most such families to rely on child labor. Only in the economic boom that followed World War II, with the indispensable assistance of a strong union movement and massive government investment in job creation, did significant numbers of blue-collar men earn enough to marry and support a family at an early age.

The average real wages of manufacturing workers doubled between 1950 and 1973. Wages rose faster for low-income workers than for high-income ones in this era,

lessening economic inequality. Young male workers just out of high school started work at lower-than-average salaries but saw their earnings increase steadily as they aged. In 1969, only 10 percent of men were still low earners by the time they were between 30 and 35 years old.

The postwar white working-class male-breadwinner family was a historical aberration, but it was accompanied by such an improvement in living standards that it's small wonder it has become the subject of nostalgia. Never before had so many men with a high school education or less been able to get jobs that paid significantly more than their fathers had earned at the same age and that allowed them to comfortably support a family on their earnings alone.

Robert Putnam's *Our Kids* combines social science data with personal interviews to show the contrast between several American towns and suburbs in the 1950s and today, arguing that the social and economic trends of the postwar era fostered a sense of community and optimism, at least among white working people, that has since been lost. He begins by contrasting what it was like growing up in the 1950s in his (mostly white) hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio, with what it is like there today.

In the 1950s, Putnam argues, residential and educational segregation by income (as opposed to race) was low, "and opportunities for kids born in the lower echelon to scale the socioeconomic ladder were abundant." Even low-income children had access to extracurricular activities that were, unlike today, provided free of charge by schools. Their families could enjoy the undeveloped beaches, camping spots, and inexpensive resorts along Lake Erie.

Although Putnam exaggerates the economic mobility of poor Americans before the War on Poverty, he draws a compelling contrast with the Port Clinton of 2012, when the average worker hadn't seen a rise in real wages for nearly 50 years. He notes that unlike the postwar era, children from low- to middle-income families now go to entirely different schools than do upper-class children. Their families have even lost access to the lakeshore, which has been bought up by wealthy families and transformed into an unbroken line of gated communities. Putnam also describes a widening class gap in participation in the extracurricular activities that have been shown to improve young people's chances of success. (And a recent paper released

by the Council on Contemporary Families finds that income explains twice as much of this gap as does family structure.)

Cherlin and Putnam point out that the family and work arrangements of the postwar era were not idyllic. Women had few economic options outside marriage and few legal rights within it. The class divide was not as wide in most communities as it is today, but the racial divide was certainly wider, and black poverty rates remained exceptionally high through the period. During the 1960s, African Americans gained more access to manufacturing jobs, becoming even more dependent than whites on industrial employment for economic security. As a result, deindustrialization in the 1970s was especially devastating to blue-collar African American families.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, even when their jobs were physically exhausting and money was tight, most working people had reason to be optimistic when they looked at where they had come from and where they seemed to be headed. Optimism is a wonderfully socializing force. In that era, a young man with a high school education or less could start out in almost any job and see his earnings improve substantially over time, outstripping those of his father and grandfather. Real-life experiences, not abstract preaching, imbued him with the sense that deferring gratification and sticking it out would end up paying off.

But the stability of blue-collar family patterns in the 1950s cannot be explained solely by the expanding economic opportunities for young men. Blocked opportunities for women also played a major role. Full-time jobs open to women were scarce, job tenures were short, and pay was low. In fact, historian Steven Ruggles shows that the gender pay gap for full-time workers increased over the period, peaking in 1966. The only way most women could participate in the prosperity of the postwar era was by marrying. And once a woman married, the legal and cultural enforcement of female deference made her also more likely to “stick it out,” even in an unhappy marriage.

As women won more legal rights and wider job opportunities in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the hold of this marriage culture on people’s lives weakened. Young people began to delay marriage. Premarital sex and cohabitation lost their stigma. Divorce rates rose among all groups of Americans.

But the most dramatic familial changes occurred among those who were left behind, victims of the falling real wages, increasing job insecurity, and declining investment in community resources that began in the early 1970s. Both authors describe the resultant growth of inequality in vivid detail. By 1996, Cherlin notes, the average 30-year-old high school graduate earned 20 percent less than his counterpart in 1979, and the gap between his standard of living and his prospects for advancement versus that of college-educated earners had widened dramatically. By 2004, almost a quarter of men ages 30 to 35 were still low earners, compared to just 10 percent in 1969.

Furthermore, the jobs available for people without a college degree became less likely to offer the socialization experience that encourages people to make long-term plans for the future. Cherlin describes the “casualization” of work, as jobs have increasingly become part-time or temporary, without long-term prospects or short-term protections. He offers a withering critique of Charles Murray’s claim that men have lost the work ethic of the traditional laboring class. Rather, he argues, “the defining problem of high-school educated young adults is that they cannot become working-class.”

Taken together, these books suggest that even as marriage has become more beneficial for educated dual-earner couples and their children, it has become a riskier proposition than it used to be for men and women without a college education. In an economy where most wage-earners need an employed partner to make ends meet, unemployed women and men are not attractive potential partners, and even someone who is employed might not have a job very long. Two low salaries are certainly better than one, which is why low-income couples move in together much more quickly than do their college-educated counterparts. But now that a woman has at least some earnings potential, it makes less sense to hitch herself to a man who might lose his job, leaving her with one more mouth to feed.

If her husband leaves her or loses his job, such a woman can end up worse off than if she had stayed single and focused on increasing her own earnings power. Tellingly, Cherlin reports, between 1980 and 2012 the median income of dual-earner couples increased by nearly 30 percent, while the median income of one-earner, married-couple families remained flat. In contrast, the median income of single mothers

increased by 11 percent—not always enough to pull them out of poverty, but better than nothing. And “nothing” is increasingly possible in today’s job market. Overall, among single adults ages 25 to 34, according to a Pew Research Report released last October, there are only 84 currently employed single men for every 100 single women, and only 51 currently employed single black men for every 100 single black women.

Neither Putnam nor Cherlin denies that cultural factors play a role in the decline of marriage and especially in the rise in unwed motherhood. Cherlin finds that a class-based marriage gap also opened up in the Gilded Age, another period when income inequality was high and rising. But cohabitation and unwed childbearing remained low in that period, as they did during the Great Depression. The destigmatization of nonmarital sex and childbearing certainly contributes to the rise of unwed motherhood, and the cultural emphasis on “self-fulfillment” has clearly increased people’s willingness to divorce. But Cherlin would agree with Putnam that changing cultural values have such a strong impact on family instability “only in conjunction with adverse economic trends.”

I do wish both authors had devoted more attention to the possibility that some of the most detrimental familial changes stem in part from the *incomplete* spread of many new cultural values. Men and women with a high school degree or less are twice as likely as college-educated Americans to believe that the man needs to be the primary breadwinner in a marriage. When a man cannot fulfill that role, a woman who values this above other characteristics (as a poor woman understandably might) may become contemptuous or impatient, while a man who holds such values may react violently to a partner who earns more than he does. Other things being equal, low-income men are not more likely to abuse their wives than high-income men. But when a man has low earnings or no earnings *and* adheres to traditional gender ideologies, he is especially likely to do so.

Similarly, the women most likely to see motherhood as the main route to achieving meaning in their lives are the ones least likely to hold feminist aspirations. And the men most likely to take pride in impregnating a woman or juggling multiple sexual partners are the least likely to have embraced new cultural ideas favoring a nurturing, egalitarian masculinity.

In other words, the problem is not simply the collapse of traditional values. It is, in part, the failure of modern values to spread fast enough. And that too is connected to growing educational and occupational inequality. People who have little access to new sources of achievement tend to fall back on old sources of identity.

Cherlin and Putnam are less concerned about the decline in marriage per se than about the consequences for children of widening economic inequality and changing family patterns. As Cherlin notes, several other wealthy countries have lower rates of marriage but less poverty and more stable living arrangements for children than the United States does.

Both authors overstate the well-being of children raised in the 1950s, when harsh, authoritarian parenting was more widespread than today, child abuse was not seen as a social problem—or even recognized by emergency room physicians who treated injured children—and experts dismissed children’s reports of incestuous abuse as fabrications or signs of female “sex delinquency.” In that era, even loving, married parents actually spent less time interacting with their children than single mothers do today.

But a vicious cycle is certainly at work here. Growing economic inequality and social insecurity, combined with declining investment in public resources, put ever more stress on the finances and personal relationships of low-income parents. Yet they also require parents to spend ever more time and money on enrichment and educational activities for their children. This is a race in which poor parents, even married ones, inevitably fall behind, with single parents especially disadvantaged.

Both Cherlin and Putnam suggest ways to break the cycle without resorting to marriage promotion efforts that have already been proven not to work. Putnam provides an especially helpful summary of evidence showing that social initiatives and investments to improve child outcomes *do* work. The question, these books make clear, is whether we can develop a new “moral majority” in America that is willing to challenge the increasing concentration of resources in the hands of the few, and is eager to invest in the future of all our children.