

LATEST STUDY

Traditional U.S. family is getting hard to find

By [Rita Price](#)

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Not long ago, researchers could easily pinpoint the typical American family. Not anymore.

The traditional portrait of working dad, stay-at-home mom and their kids is bobbing in a sea of cohabitation, single parenthood, divorce and remarriage.

Most troubling, says the author of a new report on the divergent paths of American families, is the economic polarization.

“There’s this sharp contrast,” said Zhenchao Qian, author of the study and a sociology professor at Ohio State University. “Race and ethnicity, education, economics and immigration status are increasingly linked to how well families fare.”

The marriage divide, for example, closely tracks the nation’s growing class divide. People with lower levels of employment and education also are less likely to wed.

They might see marriage as a bar to aspire to — surveys show that more than 90 percent of Americans say they expect to marry someday — yet still feel unable to reach it, Qian said. Many become parents first, and their relationships tend to be fragile.

“This has implications for children,” he said. “Those kids are much more likely to live in poverty.”

Qian’s analysis, based on data from the 2000 census, 2008-10 American Community Survey and other sources, shows that the Great Recession speeded up family change after what had been a period of relative calm during the 1990s.

The report is part of the US2010 Project, sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation and Brown University.

It identified five key trends among families in the U.S. during the 2000s:

- Young people are delaying marriage longer than ever. The percentage of women ages 20 to 24 currently or previously married went from 31 percent in 2000 to 19 percent in 2008-10. For men, the share dropped to 11 percent from 21 percent.
- Americans are on a marriage-go-round. More men and women move from marriage to divorce to remarriage, sometimes multiple times. About 25 percent of currently married men are remarried, up from 17 percent in 1980. Women posted similar rates.
- The surge in cohabitation is leveling off. After a swift rise from 400,000 couples in 1960 to 3.8 million by 2000, the percentage of never-married adults living with a partner appears unchanged from 2008-2010, at 12 to 14 percent.

- Minorities, the less educated and the poor have seen their family situations become less stable during the 2000s when compared with whites, the educated and the economically secure. Blacks had the lowest marriage rates in every age group, highest proportion of permanent singlehood by ages 50 to 54, highest divorce-to-marriage ratios and a larger share of remarriages.

- Immigrants are the most likely to have traditional families. Regardless of education or race or ethnicity, immigrants married at higher rates and were less likely to divorce and remarry than their U.S.-born counterparts.

“The question is, ‘For how long?’” Qian said of first-generation immigrants. “Are they going to follow their parents or American society?”

Policymakers should consider the emerging trends, child advocates say. Some advocates for the poor complain that assistance programs can penalize low-income couples who marry, disqualifying them from the help they need to pay for child care and food.

“The household looks very different today than it did 20 years ago,” said Renuka Mayadev, the executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio. “What we need to do is, not only acknowledge it, through research from the academic community, but to ask how we’re going to help the children.

“Their needs can’t wait.”

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