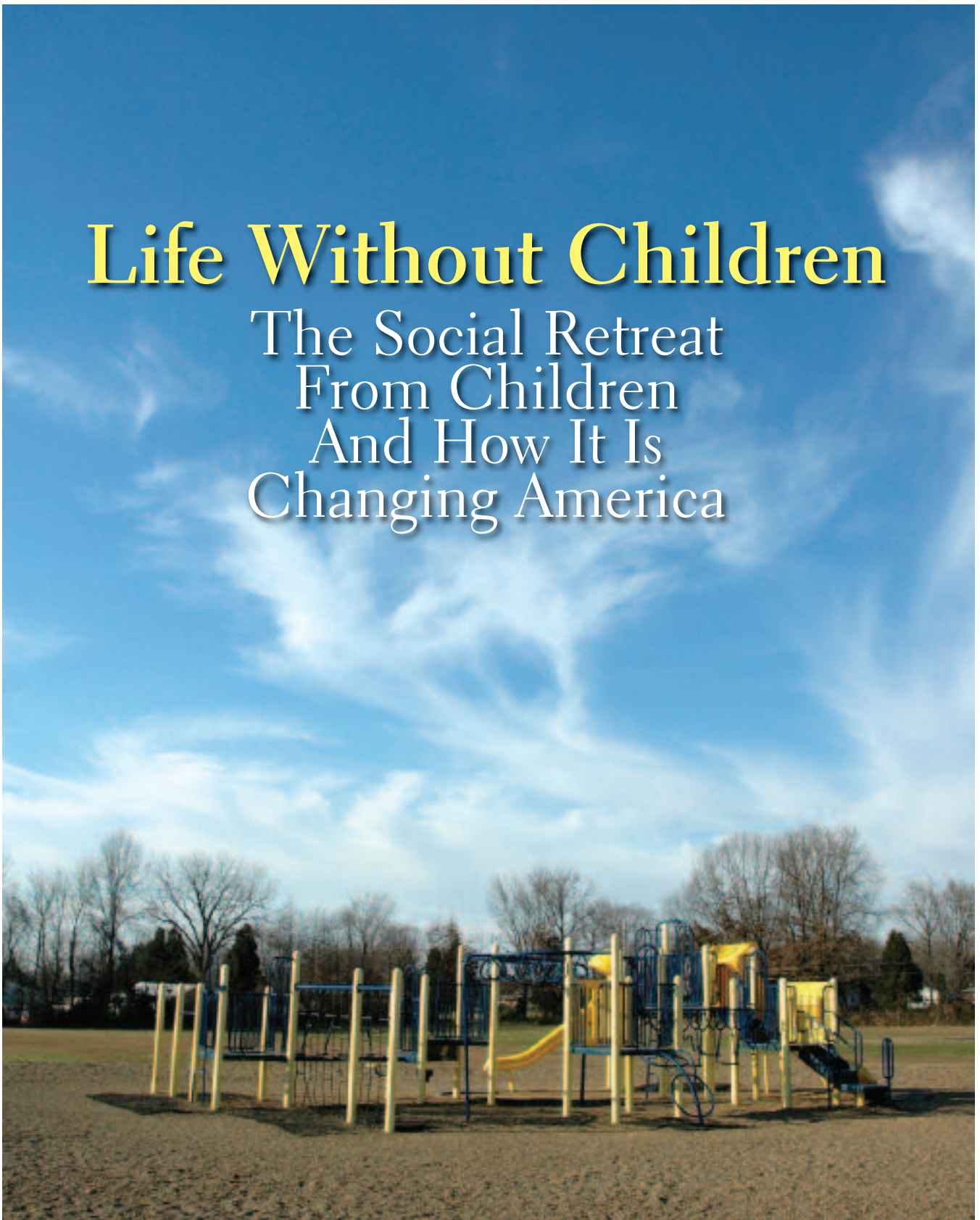


Life Without Children

The Social Retreat
From Children
And How It Is
Changing America



The National Marriage Project



The National Marriage Project

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at Rutgers, the State University of 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 in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing.

The National Marriage Project has five goals: (1) annually publish *The State of Our Unions*, an index of the health of marriage and marital relationships in America; (2) investigate and report on younger adults' attitudes toward marriage; (3) examine the popular media's portrait of marriage; (4) serve as a clearing-house source of research and expertise on marriage; and (5) bring together marriage and family experts to develop strategies for revitalizing marriage.

Leadership

The project is co-directed by two nationally prominent family experts. David Popenoe, Ph.D., a professor emeritus and former social and behavioral sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of *Life Without Father*, *Disturbing the Nest* and many other scholarly and popular publications on marriage and family. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D., an author and social critic, writes extensively on issues of marriage, family and child wellbeing. She is the author of *Why There Are No Good Men Left*, *The Divorce Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), and the widely acclaimed *Atlantic Monthly* article "Dan Quayle Was Right."

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by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe



Introduction

For most of the nation's history, Americans expected to devote much of their adult lives to the nurture and rearing of children. Life with children has been central to norms of adulthood, marriage and the experience of family life. Today, however, this historic pattern is changing. Life *without* children is becoming the more common social experience for a growing percentage of the adult population.

This is not to suggest that Americans are anti-child. On the contrary, the vast majority of Americans want, and expect to have, children. Parents love and enjoy their children. Some—famously tagged “helicopter parents”—are investing huge amounts of time, money and anxiety in sponsoring their children's careers from birth to age thirty—and even beyond. Nor is it to suggest that Americans are having too few babies. Largely due to the flood of recent immigrants, the U.S. birth rate remains at replacement level—well above the declining rates of European nations like Italy and Germany.

But what key indicators do suggest is that American society is changing in ways that make children less central to our common lives, shared goals and public commitments.

This report looks at the social indicators and cultural trends that are contributing to this large, if largely unacknowledged, transformation in American life and considers what the loss of child-centeredness means for the future prospects of children and for the society as a whole.

Child-centeredness in the United States: What is it and how is it measured?

Broadly speaking, all human societies are child-centered, because the successful rearing of children is essential to human survival. But in a narrower sense, societies vary in the breadth, location, duration and intensity of child-centeredness. In most societies, the responsibility for child rearing

“In the United States, to a greater degree than almost any other place in the world, social responsibility for childrearing rests with lone couples, and increasingly, with lone parents.”

is highly communal. It is widely shared among families, kin networks, and the larger adult community. In the United States, to a greater degree than almost any other place in the world, social responsibility for child rearing—and thus the primary source of child-centeredness—is highly individualistic. It rests with lone couples and increasingly with lone parents.

Further, in other societies, child-centeredness is rooted in ethnic identity, national heritage or common culture. The French have a stake in children because they want their children to be French in their blood, bones, and consumption of Brie. In the United States, on the other hand, such cultural traditions don’t matter nearly as much. Here, child-centeredness is mainly driven by the demographic dominance and political influence of the child-rearing population. To gauge child-centeredness in America, therefore, it is important to look at the proportion, composition and distribution of child-rearing households in the society.

In this report, we look at four key social indicators: the status of marriage as a child-rearing institution; the proportion of the adult life course devoted to rearing minor children; the proportion of American households with minor children; and the proportion of married and single parent households with own minor children.

The decline of child-centered marriage

Throughout our history and in much of the world today, marriage is first and foremost an institution for bearing and rearing children. For our grandparents, as for generations before them, it would have been ridiculous to ask the question: What does marriage have to do with children? What *else* is marriage for, they might have replied, but for the purpose of having and raising children?

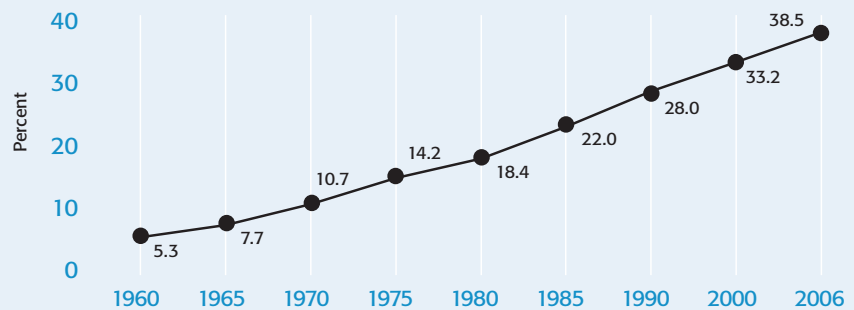
But today, marriage is undergoing profound change, and much of that change is shifting the focus away from children. This is happening on two levels. First of all, there is a weakening link between marriage and child-



“More than half of all births to women under thirty are now outside of marriage.”

bearing. More couples are having children outside of marriage and, increasingly, without ever marrying each other. Births to unwed women rose from 5.3 percent in 1960 to a record high of 38 percent in 2006. More than half of all births to women under thirty are now outside of marriage.

TABLE 1
Percentage of Live Births to Unmarried Women, by year, United States



Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1995, Page 77, Table 94; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1999, Page 79, Table 99; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2000, Page 69, Table 85; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001, Page 63, Table 76; National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 50, 5. Hamilton, B., et al. *Births: Preliminary Data for 2006*, National Vital Statistics Report, 56:7, Dec. 5, 2007, Table 1.

In addition, cohabitation among opposite-sex couples has soared in recent decades, and this trend contributes to high rates of unwed births, especially among young adults. More than forty percent of cohabiting couples have children, and these unions are much more likely to break up than marital unions—one study estimates the risk as five times greater for cohabiting parents compared to married parents.¹ The high rate of breakup places children in cohabiting households at greater risk of the hardships associated with family fragmentation. Significantly too, the experience of motherhood for cohabiting women is uniformly and dramatically poorer compared to married new mothers—an indication that the quality of mothering might be lower for children born to cohabiting couples.²

And finally, the persistence of high rates of divorces involving children

¹ Georgina Binstock and A. Thornton, “Separations, Reconciliations and Living Apart in Cohabiting and Marital Unions,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 432-443.

² Hyeyoung Woo and R. Kelly Raley, “A Small Extension to ‘Costs and Rewards of Children: The Effects of Becoming a Parent on Adults’ Lives’,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (2005), 216.

has contributed to the weakening of the connection between marriage and parenthood. Today, most Americans believe that it is better to leave an unhappy marriage than to stay together “for the sake of the children”—a popular view that both reflects and contributes to the incidence of parental divorce.

At a second level, child-centeredness *within* marriage is fading. Americans today are less likely to see children as central to a successful 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 recent Pew survey, only slightly more than forty 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.³

The retreat from child-centeredness within marriage is part of a larger transformation in the meaning and purpose of marriage. In recent decades, marriage has been deinstitutionalized—that is, it has lost much of its influence as a social institution governing sex, procreation and parenthood. Legally, socially, and culturally, marriage is now defined primarily as a couple relationship dedicated to the fulfillment of each individual’s innermost needs and desires.

To be sure, the emphasis on the couple relationship is not new. The ideal of companionship in marriage is a distinctive part of a long-standing tradition in Anglo-American societies.⁴ What is new is that today’s couples are ratcheting up their expectations from companionship to the even hard-

“Legally, socially, and culturally, marriage is now defined primarily as a couple relationship dedicated to the fulfillment of each individual’s innermost needs and desires.”

³ “As Marriage and Parenthood Drift Apart, Public Is Concerned about Social Impact: A Social and Demographic Trends Report,” Pew Research Center, July 1, 2007. <http://pewresearch.org>.

⁴ Visiting England in 1784, Duc de La Rochefoucauld noted that three out of four marriages are based on affection and most are perfectly happy. And once married, he wrote: “husband and wife are always together and share the same society. It is the rarest to meet one without the other . . . It would be more ridiculous to do otherwise in England than to go everywhere with your wife in Paris.” Cited in Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), 112-13.

“Like babies, soul-mate marriages have to be nurtured and coddled in order to thrive.”

er-to-achieve ideal of a emotionally satisfying “best friends” relationship—what some call a “soul-mate” marriage.

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.⁵

It is easy to understand why the soul-mate ideal holds such appeal. Americans live in a “bowling alone” society. Given the frazzling pace and fractured relationships of a mobile society and a boom-and-bust economy, people are less involved in social relationships and community ties that provide occasions for friendship and acceptance. Consequently, many turn to marriage for the warmth, intimacy, and emotional security that is missing in other domains of adult life.

However, isolated from other social ties and institutions, this new marital ideal is fragile. It takes lavish investments of time, attention and vigilance for lone 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 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.

Further, such high maintenance 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

⁵ Paul R. Amato, Alan Booth, David R. Johnson, Stacy J. Rogers, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America is Changing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 16.





attention in their relationship to continue after the baby arrives. This is not to say that couples should neglect each other during the child-rearing years but it is to suggest that 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, though a good thing to pursue and even better to achieve, have also made such marriages harder to sustain. The greater liabilities and costs associated with the fragile, couple-centered marital ideal fall heavily on children. 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.

Declining child-centeredness in the life course

Child rearing used to occupy the greater share of an adult's entire life. In the recent past, couples married in their early twenties, had children shortly after marrying, and often lived only a few more years after the children had grown up and left home. Many parents didn't live long enough to see their children reach adulthood. Indeed, at the beginning of the last century, only about four out of ten people survived to age 65.

Today, however, that life course pattern has changed dramatically. Child rearing is still all-consuming, but it no longer consumes an entire life. Adults are spending a growing share of their life in households without children and a shrinking share of their life in households with children.

“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.”

“Once fleeting and transitional, the years of life before children have become a life stage in their own right.”

The expanding years of life before children

Within living memory, it was typical for an American woman to bear a first child shortly after her teen years. Oftentimes, she would then give birth to one or more additional children and by the time the youngest child left home, the mother was well into what was then regarded as her late middle age.

Today, women postpone marriage-with-kids in order to get more years of schooling, work and relationship experience before they settle into married life. In 1970, for example, the median age of first marriage for women was not quite 21. Since then, the age of first marriage for women has risen to just short of 26. For women who earn a four-year college degree or better, the age of first marriage is estimated to be closer to 30.

After marriage, women are waiting longer before they have their first child. In 1970, 71 percent of married women had a first birth within the first three years of marriage. By 1990, the percentage had fallen to 37. Consequently, married women today spend a greater number of “child-free” years before they become mothers.

Thus, the years of life before children have expanded to close to a decade, or even longer for the college-educated. Once considered a fleeting and transitional stage of early adult life, these early “child-free” years have now become a life stage in their own right.

The expanding years of life after children

Likewise, the years of life after children are growing longer. Americans today are likely to enjoy many more empty-nest years than earlier generations. Eighty-two percent of the population is expected to live to age 65, more than double the figure a century ago. And for those who make it to their 65th birthday, the candles on their cake are likely to continue to grow. Women can expect to live for another two decades, and men for about sixteen additional years.

The years of life after children are also healthier. It’s no longer the case

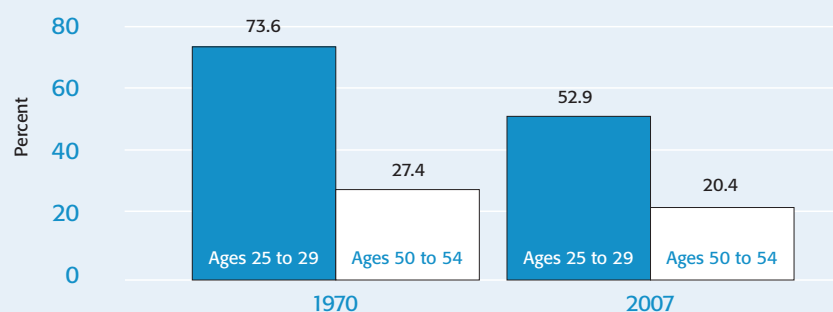
that the emptying of the nest is soon followed by the arrival of the hearse. After the children leave home, many empty-nesters will have decades of vitality before they begin to experience debilitating health problems. Women who have reached the age of 65 can expect most of their remaining years to be active. Some will still be going strong at 85, or even 95.

The shrinking years of life with children

As the years of life before and after children expand, the years of life with children represent a shrinking share of women's life course. For one thing, postponed marriage and childbearing increases the likelihood that women will have fewer children over a lifetime. Except in cases where offspring are spaced widely apart, fewer children means fewer years spent in households with children. Thus, though women have their first child at older ages, they are likely to complete their child-rearing years at younger ages than women in the past. In 1970, nearly three-quarters of women 25 to 29 were living with at least one minor child of their own in the household; by 2007, the share of such women had dropped to slightly more than half. The child-rearing share of women in their early fifties has declined as well. In 1970, 27.4 percent of women, ages 50 to 54, had at least one minor child of their own in the household. In 2007, that percentage had fallen to 20.4.

"Americans today are likely to enjoy many more empty-nest years than earlier generations."

TABLE 2
Percentage of Women with Own Children in the Household, 1970 and 2007

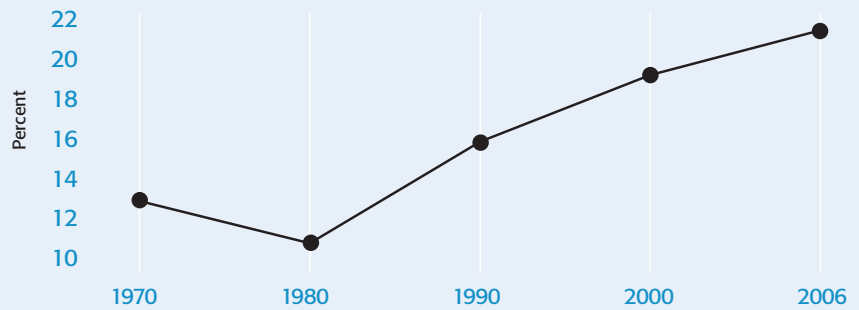


Source: 1970 data calculated from decennial data via iPUMS microdata (<http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>). 2007 data from Current Population Surveys microdata calculated using DataFerret (<http://dataferret.census.gov/>)

Finally, a small but growing percentage of women are not having any biological children. One out of five women in her early forties is childless compared to about one out of ten in 1980.

“One out of five women in her early forties is childless compared to one out of ten in 1980.”

TABLE 3
Percentage of Women 40 to 44, Childless, 1970–2006



Source: 1970 through 2000 data from decennial census. 2006 data from Jane Lawler Dye, *Fertility of American Women: 2006*, Current Population Surveys, US Census Bureau, 2008.

The increase in childlessness does not mean that women are turning away from motherhood. Indeed, relatively few women are dead set against having children from an early age. More commonly, women are childless as a result of other circumstances that occur in early adult life, including the delay of marriage, marriage to a partner who already has children, or never marrying.

Relationship instability and uncertainty also contributes to childlessness. Cohabiting women, for example, may postpone childbearing until they have a better sense of the long-term future of the relationship. However, if they wait too long, they may be at risk for never having children. An unhappy marriage is another source of relationship uncertainty. Married women who are worried about getting divorced are the most likely to remain childless. Finally, high levels of educational attainment contribute to childlessness. Women with four-year college degrees or better are more likely to be childless than women with lower levels of educational





attainment.⁶ In 2006, for example, slightly more than twenty-four percent of women, 40 to 44 years of age, with a bachelor's degree, and 27.4 percent of women, 40 to 44 years of age, with graduate or professional degrees were childless compared to only 14.9 percent of those without a high school degree.⁷

Of course, some nonchildbearing women are rearing stepchildren, adopted children or other children in the household. Still, the 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 child rearing.

The fading presence of children in men's lives

Although a smaller share of women's life course is spent raising children, the great majority of mothers spend their child-rearing years in households with their own children. It's a different story for men. 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. Close to eight out of ten African-American children are born outside of marriage, and the 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 one group. It is a commonplace feature in a society where marriage and parenthood are splitting apart. Compared to children in mid-twentieth century America, the proportion of children living apart from their biological fathers has increased sharply,

“Father absence is a commonplace feature in a society where marriage and parenthood are splitting apart.”

⁶ Tim B. Heaton, Cardell K. Jacobson, Kimberlee Holland, “Persistence and Change in the Decision to Remain Childless,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999), 531-39.

⁷ Jane Lawler Dye, *Fertility of American Women: 2006*, Current Population Report P20-558, Washington, D.C.: US Census Bureau (2008): Table 2, 5.

from 17 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2000.

The weakening link between marriage and fatherhood has hugely negative consequences for male child-centeredness. This is because marriage strongly influences men's positive disposition toward children and toward the prospect of future fatherhood. Men's procreative ambitions differ from women's. Like women, men want to have children, but compared to women, their desire for children is not as intense, persistent or central to their future goals and identity. They are less likely to think about having children from their early years on, or to have plans, and even picked-out names, for the children they hope to have in the future. Rather, it is the institution of marriage that helps men to "sign on" to fatherhood. By choosing to make a legal, social and public commitment to a spouse, a man voluntarily agrees—often well ahead of the actual arrival of a child—to take on the legal and social role of a father.⁸

However, the currently high levels of father absence are not likely to be reversed any time soon. Young men are delaying marriage but they are not putting off sex until marriage. This puts them at increased risk for unmarried fatherhood. Further, the casual sexual relationships that are now part of single life may contribute to young men's greater ambivalence about children. A National Marriage Project study of young 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.⁹

Further, a study of teenage males suggests that there may be growing support for a minimalist norm of fatherhood: when asked their views about

⁸ Steven L. Nock, *Marriage in Men's Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

⁹ *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2003* (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, 2003), 10.

how an unmarried girl should resolve a pregnancy, the percentage of adolescent boys recommending adoption, abortion or marriage declined substantially between 1979 and 1995, whereas the percentage recommending that the unmarried mother raise the child with financial support from the nonresidential father surged from 19 to 59 percent.¹⁰

Declining American households with minor children

During the post-war baby boom, the U.S. reached a peak of child-centeredness. This was due, in large measure, to the sheer dominance and geographic density of households with children. Kids were everywhere. In some of the new suburbs, three out of four households were made up of parents and their minor children. And like children everywhere, all these baby boom children had to be fed, clothed, housed, educated and kept out of trouble. Meeting those needs became a widely shared experience for parents and communities.

Then, too, the WWII generation was shaped by communal experience of the Great Depression and war. The “greatest generation” took up the tasks of child rearing in the same spirit. Growing up in Chicago in the middle of the last century, Alan Ehrenhalt remembers the post-war system as “childrearing by the nearest parents who happened to be around.”¹¹ He writes:

It was the tacit assumption in the alleys and on all the streets of the neighborhood that one child’s parent was every child’s parent, equally responsible for the behavior of the children on the block and equally authorized to mete out small doses of justice. Boyhood quarrels in the alley or acts of petty vandalism were handled by the parent who happened to be nearest to the scene. It didn’t occur to any of the families that a particular parent down the street might

¹⁰ Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, “Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes toward Family Issues in the United States: the 1960s through the 1990s,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63 (2001), 1025.

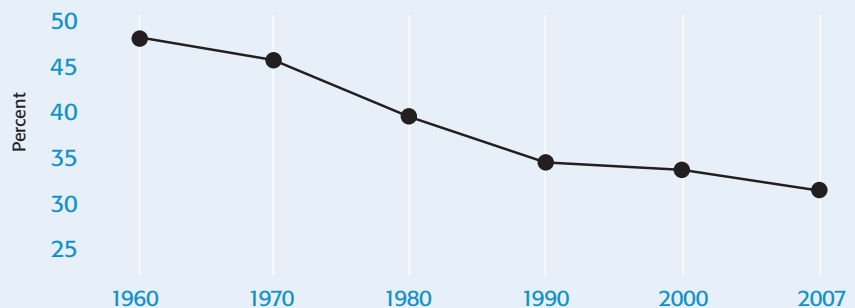
¹¹ Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: Discovering the Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 29.

“By 2010, households with children will account for little more than one-quarter of all households – the lowest share in the nation’s history.”

have different ideas about discipline than they did; when it came to discipline, everyone on the block worked from the same assumptions.¹²

Over recent decades, however, the child-rearing household has lost its demographic dominance. The percentage of American households with children has dropped from nearly five out of ten in 1960 to slightly more than three out of ten today. And this proportion is projected to decline further. According to Census Bureau projections, by 2010, households with children will account for little more than one-quarter of all households—the lowest share in the nation’s history.

TABLE 4
Households with Children under 18, 1960–2007



Source: Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1964, Tables 36 and 54; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1980, Tables 62 and 67; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1985, Tables 54 and 63; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1994, Table 67; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2004-05, Table 56; and *America’s Families and Living Arrangements*, 2007, Tables F1 and H1

As a consequence, the child-dense neighborhood is disappearing in many places. Suburbs that once hatched the baby boom are now filling with empty-nesters. And many affluent empty-nesters are abandoning the tree-shaded streets of suburbia for the neon-lit excitement of the city. Once in the city, these older parents join the growing population of young working adults who are not yet ready to become parents. The two groups—the young “not-ready-to-nest” and the older empty-nesters—are forming a population of adults who share the pleasures and freedom of life without children.

¹² *Lost City*, 95-96.



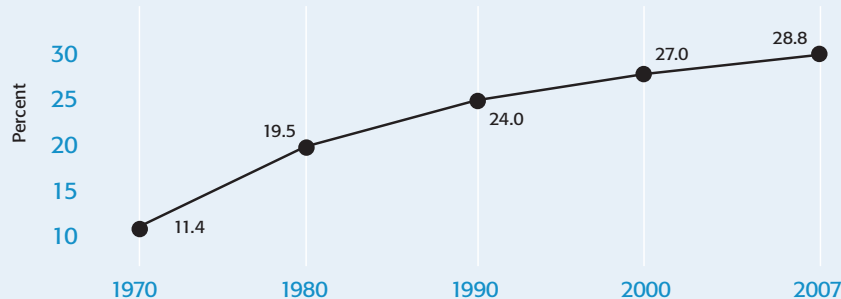


Polarization in the child-rearing population by marriage and education

Along with the decline in the proportion of child-rearing households, the child-rearing population has become more diverse. Married parents used to make up the largest share of the child-rearing population. In 1970, married couples with children under 18 represented almost half of such child-rearing families. By 2006, the proportion of married parent families had fallen to about a third of families with minor children.

Over the same period, the percentage of lone parent families with minor children has more than doubled, from 11.4 to 28.8

TABLE 5
One-Parent Families with Minor Children as Percent of All Families with Minor Children, 1970–2006



US Census Bureau, America's Families and Living Arrangements, Historical Time Series,
<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>

Married parents, and especially college-educated parents, typically have greater financial resources to invest in their children than lone parents. Moreover, they have knowledge and connections to higher education and the professional work world, and thus are well-equipped to guide their children onto upper rungs of the economic ladder and social world. And their marriages are stabler and happier than those of less advantaged parents, so they are better able to provide economic and emotional security for children.

In addition to their own investments in their kids, many married, college-educated parents have a second great advantage: they possess the polit-

“Married parents and lone parents are divided by their life circumstances and childrearing styles.”

ical clout to make claims on the public purse for schools, parks, playgrounds, gifted and special education school programs, and other child-rearing amenities in their neighborhoods and communities.

Lone parents, on the other hand, have a much tougher time. They have far more limited resources of time, money and access to social networks that will help them boost their children into higher education, internship opportunities, and professional jobs. And because they are less able to afford housing in affluent communities, they are deprived of the advantage of good public schools and other publicly funded facilities that are standard features of life with children in upscale America.

As a result of this growing polarization by marriage and education, there is little common ground—quite literally—among the child-rearing population. Married parents and lone parents often live in neighborhoods far apart from each other, shop in different grocery stores, work on different schedules and in different kinds of jobs. They are also 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 children’s competitive rankings among peers. Less well-educated parents, and especially 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 married parents, parents in these households face greater economic stresses and

spend less time reading to children, sharing mealtimes, and encouraging aspirations for a college education.¹³

This “nurture gap” is likely to widen in the future as a growing share of American children are born to lone 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. “Families with highly educated mothers and families with less educated mothers,” notes one recent study, “are clearly moving in the opposite directions, and the disadvantaged group is doing worse.”¹⁴

Unfortunately, “nurture gap” could not have come at a worse time. In a global economy and dynamic society, the tasks of guiding and preparing children for flourishing adult lives demand ever higher levels and longer commitments of parental time, money and involvement. Indeed, 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.¹⁵

“Research on early brain development demonstrates the advantages of intensive parental nurture in the first three years of life.”

Rising costs of life with children

Another source of the nurture gap is the cost of raising children in the 21st century. In the U.S., parents have always been the primary source of investment in their own children. There’s nothing new in that. What is new is that the costs of child rearing are escalating at an astonishing clip.

Take the most basic needs for food, shelter and schooling. According to the Department of Agriculture’s 2007 estimates, it cost \$204,060 for a husband-wife family with an average annual before-tax income of \$61,000 to

¹³ Jane Lawler Dye and Tallese Johnson, *A Child’s Day: 2003 (Selected Indicators of Child Well-Being)*, Current Population Report P70-109, Washington, DC: US Census Bureau (2007), 20.

¹⁴ Steven P. Martin, “Growing Evidence for a ‘Divorce Divide’? Education and Marital Dissolution Rates in the U.S. since the 1970s,” Working Paper, Russell Sage Foundation, 21 (www.russell.sage.org/publications/workingpapers)

¹⁵ Commission on Children at Risk, *Hardwired to Connect*, NY: Institute for American Values, 2003.

“Today, parents are often called upon to provide financial help to their adult children as the young adults struggle to complete their education, gain job experience and eventually marry.”

feed, clothe, house, and educate one child from birth to age 17.¹⁶ But this estimate, like the three-month summer school vacation, is pegged to an increasingly obsolete way of life. It excludes one of the biggest and increasingly most essential child-rearing costs—a college education. And the cost of college is increasing at more than double the rate of inflation.

Expenditures on Children by Families, 1995 and 2007

	1995	2007	% Change
Estimated cost of raising a child from birth through Age 17 ¹	145320	204060	40
Constant 2007 Dollars*	197709	204060	3
Average income for husband-wife families ¹	44800	61000	36
Constant 2007 Dollars*	60950	61000	0
Average cost of in-state, public college (annual costs) ²	6293	11963	90
Constant 2007 Dollars*	8562	11963	40

*2007 Dollars calculated using the Bureau of Labor Staticistics CPI Inflation Calculator (www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).

¹ Lino, Mark. Expenditures on Children by Families, US Dept of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (www.cnpp.usda.gov).

² The College Board, Annual Survey of Colleges, Supplemental Table: Unweighted Tuition and Fees Over Time in Current Dollars.

The Agriculture Department’s estimate also excludes many desirable enrichment activities, such as sports, music lessons, camp, tutoring, SAT prep classes and the like. Nor does it take into account extraordinary expenses for medical care or special needs. Nor does the government estimate reflect the increasingly prolonged period of young adults’ dependency on parents. Today, parents are often called upon to provide some financial help to their adult children as young adults struggle to complete their education, gain job experience, and eventually marry.

¹⁶ Mark Lino, *Expenditures on Children by Families, 2007*, US Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutritional Policy and Promotion, Misc Publications 1528-2006, (<http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/CRC/crc2006.pdf>)





Even if parents ignore, or are unaware of, these eye-popping numbers, they can scarcely miss the insistent message that comes to them through the media: namely, children are budget-busters. The financial service industry urges parents of newborns to start investing in a college fund. The auto industry tells parents they need to buy bigger, safer, and more expensive cars. The toy industry reminds parents that they should purchase games and gadgets that will increase their child's school performance. The travel industry underscores the necessity of a Disneyland vacation.

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. According to one estimate, motherhood imposes a life-time wage penalty of five to nine percent per child.¹⁷ 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, particularly if the couple needs two incomes to sustain their standard of living. Also, since most men see themselves as primary breadwinners, they may be especially 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

“For many parents, the costs of child rearing mean more debt, smaller retirement savings and greater exposure to economic uncertainties than they would otherwise have.”

¹⁷ Longman, *Empty Cradle*, 74.

“Adults without children in the household have over 500 extra hours of leisure time per year compared to adults with children in the household.”

they could have a more lavish lifestyle without children. “Without the multimillion-dollar liability of children,” writes journalist Philip Longman, “even young couples of comparatively modest means can often afford big-ticket luxury items. These might include a fair-sized McMansion, two BMWs, and regular vacations to the Caribbean, all of which could easily cost less than raising 2.1 children.”¹⁸ Of course, most Americans don’t opt for BMWs over children. But 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.

Conclusion

We are in the midst of a profound change in American 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 ever larger share of adult time, energy and identity. Leisure time and activities also increase, as the population of child-free householders grows. According to the Department of Labor, adults without children in the household have over 500 extra hours of leisure time per year compared to adults with children in the household.¹⁹

The physical landscape of communities is changing to fit the lifestyle of the non-child-rearing population. Private housing developers are building condos with health clubs, golf courses, and other adult-only amenities for the growing population of affluent singles, childless couples, and empty nesters. Big cities and small college towns, with a cosmopolitan mix of educational

¹⁸ Longman, *Empty Cradle*, 82.

¹⁹ US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time-Use Surveys, released June 2008 (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf>)

and recreational attractions, are becoming magnets for the childless young and empty-nest old while the child-rearing population is migrating to the exurbs in search of affordable housing, safe streets, and decent schools.

The political landscape reflects a similar shift. With the decline in child-rearing households, parents today have less political clout than in decades past. In the last Presidential election, parents represented slightly less than 40 percent of the electorate. They can no longer assume that their own child-centered values are widely shared by the larger society. In order to be heard, they have to function more like a special interest group and explain themselves to the larger population. And everywhere, child-rearing families have to compete for scarce public dollars against the other pressing local needs and priorities. A recent study by the Urban Institute reported that under current projections, federal investment in children is scheduled to decline significantly from 2006 levels, mainly because future government revenues are already earmarked for the three big and growing entitlements for their parents and grandparents.²⁰

Closer to home, parents are losing community support for funding of schools and youth activities. As one example, voters in New Jersey rejected just under half of the state's school budgets in 2006, the harshest level since 1994 and down significantly from 2005 passage rates.²¹ Other communities across the nation are trying to hold down property taxes by restricting the construction of affordable single family housing—a trend that one Massachusetts official has termed “vasectomy zoning.”²²

“Federal investment in children is scheduled to decline significantly from 2006 levels, mainly because future government revenues are already earmarked for the three big and growing entitlements for their parents and grandparents.”

²⁰ C. Eugene Steuerle, Gillian Reynolds and Adam Carasso, Investing in Children, Issue Paper #1, Washington, D.C: Partnership for America's Economic Success, (November 12, 2007), 27. www.PartnershipforSuccess.org.

²¹ Geoff Mulvihill, “Voters Say No To Nearly Half of School Budgets,” Associated Press, April 19, 2006.

²² Charisse Jones, “Housing Doors Close On Parents,” *USA Today*, May 6, 2004, A03. In Brick, N.J., the town manager says his community has spent \$30 million dollars to date to buy vacant parcels and keep out developers of single family housing. “At 2.1 children each,” he says “that adds up to a savings of \$13.86 million in school expenses per year.” Cited in Deirdre Fretz, “Child-Free New Jersey,” *NJBIZ* 16: 33 (Snowden Publications, Inc.) August 18, 2003.

“The popular culture is oriented to an ethos of fun and freedom pitched to the X-rated fantasies of adults.”

The popular culture is increasingly oriented to an ethos of fun and freedom pitched to the X-rated fantasies and desires of adults.²³ Television shows like *Friends* and *Sex and the City* have sexualized and glamorized the life of young urban singles. The characters in these hugely popular shows hang out with friends, hook up for sex, and spend enormous amounts of free time in restaurants, clubs, and coffee bars.

The empty-nest years have undergone a similar makeover. The AARP — once self-styled as the political voice of millions of fixed-income pensioners — has changed its image. It has retired the word “retired” in order to appeal to aging baby boomers, a demographic group that famously refuses to grow old. It has mothballed the name of its flagship magazine, once known as *Modern Maturity*, in favor of the more age-neutral *AARP Magazine*. Most telling of all, it has revised the content of the magazine to include features on sex, dating, romantic relationships and “having a baby after 50.” Borrowing the language of teen magazines, it developed its own list of the 50 Hot People over 50—including “babelicious baldies,” like Bruce Willis or “sexy scribes,” like Terry McMillan.

AARP is not alone in the effort to remake the image of older adulthood. A raft of recent books on women’s “second half of life” has transformed the post-menopausal years from frumpy to fabulous. Television ads for the denture adhesive, Fixodent, used to tout the product’s effectiveness in preventing false teeth from slipping out of place at family parties. Now the Fixodent spots feature a handsome, well-seasoned couple in evening clothes locking lips in the back seat of a taxi-cab. The Hartford Insurance Company pitches its services to older adults with a print ad stating “We

²³ Obscenity was at one time legally defined as that which tends to corrupt youth. However, over time, court rulings stopped taking the moral vulnerabilities of children into account. The standard shifted from children’s susceptibility to prurient material to “material that violated contemporary community standards and lacked “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.” In *Pinkus v. U.S.*, 436 US293 (1978), the Supreme Court confirmed the point, ruling that the idea of “community” excludes children. See David L. Tubbs, *Freedom’s Orphans: Contemporary Liberalism and the Fate of American Children* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007), 209-10





don't know when childhood ends, but it starts again at retirement."

Ameriprise Financial's ad claims "Retirement is about second acts. Third acts too."

As yet another sign of cultural change, the "adult entertainment industry," which includes gambling, pornography and sex, is one of the fastest growing and most lucrative sectors of the consumer economy. Not only has this multibillion dollar industry gained respectability and power in the corridors of Washington. It has used its power to defeat every effort to restrict the access of underage children to its most misogynistic and hyperviolent products. Parental protests against the sleaze receive a far less sympathetic hearing than in times past. When parents of young children complained about R-rated inflight movies, the airlines advised parents to tell their children to look away. A *New York Times* letter writer was blunter: "I am sick of having my world revolve around the aesthetics and concerns of a 6-year-old . . . It's up to parents to parent, and I for one want no part in doing their job. Nor should the airlines."²⁴

More generally and pervasively, the expressive values of the adult-only world are at odds with the values of the child-rearing world. The new ethos is libertarian; its outlook is present-minded; its pursuits include the restless quest for new experiences; the preoccupation with youth and sex appeal; a denial of suffering, loss and finitude; and confidence in personal transformation through the make-over, the second chance and the new beginning. In short, America is an aging society with an adolescent culture.

Of course, restless self-invention and a youthful outlook are classic features of American life and culture. However, in the past, this tendency has been limited and checked by the obligations and responsibilities of marriage, parenthood and family life. Now, those family obligations and responsibilities have become more counter-cultural. Indeed, child-rearing values—sacrifice, stability, dependability, maturity—seem stale and musty

"The adult entertainment industry is one of the fastest growing and most lucrative sectors of the consumer economy."

²⁴ Letters to the Editor, *The New York Times*, September 9, 2007.

“What it takes to raise children is almost the opposite of what popularly defines a satisfying adult life.”

by comparison to the “child-free” values. Nor does the bone-wearying and time-consuming commitments of the child-rearing years comport with a culture of fun and freedom. Indeed, 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 experience. 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.

The cultural devaluation of child rearing is especially harmful in the American context. In other advanced western societies, parents’ contributions are recognized and compensated with tangible work and family benefits. In American society, the form of compensation has been mainly cultural. Parents have been praised and rewarded (many would argue inadequately) for the unpaid work of caring for children with respect, support and recognition from the larger society. Now this form of cultural compensation is disappearing.

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 as stressful for them and burdensome for others, especially when compared to the joys of life without children. [See Sidebar: Are Children A Public Burden or Blessing?] 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.



SIDEBAR

**Are Children A Public Good
or A Public Burden?**

Americans have a long tradition of identifying children as a public good. In the 18th century, children were the key to populating a vast, unsettled territory. Fertility was a community concern, and big families were encouraged. American birthrates were higher than those in Europe. The average woman gave birth to about eight children between her twentieth and fortieth year.²⁵

In the 19th century, children became a valuable source of cheap labor for the farm, mine, factory. Their wages, along with their unpaid work in the family, contributed to the household economy.

By the 20th century, children's productive contributions to the family and to the larger national economy had begun to fall off. Anti-child labor laws and compulsory schooling took children out of the workforce and into a force of nonworking dependents. But as children became less valuable as workers and earners, they became ever more important as consumers and spenders. The post-World War II baby boom fueled the growth in the burgeoning consumer economy. Families of six fed more mouths, bought more clothes, and needed more haircuts than families of four. A 1958 cover of *Life* magazine proclaimed: *KIDS: A Built in Recession Cure*.

But the public value of children was not limited to an appreciation for their economic contributions as producers and then, later, as consumers. Especially in the 20th century, children came to rep-

²⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land* (NY: Basic Books, 1995), 31.

resent the nation's highest hopes and ideals as well. Early in the century, at a time when nativist Americans feared that poor, immigrant and minority children posed a threat to the public order, Progressive reformers argued that children were agents of social renewal. The nation's future, they contended, depended on the development of healthy, educated, civic-minded children. The Cold War called upon the young to educate themselves in the sciences and foreign languages in order to beat Communism, win the space race, and spread democracy. By the 1960s, the young John F. Kennedy mobilized the nation's youth to serve as the exemplars of American ideals through their service to the poor and dispossessed in the U.S. and throughout the world.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, new strains of popular thought challenged the idea of children as a public good. In her hugely influential *Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan took aim at the postwar generation of college-educated women who were making careers out of having babies. There has been a "fantastic increase in the number of babies among college women," she wrote. "Where once they had two children, now they had four, five, six." Not only was this obsession with motherhood contributing to a birthrate that was overtaking India's, she claimed, but it was also leading droves of talented women into an neurotic preoccupation with bedwetting, thumb sucking, overeating, slow reading, lack of friends and other problems.

A second challenge to the public good of children emerged with the zero population growth movement. In 1968, a hitherto unknown butterfly scientist named Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, a wildly popular book that predicted a future of



mass starvation and global devastation due to overpopulation.²⁶

Ehrlich saw children as the chief source of an impending economic catastrophe. The American postwar orgy of baby making, he claimed, drove an endless cycle of overwork, overspending and overconsumption.

Calling upon Americans to quell their mania for children, he recommended protests against any honorary “mother of the year” who had more than two biological children. He encouraged his followers to proselytize friends and neighbors. He appealed to economics and business professors to hit the lecture circuit with the message “The Stork is an Enemy of Capitalism.” And he reminded the childless that they were “paying through the nose to raise other people’s children.”

To inspire anti-natalist activism, he founded and became president of Zero Population Growth, an organization with the motto “the population bomb is everybody’s baby.” He traveled widely, giving lectures on college campuses and recruiting support for his cause among baby boomers who were the offspring of the prolific procreators in the post-World War II generation. He appealed to students’ idealism by characterizing childlessness as a selfless act for humankind. By the early 1970s, Zero Population Growth had 102 chapters in 30 states.

²⁶ Far from being dismissed as the ravings of a mad scientist, *The Population Bomb* was a huge success. The book sold over three million copies and remained on *The New York Times* paperback best-seller list for 28 weeks. Ehrlich became a celebrity. He made more than two dozen appearances on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show* and testified before congressional committees; got an endowed chair at Stanford, an Emmy nomination, awards from the United Nations, MacArthur Foundation and Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. See Daniel Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-79* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 192-201, passim

Since then, Ehrlich's overpopulation argument has been widely discredited, but it still holds appeal for many environmental activists, albeit in a less apocalyptic form. For example, the gifted essayist Bill McKibben calls upon Americans to limit themselves to one-child only families, as he himself has done, for the "sake of the planet."

Feminist arguments against children persist as well. In the past few years, the criticism has focused on women who put aside careers in order to stay home with their small children. Feminist Linda Hirshman, a fierce critic of full-time, stay-at-home motherhood, chides highly educated women who have "opted out" of the paid workforce in order to care for their children. In choosing to have children, she writes, highly educated women will be "bearing most of the burden of work always associated with the lowest caste—sweeping and cleaning bodily waste."

Libertarians also question the public good of children. According to their argument, people who choose to have children are making a private choice that should not burden people who choose not to have children. Thus, tax and workplace policies that favor parents impose unfair costs on nonparents. In her 2000 book, *Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, Elinor Burkett sets forth the libertarian perspective. She writes: "History cannot look kindly on a nation that can protect its parents and children only by demeaning its childless citizens, by creating one set of rules for those who breed and a different set for those who do not."





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