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# History and Current Status of Divorce in the United States

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This article explores the remarkable shift in marriage and divorce practices that has occurred in the last third of this century in the United States. Initially, information is presented on trends in divorce and remarriage; commonalities and differences between family patterns in the United States and in other industrialized nations are discussed. The author then identifies some of the factors that have transformed marriage practices in the United States and describes how changes in these practices have altered the family experiences of children. Finally, the author suggests trends in family patterns that might occur in the near future and discusses various policy initiatives and how they may influence the future of the family.

## **Disciplines**

Family, Life Course, and Society | Sociology

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# History and Current Status of Divorce in the United States

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.

## Abstract

This article explores the remarkable shift in marriage and divorce practices that has occurred in the last third of this century in the United States. Initially, information is presented on trends in divorce and remarriage; commonalities and differences between family patterns in the United States and in other industrialized nations are discussed. The author then identifies some of the factors that have transformed marriage practices in the United States and describes how changes in these practices have altered the family experiences of children. Finally, the author suggests trends in family patterns that might occur in the near future and discusses various policy initiatives and how they may influence the future of the family.

**A**s far back as the nineteenth century, when divorce was still uncommon in the United States, Americans worried about the consequences of marital dissolution for children.<sup>1</sup> Then as now, opinion divided between critics of liberalized divorce practices who worried that reform would undermine the capacity of parents to protect and nurture children and reformers who believed that divorce is a necessary mechanism to ensure matrimonial success.<sup>2</sup> None of the participants in these debates a century or more ago, however, contemplated an era when divorce would become an intrinsic part of our marriage system or a time when close to half of all those who entered marriage would voluntarily end their unions.

This article explores the demographic and social changes that have come about in American families as a result of the "divorce revolution," a phrase that Weitzman used to characterize the remarkable shift in marriage and divorce practices that occurred in the last third of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> This change, dramatic as it sometimes appears, was actually a gradual one that is firmly rooted in American cultural values. True, the divorce revolution has occurred among most developed nations.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the pace of change and the prevalence of marital disruption and family

reconstitution is distinctly American. By a considerable margin, the United States has led the industrialized world in the incidence of divorce and the proportion of children affected by divorce.<sup>5</sup> Part of the mission of this article is to understand why this is so.

The first section of this article describes trends in divorce and remarriage (see the article by Shiono and Quinn in this journal issue for a detailed presentation of these and related important demographic changes) and comments on the

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growing pattern of informal unions that complicates our interpretation of recent patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The commonalities and differences between family patterns in the United States and those in other industrialized nations are discussed. The second section of the article identifies some important sources of the transformation in marriage practices. Although other articles in this volume deal more directly with the consequences of divorce for children, this article, in the third section, provides a demographic context for this discussion

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by comparing the family experiences of different cohorts of children as they have encountered increasing levels of marital instability. In doing so, it highlights the very different types of family patterns that occur among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. In the final section, some themes that emerge throughout the article are addressed, including what sorts of trends might occur in the near future and whether various policy initiatives can influence the future of the family, the patterns of parenting, and the welfare of children who face high degrees of uncertainty in their family arrangements.

### **Historical Changes in Divorce and Remarriage**

Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, divorce was largely proscribed by law and shunned in practice much as still happens today in many nations including some European countries such as Italy and Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Most marital disruptions occurred not as a result of divorce but from desertion or informal separation. Because population surveys were not available prior to the middle part of the twentieth century, it is difficult to know how often de facto divorce took place in the United States. But, it seems likely that all but a small minority of marriages survived until the death of one or another partner, an event that typically occurred much earlier than it does today.<sup>7</sup> Some have argued that

the rise of divorce was partly prompted by increasing survival rates, which placed a greater strain on the ability of couples to manage marital stress or maintain marital contentment.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no firm evidence to support this conjecture.

Divorce rates in the United States began to rise shortly after the Civil War and continued on an steady upward course for more than a century. Over this time rates have fluctuated, often falling in poor economic times and generally surging after major wars. But these short-term variations have been far less consequential to the long-term pattern of constant growth.<sup>9</sup> Nearly two decades ago, Preston and McDonald calculated the likelihood of divorce for each marriage cohort beginning in 1867 and continuing until the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup> Their results showed a continuous trend of dissolution among successive marriage cohorts. Roughly 5% of marriages ended in divorce just after the Civil War compared with an estimated 36% in 1964. Thus, the pattern of prevalent divorce was firmly in place in this country even before the divorce revolution of the 1960s.

Nonetheless, there was a sharp increase in the incidence of divorce from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. During a span of a decade and a half, divorce rates for married women more than doubled (from 10.6 per 1,000 in 1965 to 22.8 in 1979), pushing the risk of divorce much higher for all marriage cohorts, especially those who wed after the mid-1960s.<sup>11</sup> Some researchers speculated that a majority of all marriages contracted in the 1970s and after would end, especially when both informal separations and formal divorces were counted.<sup>12</sup> Other researchers reached more conservative estimates but still projected that more than two in every five marriages would end in divorce when divorce rates reached their peaks in the middle 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

Divorce rates began to level off in the late 1970s and actually declined by about 10% during the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned earlier, fluctuations of this sort are common historically and do not necessarily signal a reversal in divorce trends. Nonetheless, most demographers think that divorce is not likely to continue its upward pattern, at least in the near term. There are several demographic explanations for the failure of divorce rates to increase after the 1970s which do not necessarily imply

that Americans today are becoming more committed to staying married than they were in the previous two decades.

The huge cohort of baby boomers, reacting to changing economic opportunities, postponed marriage.<sup>9,14</sup> A larger proportion opted to obtain more schooling and wait to form a family.<sup>15</sup> Marriage age for women rose from just above 20 in the mid-1950s to 24.4 in 1992, an increase of more than four years.<sup>16</sup> It has long been known that early marriage and lower education are associated with marital instability.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the pattern of delayed marriage might have had a role in curbing the rates of divorce.

Another potent source of marital disruption, associated with early marriage, is premarital pregnancy. Fewer marriages today occur as a result of a premarital pregnancy.<sup>18</sup> It also seems plausible that the greater availability of contraception and abortion in the 1970s may have discouraged the formation of early unions, reducing the number of ill-considered marriages, though evidence to support this hypothesis is not available.

Furthermore, the population has been getting older as the baby boomers mature. Older couples in long-standing marriages have a lower propensity to divorce.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as the baby boomers reach middle age, a larger proportion of those married have passed through the high-risk years, when their marriages are young and relatively more fragile.

Finally, growing rates of cohabitation before marriage may have brought down the rate of divorce. As more and more couples elect to live together prior to marrying, it seems likely that many unions that would have ended in divorce end before marriage occurs. That is, a growing number of Americans are divorcing without marrying, making the official divorce statistics a less reliable barometer of union stability.<sup>20</sup>

For all these reasons, it is probable that the modest drop in divorce rates does not indicate a higher propensity toward marital stability. Instead, the composition of those marrying has changed in ways that only make it appear that marriages are becoming more stable.

### Remarriage

Not so many years ago, it was common for family experts to reassure those who were alarmed at the steady increase in divorce

rates by pointing out that divorce typically is not a terminal event but a transition from one marriage to the next. So it was said that couples who separated lost faith in a particular marriage but not in the institution of matrimony.<sup>21</sup> In 1975, close to three-fourths of all women in their fifties who had experienced a divorce had remarried. For formerly married men, the occurrence of remarriage was even higher, about four in five eventually remarried, owing to the greater pool of eligible partners. (It is easier for men to attract younger partners than it is for women.) But recently, the rate of remarriage has been declining.<sup>22</sup>

In part, the trend toward lower remarriage rates may reflect the greater tendency to postpone second unions as both men and women may be more willing and able to live as single persons. But recent evidence from the National Survey of

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Families and Households (NSFH) suggests the rate of recoupling has not declined notably.<sup>23</sup> Many divorced persons have become more cautious about reentering matrimony, preferring instead to cohabit in informal and more fluid unions. This pattern, discussed below, poses particular problems for children who are, to an increasing extent, being raised by quasi-stepparents who are often transitional figures in their households.

The lower rates of remarriage may reflect a growing reluctance to formalize unions after a failed first marriage. Couples who remarry are known to have a higher risk of divorce than couples entering first marriages. And divorces from second marriages occur more quickly than from first unions. Cherlin has shown that the proportion of couples who will marry, divorce, remarry, and redi-vorce has risen eightfold during the course of this century, climbing from barely 2% of those who were born in the first decade of the twentieth century to 16% of those born after 1970.<sup>9</sup>

Cherlin described the changing patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage

for four birth cohorts of women (see Figure 2 in the article by Shiono and Quinn in this journal issue). For all but the most recent cohort, the proportion ever marrying remained relatively stable while the prevalence of divorce, remarriage, and redi-orce progressively increased. In the youngest cohort, women born after 1970, Cherlin projects that marriage (and remarriage) will decline significantly and divorce will remain high among women who elect to marry or remarry.

### **Racial/Ethnic Differences in Patterns of Divorce and Remarriage**

Rising rates of marital instability have been experienced by all Americans regardless of socioeconomic status, race, religious affiliation, or region of the country. However, the extent of marital instability differs enormously among various social groups. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore in detail the patterns described above for different social classes, religious groups, or regions of the country. It is hard to ignore, however, racial/ethnic differences in patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage because the experiences for whites, African Americans, and some Hispanic groups are so very disparate.

African Americans have long exhibited different patterns of family formation.<sup>24</sup> As far back as the nineteenth century, blacks were more likely to marry earlier, had a higher incidence of premarital pregnancy and nonmarital childbearing, formed less stable unions, and were less likely to remarry when disruption occurred. Scholars disagree on the origin of these patterns.<sup>25</sup> Some believe that they are rooted in different notions of kinship brought to America; others argue that distinctive patterns of family formation emerged in slavery; and still others contend that these family differences did not really take hold until after Emancipation, when black Americans were exposed to economic discrimination and racism. Still others argue that the differences are more recent in origin.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the particular origin or combination of origins, there is convincing evidence that African Americans are much less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and less likely to remarry when divorce occurs.<sup>27</sup> More than 90% of whites will marry compared with about 75% of African Americans; of those who do wed, African Americans have a substantially higher risk of divorce.<sup>13</sup> Ten years after

marriage, 47% of blacks have separated or divorced compared with 28% of non-Hispanic whites. Blacks are also far less likely to remarry after separating. As a result, African Americans spend far less time in marriage than do whites.<sup>28</sup>

Much less information exists on the marriage patterns of other racial and ethnic groups. Census data on Hispanics suggest that their levels of marriage, divorce, and remarriage fall somewhere between those of whites and those of blacks.<sup>13</sup> However, official statistics actually conceal as much as they reveal about the behavior of different Latino groups. There is reason to suspect that as much difference exists between Cubans or Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans as between whites and blacks in rates of marriage and marital stability.<sup>29</sup> Still, such as it is, the evidence on Hispanic subgroups reveals similar trends to those described for blacks and whites in the United States.

In sum, virtually all population subgroups have experienced a postponement of marriage, a steady increase in divorce, and a decrease in remarriage after divorce. Cohabitation as a prelude, aftermath, and perhaps alternative to marriage has become more common. These patterns are more evident among African Americans.

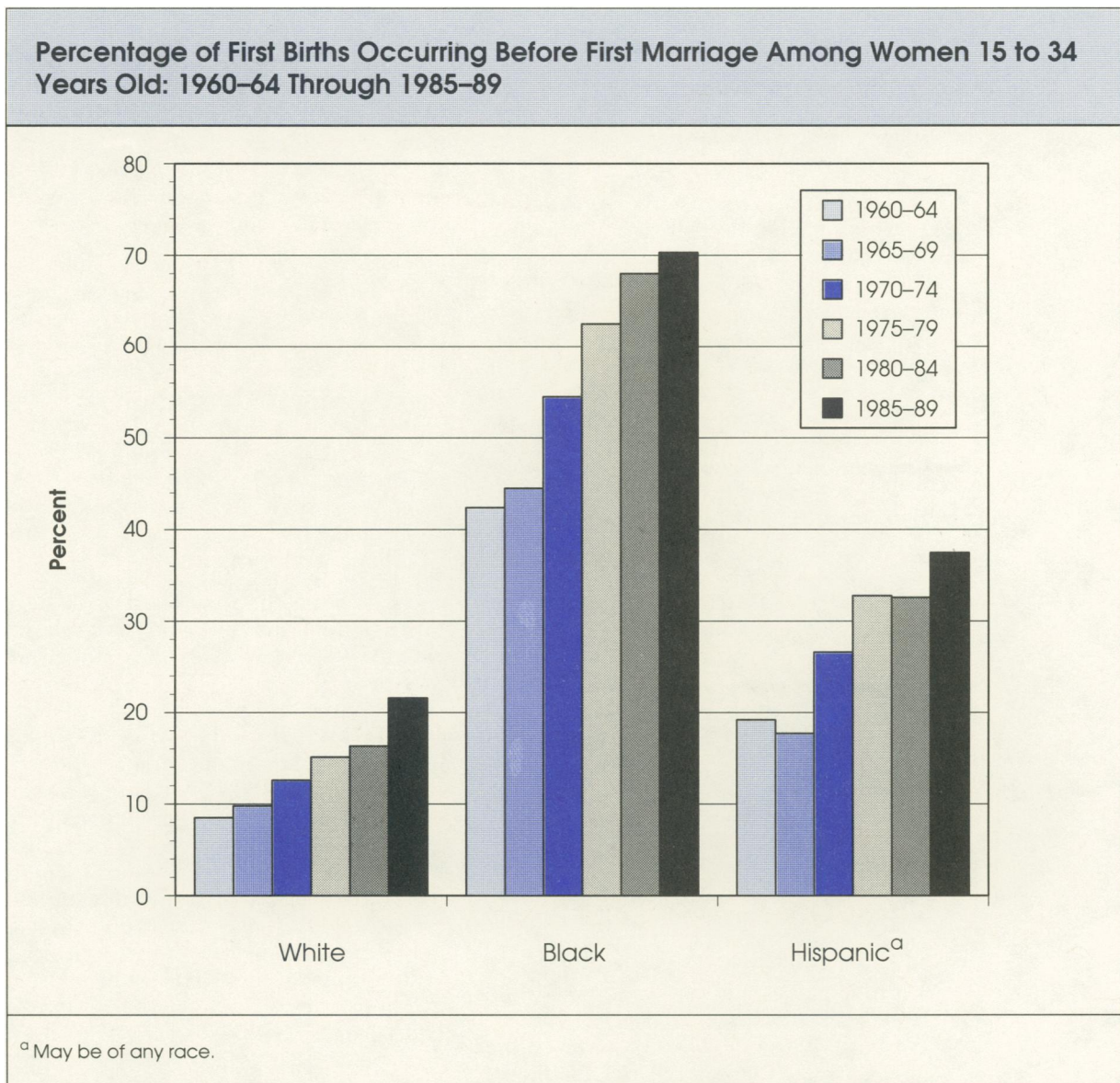
### **Childbearing**

The declining institution of marriage has important ramifications for patterns of childbearing. Typically, now, marriage no longer regulates the timing of sex, and to an increasing degree, it no longer regulates the timing of first birth.<sup>30</sup> Nonmarital childbearing has become more prominent over the past several decades as rates of marital childbearing have declined and rates of nonmarital childbearing have held steady or increased. In 1960, only 5% of all births occurred to unmarried women; in 1990, this proportion had risen to 28%.<sup>31</sup> The increase for whites has been tenfold, from 2% to 20% in this 30-year period.

Figure 1 depicts the remarkable rise in the number of first births among women between the ages of 15 and 34 which have occurred before marriage for whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Among each of the racial/ethnic subgroups, the increase has been remarkable over the past 30 years. For whites this number rose from 8.5% for births occurring in the early 1960s to 21.6% for those that took place in the late 1980s. The rise for blacks was even more spectacular, going from 42.4% in the early



Figure 1



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Households, families, and children: A 30-year perspective*. Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 181. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992, Figure 6.

1960s to 70.3% in the late 1980s. The proportion for Hispanics doubled during the same period, going from 19.2% to 37.5%. Clearly, out-of-wedlock childbearing has become a far more important source of single parenthood for all Americans and especially so for African Americans, who now have a sizable majority of first births before marriage.<sup>18</sup> (See Figure 1.)

### International Comparisons

The weakening of marriage as a social institution is not unique to the United States. Most developed countries are witnessing similar demographic trends.<sup>32</sup> In some instances, the retreat from marriage

is even more pronounced. For example, in Scandinavia cohabitation has become a widely accepted alternative to marriage.<sup>33</sup> France and England have higher proportions of out-of-wedlock births than occur in the United States, though a higher proportion of these births occur to parents who are cohabiting than in this country.<sup>34</sup>

Divorce rates have also risen sharply in a number of European nations, though none equals this country in the prevalence of divorce. Still, about a third of marriages in Northern Europe will end in divorce; in England and Scandinavia, as many as two in five marriages may dissolve.<sup>35</sup> Thus, explanations for the de-institutionalization

of marriage cannot reside solely in the special features of American culture or society.

## Explaining Changing Marriage Patterns

Much recent scholarly activity has been devoted to accounting for the declining strength of the marriage institution. The centrality of marriage and the nuclear family in the middle part of the twentieth century makes it especially puzzling to explain what appears to be the rapid erosion of a high cultural commitment to lifelong monogamy.<sup>9,36</sup> As we have already seen, the view that change came suddenly and

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only recently is certainly spurious. Many of the elements that were undermining the particular model of marriage prevalent in the 1950s have been evident for some time.

An explanation does not point to a single source of change. A configuration of many changes, some long-standing and others more recent, have shifted the balance of individual interests away from forming permanent unions to more fluid and flexible arrangements. The most important of these was undoubtedly the breakdown of the gender-based division of labor that led men to invest in work and women to specialize in domestic activity.<sup>37</sup>

In the United States these changes occurred in a culture that has long trumpeted the virtues of individual choice and, more recently, personal freedom and self-actualization.<sup>38</sup> Little wonder that Americans lead other nations in the divorce revolution.<sup>39</sup> Our ideology of individualism may have helped to grease the main engine of change, the movement of women into the labor force which subverted the model of marriage as an exchange of goods and services between men and women.

Other simultaneous developments may have hastened the breakdown of the nuclear family. The sexual revolution in no small measure made marriage seem

less attractive. As premarital sex with decreased risk of pregnancy became more accessible in the 1960s, the lure of early marriage lessened. The spread of birth control to unmarried youth and the availability of abortion played a part, but the growing visibility of sex that occurred in the post-Kinsey era was probably as influential as the availability of methods of fertility control in changing sexual practices.

Finally, the shift of public opinion favoring more liberal divorce laws may have fed the process of change.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the laws were a response to a growing demand for divorce.<sup>40</sup> Increases in marital disruption preceded the legal changes or even the opinion favoring changes.<sup>41</sup> However, the laws, in turn, consolidated opinion institutionalizing alternative marriage forms, replacing the permanent monogamy with conjugal succession and, of late, even more conditional arrangements.

Apart from the development of new norms, marital instability promotes more instability as individuals become more wary about the prospects of permanency. They prepare for the contingency of being alone by spending time alone, and they hedge their bets by entering temporary partnerships.<sup>42</sup> As they do, they develop more resources for independence and a greater commitment to living alone unless they are highly contented in unions. Thus, the standards for what constitutes a gratifying relationship may have been rising to higher levels, some would say to unrealistically higher levels. Whether this is true or not, most Americans, perhaps women especially, are now less willing than they once were to settle for “good enough” marriages because they have the option of seeking more gratifying relationships or of living alone in the event that such relationships prove elusive.<sup>43</sup>

## Divorce and the Changing Family Experiences of Children

The implications of these new marriage patterns for children has been the subject of enormous attention and mounting concern.<sup>44</sup> Close to a majority of children growing up today are likely to spend some time living in a single-parent family before reaching adulthood.<sup>23,45</sup> And, at least one in five will acquire a stepparent or surrogate parent. Family instability is not novel to the latter part of the twentieth century.

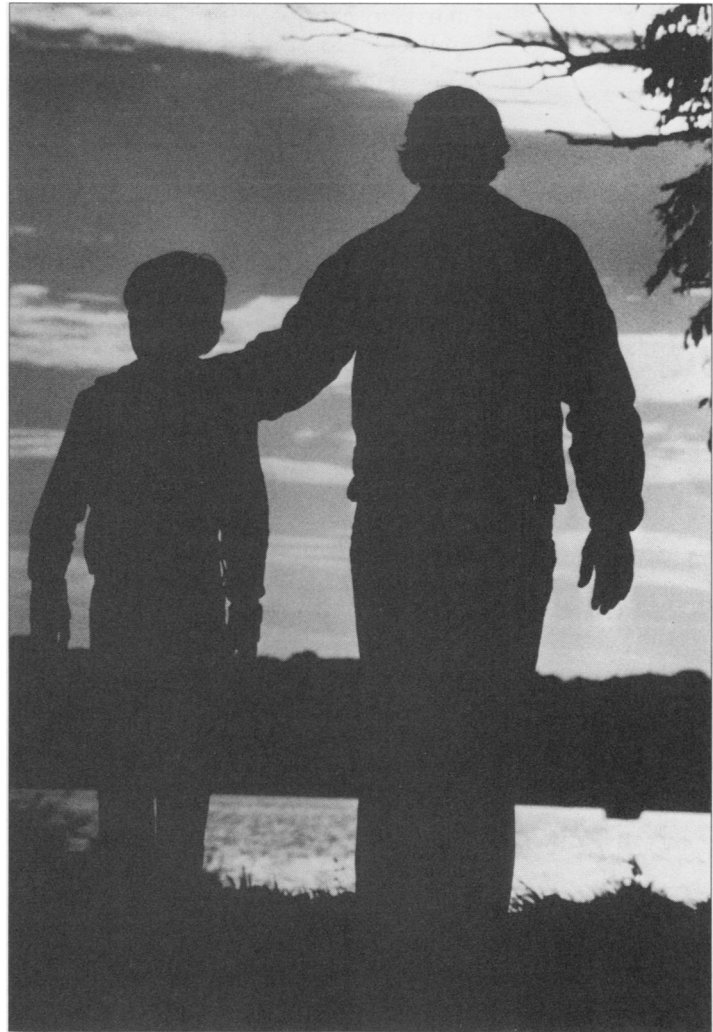


Uhlenberg calculated that about one quarter of all children growing up in 1900 lost a parent by death.<sup>46</sup> If another 7% or 8% encountered a voluntary separation, then close to one in three spent time in a single-parent household during childhood. By mid-century, families had become more stable: the rapid decline of mortality was offset to some degree by rising voluntary dissolution and slightly higher rates of nonmarital childbearing. Still, the total disruptions probably did not affect more than one quarter of all children.<sup>47</sup>

Since the 1950s, when rates of stability were at their highest point, the risk of family disruption has more than doubled, owing to much higher rates of divorce and separation and, more recently, an explosion of nonmarital childbearing. Several estimates of children's probability of experiencing parental separation or divorce conclude that at least two in five children will see their parents separate before their late teens.<sup>20,48</sup> More than one quarter of children are born to unmarried couples, generally couples who are not living together when the birth occurs. Of course, there is some overlap between these two populations, but still, close to half of all children will spend time in a single-parent household before age 18.

This staggeringly high figure does not even tell the whole story. Among African Americans, the proportion of children who live continuously with two biological parents throughout childhood is certainly less than one in five and may be as low as one in ten.<sup>49</sup> Although data are unavailable on the experiences of different Latino groups during childhood, based on family composition, it is safe to assume that the difference among Hispanic populations is at least as great as the variation between Hispanics and either whites or African Americans. Puerto Rican patterns resemble those of African Americans while Mexican Americans appear to have even higher stability than white non-Hispanics.<sup>50</sup>

Marital disruption or nonmarital childbearing for many children initiates a complex family career.<sup>47</sup> Most are likely to see one or both parents live with a partner for a time. Some of these partnerships eventually in marriage; others dissolve and are succeeded by new relationships. Some remarriages persist while others end in divorce. At least one quarter of all children



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growing up today are likely to acquire a stepparent by marriage, and others will live with a quasi-stepparent. Beyond their household, children also may see their noncustodial parent enter new relationships. Thus, a high proportion of children growing up today will have more than two parents by the time that they reach age 18. Many more will gain additional parents in adulthood.

There has been considerable debate over the consequence of family flux on children's development and well-being. Many researchers stress the considerable costs incurred by children who are not raised in a nuclear family. Others cite the fact that most studies show relatively modest effects on children's adjustment in later life and observe that divorce represents an improvement in family circumstances for some children.<sup>51</sup> (See the article by Amato in this journal issue for an in-depth discussion of adjustment in children of divorce.)

Given the diversity of experience among children whose parents do not live together, it is difficult to arrive at a simple bottom line when assessing the effects of divorce. The starting point for families is so different, ranging all the way from instances where parents barely are acquainted to those who never live together to those who have lived together but are unsuccessful in collaborating to those who collaborate well before they separate but poorly afterwards to those who continue to collaborate effectively as parents even when they are no longer partners.

A growing body of research has examined how parents manage to raise children when they live apart.<sup>52</sup> More than half of all noncustodial parents effectively drop out, maintaining little or no contact with their children after divorce and providing little in the way of economic support. One survey in 1981 revealed that a majority of noncustodial parents saw their children infrequently or not at all.<sup>53</sup> Reports on child support also confirmed that a majority of noncustodial fathers contributed little or no support to their children—even those with formal support agreements.<sup>54</sup> (See the article by Roberts on child support enforcement in this journal issue.)

Over the past decade, there appear to have been some indications that paternal involvement after divorce may be increasing as laws both permit shared responsibility and enforce paternal obligations.<sup>47</sup> Unmarried fathers, too, may be experienc-

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ing the same opportunities and pressures for greater economic and emotional investment. Evidence from several longitudinal studies indicates that fathers who may be disconnected when children are young may become more involved with their offspring later in life.<sup>55</sup> Still, the preponderance of data indicates that a high number of nonresident fathers (and a substantial minority of nonresident mothers) disengage from their children when they do not live in the household. (See the article by Shiono and Quinn in this journal

issue for further discussion of paternal involvement with children after divorce.)

At the heart of the problem is that many regard parenthood as part of a “package deal” that is inextricably linked with marriage or a marriage-like relationship. Men, in particular, often relate to their children in large part through their wives or partners. The disintegration of that relationship reduces noncustodial parents’ willingness to invest resources in their children. This is especially so after remarriage, when parents often feel supplanted and disadvantaged by a new figure.

As many studies have shown, the withdrawal of economic support often has devastating effects on the living standards of mothers and children.<sup>3,56</sup> Though it is clear that stricter enforcement of child support will not lift all children in female-headed families out of poverty, the distributional effects would be substantial.<sup>57</sup> There is ample evidence that women and their children are far worse off after divorce than men and that noncustodial fathers are not paying their fair share.<sup>58</sup>

The effects of paternal participation on children’s emotional development are less clear, though many experts believe that children are better off when their noncustodial parents remain involved.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the evidence for this assumption is equivocal at best. (See the articles by Amato, Kelly, and Thompson in this journal issue for further discussion of paternal participation and children’s adjustment.) It may be that the level of paternal involvement is too low to produce a benefit or that greater involvement is accompanied by more conflict and ineffective collaboration.<sup>60</sup>

Despite a growing pattern of joint custody and shared responsibility, most formerly married and never-married parents do not cooperate effectively: they do not consult with one another, share information, support each other’s efforts, or provide consistent monitoring and discipline.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the general axiom that children are better off when both parents are involved, even if they do not work well together, needs further consideration by researchers and clinicians.

A growing body of evidence also suggests that remarriage can pose complications for children even though they benefit economically when the parent with whom they live remarries.<sup>47</sup> The eco-

economic status of households headed by a remarried couple appears to be similar to that of couples in first marriages though few investigators have given careful consideration to the potentially greater economic demands on parents in second marriages. Still, there is no doubt that remarriage often lifts women and children out of poverty, probably because women are much less likely to reenter marriage if their potential partners have limited resources.

Remarriage not only reverses, to a large extent, the economic slide resulting from divorce but also introduces a new set of challenges for children. Remarriage can upset a stable family situation. It may, at least temporarily, divert attention and time that children may be receiving from their parents and perhaps create frictions between stepparents and nonresident parents. Family life can become more complex, uncertain, and possibly conflict-ridden, especially when households join children from different families.<sup>61</sup> (See the article by Shiono and Quinn in this journal issue for further information on stepfamilies and adjustment.)

Most studies show that children in stepfamilies do not do better than children in single-parent families; indeed, many indicate that on average children in remarriages do worse.<sup>60,62</sup> Remarriage creates a new family form that has been described by Cherlin as “incompletely institutionalized.”<sup>63</sup> Family rights and obligations are less clearly defined and understood than in nuclear households. The absence of normative consensus extends beyond the household. A growing body of research suggests that kinship ties among steprelations are more discretionary and probably less enduring.<sup>64</sup> A positive aspect for children in stepfamilies is that they have access to a larger network of kin; a negative aspect is that these relations may be less reliable and committed to extending support and sponsorship.

Several recent studies of the effects of divorce and remarriage on kinship relations in later life indicate that marital disruption may be giving our kinship system a matrilineal tilt.<sup>65</sup> Children are less likely to give and receive time and money from their fathers and their fathers' kin than from their mothers and mothers' kin. Remarriage restores a measure of balance between maternal and (step)paternal lines, but only to a limited extent. In sum,

divorce truncates the kinship network, and remarriage only partly repairs it.

Despite the evident disadvantages of marital disruption for children—loss of economic status, instability of parenting figures, and the complexity of new family arrangements—it is important to recog-

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nize that most studies show that the differences between children who grow up with both biological parents in the home and those who spend some time in non-nuclear families are relatively modest.<sup>47,60</sup> Unquestionably, marital disruption raises the risks of adverse consequences; but contrary to popular impression, the vast majority of children who experience life in single-parent families and stepfamilies do well in later life (see the article by Amato in this journal issue for an in-depth discussion of adjustment). This result suggests that we have not given enough attention to understanding when and why disruption matters or, perhaps, to some of the advantages for children whose parents improve their family situation by divorce.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Implications of Marriage Family Patterns for Children's Welfare**

Demographers and sociologists have had little success in forecasting family trends. However, there are many reasons for believing that the United States and other Western industrialized nations will continue to experience high levels of marital instability. Western family systems, and the United States in particular, place a high premium on individual choice and marital happiness.<sup>39,67</sup> The combination of imposing extremely high standards for intimate relationships while providing social and economic alternatives to those who are not achieving the desired standard of marital closeness is a virtual formula for producing high rates of marital instability. The breakdown of the gender-based division of labor accompanied and solidified

the divorce revolution, a revolution that had already begun in the United States owing to Americans' well-documented taste for conjugal contentment. It created alternatives for couples (women especially) who were discontent in marriage and, in turn, probably helped to change the standards for a satisfactory marital relationship.

If this explanation for why divorce is so prevalent in the West is basically correct, there is reason to be pessimistic about containing divorce, either through moral suasion or public policy measures. Even a generation ago, when severe social and legal sanctions against divorce were still in place, rates of marital dissolution were relatively high in the United States, as high

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***Raising the barriers to divorce might convince some couples to postpone marital dissolution for the sake of their children.***

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as they are in most European countries today. Restoring those sanctions, reimposing stricter divorce laws, and mobilizing social opinion against those who end their marriages probably would not persuade individuals to remain in unrewarding relationships.

Raising the barriers to divorce might convince some couples to postpone marital dissolution for the sake of their children. Whether the net effect of such efforts would benefit children is very much an open question. Existing research strongly suggests that children in poor quality marriages with high conflict do as poorly, if not worse, than children in marriages that dissolve.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, children living with parents who are merely disaffected probably benefit from having them remain together. How much children would be protected by a return to the *status quo ante*, a regime with more restrictive divorce practices, is a matter for speculation.<sup>68</sup>

One likely consequence of restoring stricter divorce laws might be a further decline in marriage and an increase in nonmarital childbearing unless, of course, some effort was made to restigmatize unmarried parenthood. Recently, some attempts have been made to discourage the

acceptance of single-parenthood. The most dramatic of these was the discussion initiated by Vice-President Dan Quayle to condemn the fictional character of Murphy Brown for having an out-of-wedlock child.<sup>69</sup> However, long before the public debate over Murphy Brown's decision, various public campaigns had been mounted to reduce nonmarital childbearing among teenagers. None of these, including national efforts by the Urban League and the Children's Defense Fund, have been notably successful.<sup>70</sup> This is not to say that public opinion cannot shift as a result of political dialogue. However, moral exhortation, however well-intentioned, is not easily accomplished in a society that is highly diverse and socially segmented. If many devout Catholics cannot be dissuaded from having premarital sex, using contraception, or even obtaining abortions, we should not hold out much hope of raising cultural sanctions against divorce and nonmarital childbearing.

Many have argued that recent efforts to strengthen child support enforcement may increase the men's sense of family obligations.<sup>71</sup> Part of the rationale of the Family Support Act of 1988 was to shift some of the costs of child care to men, relieving the high burden that women bear for child support and the mounting public costs of programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).<sup>72</sup> Some have argued that, as legal and social pressures for men to support their children mount, males may be less likely to desert their families because the economic costs of doing so will be greater. Similarly, the knowledge that they will be required to provide child support may make males more careful about impregnating partners with whom they have only casual ties.<sup>71</sup>

Stricter child support obligation is unlikely to have more than a modest effect on increasing marital stability or reducing nonmarital childbearing.<sup>73</sup> On the positive side, these laws—and the publicity surrounding them—convey an ethic of responsibility to children. However, the certainty of child support could make men more hesitant about entering marriage and women less reluctant to leave unsatisfactory unions. The net effect may be to reinforce the current retreat from marriage. Indeed, since the passage of the Family Support Act of 1988, marriage rates have continued to drop, marriage age has continued to rise, divorce rates have remained stable, and nonmarital

childbearing has risen. This is not to say that the Family Support Act has contributed to these trends, but, not surprisingly, this legislation and the publicity surrounding it seem to have had little effect on the family formation patterns of Americans.

Are there ways of stemming the erosion of marriage? At present, most public policy discussion has revolved around ways of discouraging divorce and nonmarital childbearing, largely through public rhetoric, rather than by designing measures to make marriage a more attractive and viable arrangement. Perhaps this emphasis is predictable because it is unclear how much can be done to shore up the institution of marriage. Besides, Americans are generally chary about policies designed to promote particular family arrangements.

At a minimum, most parents support some form of family life education in the schools that involves more careful consideration of the responsibilities and rewards of parenthood, that raises issues of gender roles and the difficulties of managing marriage. Efforts to prepare young people for parenthood, for entering and maintaining stable relationships are not highly controversial, but there is little evidence that family life education fosters commitment to marriage or encourages planned parenthood.

Much more controversial is the growing pressure to extend various welfare measures—common in some European nations—aimed at aiding parents with dependent children. Job security and income supplements for parents who are part-time workers, day care, parental leave, and family support allowances are economic measures designed to relieve strain on overburdened parents. Whether they also help to reduce marital breakup is not known. It might be argued that these types of family support programs make single-parent life more manageable and, thus, do little to reduce the breakup of parental unions.

Assuming that the breakdown of a gender-based division of labor is, at least, partly responsible for the destabilization of marriage from the 1960s to the present, some observers have insisted that a revision of gender roles is required to renew the institution of marriage. Family researchers have noted that considerable resistance exists to changes in the domestic division of labor.<sup>74</sup> Some have seen the

surge of divorce as a reflection of the problems of adjusting to changing gender expectations and have argued that, with more egalitarian marriages, marital discontent may decline. How to bring about changes in marital roles through public policy is not obvious.

Clearly, there is a place for public education, but such efforts are likely to be effective only if accompanied by structural change in opportunities. Even if this occurs, it is not certain that changing gender expectations will result in more stable and secure family lives for children. Greater sensitivity to gender inequality

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*Some have seen the surge of divorce as a reflection of the problems of adjusting to changing gender expectations.*

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may actually continue to raise expectations about equity in marriage. At least in the short term, expectations may continue to rise more quickly than behavior. In other words, men may assume a greater share of the domestic burdens, but their contributions may be judged by more exacting standards if they continue to fall short of true equality.

In sum, it is difficult to identify plausible policies to strengthen the institution of marriage by making divorce and nonmarital childbearing measurably less attractive or marital stability more attractive. Accordingly, it is hard to foresee a rapid reversal of current family patterns in the direction of greater family stability.

Therefore, it may be necessary to consider alternative approaches to strengthening the situation of parents and children who are economically and socially disadvantaged by living in particular family forms. At least part of the deficit associated with growing up in a single-parent household results from rapid income loss and chronic poverty created by the loss of a parent who is both a wage earner and a supplier of unpaid domestic labor.

There are some policies that might help to reduce the huge income spread between two-parent and single-parent families and thereby improve the life chances of children who grow up in a

nonnuclear family. Foremost among these is the provision of an effective child support assurance plan that provides income to children whose parents cannot or do not contribute to their support. Other measures, such as low-cost child care, health care, and workplace benefits to reduce the conflict between work and family roles, could also help overburdened single parents. I noted earlier that all of these measures might also contribute to the formation and preservation of unions between parents or parent surrogates. In short, these supports to parents are proposed to benefit children regardless of whether or not parents marry and stay married.

American citizens generally agree that we share responsibility for protecting our children's future.<sup>75</sup> Presently, however, there is little public consensus on what that responsibility involves. More than our European counterparts, we Americans are inclined to voice strong moral concerns about the family and the well-being of children. But, our willingness to act on these concerns is undermined both by ideological disagreement and by distrust of government-sponsored interventions. At least for the time being, America's children are being held hostage to our inability to reach any kind of public consensus on a course for the future.

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