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Modern family redefined: Say 'goodbye' to the typical American family

The American modern family no longer resembles the old vision of a 'traditional family,' says a new study from Ohio State University; marriages are in decline, divorces on the rise, and adult kids are returning home bringing some big shifts in the makeup of US households.



Joyce Chen hugs her daughter Kathryn as they pose for photographs in San Francisco, May 29, 2013. A new poll finds that one in five unmarried women would consider having a child on their own, and more than a third would consider adopting solo, just one indication of America's changing family structures. (Jeff Chiu/AP)

By James Norton

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It's often said that the only permanent thing is change, and that old saw apparently applies the composition of the typical American family.

A study released today by Zhenchao Qian, a professor of sociology at The Ohio State University Ohio State University, shows a number of troubling trends: a decline in marriage (young people are delaying marriage longer than ever, and permanent singlehood is increasing), a rise in divorce and

remarriage (the "marriage-go-round"), and a rise in adult children living with their parents for economic reasons.

Most troubling is a polarizing divide that means white people, the educated, and the economically secure have much more stable family situations than minorities, the uneducated, and the poor. Viewed against a background of widening gaps between the haves and have-nots in America, this is a particularly stark divide.

In a release on the study, which is based on census data and the 2008-2010 American Community Survey, Qian said that "there is no longer any such thing as a typical American family", although the study makes a caveat – immigrant families may come closest, with relatively low rates of divorce and remarriage, and low rates of cohabitation.

The key question is: if the typical American family is going the way of the passenger pigeon, does it really matter?

The answer seems to be: yes. Households headed by married couples lead to better educational, educational, and social outcomes for their children. (Whether that's causal - married parents lead to better outcomes - or correlated - stably married parents have other qualities that help their kids thrive - is open for debate.)

A New York Times story looking at the skyrocketing rate of birth outside of marriage among women under 30 (now over 50 percent of such births) pointed up one of the key differences between marriages and cohabitating couples:

Almost all of the rise in nonmarital births has occurred among couples living together. While in some countries such relationships endure at rates that resemble marriages, in the United States they are more than twice as likely to dissolve than marriages. In a summary of research, Pamela Smock and Fiona Rose Greenland, both of the University of Michigan, reported that two-thirds of couples living together split up by the time their child turned 10.

The research, in aggregate, says that things are changing for the American family, and quickly. There may be ways for the government to address the trend: increased financial benefits for getting and staying married, for example, or a macro-effort to actively battle rising economic inequality, but systematic change will be a long hard fight. The research seems to suggest that such a fight is worth the effort.

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