

# Center for Marriage and Families

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## **The American Family, 1988–2028** *Looking Back and Looking Forward*

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### **Twenty Years Ago**

In 1988, the American family appeared to be in serious trouble—at least according to the statistics. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the marriage rate plummeted and the divorce rate and unwed birth percentage skyrocketed. By the late 1980s the percentage of broken homes in America was at a historical high. Yet few academics, politicians, journalists, and other national leaders were at all alarmed. A common theme among many family experts was that family weakening or decline was only a “myth.”

Family statistics since the 1980s have provided little support to the myth proponents. The marriage rate has dropped from 50.8 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women in 1990 to 38.7 in 2006, while during the same time period the percentage of out-of-wedlock births climbed from 28 percent to almost 39 percent. Part of the reason for both the drop in marriage and the increase in unwed births was the dramatic rise in the number of people living together outside of marriage, which jumped from 2,856,000 couples in 1990 to 5,368,000 couples in 2006.

Such a relentless statistical message led most family experts eventually to agree, often reluctantly, that the family as an institution had at least “weakened” in recent decades. But the shift of opinion did not come easily. Concerns about the stigmatization of single parenthood and the return of patriarchy and, more recently, the debate about same-sex marriage have often overshadowed any judgments about family weakening. It is interesting to note that, while academic and opinion leaders had to be won over to the idea that families were growing weaker, national surveys indicate that the average American has never had the slightest doubt that families were in trouble.

### **A Cultural Breakthrough**

Yet as experts came to agree on what was happening to the family, a major issue remained unresolved: Even if we grant that the family has weakened, why should we care? The far-reaching detrimental effects of family decline, especially on children, were long denied in many leading intellectual circles. Divorce was often seen as liberating for adults, and unwed births were viewed as a new freedom for women, both without a serious downside. A 1992 front-page article in the *Washington Post*, for example, announced that according to “a searching reevaluation by social scientists” the “conventional two-parent household may be far less critical to the healthy development of children than previously believed.”

A heated national debate on this topic was triggered by Dan Quayle's now-famous speech, given when he was running for reelection with President George H. W. Bush in 1992, which criticized the TV program *Murphy Brown* for glorifying unwed motherhood. The debate rapidly accelerated when the *Atlantic Monthly* published an April 1993 cover story titled "Dan Quayle Was Right." The article by the prominent family expert Barbara Dafoe Whitehead was an extensive review of the empirical data relating family structure to child well-being. The accumulated empirical data she reviewed were irrefutable: Family breakup hurts children.

**During the 1990s, intellectual debate about family breakup changed from denial of problems to concern and growing action.**

From that point public debate about the family loosely proceeded along the following lines: Children are being hurt, fathers are important, and marriage is essential. In 1992 a group of leading scholars and intellectuals from all shades of the political spectrum formed the Council on Families in America, sponsored by the Institute for American Values, to analyze, evaluate, and weigh in on the issues. Its pioneering 1995 report *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation* had a wide influence, being among the first to single out the

weakening of marriage as the key to family decline. The executive summary read: "The divorce revolution . . . has failed. It has created terrible hardships for children, incurred unsupportable social costs, and failed to deliver on its promise of greater adult happiness. The time has come to shift the focus of national attention from divorce to marriage."

The loss of fathers from the family via the decline of marriage, which was particularly severe in the African American community, began to take on a central role in the debate. By the mid-1990s, marriage and fatherhood "movements" had begun to blossom with many new organizations set up specifically to promote marriage and responsible fatherhood and to try to halt family breakup and its negative effects, especially on children. The groups included Smart Marriages; the National Fatherhood Initiative; Marriage Savers; the Religion, Culture, and Family Project at the University of Chicago; the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University; and numerous national and state-level family policy organizations. By the late 1990s, a very different climate of opinion about the effects of family change came to prevail among journalists, family experts, and other opinion leaders. Symptomatic of this change was an August 12, 2001, front-page article in the *New York Times* reporting that "a powerful consensus has emerged in recent years among social scientists, as well as state and federal policy makers. It sees single-parent families as the dismal foundries that produced decades of child poverty, delinquency and crime. And it views the rise of such families . . . as a singularly important indicator of child pathology."

The climate of opinion had changed so much, in fact, that by the late 1990s even Candice Bergen, who played *Murphy Brown* in the TV series, was able to say what she really thought about the TV episode that triggered the debate. "I didn't think that it was a good message to be sending out," she told the *Los Angeles Times*. And in 2002 she said to the Television Critics Association, "I think all of us feel that family values have to sort of come back front and center."

As the twenty-first century dawned, even the family statistics themselves were beginning to look more promising. Perhaps the changing climate of elite opinion about families was having some effect on actual behavior. The divorce rate was dropping nationwide, and the marriage rate decline was slowing. In the African American community, the percentage of out-of-wedlock births declined for the first time in recent

decades from 70 percent in 1994 to 68 percent in 2000, while the percentage of black children living in two-parent families increased from 36 percent to 38 percent between 1998 and 2000.

Also, marriage and family concerns had finally become respectable topics for national political discussion. In the presidential election campaign of 2000, candidate George W. Bush became the first major presidential candidate in modern times to state publicly that the federal government should do more to support marriage. After he was elected he carried through on this pledge by securing legislation that authorized a portion of welfare monies be devoted to the goal of strengthening marriage. This has led to hundreds of “marriage education” programs being established across the nation, concerned with the marriages not only of the poor but also of the middle class.

## **The Family Situation Today**

Even though there is now almost universal agreement in this nation that modern family breakup is problematic, the public debate concerning what—if anything—to do about family decline has in recent years become silenced. As this brief was being written only one of the then fifteen or so presidential primary candidates had mentioned family breakup as an issue of national concern, and that was in passing in a long speech emphasizing other topics. Divorce, unwed births, and cohabitation have now become so widely accepted—and practiced—that a politician today risks alienating voters and sounding like that worst of all modern personalities—a judgmental moralist—by even suggesting that these family conditions are problems that need to be dealt with. One exception may be in discussions of the very poor, but even then the fear of seeming to “blame the victim” often stops any serious analysis—or even mention—of this elephant in the room.

**The risk of serious behavioral problems remains higher for children not living with their own married mothers and fathers.**

Lying behind the silenced public debate about the family is a surprising and unexpected development: Since the mid-1990s, many social problems that stemmed in part from the dramatic family changes in the 1970s and 1980s have lessened in severity. Crime and delinquency, teen pregnancies, and even teenage substance abuse are all down to the lowest levels seen in several decades. The reasons for this apparent amelioration of youth problems are unclear. Among the possibilities that have been mentioned are the recent strong economy; fewer people in the more problem-prone youthful age cohorts; changes in federal and local policies, especially welfare reform and new crime control measures; an easing of family decline together with a better adaptation to the family changes that have occurred; and changing values that have generated less “permissiveness.”

While this social improvement is surely welcomed, it is worth noting that the “social problem gap” between intact and broken families does not seem to have changed; that is, the risk that a child will have serious behavioral problems has gone down for children of every family type but still remains much higher for those children who grow up in families that don’t contain their own two, married, biological parents. Also, as “modernity” advances, there is evidence that the classic behavioral problems of youth such as delinquency are gradually being replaced by more benign, albeit still serious, psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, and the latter are rapidly on the upswing. Nevertheless, the nation’s attention for the time being has turned to other issues, such as troubles in the Middle East, the now-weakening economy, health care, and illegal immigration.

## The Next Twenty Years

Following in the footsteps of the small family improvements that occurred around the turn of the twenty-first century, family conditions may now be worsening once again. The family data for 2006 (the latest year for which data are available) provide no grounds for being sanguine about the family's future. The percentage of all births that take place outside of marriage is not only continuing to increase but also accelerating, jumping in one year from 36.9 percent to 38.5 percent. The teen birthrate rose again, after fifteen years of decline. And while we don't yet have good data, it is highly probable that the rate of nonmarital cohabitation has continued to climb rapidly. As one portent of the future, the family condition of our most rapidly growing immigrant population—Hispanics—seems to be deteriorating at the fastest clip, with steeply climbing rates of cohabitation and unwed births. None of this data suggests any imminent diminution in our regrettable national standing as the industrialized, Western nation with the largest percentage of children (42 percent) who are living in families that don't contain their married, biological parents.

**When families cease to function, the state and the market can never fully replace the resources that the family provides.**

A troubling development of recent years is what is sometimes called “the marriage gap” between differently educated segments of the population. People who have completed college (who are about one quarter of the population) tend to have significantly higher marriage and lower divorce and unwed birth rates compared to those with less education. This divide could signify a growing movement in the direction of two different family systems in the United States: the privileged with intact families and births within marriage, and the underprivileged with broken families and births outside of marriage. Moreover, the birthrate of the privileged classes is considerably below that of the underprivileged, so on that basis alone the broken-family classes are bound to grow as a percentage of the total population. The sobering reality is that, in every category of social, psychological, economic, and medical dysfunction, the highest percentages are found among those who are less well educated and come from broken homes.

Family trends of recent years have been largely generated by a distinctive set of cultural values that have come to be labeled “secular individualism.” This value set, which already predominates in the northern European nations, consists of the gradual abandonment of religious attendance and beliefs, a strong leaning toward “expressive” values that are preoccupied with personal autonomy and self-fulfillment, and a political emphasis on egalitarianism and the tolerance of diverse lifestyles. An established empirical generalization is that the greater the dominance of secular individualism in a culture, the more fragmented the families. As America continues to move in this cultural direction—as by all current empirical evidence it is—the family can be expected to continue to weaken.

Adding to family weakening is the fact that, in many respects, families are simply not needed in modern societies as much as they once were. Many traditional functions of the family—such as education, economic support, child rearing, care of the elderly, and even food preparation—have been at least in part shifted over to the state and the market. The welfare state with its many life supporting measures, and the incredible abundance of goods and services provided in modern economies, means that the overall importance of the family for the average person is less than ever before: No job, and one can rely for a while on unemployment insurance; no husband, and a woman can rely at least for a while on welfare; no children, and people can rely on social security when they get old. Because these are all desirable social developments

that people want, there is every reason to believe that this “loss of family functions” will accelerate over time. Yet when families cease to function, the state and the market can never fully replace the economic and social resources that the family provides, not to mention the psychological grounding and emotional comforts of growing up and growing old with others closely tied to you.

When attempting to predict the future, one must be careful not to rely entirely on making simple linear extensions of existing trends. In other words, just because some statistical measures of family life are currently moving in a certain direction does not mean that this movement will necessarily continue. For example, if linear projections had been used by a researcher in the late 1930s, that person never would have predicted the baby boom era. And if linear extensions had been used by researchers during the baby boom, the massive social changes of the late 1960s and 1970s would have remained unpredicted. In fact, almost no one predicted either the baby boom or the 1960s cultural revolutions for this very reason—because they relied on simple linear extensions of contemporary family trends. We can’t know what twists and turns lie ahead because of the impossibility of accurately anticipating such phenomena as new technologies and their effects, human calamities and disasters, and, to put it simply, changes in the human heart. Just as there are economic cycles of growth and recession, and political cycles toggling back and forth between liberalism and conservatism, so are there cultural cycles. Historically, some societies have shifted back and forth over time between, for example, restrictiveness and permissiveness in human behavior.

Strong families remain essential for a strong and healthy society and irreplaceable for successful child rearing and for satisfying the deeper social-emotional needs of both adults and children. This fact leads one to think that perhaps future generations of Americans will want to make a cultural shift back in the direction of two-parent families held together by lifelong marriage. It is hard to envision this scenario in the very near future, but over the course of the next twenty years signs of this change could become evident. And the scenario will surely become more likely if the nation becomes better educated about the evidence relating family weakening to the host of problems that ail modern societies, especially those concerning our children.

## **About the Author**

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The premier fatherhood renewal organization in the country, the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) works in every sector and at every level of society to engage fathers in the lives of their children. NFI is one of the leading producers of research on the causes and consequences of father absence, public opinion on family issues, and trends in family structure and marriage. NFI's national public service advertising campaign promoting fatherhood has generated television, radio, print, Internet, and outdoor advertising valued at over \$500 million. Through its resource center, FatherSOURCE, NFI offers a wide range of innovative resources to assist fathers and organizations interested in reaching and supporting fathers. Learn more by visiting [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org).

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