

**FLIGHT FROM THE NUCLEAR  
FAMILY: TRENDS OF THE PAST  
THREE DECADES**

**By David Popenoe**

The past three decades have witnessed a remarkable "flight" from the family. It has been not only from the "traditional" family, the relatively patriarchal form made up of male breadwinner and female housewife, but also from the nuclear family itself—one focused on childrearing and constituted by a legal, lifelong, sexually exclusive, heterosexual, monogamous marriage. The rejection of the traditional family now has wide popular support, but we are perhaps unwittingly in the process of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

The recent transformation has been especially dramatic because just prior to the period in question the nuclear family had reached its apogee in America. In the 1950s—fueled in part by falling maternal and child mortality rates, greater longevity, and a high marriage rate—a higher proportion of children than ever before grew up in stable, two-parent families. Similarly, in this period, the highest-ever proportion of women married, bore children, and lived jointly with their husbands until at least age 50.

In the 1960s, however, four major social trends emerged to prompt a widespread decline of the nuclear family: rapid fertility decline; the sexual revolution; the movement of mothers into the labor force; and the divorce revolution. None of these trends were entirely new to the 1960s; each represents a tendency already in evidence earlier. But the sixties saw a striking acceleration of the tendencies.

**Turning From Having Children**

First—taking these four trends without reference to their relative importance or causal priority—fertility declined in the United States by nearly 50% between 1960 and 1990, from an average of 3.7 children per woman to only 2.0. Although it had been gradually diminishing for several centuries (the main exception being the two "baby boom" decades following World War II), the level of fertility fell during the 1980s to its lowest point in US history, and below that necessary for the replacement of the population. Over the last 30 years, children dropped from more than a third to about one-quarter of the total population. A growing dissatisfaction with parenthood is now evident among adults in our culture, along with a dramatic decrease in the stigma associated with childlessness. Some demographers have predicted that between 20% and 25% of today's young women will remain

completely childless, and nearly 50% will have at most one child.

**Dismantling Traditional Strictures on Sex**

What is often called the sexual revolution has shattered the association of sex and reproduction. The erotic has become a necessary ingredient of personal well-being and fulfillment, both in and outside of marriage, as well as a highly marketable commodity. The greatest change has been in the area of premarital sex: over just eleven years, from 1971 to 1982, the proportion of unmarried girls in the US aged 15-19 who engaged in premarital sexual intercourse jumped from 28 to 44%.<sup>1</sup> This reflects a widespread change in values. In 1965, 69% of women under 30 called premarital sex "always" or "almost always" wrong. By 1986 however, the proportion doing so had fallen to just 22%. There was a similar change in the attitudes of women over age 30, and of men.<sup>2</sup> The sexual revolution has also been a major contributor to the striking increase in unwed parenthood. Nonmarital births jumped from 5% of all births in 1960 to 25% in 1990—the highest rate ever recorded in the US.

**Turning to Child Care by Others**

Unmarried women have long been in the labor force. The past three decades have seen a dramatic movement into the paid work-world of married women with children. In 1960, only 19% of those with children under 6 years of age were in the labor force (full or part time); by 1990, the proportion had climbed to 59%. Shifts of this magnitude are without any real precedent or parallel.

**Breaking the Bond**

The divorce rate in the US nearly quadrupled—from 35 to 130—over the past thirty years (measured by the number of divorced persons per 1,000 married persons). It's not hyperbolic to call this a divorce revolution. A landmark of sorts was passed in 1974, when for the first time in American history more marriages ended in divorce than in death. Estimates of the probability that a marriage contracted today will end in divorce range from 44 to 66%.

Unlike most previous family changes, which reduced family functions and diminished the importance of the kin group, the recent shifts have tended to break up the actual "nucleus" of the family unit—the bond between husband and wife. Nuclear families are therefore losing ground to single-parent families, serial and step-families, and unmarried and homosexual couples. The number of single-parent families has grown sharply—the result not only of marital breakup, but also of marriage decline (fewer persons who bear children are getting married), and widespread male abandonment. In 1960, only 9% of US

## **The American Family Beleaguered/Popenoe/cont.**

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children under 18 were living with a lone parent; in 1990, this figure had climbed to nearly one quarter.

Over the past thirty years there has also been a retreat from family living in general. For instance, the percentage of "nonfamily" households—those not containing two or more persons living together and related by blood, marriage, or adoption—has nearly doubled, from 15% to 28% of all households. About 85% of these new households consist of a person living alone.

Today, fewer persons are marrying and they are marrying later in life; those marrying are having fewer children and delegating more of the latter's care to others; and more marriages are ending in divorce. Trends such as these have dramatically reshaped people's lifetime family experiences—their connectedness to the institution of the family. The proportion of an average person's adulthood spent with spouse and children was 62% in 1960, the highest in our history. Today it has dropped to 43%, the lowest in our history.

### **Leveling Off at Unprecedented Levels**

Many of the family trends noted above have leveled off; a few have even changed direction. The fertility and marriage rates have edged up, and the divorce rate has reached a plateau. The rapid increase in mothers of young children in the labor market has diminished. The sexual revolution has shown signs of a modest conservative shift. Few experts find signs, however, of any large-scale reversal of the enormous shifts which have distinguished the modern era. The chances are strong that the fertility and marriage rates will continue to go down, and that the divorce rate will remain near its record high.

There have, of course, been many real and substantial social gains in the past three decades. But the family trends of this period have taken their toll, most notably on children. A recent national survey found that children from single-parent and step families are two to three times more likely to have developmental, learning, and emotional problems than are children from intact families.<sup>3</sup> Non-intact families also contribute disproportionately to the very high (and currently increasing) rate of juvenile delinquency. The changing family structure has, moreover, helped to continue—and in some ways has exacerbated—the tragedy of child poverty. Since 1974, the poverty rate among children has exceeded that among the elderly, and 40% of all poor people in this nation today are children. According to a recent estimate, almost one out of every four American preschoolers in 1987 was living below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup>

The unavoidable conclusion from recent family trends is that American society has been moving in an ominous direction—toward the devaluation of children.

<sup>1</sup>Cheryl D. Hayes, *Risking the Future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>Arland Thornton, "Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51-4:873-893, 1989.

<sup>3</sup>Nicholas Zill and Charlotte A. Schoenborn, "Developmental, Learning, and Emotional Problems: Health of Our Nation's Children, United States, 1988," *Advance Data #190* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Data from National Center for Children in Poverty (New York: Columbia University School of Public Health, 1990).

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