

**The Spread of Single-Parent Families
in the United States since 1960**

By

David T. Ellwood

and

Christopher Jencks

John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

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The Spread of Single Parent Families in the United States since 1960

The spread of single-parent families has been both an intellectual challenge and a source of persistent frustration for social scientists. Some of the nation's most influential social theorists, including Gary Becker and William Julius Wilson, have sought to explain the change. These theories have led to a large body of empirical research, but there is still no consensus about why single parenthood spread, much less about why it spread faster in some populations than others. The most widely cited empirical papers seem to be those that disprove various hypotheses. Indeed, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that quantitative social scientists' main contribution to our understanding of single-parent families has been to show that *nothing* caused them to become more common. Nonetheless, they did.

This paper examines the ways in which American families with children changed over the course of the twentieth century. We begin with a brief discussion of what kinds of changes ought to worry us. Next we describe the changes that have actually occurred. Finally, we try to explain these changes. While many questions remain unanswered, our review suggests that social scientists may have learned more than they realize.

1. What changes should worry us?

When legislators, policy analysts, and opinion leaders discuss family change they usually focus on two issues: out-of-wedlock births and fatherless families. In many cases they discuss these two issues as if they were identical. Yet more than half of all fatherless families are still created by divorce, separation, death, or imprisonment, and nearly half of all out-of-wedlock births are now to cohabiting fathers and mothers. These facts suggest that we need to be more precise about which changes worry us. Americans worry about family change for at least three kinds of

reasons, which we will label economic, developmental, and moral. Each of these concerns implies a different definition of “the problem.”

The economic problem. From an economic perspective, the most troubling feature of family change has been the spread of single motherhood. Single mothers seldom command high wages. They also find it unusually difficult to work long hours, since they must also care for their children. Many get very little in child support from the absent father, and even generous child support payments provide less support than a resident father with the same income would normally provide. While poor single mothers are eligible for various forms of public assistance, neither legislators nor voters have wanted to make such assistance at all generous, lest generosity encourage still more women to raise children on their own. The spread of single-mother families has therefore played a major role in the persistence of poverty. In 1964, when Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, only 30 percent of poor families with children were headed by single mothers. Since the late 1970s the figure has been about 60 percent.¹

Not all children from disrupted families live with a lone mother, but the other alternatives generate far less poverty. Mothers who divorce and remarry tend to be about as well off economically in their second marriage as in their first. Unmarried mothers who live with their parents or other relatives also face fewer economic problems than mothers who live alone. Unmarried mothers who cohabit with a boyfriend also tend to have significantly higher household incomes than those who live on their own, although it is not clear how much of the boyfriend’s income is available to support the mother’s children. Finally, when children live with their father rather than their mother their chances of being poor are greatly reduced. Unfortunately, these arrangements often have noneconomic costs that outweigh their economic benefits.

¹ Calculated from US Bureau of the Census (2000), Table B-3.

Furthermore, while single mothers tend to have low incomes, it does not follow that marriage or remarriage would always solve their economic problems. Marrying an unemployed man, for example, is likely to exacerbate a mother's problems. But if our basic concern is with economic hardship, lone mothers are the group at greatest risk.

The child development problem. Most Americans believe that growing up in single-parent family has a negative effect on children independent of its effect on family income. Indeed, the idea that two loving parents can raise children better than one seems self-evident to most couples who get along reasonably well. But when parents do *not* get along, the assumption that their children will always fare better if the parents live together becomes problematic. Much is likely to depend on what form the parents' incompatibility takes. Getting a violent parent out of a child's household is often a good idea. Determining the optimal divorce rate is no simple task though, and determining the optimal marriage rate among unmarried couples who conceive children would be even harder.

The fundamental problem from a policy viewpoint is that parents tend to make choices aimed at maximizing their own welfare, and while they usually put some weight on what they think would be good for their children, they may put less weight on children's welfare than society as a whole thinks they should. Children's long-term welfare might, for example, be optimized when 80 percent of parents stayed together until their children were grown, while parents' welfare might be optimized when only 40 percent did so. If a *laissez faire* system in which each parent is free to do what he or she thinks best produces a society in which 50 percent of biological parents split up, *laissez faire* may not be serving children very well.

Those who worry about the noneconomic effects of lone parenthood on children express concern about the lack of male role models, the potential for reduced discipline and control of

children, the legitimation of “dependency” on the government, and the nature and quality of single parents’ relationships with their children. Of course none of these things automatically accompany single-motherhood, nor does having two resident parents necessarily offer better prospects for development simply by virtual of the dual presence.

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) assembled data from a number of American surveys showing that children who grew up with both of their biological parents performed better on school achievement tests, had fewer children as teenagers, finished high school more often, attended college more often, and earned more in early adulthood. They also showed that only about half of this association was explained by parental income.² For our purposes their most important finding was that children raised by both of their *biological* parents did better than children raised in any alternative arrangement. There was no consistent difference between children raised by remarried mothers, divorced mothers, and never-married mothers. Children raised by a widow fared somewhat better than those whose biological families had been disrupted for other reasons. The sampling errors for some of the estimates are fairly large, so concluding that all forms of disruption are equivalent may be premature, but that seems to be a fair reading of currently available evidence.

There are complex methodological issues associated with determining whether the differences between children living in different kinds of families are really causal, since the adults in these families differ in all kinds of unmeasurable ways. But if children’s social and psychological outcomes depend on whether their biological parents stay together, the trend that

² One potential limitation of McLanahan and Sandefur’s findings is that they generally controlled income in a single year, which is a very imperfect proxy for long-term income or for most forms of consumption. To the extent that family structure is a proxy for unmeasured income differences, their estimates will underestimate the importance of family structure’s economic effects and exaggerate the importance of its noneconomic effects. Studies that use multi-year measures of parental income often show very small effects of family structure.

should worry us is not the percentage of children living with a lone mother but the percentage not living with both of their biological parents – a group we refer to as living in “disrupted” families. As we shall see, the percentage of children from disrupted biological families is much larger than the percentage living with a single mother, and it has risen even more since 1960.

The moral problem. When American politicians and citizens talk about changes in the family, moral issues tend to dominate the discussion. But when social scientists talk about changes in family structure, they seldom describe the changes in moral terms. Even social scientists who deplore the spread of single parenthood, for example, mostly do so because they think single parenthood has costly social consequences, not because they think it is morally wrong. Sociologists do tackle the moral dimension of social change indirectly, however, when they discuss changes in social norms, many of which are based on moral judgments. Sociologists also discuss the factors that influence a society’s ability to enforce its moral norms, whatever these may be.

When Americans link family change to a breakdown in “traditional” moral norms, they usually emphasize the spread of premarital sex, out-of-wedlock births, and divorce. Those who see such behavior as immoral often claim that it has costly social consequences, but it is important to remember that their moral judgments seldom depend on the validity of such claims. If premarital sex is morally wrong, it is wrong even for those who contracept effectively, do not spread AIDS, and eventually marry. Likewise, if divorce violates immutable religious principles, its moral status does not change when it makes both partners in a particular marriage happier or when it makes particular children better off. The proportion of Americans who view these issues in moral terms has clearly declined over the past generation, but for those who continue to see the

problem in moral terms these changes in public opinion serve as further evidence that the nation faces a moral crisis.

Divorce—In the early twentieth century most Americans took wedding vows literally and saw marriage as a lifetime commitment. Divorces were almost as rare as nonmarital births. But between 1960 and 1980 the divorce rate more than doubled, and it has remained high ever since. Thornton (1989) demonstrates that attitudes toward divorce changed dramatically between the early 1960s and the mid 1970s. In 1962, only half of all respondents disagreed with a statement suggesting that parents who don't get along should stay together for the children. By 1977, over 80% disagreed. Attitudes have changed little since the 1970s.

Premarital sex—In the early 1960s roughly half of all twenty-five year old women had had sexual intercourse before they married. By the late 1980s five out of six had done so. Moral judgments about premarital sex changed in much the same way. In early 1960s roughly three-quarters of American adults thought that premarital sex was wrong. By the 1980s only a third of adults thought that premarital sex was “always” or “almost always” wrong.³

Out of wedlock births—In 1960 most men and women who engaged in premarital sex assumed that if the woman became pregnant they would marry and raise their child together. Thus while premarital pregnancies were fairly common, premarital births were rare. By the 1990s roughly one baby in three was born to an unmarried couple. Here too moral norms have changed along with behavior, but apparently not nearly as much. In 1994 three-quarters of all adults interviewed by the General Social Survey (GSS) agreed with the proposition that “people who

³ These estimates come from Harding and Jencks (2002). The estimate for the 1960s is from Gallup data for 1969, but Harding and Jencks find little evidence of change between 1962 and 1969. The estimate for the 1980s is from the General Social Survey, which uses a different question, but Harding and Jencks find that the change in wording only accounts for about five percentage points of the shift.

want children ought to get married,” but in many cases this judgment may have been prudential rather than moral.

Most Americans’ worries about family change probably reflect their belief that it poses economic, developmental, and moral problems. Certainly that seemed to be the case for Moynihan (1986) when he declared:

The institution of the family is decisive in determining not only if a person has the capacity to love another individual but in the larger social sense whether he is capable of loving his fellow men collectively. The whole of society rests on this foundation for stability, understanding and social peace.

2. Trends in family disruption

We now turn to an examination of trends in disrupted families, divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and single parenthood.

Disrupted families. The child development literature seems to be pointing to the possibility that children not living with both *biological* parents are in jeopardy. Moreover, the moral arguments all suggest that biological parents have an obligation to raise their children together if this is at all possible. So we begin by examining these trends. Unfortunately, the US Bureau of the Census, which is our main source of data on long-term trends in living arrangements, seldom distinguishes between biological parents and step-parents.⁴ This omission reflects the fact that federal policy has been mainly concerned with the spread of single-parent families, which tend to be poor, not with the spread of step-families, which are less likely to be poor. As a result, research on trends in the proportion of children living with their biological parents is scarce.

Nonetheless we have tried to construct information on the trends. Since 1972 the GSS has been asking American adults, “Were you living with both your own mother and father around the time you were 16?” Most respondents presumably interpret this question as referring to their

⁴ The Survey of Income and Program Participation is an exception.

biological parents, but some adopted children may also have said they lived their own mother and father. Indeed, some children adopted before 1960 were never told that they were adopted.

Figure 1 shows that from 1900 until around 1970 about a quarter of American sixteen year olds did not live with both of their own parents. By the 1990s the proportion had risen to almost half. The estimate for the 1990s is roughly consistent with other sources.⁵

Figure 1 also shows the fraction of children whose parent(s) died before they reached 16 and the fraction who split up for all other reasons. In the early part of the century family disruptions due to the death of a parent affected about one child in six, while other sources of disruption affected about only half that number. By the end of the century the pattern was reversed. Just 5% of those who turned sixteen in the 1990s reported that one of their parents had died, while 39% reported that they did not live with both of their parents for some other reason.⁶ Unfortunately, the GSS does not distinguish respondents whose parents divorced from those whose parents never married.

Similar changes have occurred in most other affluent nations, but Figure 2 reveals that none have nearly as much family disruption as the United States. It is true that out-of-wedlock births are as common in many European countries as in the United States. But the estimated percentage of fifteen year olds living with both of their biological parents is far lower in the United States than in Western Europe.⁷ Even in Sweden, where nonmarital births are almost twice as common as in

⁵ The estimates in Figure 5 will overstate the fraction of children living with both of their own parents early in the century if, as seems likely, such children live longer than children raised in other arrangements. We have no data on the magnitude of this bias, but we doubt that it is large enough to alter the basic picture in Figure 5.

⁶ Both nonmarital births and divorce among married parents with children have now leveled off, but the proportion of sixteen year olds living with both of their own parents is likely to keep falling for at least another decade, because a child born to a lone mother in 1994 will not be sixteen until 2010.

⁷ The difference between the estimates for the United States in Figures 5 and 6 are probably a byproduct of methodological differences. The estimates in Figure 6 are analogous to life expectancies in that they are projections based on the rates at which parental unions dissolved during the seven-year interval shown for a given country.

the United States, most unmarried parents raise their children together. As a result, two-thirds of all Swedish fifteen year olds are expected to live with both of their biological parents – a figure comparable to that in Germany and France.

Divorce. Figure 3 shows both divorce rates and the fraction of children whose parents will divorce by age 18. Until the 1940s divorce was rare. It shot up briefly after World War II, but quickly return to close to the previous levels. Then in the 1960s and 1970s, divorce rose rapidly. Finally it peaked around 1980 and it has fallen back slightly since that time.

Non-marital births. Figure 4 shows that non-marital childbearing was also unusual until the 1960s. But whereas divorce leveled off around 1980, the fraction of children born out of wedlock continued to rise until the mid-1990s. Since then the rate of increase has slowed dramatically. As we noted earlier, the fact that nonmarital births were rare before the 1960s does not mean that nonmarital *pregnancies* were rare, only that prospective parents nearly always married before their baby was born.

Another important change since 1980 is the increasing probability that unmarried parents are living together when their baby is born. Indeed, Bumpass and Lu (2000) argue that cohabitators accounted for the entire increase in nonmarital births to white women between the early 1980s and the early 1990s. No consensus has emerged about how we should treat such families. Data collected in the early 1990s implied that 78% cohabiting couples would split up before their child was fifteen (Andersson (2001), compared to 35% of married couples. In the United States, moreover, many of the cohabiting couples that stay together also marry. We have no data on

Because dissolution rates have been rising, the observed rate among fifteen year olds in the years shown is likely to be lower than the projected rate. The estimates for the 1990s in Figure 5 are based on a relatively small sample of GSS respondents, most of whom turned sixteen in the first half of the 1990s.

whether cohabiting relationships are becoming more or less stable.

3. Trends in Single Parenthood

From a child's perspective not living with both biological parents is usually an irreversible transition, although some parents who have had a child out of wedlock and were not cohabiting at the time of the child's birth do eventually marry, and some parents who are separated do reconcile. Living with a lone mother, in contrast, is often a temporary situation. But because families headed by unmarried mothers are so often poor, the proportion of children living in such families is a focus of national attention.

Figure 5 shows that the proportion of children in single parent families rose from about 10 percent in 1965 to 29 percent in 1997 but then began to fall, reaching 27 percent in 2001. The reasons for this decline are still uncertain, but the combination of welfare reform and low unemployment seems like the most obvious candidate. Figure 5 also shows that most of the rise during the 1960s and 1970s can be traced to rising divorce rates. In the 1980s and 1990s nearly the entire rise was traceable to out-of-wedlock births.

In Figure 6 we show the same information for African-American children only. Vastly more black children are affected (note the change of scale). And for black children, never-married motherhood became the primary source of change much earlier. Here too rates have fallen slightly in recent years. Note the change of scale.

Figure 7 looks only at children living with mothers and asks how the mother's education relates to the probability that she is married. Trends for college graduates are strikingly different from the trends for mothers who did not complete college. Between 1965 and 1980 the chances that a child whose mother finished college was unmarried rose only from 6 to 10 percent. Since then there has been no further change. Among children whose mother did not finish high school,

in contrast, the chances that she was unmarried from 13 percent in 1965 to over 40 percent in the mid 1990s, although there has been some decline since then.

If the growth of single motherhood had been largely confined to college educated women with high earning power, it would not pose a major economic problem. But Figure 7 shows precisely the opposite trend. Single motherhood has spread fastest among women with the lowest potential earnings. The trend is not confined to the least educated. Quite the contrary. The increase has been about as steep among women with 12 to 15 years of school as among those with less.⁸ Only college graduates seem largely exempt. The obvious question is why?

4. The Role of Divorce and Nonmarital Childbearing

Social science literature is rich with models and hypotheses that might explain these changes in family structure, but the empirical literature has proven disappointing. As a result, no explanation has won general acceptance. But there are some partial explanations in the literature and some pretty clear implications about where we should search for better answers.

As we have seen, variation by race and education in the spread of single motherhood can be traced primarily to variation in the rate of increase in divorce and nonmarital births. Until now we have focused on trends among children, since concerns about their well-being often motivate the discussion of family change. But if we want to understand the causes of family change we need to understand the choices made by adults -- men and women making complicated and often joint decisions regarding whether and when to have sexual relations, become pregnant, have abortions, live together, marry, divorce, and remarry. Since 92% of children under 18 live with their mother, most social scientists have found it convenient to focus on explaining women's behavior. We

⁸ It is tempting to suppose that single motherhood has risen among the less educated because mothers at each educational level have become a less and less select group since 1964. But if one assigns women to the top, middle, or bottom third of the educational distribution for their birth cohort and then tracks trends for each third of the distribution, the results are essentially identical to those shown in Figure 7 (Ellwood and Jencks, 2001).

largely adopt that convention here, while conceding that this approach could obscure crucial elements of the story.

The growing correlation between a mother's marital status and her education can be traced primarily to the fact that nonmarital childbearing rose far more rapidly among the less educated. In 1965, hardly any mothers at any education level reported that they had never been married. This does not mean there were no nonmarital births. Some mothers had placed such children for adoption. Some had married after their child's birth. Some had been married and divorced before their children's birth. Still, nonmarital births were rare. That is still true among mothers who have finished college, all but 3 percent of whom have also been married. *Murphy Brown* really is largely fiction.

Today, however, almost 25 percent of mothers without high school diplomas say that they have never been married. This difference is not attributable to the large share of less educated women who are black or Hispanic. The same pattern recurs when we look at blacks, whites, and Hispanics separately. Nonetheless, it is also true at each education level blacks are more likely than whites to be never-married mothers.⁹

One useful way to think about these trends is to compare changes in the timing of first births and first marriages. If a woman's first birth precedes her first marriage, she becomes a never married mother, at least temporarily. Table 1 compares women born in 1940-44 and 1960-64. The first row shows the fraction of all women born in 1940-44 who had had their first marriage and their first birth at ages 25, 30 and 40.

⁹ In 2001, for example, 19% of white non-Hispanic dropout mothers had never married compared to 54% for blacks. Among white mothers who had completed college less than 2% had never married, compared to 18% of black mothers who had completed college. For Hispanics the figures were 16% for dropouts and 4% for college graduates.

- When we compare women born in the early 1960s to those born in the early 1940s we see a 19 or 20 point decline in percentage of women who had married or borne a child by age 25.
- When we compare these two groups of women at age 40, we see only a 7 or 8 percentage point decline in women who will have been married or had a child.¹⁰ For most women, therefore, delaying marriage or motherhood did not lead to avoiding it entirely.

Black women show far greater declines in marriage than white women, Only about 68% of black women in the most recent cohort will have married by age 40, compared to 87% of those born two decades earlier and 89 percent of whites in the more recent cohort. But while more black than white women are eschewing marriage, fewer blacks than whites are either delaying or eschewing motherhood.

Table 2 shows changes by level of education.¹¹ Looking down the rows we see that marriage patterns for the cohort born 1940-44 were very similar across all education levels, except that college graduates married a bit later. Twenty years later, women at all education levels were marrying later, but the pattern still looked remarkably similar across education levels.

The trends are very different for childbearing. The least educated women hardly postponed childbearing at all. But the fraction of college graduates with a first birth by age 25 fell from 47% to 20%. Even by age thirty the fraction of college graduates who had had a child fell from 71% to 50%.

- In sum, higher educated women are postponing both marriage and childbearing. Less educated women are postponing marriage but not childbearing. The rapid rise in the fraction of less educated women who are never married mothers is a product of these two

¹⁰ Note on estimates for younger cohort at age 40.

¹¹ Education, of course may be partly endogenous. Women who have children early are presumably less likely to get as much education and thus will be more likely to show up in the bottom education third. Ideally one might like to do such tables based on parental education or some other non-endogenous variable.

changes. If we are to understand the trends in out-of-wedlock childbearing, we must explain why delays in marriage and childbearing differed so much by education.

Trends in divorce also differ by race and education. Figure 9 shows the fraction of never married mothers who were separated or divorced by race from 1964 to 2001. The chances of having once been married, but now divorced or separated are highest for blacks and lowest for white non-Hispanics, with Hispanics in between although closer to whites. Divorce rates rose fastest for both blacks and whites in the 1960s and 1970s. Rates fell for all groups in the late 1990s. Figure 10 shows that the chances of being a divorced single mother rose in every education group from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. College educated women were less likely to be divorced in all years. These patterns hold for both blacks and whites.

It may seem somewhat perplexing that divorce levels off in the 1980s and 1990s while non-marital births continued to rise. Presumably the fact that most couples were marrying later (and some were not marrying at all) reduced the proportion of unstable marriages, but it is not clear that this is sufficient to explain the trend.

This brief examination of the data for mothers sharpens the questions we face. Why the sharp divergence in the tendency to postpone childbearing by education and race? Why so little difference in marriage delays by education? Why are educated women postponing childbearing so much? And why did divorce rates flatten out when out-of-wedlock childbearing was accelerating?

5. The Traditional Economic Model

Most of the empirical literature on family structure has been based on a broad class of economic models that we will refer to as the “traditional economic model” (TEM). Much of this work derives from Gary Becker (summarized in Becker, 1991). The adjectives “traditional” and “economic” are both slightly problematic, since far more elaborate formulations are now found in

the economics literature, and sociologists have proposed models in which economic variables play similar roles. Still, since this model lies at the core of much current empirical work, some label is needed.

The traditional economic model seeks to explain decisions about marriage, not decisions about fertility, but it also assumes that marriage leads to parenthood. It treats marriage as a contract from which both husbands and wives expect to reap economic benefits.¹² Becker emphasizes gains associated with specialization among marrying partners. If one partner has a comparative advantage in either market work (because of higher wages) or home production (because of more efficient nurturing), it will generally make sense for at least one partner to specialize. Thus most men might specialize in market work and most women in home production. By improving efficiency, specialization creates gains from marriage analogous to gains from trade. This model yields fairly straightforward predictions. If male and female wages converge, both the advantages of specialization and the gains from marriage will decline. The same logic applies if the non-monetary value that men and women assign to employment becomes more similar.

Marriage can also yield economic benefits for other reasons, though they get far less attention in the economics literature. Weiss (1997) highlights three other ways in which marriage can generate economic benefits: overcoming credit market imperfections (one partner can invest in the other's schooling, for example), sharing collective goods (such as a home), and sharing risk (if one partner loses a job, the other can enter the labor force or share earnings). These economic advantages of marriage should be more sensitive to absolute income levels than to the relative incomes of men and women. Those with more income can afford to live alone rather than sharing

¹² There are several excellent recent reviews of the theoretical literature. In particular see Weiss (1997) and Hotz et al. (1997).

their home with someone they do not find congenial. Those with more income also suffer fewer credit constraints and have less need to share economic risks.

The traditional economic model also predicts that external economic support for single adults, particularly single parents, will make marriage less common. If a single parent can specialize in household production and still get money from public assistance or relatives, the advantages of marriage diminish. Rising welfare benefits should therefore reduce marriage rates, while falling benefits should raise marriage rates. What matters, however, is not the absolute benefit level but the difference between a mother's standard of living when she is unmarried rather than married. Thus if real welfare benefits fall but unskilled men's wages fall even more, marriage rates may rise.

Economic factors also figure prominently in the work of sociologists. The best known theory is the one proposed by Wilson and Neckerman (1986). Unlike most economists, Wilson and Neckerman focus on blacks living in inner cities. But like many economists they emphasize the importance of male earning power and the ratio of young black men to women. They argue that high levels of unemployment, weak connections to mainstream employers, rising levels of imprisonment, and a low ratio of young men to young women created a shortage of "marriageable" black men. They spend little time on whether improved economic opportunities for black women might also have contributed to declines in black marriage rates.

In summary, traditional economic models highlight the potential importance of four factors:

1. *Male earnings.* Higher male earnings should be associated with higher marriage rates and lower levels of single parenthood.
2. *Female earnings.* Improvements in women's economic opportunities should be associated with lower marriage rates and higher levels of single-parenthood.

3. *Sex ratio*. When one sex is in short supply, marriage rates for the other sex should fall.
4. *Public assistance*. More generous benefits for single-parent families should lead to reductions in marriage and rises in single parenthood.

Empirical tests of these predictions generally use one of three methods: comparisons of geographic areas, comparisons of individuals observed at a single point in time, and changes over time in the behavior of the same individuals (“hazard models”). Comparisons of geographic areas examine variation in the fraction of a particular age/race/education group that is married, divorced or separated, or a single parent. These area averages are typically regressed on the area’s economic characteristics. Comparisons of individuals link the odds that an individual has a given marital or family status to the individual’s labor market opportunities, the characteristics of potential spouses, and local welfare benefits. Both individual and area models are sometimes estimated by pooling cross-sectional data for a number of years.

Unfortunately, studies that use these methods seldom distinguish changes in the timing of events from changes in the probability that the event will occur at all. Many studies examine changes in marriage levels among 25-34 year old whites, for example. They almost all find that marriage rates in this group have fallen over time, but because they look at relatively young women they cannot determine how many of these women are merely postponing marriage or how many will never marry.

Hazard models use longitudinal data to estimate the odds that an unmarried person will marry at a given point in time. Such models can yield predictions about the timing as well as the overall likelihood of marriage, but as implemented they still have critical limitations. First, they rarely allow the effect of variables such as women’s labor market opportunities to vary by age. Goldstein and Kenney (2001) argue, for example, that higher education leads women to delay marriage but increases the probability that they will eventually marry. Most of the hazard models

in the literature would miss such a pattern.¹³ Like all individual-level models, moreover, longitudinal hazard models have trouble measuring the characteristics of a respondent's potential spouses. Most surveys observe only one partner until a marriage is culminated.¹⁴

Findings on marriage and divorce. Ellwood and Jencks (2002) summarize many of the articles on marriage and divorce, and describe their strengths and weaknesses. In this paper we will merely summarize what we see as the key conclusions of that review.

- All empirical methods suggest a strong influence of men's economic performance on marriage and divorce patterns. Improved male earnings appear to hasten marriage and perhaps also raise overall marriage rates.
- The role of women's earnings is unclear. In cross-sectional studies of areas and individuals, women with more economic opportunities are less likely to be married and in some cases more likely to divorce. But hazard models that follow the same woman over time seldom find this pattern. These divergent findings cast doubt on the hypothesis that improvements in women's economic opportunities discourage marriage, although they may lead women to *postpone* marriage.
- A lower ratio of men to women reduces marriage.
- Welfare has ambiguous effects on marriage but may have modest positive effects on divorce.

Several authors have also sought to explain trends over time in marriage. Changing patterns of male work and earnings cannot explain much of the trend.¹⁵

Findings on female headship and unwed motherhood. Another part of the literature focuses on female headship and unwed motherhood. Most of this work is preoccupied with whether

¹³ Suppose that improvements in women's economic opportunities lower the odds that a young unmarried women will marry in the next year, but raise the odds that an older unmarried women will marry in the next year. Unless one allows the effect of female opportunity to vary in both magnitude and sign by age one will not find this result.

¹⁴ Recent research on cohabiting couples has begun to overcome this limitation (cites to come), as has the Fragile Families study, which has been quite successful in tracking the fathers of children born out of wedlock (cites to come).

¹⁵ Ellwood and Rodda (1990) employ a hazard model with little control for female work. This combines both timing and avoidance effects, thus providing an upper bound for the impact of male earnings. Yet even they conclude, along with Jencks (1992) and Wood (1995), that male labor market performance can explain only a tiny share of the declines in marriage.

welfare has a major influence. There have been a number of careful reviews of this literature, notably Moffitt (1998). We have little reason to disagree with Moffitt's overall conclusion:

Based on this review, it is clear that a simple majority of the studies that have been conducted to date show a significant correlation between welfare benefits and marriage and fertility, suggesting the presence of such behavioral effects. However, in addition to this finding not being able to explain the time-series increase in non-marital fertility and decline in marriage, the majority finding itself is weakened by the sensitivity of the result to the methodology used and to numerous other differences in specification. A neutral reading of the evidence still leads to the conclusion that welfare has incentive effects on marriage and fertility, but the uncertainty introduced by the disparities in research findings weakens the strength of that conclusion.¹⁶

The reviews by Acs (1995) and Hoynes (1997) are also about welfare exerting a major influence on family structure. But even if welfare impacts are large, traditional economic models suggest that the gradual cuts in welfare benefits since the early 70s should have reduced the number of single parent families.¹⁷

Why doesn't the economic model perform better? The fact that empirical work generates such divergent results and does such a poor job of explaining trends over time poses a challenge for anyone who thinks that economic changes have played a major role in the trends we observe. In our view, however, the problem may be with the traditional economic model, not the notion that economic forces are playing a major role. Two critical limitations of the TEM are worth highlighting.

First, as Oppenheimer (1997) points out, the model is meant to explain *whether* people will marry, not *when* they marry. If the economic gains to marriage decline, more unmarried individuals should permanently eschew marriage, and more married individuals should divorce and not remarry. But the biggest change is in the timing of marriage, not in the proportion who

¹⁶ Moffitt (1998, p. 75.)

¹⁷ As the cost of medical care rose, the value of Medicaid also rose. This change could offset the declining value of cash benefits for families with serious medical problems.

eventually marry. Since the TEM is only a model of whether marriage makes sense at all, using it to explain patterns of delay is problematic—indeed some signs might even be reversed. For example, higher earning women may want to marry later as they invest in careers, but may eventually marry in larger numbers (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001). Because we seldom distinguish between delay and avoidance, the role of economic change may well be obscured.

Second, the TEM pays very little attention to fertility decisions, especially outside marriage (Hotz, Klerman and Willis (1997)).¹⁸ Implicitly, the TEM assumes that marriage and childbearing are almost simultaneous. The gains from marriage come chiefly from specialization in the care and nurturing of children. Yet one of the most important changes over the past generation is that the timing of marriage and childbearing have become decoupled. The changes are quite dramatic.¹⁹

- For women who married for the first time in 1960, 71% had a first birth within the first 36 months after marriage. For women first married in 1990, only 37% had their first child in the first 36 months after marriage.

The decoupling of marriage and childbearing occurred not just because more women were having children before marriage, but because a far larger share of marital births occurred more than 3 years after marriage.

- Whereas over 75% of childless women who married in 1960 had a child within three years of marriage, less than 50% of those who married in 1990 had a child in three years.

It was not so unreasonable to treat marriage and childbearing as essentially simultaneous events in 1960. But by the 1990s the timing of first marriages and first births were less connected.

¹⁸ As will be discussed later, there have recently been a few attempts to integrate models of fertility and childbearing, see for example, Willis (1999).

¹⁹ The source for all the information on marriage fertility decoupling is Ellwood and Jencks (2002).

Since this decoupling of marriage and childbearing is a large part of what we seek to explain, economic models need to deal with timing of marriage and fertility decisions together.

6. Noneconomic Explanations

The traditional economic model largely ignores the interpersonal and power dynamics associated with marriage, treating a family like a firm that generates improved utility for its owners (the husband and wife). If the family ceases to improve the well-being of either partner it is dissolved. But marriage involves sharing power and control. These arrangements are shaped by societal norms and expectations and by the legal environment, all of which change over time. Sociologists, anthropologists, social psychologists, and even some economists have investigated the interpersonal, social, and legal forces that might influence family formation and dissolution. Here we consider four types of explanations: gender role conflict, limited confidence and personal efficacy, altered attitudes and social norms, and technological and legal change.

Gender role conflict. One popular explanation for the rise of single motherhood is that women are no longer willing to “put up with” the way men often treat them. Explanations of this kind are often attributed to the breakdown of consensus about “gender roles” (Furstenberg 1996, 2001). Both the women’s movement and the increase in women’s employment have probably changed the way husbands and wives think about their obligations to one another. If male and female expectations change in different ways or at different rates, there might be an extended period when old marriages dissolve and new marriages are slow to form, because the parties cannot agree on the appropriate roles.

Patterson (1998) focuses on blacks, arguing that African-American men and women are moving on “very different socioeconomic trajectories” with men “falling behind in both absolute

and relative terms.”²⁰ He sees high levels of gender conflict as endemic in African-American culture and traces this to the legacy of slavery, not poverty. Patterson’s work remains highly controversial, since it is not obvious why these cultural legacies should suddenly have become more important in the last half of the 20th century. Patterson argues that there has always been a big difference between black and white families, and that the underlying conflict between black men and women has a bigger impact on living arrangements today because black men's economic position has deteriorated while black women's position has improved.

Stories about gender role conflict also imply changes in interpersonal dynamics as women seek to redistribute the costs and benefits of marriage and childbearing. Beliefs about women’s roles changed sharply in the late 1960s and 1970s. If women’s expectations changed more than men’s, this could have contributed to the spread of single motherhood. If these changes were unevenly distributed by education or race, they could also help explain why single motherhood increased more among black women and those without college degrees.

Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) review changes in the role expectations of men and women. Using data on the attitudes of high school seniors from 1976 to 1998, they report that disagreement with the statement “the husband should make all the important decisions in the family” rose from 72 to 85 percent among women and from 44 to 49 percent among men. Disagreement with the statement “it is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family” rose from 42 to 71 percent among women and from 17 to 37 percent among men. If this pattern also holds at the behavioral level, it could help explain why men and women have become more reluctant to marry and have had more trouble staying married. But these data do not tell us how such attitudes

²⁰ Patterson (1998, p. 160).

change as people age or whether the gender gap narrows among those who attend college.

The General Social Survey also asks two questions about gender roles that can be construed as measuring beliefs about equality between the sexes. One question asks whether respondents agree or disagree with the statement “women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country to men.” The second asks whether the respondent approves of “a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her.” Each succeeding birth cohort was more likely than its predecessors to endorse gender equality. Among those who had completed college, the trend was the same for men and women. Among those who had not completed college, egalitarian responses to the question about women’s place being in the home increased significantly more among women than among men. This area deserves more systematic study.

Limited efficacy and the desire for meaning and control. Expectancy models are the domain of social psychologists, who typically posit an interactive relationship between confidence and perceptions of control on the one hand and the results of actual behavior on the other. Behavior that is validated by success (however perceived) is reinforced, building confidence. Behavior that leads to perceived failure can lower self-esteem, reduce sense of control, and sometimes generate dysfunctional behavior. Poor information on subjects such as contraception can also weaken people’s sense of control.

Women who have fewer opportunities in the labor market might turn to childrearing in order to gain a greater sense of self-worth and importance. Nurturing children can provide avenues for success and validation that the market does not provide. Whereas the traditional economic model suggests that better job opportunities for women reduce the advantage of marriage, efficacy models suggest that better market opportunities could reduce women’s chances

of becoming young single parents and perhaps increase the proportion who marry, since women with better jobs will be better able to maintain a sense of control or power in a relationship. However, if men have less power they might be less inclined to marry.

The notion that low efficacy causes out-of-wedlock births among disadvantaged women comes up repeatedly both in the social sciences literature on teen pregnancy and in programs designed to prevent it.²¹ The National Academy of Sciences' Panel on Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing (1987) noted, however, that "several studies of social and psychological factors associated with adolescents' sexual behavior conclude that self-perception (not self-esteem)—that is who one is, can be, and wants to be—is at the heart of teenagers' sexual decision making."²² Plotnick (1992) finds that a variety of measures of self-esteem, attitudes toward school, educational expectations, and employment of an adult women in a teenager's household influence teen pregnancy and its resolution. Lack of knowledge about contraception and inability to resist peer influences and pressures from males remain frequent themes as well.

Power and control can also play a big role in explaining decisions of single mothers not to marry. Edin (1999) offers a powerful ethnographic study of the factors leading inner-city mothers to eschew marriage that emphasizes control. She reports:

In a non-marital relationship, women often felt they had more control than they would have had if they were married. Even if the couple cohabited, they nearly always lived with her mother or in an apartment with her name on the lease. Thus, mothers had the power to evict fathers if they interfered with childrearing or they tried to take control of the financial decision making....

When we asked single mothers what they liked best about being a single parent, their most frequent response was "I am in charge," or "I am in control"....²³

²¹ For excellent reviews of the recent literature see Moore et al. (1995a) and Moore et al. (1995b).

²² Panel on Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing (1987, p. 120).

²³ Edin (1999, p. 22, 24).

Edin emphasizes that the women want to marry, but only if men bring something valuable to the table, namely resources. Much of her work focuses on men's inability to provide income and their unwillingness to do their share in the home—a story consistent with both traditional economic models and gender role conflict. But control is also central. She reports that women wanted to continue to be able to exercise control, and the “primary way that mothers thought they could maintain power in a marriage relationship was by working and contributing to the family budget.”²⁴

Expectancy models have traditionally been applied to highly disadvantaged women and teenagers. But the hypothesis that better employment opportunities lead both to postponing childbearing and to higher marriage rates is also consistent with the data. As we noted above, women’s labor market success seems positively correlated with marriage in hazard models.

Altered attitudes and social norms. In sociology and anthropology, culture is often seen as a collective interpretation of one’s situation and as a guide to the appropriate response. Members of subcultures have different definitions of what is “rational,” “reasonable,” “desirable,” and “good.” Such ideas determine how individuals react to particular opportunities and stimuli. But most anthropologists also believe that norms are at least partially adaptive. If past norms of behavior are widely felt to have failed, they may be replaced by new norms. New definitions of success and failure may also emerge. Unfortunately, the adaptive nature of both culture and norms makes it hard to investigate their causal role unless they can be measured directly and exogenous sources of change can be identified.

Altered attitudes and values may have led to changed family patterns in two different ways. First, exogenous forces might alter attitudes. Consider the “sexual revolution” that de-stigmatized

²⁴ Edin (1999, p. 25).

premarital sex. The origins of the sexual revolution might be traced to technological changes such as the pill or to social upheaval. But once sexual activity outside of marriage becomes socially acceptable, this could easily reduce marriage rates, since one strong incentive to marry has been removed. Norms could also moderate or diffuse the impact of changing economic conditions. If economic conditions reduce the appeal of marriage, marriage rates should fall. But since norms are slow to change, the change in marriage rates should not be instantaneous. Instead, changes in economic incentives should generate normative feedbacks that magnify the initial effect. Some changes may even be irreversible.

The uncertain pace of normative change poses a problem for social science, since it rules out empirical tests that depend on linking the timing of two different changes. But if arguably exogenous shifts in attitudes or norms vary across groups, then one can look for evidence that long-term changes in behavior vary across groups in the same way.

Norms and culture play a prominent role in discussions of the “culture of poverty” and the “underclass.” In Murray (1984), altered social policies reward behavior that is dysfunctional within the larger society and ultimately undermines traditional mores. In Wilson (1987), lack of economic opportunities for less educated blacks plus the out-migration of the black middle class leaves an impoverished inner-city ghetto with few ties to mainstream economic opportunity. Those left behind see few men employed in the regular economy to serve as role models. An urban underclass is the result.

Parental religion is often seen as relatively exogenous, and there is substantial evidence that religion has a significant influence on marital and childbearing behavior. Lehrer (2000) finds, for example, that even after controlling for parental SES, education, family structure and the like, children raised in fundamentalist Protestant households are significantly more likely to marry early

than mainstream Protestants, who in turn are more likely to marry early than Jews. Mormons are the most likely to marry early. But while religion alters sexual behavior, these differences may not lead to differences in single parenthood. Zelnik et al. (1981) report, for example, that religion affects the odds of premarital intercourse, but not the likelihood of becoming pregnant before marriage. Presumably those with a more tolerant view of premarital sex are also more likely to practice birth control.

There is abundant evidence of major attitudinal shifts, particularly during the 1960s and early 1970s. Thornton (1989) reports that in a 1965 NORC survey, 69% of women under the age of 30 said that it was always or almost always wrong if a woman “has intimate relations with a man *to whom she is engaged to and intends to marry*” (italics ours). By contrast in the 1972 General Social Survey (GSS), only 34% of women under 30 thought it was always or almost always wrong “if a man and a woman have sex relations before marriage.” The number had fallen to 24% by 1974 and has hardly changed since.

More permissive attitudes towards non-marital sex have been accompanied by greater acceptance of women choosing not to marry. According to Veroff et al. (1981), a 1957 national survey found that 80% of respondents considered a woman who remained unmarried to be “sick, neurotic, or immoral,” whereas only 25% endorsed this view in 1978. Just as with attitudes towards premarital sex, Axinn and Thornton (2000) find virtually no changes in attitudes toward marriage since the mid-1970s. Nonetheless, both ethnographic and survey data show that there is still widespread interest in marriage, even among inner city blacks whose actual marriage rate is low.²⁵

²⁵ Edin (1999).

- Surveys of attitudes show a substantial change in attitudes during the 1960s and early 1970s on everything from divorce to gender roles to premarital sex. With the exception of attitudes toward cohabitation, there has been relatively little change in attitudes since then.
- Published time series seldom distinguish attitudes by level of education, making it difficult to determine whether attitudinal changes could account for the uneven spread of single parent families. This issue requires further work.

While attitudinal changes might explain behavioral changes in the 1960s and 1970s, their role in explaining more recent behavioral changes is harder to assess. To do this we would need to distinguish individual attitudes from societal norms and construct models in which norms change gradually as older cohorts are gradually replaced by younger cohorts with different attitudes.

The pill and abortion. Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz (1996) argue that new contraceptive technologies and legalization of abortion altered the character of sexual relations. Until abortion became legal, women could usually assume that if they engaged in premarital relations and became pregnant, the man would marry them. “Shot-gun” marriages were the frequent result. The authors suggest that the invention of the pill and legalization of abortion enhanced unmarried women's willingness to “participate in uncommitted, premarital sex by reducing the odds of a pregnancy”. At the same time, however, women who sought to hold men to the old rules (no sex without a commitment to marry) could not compete for prospective boyfriends. Akerlof et al. estimate that “about three-fourths of the increase in the white out-of-wedlock first birth ratio, and about three-fifths of the black increase, between 1965-1969 and 1985-1989” can be traced to a decrease in the fraction of premarital pregnancies that led to marriage.

Akerlof et al. (1996) rest their argument primarily on a clever theoretical construction and a loose connection between the timing of changing events. Several other authors have sought to tighten the case by investigating whether the legalization of abortion led to changes in teen birthrates. There is an obvious direct effect: if pregnancy rates remain unchanged, birth rates should fall when abortion is legalized. But when the risk of pregnancy falls, the expected cost of

premarital sex falls and premarital pregnancies presumably increase. In principle, the increase in premarital pregnancies can exceed the increase in abortions, leading to an increase in the teen birth rate. This is possible because halving the probability that intercourse will lead to an unwanted birth may more than double the frequency of intercourse.

Several scholars, notably Levine et al. (1996) and Sklar and Berkov (1974), have shown that birth rates among both married and unmarried women fell in states when abortion became legal. But Kane and Staiger (1996) have also found evidence that modest new abortion restrictions reduce teen motherhood, even though making all abortions illegal increases it. They argue that small increases in the obstacles to obtaining an abortion may make some people more careful about avoiding pregnancy while not reducing abortions among women who were very likely to abort before the "costs" rose.

Goldin and Katz (2000) examine the diffusion of the pill among college-educated women and argue that by facilitating sexual activity prior to marriage, easy availability of the pill reduced the cost of delaying marriage and staying in school.²⁶ Other legal changes, such as liberalization of divorce laws, have also been investigated as possible influences of divorce rates, marriage, property settlements, and even suicide and spousal murder.²⁷ In virtually every case, there is clear evidence that the legal and institutional changes had an impact.

- The literature on new contraceptive technologies and altered legal climate is recent and far from definitive, but it makes a fairly plausible case that these changes influenced sexual behavior, fertility, and marriage.
- The big changes in contraceptive technology and abortion occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s. Changes in behavior continued for at least two more decades. Nor is it clear whether legal and technical changes can explain differential trends by race or education.

²⁶ Goldin and Katz (2000, p. 26).

²⁷ See for example, Friedberg (1998) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2000).

7. Where Do We Look For Better Answers?

Our review of existing research presents a somewhat discouraging picture. We do find evidence that improving job opportunities for men somewhat increases marriage and reduces single parenthood. Both the theoretical and empirical literature is far more ambiguous about the effects of female labor market opportunities. Contraceptive technology, access to abortion, and attitudes regarding premarital sex and the family all changed during in the 1960s and early 1970s, but family change continued well into the 1990s. This could be because technical, legal, and attitudinal changes just take a long time to exert their full influence, but it could also mean that other factors were at work.

Yet if one takes a broad view of the trends and findings, we believe a fairly plausible hypothesis emerges. Like Sweeney (2002), we think that the relationship between economic opportunity and marriage has changed over the years. Three factors are likely to have altered the preferred timing of marriage and parenthood:

First, *the pill and legalized abortion* gave couples, and particularly women, far more control over the timing of births and thus allowed other factors (including economic incentives) to play more of a role.²⁸ Previous forms of contraception, such as condoms, withdrawal, rhythm, and diaphragms, were often less reliable, required interruption of sexual activity, or gave males control. The pill and abortion weakened the link between marriage and childbearing.

Second, *changing sexual mores* made it far more acceptable for unmarried couples to engage in sexual activity and live together. The non-economic incentives to marry therefore fell. All else equal, this change could make economic considerations more important and allow them to influence the timing of marriage and child-bearing differently.

²⁸ See for example Goldin and Katz (2000) and many others.

Finally, *gender roles and expectations changed dramatically, particularly with respect to maternal employment*. As late as March 1968, less than a quarter of married mothers whose youngest child was under five were working. This varied little by education. Even among those with elementary school children, only about 40% worked and even fewer worked full-time. By March 2000, roughly two-thirds of married mothers with children under five were working and the numbers were even higher for mothers with older children. Despite welfare reform, moreover, maternal employment rose sharply with education. Because potential mothers expect to work far more over their lifetime, they know that their decisions about the timing of fertility have greater financial implications.

These changes can influence fertility and marriage directly, but they are also likely to change the impact of traditional economic variables. If women gain greater control over the timing of parenthood and if they have more opportunities in the labor market, some of them will find it advantageous to delay childbearing. If women are delaying childbearing, many will delay marriage as well.

Why should these changes lead college-educated women to delay childbearing more than women with less schooling? First, college educated women have more attractive labor market options, so they may choose to postpone motherhood simply because it would interfere with another satisfying activity. Second, the career costs associated with early childbearing may be greater for more skilled women. College-educated women may need to invest more heavily in the early parts of their careers in order to maximize their lifetime earnings (by becoming a partner in a law firm, for example). In preliminary work we have found strong evidence that early childbearing reduces the earnings of educated women more than the earnings of less educated

women. Finally, college educated women may be more likely to anticipate using paid childcare and may therefore want to wait until they can afford such help.

Women's economic opportunities may thus play a more important role in the timing of motherhood. Higher educated women would then delay childbearing more than less educated ones even if their relative opportunities had not changed.²⁹ But economic opportunities *did* improve more for college educated women, so there is even more reason for them to delay having a child.

Less educated women who still want to have children at a relatively early age are faced with the problem that their male counterparts have fared increasingly badly in the labor market. As a result, they see few economically attractive mates. This might lead them to delay marriage but not childbearing. More educated women, who are in no rush to have children, would also be in no rush to get married. Hence they would delay both marriage and childbearing, even though their prospective husbands are doing relatively well economically.

This hypothesis can also help to explain the recent sudden change in many trends during the late 1990s. For the first time in almost 30 years, both marriage and delayed childbearing became more common. Wages of less skilled men and women rose sharply. Jobs became plentiful. The Earned Income Tax Credit and other supports made work even more lucrative for parents. Welfare reform pushed many more women into paid employment. And perhaps welfare reform also signaled a modest shift in attitudes toward single-parenthood as well.

This explanation is far from perfect. It probably still fails to fully explain the racial differences that have grown so large. It says nothing about divorce or remarriage. We offer this

²⁹ Heckman and Walker (1990) examine the timing of fertility using Swedish data and find some evidence of changing economic impacts over time. They report that their finding of "declining male income coefficients for the first Cigno and Ermisch (1989) transition is consistent with the view that more recent cohorts of women are less dependent on male income in initiating the fertility process." But international evidence points in a somewhat different direction. McDonald (2002) argues that fertility is lower in affluent countries when there is more economic uncertainty and fewer supports for raising children.

loose hybrid hypothesis only as a starting point. It is just one of many possible explanations. But it does suggest that social science may yet be able to explain far more of what has happened to families.

8. The Policy Morass

The change in family structure is like the weather. Everyone complains about it but no one seems able to do anything about it. For those who want to alter family structure, social science offers only one bit of advice: treat anyone who claims to know how to do this with a high degree of skepticism. Still, our review does suggest that a few things might help slow or reverse the formation of single parent families. First, increasing opportunities for less skilled men seems to be an unambiguously positive step. Second, the effect of improving opportunities for less skilled women is less clearcut: it might delay marriage but it also might delay motherhood even more. From the 1970s to the mid-1990s we saw little improvement in the real wages of less educated women and declines in the real wages of comparably educated men. If wages rose for both groups, as they did in the late 1990s, one might expect more marriage and less single-parenthood, which is what we observed in the late 1990s. Finally, supports for existing two parent families would seem to reduce their vulnerability.

The changing nature of America's families remains mostly a set of puzzles. But we are beginning to see hints that a more effective understanding of the forces at work may be within reach.

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