

Families in Flux

Imagining the Next Generation
of the American Family



Families in Flux: Imagining the Next Generation of the American Family is a collaboration between Family Story and Institute for the Future.

About Family Story

Family Story works to address and dismantle family privilege in America. We conduct cutting-edge research to expose the ways family privilege causes harm and create cultural and political strategies to advance equity for all types of families. We believe everyone has a unique journey and that all adults and families deserve support and respect. familystoryproject.org

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INTRODUCTION

Looking Back to Look Forward



When imagining the future, many Americans might think of Orbit City from the popular 1960s cartoon *The Jetsons*. This animated television sitcom offered a vision of massive technological change in which we all piloted personal flying saucers, had robot maids, and lived in outer space. Yet when it came to the future of family roles and structures, apparently nothing had changed. Whether or not you believe *The Jetsons* actually represents the family of the future, if you're looking for a shared reference in U.S. culture, George Jetson, his boy Elroy, daughter Judy, and Jane his wife are likely it.

The Jetson family simply mirrored the early 1960s deeply gendered white middle-class norm of the time. Even earnest and serious attempts to depict family life in the future often reflected the assumption that while technology would be radically transformative, the “traditional” nuclear family was here to stay.

But, perhaps surprisingly, this particular family structure actually hadn't been around all that long and was not as traditional in the 1960s as one might have thought. As historian Stephanie Coontz explains, the breadwinner-father/housewife-mother dynamic was the culmination of an ideal that began to form in the mid-19th century in Britain with industrialization, and only became a reality, at least among a significant portion of the U.S. population, in the 1950s.¹ In fact, this so-called “traditional” nuclear family arrangement was made possible by a short-lived set of economic circumstances, government giveaways to predominantly white families, housing policy and Cold War ideology, and even efforts by Hollywood to depict it as ideal. It was unique to this particular time in history, and only dominant for a couple of decades. If we take a step back, we see spectacular diversity throughout world history in what family looks like and what humans consider (and have considered) family to be.

In the small-scale Bari society indigenous to Western Venezuela and Colombia, a family included a mother, her children, and her husband, who is regarded as the “primary father” of the children, but also any men that she had sex with while she was pregnant. These secondary fathers had their own familial obligations to the mother's offspring—and a study found that children with more than one father were more likely to live to adulthood.² In what is considered the “traditional” family structure in Japan (the *ie* system, which was dominant from the late 1500s to the 20th century), a family was defined less by blood relationships than by who lived within the household and participated in the family's work. Adults were adopted into the family and could even become head of the household if they served the household's social and economic needs better than blood relatives.³ And in Latino and Filipino communities, there's the *compadrazgo* system—one that emphasizes relationships between godparents, their godchildren, and the children's parents.

American history has inadvertently shaped various family structures. For example, policies that brought Asian laborers to the United States prevented most of the men from bringing their wives or marrying white women, leading to communities of bachelors.⁴ Later, changes to immigration law encouraged educated workers from Asia and their families to come, helping to create the “model minority” myth that Asians, more than other people of color, value “traditional family” structures and education.⁵ (Similarly, again today we see “public charge” laws designed to prevent poor immigrants from Asian and other countries from entering the United States.⁶)

If we look at the history of enslaved African Americans, the families they formed were completely dictated by the people who owned them as property. Owners discussed amongst

American history has inadvertently shaped various family structures.

each other whether allowing enslaved people to have families would keep them from running away. But these families were clearly not seen as sacred by their owners, as, according to estimates by historian Michael Tadman, one in three enslaved children in Maryland and Virginia experienced family separation because they or one of their parents was sold to someone else.⁷

We can clearly see in the decades since emancipation that housing and job discrimination, mass incarceration, and denial of social services and benefits have shaped and continue to shape African American family structures.

Whether or not a family is seen as legitimate is determined by how much social status the people that comprise them have, or don’t have. For instance, race and class can influence how the mainstream perceives family legitimacy through a process that could be called “trickle up respectability.” Non-traditional family structures (such as families with single working mothers, open relationships, and cohousing networks) might be considered pathological or morally degenerate when they are made up of poor people and people of color, but these same structures suddenly become “innovative” and “cutting edge” when they are comprised of middle- or upper-class white people.⁸

However, families on the margin—who have largely been invisible or looked down upon—often pioneer and practice different kinds of family arrangements as ways to be resilient in diverse, often hostile environments. Queer families, lacking traditional gender roles to default to, have long been pioneers. Before “chosen family” was considered a cool millennial trend, people in queer communities in the mid- and late-20th century often formed “families of choice” that were actually less about choice and more about necessity after being rejected by or estranged from their family of origin.⁹

We can see the consequences of how legitimacy is conferred and denied in the way queer couples were historically denied the right to marry or access other benefits of spousehood such as employment benefits or even visitation rights in the hospital.¹⁰ Or in the way DNA tests are used to prove kinship in immigration cases.¹¹ When we imagine the future of the family, it's not just an interesting intellectual exercise, it's also a way of anticipating which forms of family might be accepted or stigmatized, who will be vulnerable to oppression, who will be privileged, and what the distribution of needs and resources might be.

This way, we can begin to prepare for and shape these future possibilities today in a way that mitigates harm and maximizes family equity. That's what this report, *Families in Flux: Imagining the Next Generation of the American Family*, is about.

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If there is any story of family, it is one of diversity, resilience, and evolution. The United States is more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before, and different groups each bring their own unique histories, customs, beliefs, and aspirations to family life. Meanwhile, the white population is expected to continue its decline over the next decade.¹² The future of our families depends on embracing a wider range of family arrangements and family roles.

But despite the variety of family structures across time and space, and the fact that today family diversity is the new normal for America's children,¹³ the idea that there is one "natural," normative, even "best" type of family continues to plague the U.S. mainstream, and with major consequences. It's been used to pressure people into undesirable marriages or unwanted children, and to deny legal rights, benefits,

and privileges to those who do not conform. Deviations from the two-parent married nuclear model are blamed for all sorts of problems that the best evidence suggests is actually a result of many strong, concurrent economic and social trends. It is no coincidence that the families of people of color are the most commonly indicted.¹⁴

Exploring the history of how people define a family reveals several things. First, different family structures aren't formed as the result of random happenstance—they're created and coerced through countless factors, including economic need, social norms, political pressures and prejudices, laws, and in some though certainly not all cases, love. They're created by capitalizing on newfound liberation from social movements like feminism, civil rights, and LGBTQ rights, and to meet challenges like economic hardship and racial or sexual oppression. Second, it is the people and institutions with power in any given time and place who decide which families are considered legitimate. And third, this granting of legitimacy or illegitimacy has real consequences for families.

This report is divided into two sections. The first section introduces a framework for breaking down what we mean when we talk about “family” and analyzes what's changing. The second section puts the pieces back together to form a set of alternative scenarios for the future of family in 2040 in the United States. These four scenarios represent possible outcomes of the actions we take today, so that we can see the stakes clearly and make decisions accordingly.

Having concrete images of the future of family (beyond *The Jetsons*) helps us anticipate and plan for negative possibilities and to imagine a radically better future to fight for. These don't represent a comprehensive view of all possible futures for all families, of course, but they do represent a starting point to begin evaluating assumptions about the future, uncovering threats that might be just-out-of-view today, and finding hope on the horizon.

PART 1

The Changing Facets of the American Family



Go to Google. In the search field, type *family is*. Notice the autocomplete results. They tell many familiar stories: Family is the most important thing. Family is the greatest gift. Family is the foundation.

However, if you ask any one person or group of people what a family is, things get more complicated. We almost all agree that family is important, but most of us have a hard time defining exactly what family is. And it's likely that no two answers would be the same.

The U.S. Census Bureau's definition of family—a *group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together*¹⁵—focuses on related people who share a physical space, with its legal and economic implications. But a generic dictionary definition—a *fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children*¹⁶—highlights the social meaning of the family, albeit a very normative meaning, that elevates parenting and romantic coupling.

Both these definitions, in fact, fail to capture the full range of structures that give social, economic, biological, legal, and even political meanings to the experience of *living in a family*. There is almost limitless diversity to what people consider to be family. Families may organize themselves as nuclear families, single-parent families, extended families, polyamorous families, families without children, stepfamilies, grandparent-led families, chosen families, and much more. There have been matriarchal family traditions in every continent throughout history. Queerness has been a part of romantic and sexual relationships since the dawn of humanity. Love, meanwhile, was not a primary reason to get married and form families for most of history. The idea of love-based marriages didn't even begin to spread until the late 18th or early 19th century.¹⁷

The way people choose to organize themselves and their families reflects both their personal goals and society's agenda for everything from economic security to companionship, from personal identity to reproducing the species. Further, when it comes to forming families, many circumstances are out of an individual's control. For example, some adults who want to be married are unable to find a good partner. Some who would like to have biological children cannot due to fertility challenges or other medical conditions.

Family is both a *construct* and a *concept*—and both are constantly evolving in response to the full range of social, technological, economic, environmental, and political forces. As a construct, for example, families in America have evolved from predominantly extended families, often living for generations on the same land and within the same home, to nuclear families in “single-family” homes with a comparatively high degree of mobility. As a concept, social norms for American families have evolved significantly in the past several decades. For example, the child born to a single mother was not long ago considered a social outcast and called “illegitimate,” whereas now we typically refer to this unit more neutrally as a single-parent family (though class and race factor very heavily into how such families are perceived).

This kind of multi-dimensional evolution means that ultimately, the family—both as construct and concept—is a vortex of cultural creativity. The very complexity of the family, with its many facets, makes it highly resilient as it adapts to changing social, technological, economic, environmental, and political conditions. But it also makes it ground zero for turbulence in times of rapid change—like the current era.

In the end, the story of the American family is complex, like a compelling novel that challenges us to follow multiple interweaving plots and inspires us to think in new ways about virtually every choice in our lives.

So how shall we tell this story, and how shall we bring it to life in this report? Let’s start here, in Part 1, by naming eight facets of family that offer a framework for understanding family and thinking about how it might change in the future:

Households: How we live and share space with people and pets and even humanoid machines

Partnership: How we partner in short-term, long-term, and episodic relationships, formally and informally

Reproduction: How we manage the conception, carrying, and birthing of children

Parenting: How we raise people and nurture them—physically, emotionally, socially, economically, and spiritually

Roles: How we understand our roles within the family and as part of the larger society

Obligation: How we rely on, regulate, and support one another

Legality: How we legally define family and what legal rights and responsibilities we grant to families

Ancestry: How we understand our biological, geographic, and cultural lineage—and our aspirations for the intergenerational future

Think of these facets as foundational building blocks we will use to begin our stories about how families are changing today. Then, in Part 2, we’ll assemble these changes in different ways to discover what families might look like a generation from now.



HOUSEHOLDS

in an era of economic transformation

Households are the economic face of the family. Of course, not all families live in one home—non-custodial parents are often important parts of families—but the household unit is an important lens to understand the way many families organize themselves. And it inevitably reflects the challenges of basic material survival—and success. Here are three critical ways families are changing to meet these challenges:

More fluid household membership

Households have always been fluid: family and friends may live together for extended periods of time. Even within households that appear or identify as nuclear, caregivers, home health care workers, and other domestic workers are important participants, even if only temporarily. Low-income families and families of color—who face over-incarceration and discrimination in many areas (including employment, housing, and education) and arguably have a deeper sense of familial obligation and greater need for security—often have particularly fluid households as they are accustomed to providing temporary shelter for friends and extended family (biologically related and not).¹⁸ A recent Pew study found that the number of people in the average U.S. household just increased for the first time in 150 years.¹⁹ And as the U.S. labor force faces all kinds of disruption, and housing becomes more insecure, particularly in large cities,²⁰ we can expect a return to more fluid household membership in the coming decades among a wider spread of the population.

Expanding caregiving needs

Current projections estimate a substantial gap between the caregiving needs population and the availability of people to provide care. Specifically, the “Caregiver Support Ratio”—the number of potential family caregivers (mostly adult children) aged 45–64 for each person aged 80 or older—is projected to drop from approximately 7:1 in 2010 to 4:1 in 2030.²¹ While this is often attributed to an aging population, this is not the whole story. A substantial amount of caregiving demand will come from people under the age of 65. In the coming decades, the many people who will likely be unable to find caregiving help in the marketplace or from family members could become a major driver of formations of new kinds of “chosen family” and household living arrangements.



Bigger, more fragmented households

Even in comparatively stable households, we're likely to see fewer people living in single family homes—and new home construction patterns seem to bear that out.²² In-law units and other designs that can accommodate multiple families are on the rise.²³ (At the same time, the number of people living alone is also increasing—according to the Census Bureau, people living alone make up 28% of households, up from 23% in 1980).²⁴ And, though exact numbers are hard to find, cohousing communities seem to be spreading across the country.²⁵ Resource constraints, housing shortages, and zoning changes focused on infill will likely lead to more homes being converted into apartments and in-law units. While news articles often highlight cohousing as a millennial trend, population aging will likely be another big driver toward more cohousing, through familiar arrangements such as retirement communities.

Non-human family

While numbers can be difficult to pin down, a substantial percentage of Americans own pets.²⁶ According to one study, some people like pets more than humans,²⁷ pet spending has continually been on the rise,²⁸ and some even suggest that young Americans are choosing to parent pets in lieu of having children.²⁹ But another kind of nonhuman companion is gradually entering the American household.

Artificial intelligence with voice interfaces is rapidly advancing. As of the end of 2018, 40% of U.S. consumers had a smart speaker of some sort in their home, almost doubling the percentage from the previous year.³⁰ Assuming adoption patterns for smart devices will simulate those for smart speakers, robots—either in the form of appliances, or more human or animal-like forms—will be commonplace in the American home in the next decades. Other countries, such as Japan, have already deployed devices designed specifically to assist elders. These robotic devices often go beyond providing practical support, addressing emotional needs, including loneliness.³¹ Many children born in this decade will not experience a household in which people don't talk to machines. While we may or may not call these devices or the artificial intelligence that animates them “family,” they almost certainly will fulfill some aspects of roles traditionally held by family members.

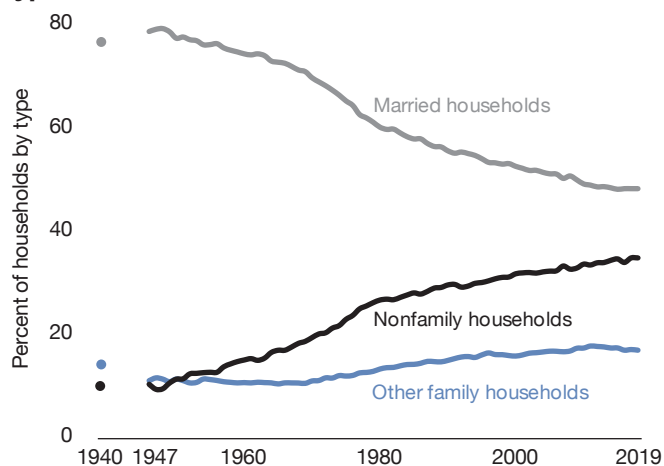


HOUSEHOLDS

More diverse household formations

From 1947 to 2018, the percentage of “married households” declined by roughly 30%, while “nonfamily households” have increased by roughly 30% and “other family households” have increased as well. This suggests that households centered on a married couple will cease to be the majority, while other arrangements, such as people living alone, with roommates, with chosen family, and extended family, will likely soon become the norm.³²

Types of households

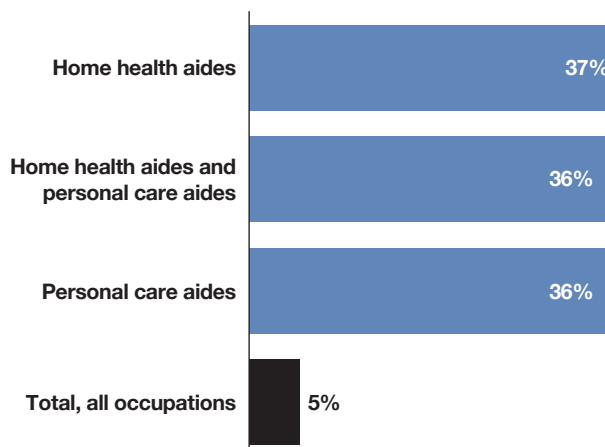


More caregivers in the home

The demand for home caregiving services is projected to continue to increase dramatically. In particular, The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the employment of home health aides and personal care aides will grow 36% between 2018 and 2028. This means that, while they might not be considered “family” in many cases, a substantial number of Americans will effectively be living with a paid or informal caregiver.³³

Demand for caregivers

Percent change in employment, projected 2018–28



Note: all Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy



PARTNERSHIP

in an era of changing expectations

Partnership often includes romantic coupling, and as the next generation begins to shape the future of family, much of that romance will continue. However, we're likely to see romance retreat a bit from its central place in partnerships over the next decade. There have always been families whose adult members do not have romantic relationships with one another, and a small but growing number of adults do not want primary partners, sexual or not (what social psychologist and author Bella DePaulo calls "single at heart").³⁴ The aging of the population may well see these platonic forms proliferate, both online and in multigenerational homes.

Marriages mattering less

As more is expected of a potential spouse, the proposition of marriage may seem daunting and less accessible. Marriage has increasingly become a mark of privilege with deep socioeconomic dimensions, and finding a partner that fulfills all the expectations of modern marriage has become more difficult.³⁵ Meanwhile, the social stigma associated with cohabitating and having children without being married has lessened over the past few generations and is increasingly an option regardless of marital status.³⁶ Younger generations believe being a good parent is more important than having a successful marriage. Many people choose not to enter legal marriages, even if they cohabit with monogamous partners. This includes both younger people who have never been married and older couples who were once but are no longer partnered due to death or divorce.³⁷

More "perfect" matches

The last several decades have seen more coupling across racial and ethnic lines, and more same-sex coupling.³⁸ Although this is making families more diverse by certain metrics, we are simultaneously seeing less socioeconomic diversity in couples. People are increasingly marrying individuals with similar levels of education and similar incomes, exacerbating economic inequality through this kind of "assortative mating" (coupling between people who share similar characteristics with one another).³⁹ Online dating is now the most common way for couples to form,⁴⁰ and marriages made by algorithm are proving longer lasting and more satisfying, according to some research.⁴¹ However, these algorithmic pairings have the potential to supercharge assortative mating,⁴² bringing people into relationships and marriages that are even more socioeconomically homogenous. Although it's unclear if online dating increases interracial coupling, it appears, from anecdotes, to lead to very specific interracial couples (such as men who identify as white with women who identify as Asian).⁴³



The “all-or-nothing” marriage⁴⁴

The rise in assortative mating dovetails with, and may be related to, change in expectations around the purpose and experience of marriage.⁴⁵ According to Northwestern University professor Eli Finkel’s work on what he dubs the “all-or-nothing marriage,” many people look to marriage to fulfill needs around companionship and emotional support that used to be met through a wider range of friends and family.⁴⁶

Combating “singlism” and embracing partnerships without romance

Not all people want to be in long-term romantic relationships and many of them form partnerships and families that don’t have romance and partnership at their center at all. While this is not a new phenomenon by any means, people who identify as asexual are growing increasingly visible. And awareness of what De Paulo calls “singlism,”⁴⁷ stigmatizing people who are not in a romantic relationship, is growing, as well. Going forward, we could see caregiving needs and a desire for intergenerational connection from people without children drive the formation of new ways of formalizing platonic partnership and family formations.

Poly partnerships

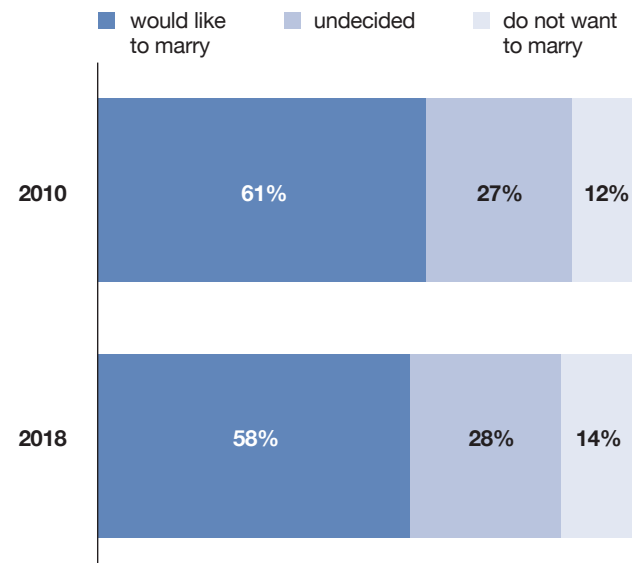
Several models of consensual non-monogamy are being practiced across the United States, with greater concentration in urban centers. While many, perhaps most, people engaged in these practices are not completely open about it in the broader society, some are openly raising families in which a parent has more than one concurrent partner.⁴⁸



Interest in marriage is waning

Pew Research Center has found the share of “never-married adults who say they would like to marry someday” fell between 2010 and 2017. In 2010, 61% said they would like to marry eventually. By 2018, that number had fallen to 58%, while people who said they didn’t want to get married increased from 12% to 14%.⁴⁹

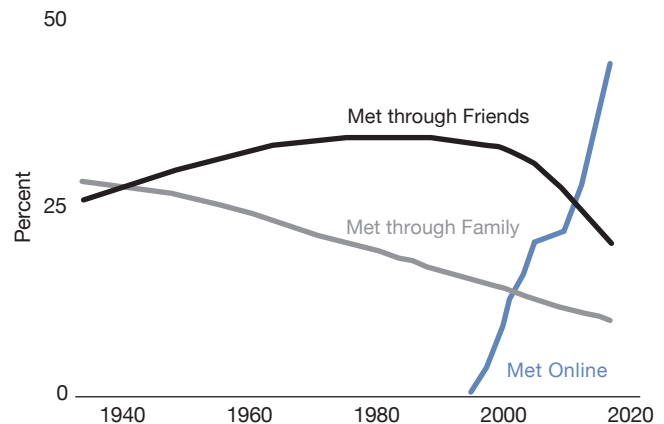
Never-married adults who say they would like to marry someday

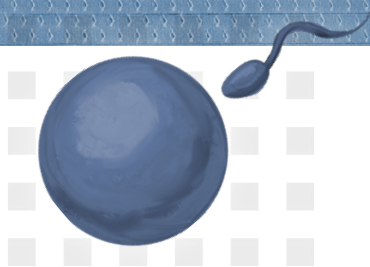


Marriages now overwhelmingly begin online

In a study of 3,510 American adults, Stanford sociologist Michael Rosenfeld found that heterosexual couples who cohabited or married are more likely to meet a romantic partner online than any other way.⁵⁰

How couples met





REPRODUCTION

in an era of biological intervention

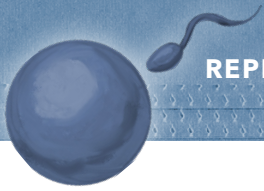
Human society is unquestionably entering an era of biological invention and intervention in the processes of reproducing our species. Already a highly charged domain in culture and politics, reproduction will, more and more, become a source of controversy. As families become the front line for figuring out just how much biological intervention is acceptable, we will react, redefine, and reorganize to accommodate it.

Reproductive rights under fire

While only a decade or two ago women's reproductive rights seemed to be expanding continuously, the last decade has seen major setbacks. The "morning-after pill" has faced challenges from legislators and business owners.⁵¹ In the fight over the Affordable Care Act, reproductive health was a huge flashpoint, with provisions ensuring women access to contraception ultimately being struck down by the Supreme Court.⁵² At the same time, many states are actively seeking to criminalize abortion, from prosecuting women who attempt to terminate their own pregnancies or who use drugs during their pregnancies⁵³ to even charging a woman with manslaughter who was shot in the stomach while five months pregnant.⁵⁴ With the current administration's attacks on family planning and women's health and a more conservative Court, the next decade is likely to be one in which reproductive rights continue to constrict, creating two classes of access based on geography and class, or even driving the market for all reproductive services underground.

Surrogacy economy

Legal surrogacy is relatively new. The first contract in the United States was written in 1980, marking the beginning of a new era of reproductive labor in the country.⁵⁵ Although current numbers are hard to come by, as of 2011, the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology tracked nearly 1,600 babies a year being born to gestational surrogates in the United States, noting that that number could be even higher.⁵⁶ Surrogacy in the United States may cost from \$20,000 to \$200,000, a wide berth for price discrimination.⁵⁷ These costs foster opportunities for reproductive tourism in countries in which surrogacy costs are lower.⁵⁸ The United States is an outlier as the only Western country in which paid, or non-altruistic, surrogacy is legal.⁵⁹ Surrogacy is illegal in most of Europe.⁶⁰ India, until recently a common destination for "fertility tourism," outlawed commercial surrogacy in 2018 due to concerns over exploitation. The industry brought in over \$400 million each year.⁶¹

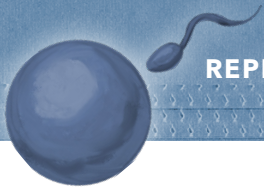


Surrogacy has gained recent prominence as celebrities, such as reality TV star Kim Kardashian-West, have famously paid women tens of thousands of dollars to carry their biological children.⁶² Reproductive labor is a controversial legal topic. The state of New York is currently weighing a highly debated proposal to legalize surrogacy in New York, only one of two U.S. states that have outlawed it.⁶³ Surrogacy as a form of assisted childbearing challenges notions of biological destiny and long-held ideas about women's roles in society. Surrogacy also reshapes the reproductive economy. Today, for example, a young, healthy female hairdresser who earns an income of \$30,000 a year might opt to carry another's child and receive \$40,000 for a single pregnancy.⁶⁴

The reproductive assistance gap

Forty years after the birth of the first test tube baby, more than eight million babies around the world are estimated to have been born using in vitro fertilization, or IVF.⁶⁵ The number of IVF babies and success of the treatment have increased year after year and show no signs of slowing down, given improvements in both techniques and efficacy of fertility drugs.

Infertility is “common,” affecting about 12 to 13% of American couples,⁶⁶ and is rising as parents have children at later ages. Yet, IVF is unaffordable for many if not most Americans. It is an expensive procedure that often requires several attempts and it is seldom covered by health insurance.⁶⁷ In the California state legislature, this remains an ongoing issue, with bills introduced that would compel insurers to cover infertility, suggesting this may become a flashpoint in debates over inequality over the next decade.⁶⁸

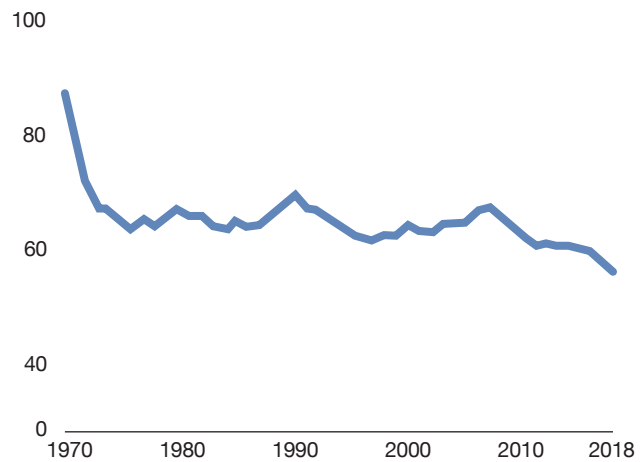


Declining fertility rate in the United States

According to research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of births in the United States dropped by 2% between 2017 and 2018, to 59 births per 1,000 women ages 15–44, part of a longer downward turn in fertility that has been ongoing for decades.⁶⁹

Declining fertility rate

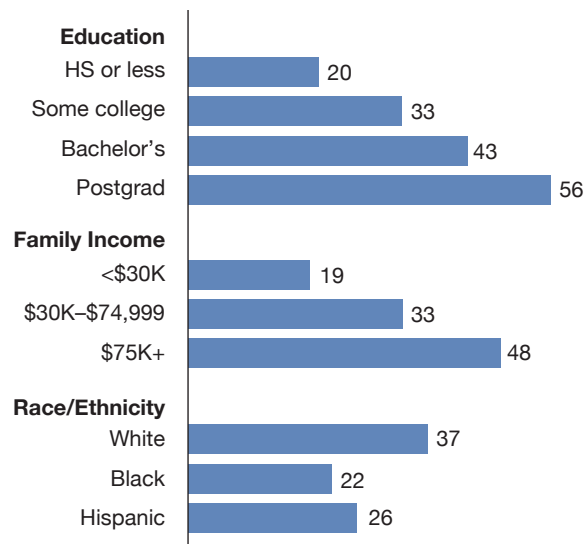
Births per 1,000 women, aged 15–44.



The fertility treatment divide

A 2018 Pew Research Center study suggests a significant socioeconomic divide when it comes to exposure to fertility treatment—56% of people surveyed with a postgraduate degree have either had fertility treatment or know someone who has, compared to 20% of respondents with a high school degree or less. This suggests a substantial new form of inequality on the horizon.⁷⁰

Percentage of people who have had fertility treatment or know someone who has





PARENTING

in an era of institutional reinvention

In education, work, health, and even religious affiliations, our institutions are in flux. Decades of neoliberal policy have rendered many of them unreliable. Technology has the potential for changing them even more, although whether they will be abandoned, restored, or reinvented is yet to be seen. In this context, parenting seems to be an undertaking with greater challenges and higher stakes than ever.

Spiraling inequality

Both the United States and the United Kingdom have seen a sharp increase in “helicopter parenting.” In recent decades, some research indicates that this kind of high-pressure, hyper-vigilant, over-involved parenting typically focused on educational success does lead to higher academic achievement in children. When looking across Europe and the United States, this kind of parenting seems most pervasive in areas where economic inequality is increasing most sharply, suggesting that it’s a response to a climate in which achieving less is perceived to have greater consequences.⁷¹

But not everyone can afford to “helicopter parent.” Today, the vast majority of women with children under 18 work full time.⁷² And polling data suggests these working women work more hours and have greater childcare burdens.⁷³ All but the wealthiest families struggle with childcare expenses and access. Poor families, in particular, spend a disproportionate amount of income on paid childcare.⁷⁴ At the same time, access to extracurricular activities and after-school programs has been growing more unequal for years, putting low-income children at further disadvantage.⁷⁵

Co-parenting parenting

People have long relied on others who they have pre-existing relationships with for help with childcare (such as their children’s grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, and cousins). In communities of color, “aunts”⁷⁶ and “compadres,”⁷⁷ biologically related or not, have long played a distinct and special, though legally unrecognized role. In recent years, more adults are forming (and later formalizing) relationships specifically for the purpose of finding a platonic co-parent.⁷⁸ While elective co-parenting grew out of a practice within the LGBTQ community, people who identify as heterosexual and asexual have also started engaging in the practice.⁷⁹ With survey data suggesting that millennials place a higher value on becoming parents than getting married,⁸⁰ it’s likely these kinds of arrangements will proliferate, at least in certain geographies, in the next decades.



Prioritizing shared custody

When partners split, custody decisions are almost always difficult. However, in recent years, winner-take-all battles are becoming less frequent as more parents opt for shared custody when they divorce, while states are adopting laws that default to joint custody when parents cannot reach agreement.⁸¹ In some cases, this principle of prioritizing children's access to both parents goes a step further, with parents choosing to remain living within the same home long after separating.⁸² If this trend continues, we could see more household arrangements emerge, for instance, in which former partners live together with their children and their new partners.

The reverse digital divide

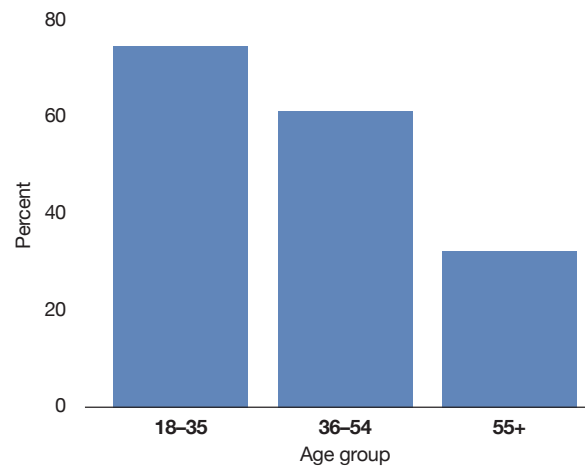
When it became clear decades ago that digital literacy would be key to educational and economic achievement, many raised the alarm about a digital divide—the idea that low-income people and people of color would not have equal access to technology and would be left behind. While this divide did emerge, it's not quite what was anticipated. While today, lower income families have less access to some specific devices like personal computers and laptops, their children generally spend more time looking at screens, both at school—where digital curricula are cheaper than human instruction—and at home, where digital entertainment is cheaper than human supervision or companionship.⁸³ As human labor remains comparatively expensive, low-income children will face a new form of inequality, as they will increasingly be given inferior digital education and care while their more privileged peers receive these things from human beings, particularly if issues of machine bias and algorithmic discrimination are not addressed.



Parenting to become the norm for queer couples

A survey conducted by Family Equality found that 77% of LGBTQ millennials are either considering having children or are parents already, compared to 33% of LGBTQ people over the age of 55. This suggests that in the next decades, queer parents will become increasingly common in the United States.⁸⁴

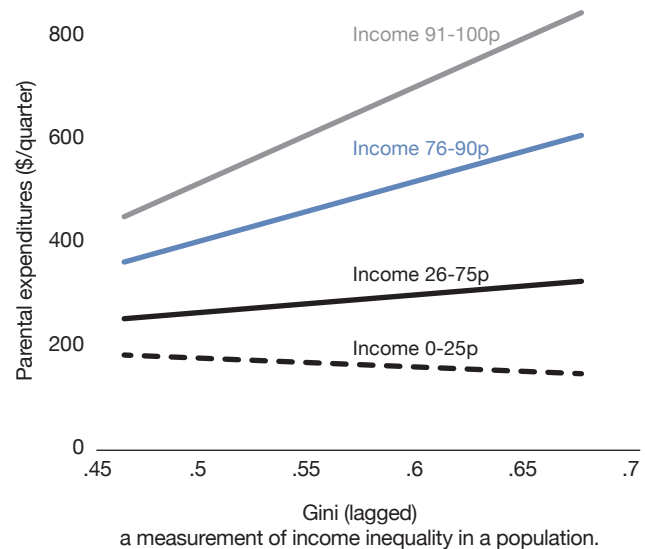
Percentage of LGBTQ people who are considering having children or are already parents



Parenting arms race in the face of inequality

Researchers found that “in the states with the highest levels of income inequality, families in the top 10% spent over three times more than those in the bottom 75%.” This suggests that, as income inequality accelerates, parents see the writing on the wall and those with the means to do so invest heavily in ensuring their children end up on the more advantaged side of the class divide.⁸⁵

Household financial investments in children by household income percentile and Gini (a measure of income inequality)





ROLES

in an era of fluid identities

In recent decades, social movements and science have challenged many of the old binaries: male vs. female, sick vs. healthy, intelligent vs. simple-minded, as well as racial binaries. In their place, we now recognize continuums of biology and behavior. This shift has also led to the redefinition of family roles, particularly those that were once strictly linked to these increasingly outdated gender binaries.

Transforming gender

Younger people in the United States are substantially more likely to understand gender as a spectrum instead of a binary, and to identify as gender queer, gender fluid, or transgender.⁸⁶ In some communities, couples, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, are beginning to use the gender-neutral term “partner” to refer to what might otherwise be referred to as “husbands,” “wives,” “girlfriends,” or “boyfriends.” And with increasing visibility for trans people and issues, over the next couple of decades, many Americans will likely be familiar with, and in some places accepting of, concepts like “pregnant men” or “women donating sperm.”

This more nuanced understanding of gender is likely to substantially shift how younger generations will approach defining roles and responsibilities within their relationships and as parents.

Women’s vs. men’s roles

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, mothers are the primary or sole earners for 40% of households with children under 18 as of 2017, compared with only 11% in 1960.⁸⁷ At the same time, women are attaining bachelor’s and advanced degrees at a higher rate than men, regardless of race, and have been for some time (though they are still significantly underpaid compared with men with the same credentials).⁸⁸ But while women’s relative earning power is clearly on the rise, this hasn’t led to a commensurate rebalancing of gender roles between male and female parents in heterosexual couples. In these families, women are still much more likely than men to care for sick children and manage kids’ schedules. Women take more time off after birth than men by a significant margin.⁸⁹ This suggests that the responsibilities expected of women are expanding, but those for men are not, at least at the same rate. This trend is proving increasingly unsustainable for women. In the future we’ll see either a rebalancing of roles, with men taking on more traditionally female household and emotional labor—or we can expect further declining marriage rates and a decline in male-female parenting partnerships.



Decentering the nuclear family

Expanding caregiving needs, shifts in the ethnic and cultural makeup of the country, housing shortages in many areas, platonic partnerships and co-parenting arrangements, and other factors are increasing the importance of roles outside of those that make up the nuclear family. As these other roles gain greater recognition, we could see the nuclear family itself recede from its spot at the center of family life in the minds of most Americans over the next decades.

The need for new language and labels

While the labels “mom” and “dad” are largely still used, even in families who believe both parents essentially take on the same role, this may not be the case indefinitely. As elective co-parenting becomes more common and we see more nontraditional families forming, people may feel existing labels are insufficient or even harmful, and we’ll likely see a period in which norms and roles are negotiated and then more clearly delineated and labeled. LGBTQ families have long experimented with creating a new language to reflect their roles.⁹⁰ In communities of color, the role of “aunt,” “uncle,” or grandparents is well-established. We’ll likely see new language emerge—including more general terms that don’t denote gender or biological relationship, like more daycares and schools referring to the adult(s) raising a child as their “grownup(s),” and in other cases more specific language, such as a term to explain the relationship between individuals who are not raised together in the same family but share a sperm donor.

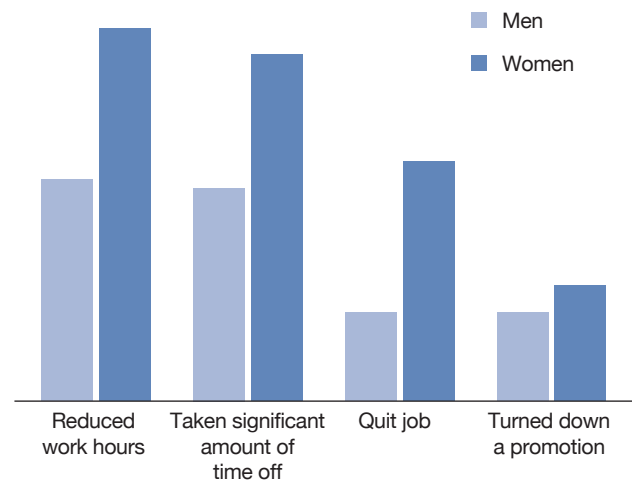


Gender roles not changing fast enough to keep up with economic change

While women make up about half of the workforce, they are still disproportionately taking on “traditionally” female caretaker roles. In 2013, Pew Research Center found that while 42% of mothers with some work experience reported that they had reduced their work hours to care for a child or family member at some point in their career, only 28% of fathers said the same. This suggests an unequal, erratic path to gender parity.⁹¹

Work interruptions between mothers and fathers

Percent saying they have...in order to care for a child or family member

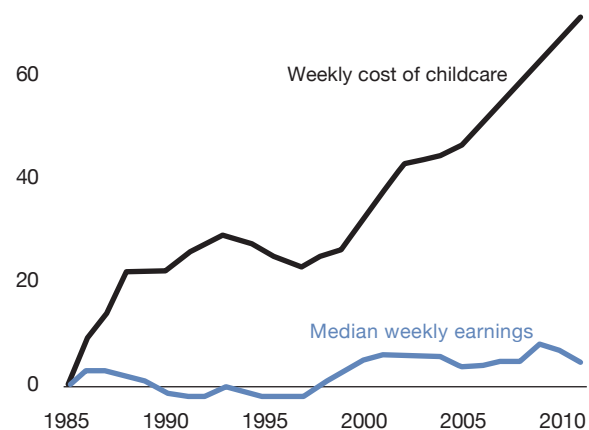


Childcare shortages

The cost of childcare has risen steadily in the United States over the past decades. And for many families, that means it makes more sense for one parent to take on parenting as their primary role and stay out of the workplace. For instance, an analysis by the Center for American Progress from data from the National Survey of Children's Health uncovered that “in each year from 2016 to 2018, more than two million parents of children age 5 and younger—9%, or nearly one in ten parents—had to quit a job, not take a job, or greatly change their job because of child care problems.”⁹² If gender roles do not change substantially enough and quickly enough, the burden will fall disproportionately on women.

Average childcare spending in the United States has skyrocketed

80% growth since 1985





OBLIGATION

in an era of continued unequal opportunity

Families impose obligations, whether it's the obligation between parent and child, siblings, or even to extended family members in another country. These obligations often formally or informally shape decisions ranging from what constitutes an acceptable marriage partner to number of children to expectations around caring for elders to where to set up house. But over the coming decades, all of these decisions will continue to be burdened by growing inequality in access to basics at a time when many governments are stepping back from their obligations to provide a safety net. Here more than anywhere, the historical patterns of precarious families may provide inspiration for innovation.

Relying on family for material support

As labor historian Louis Hyman explains, the upper class holds their wealth in money and financial capital. For people who are resource-constrained, though, their “wealth” lies in the labor, knowledge, and money of other people on whom they have “social claims.” For instance, the ability to ask friends and family for a ride, a meal, or a loan.⁹³

This divide also plays out in who has influence over and access to the resources of the state. For instance, poor people and communities of color often have little faith in law enforcement, thanks to being simultaneously over-policed (subject to profiling, harassment, and arrest for small crimes like drug possession) and under-policed (as serious crimes, like murders, go unsolved at disproportionate rates).⁹⁴ As a result, people of color, African Americans in particular, are less likely to trust police⁹⁵ and may turn to family and friends when they need the protection others might get from law enforcement.

But using social or family capital also incurs social family debt. The expectation of reciprocation means that, for poor people, family obligation includes giving time, money, and labor to family members, creating a cycle where people's time and capacity that could be directed elsewhere is often going toward paying back social debt. Assuming income inequality persists or worsens, we're likely to see more people reliant on family for help, incurring the obligations that go along with that.



Compound obligation

The first generation of workers that began their careers after the shift from pensions to 401(k)s will approach retirement age in the coming decade, largely without sufficient savings, as the burden of financial security and the risks of market investments have shifted entirely to individuals.⁹⁶ Aging parents and relatives will place significant financial and emotional strain on their adult children—many of whom also have children of their own to take care of.

Freedom from family

Social claims are not the only familial obligations. In addition to reciprocity or resources, family members who do not adhere to family social norms and values, including religious affiliation and marriage, face consequences for these violations. While individuals with families of choice can exercise more agency to participate in families and communities who share their values, families of all types exert pressure to follow group norms. Individual family members who do not share these values face a dilemma: either stay within the family and compromise themselves or risk being ostracized by openly breaking norms. If we are heading toward a future in which fewer people are financially independent and secure, we could see power dynamics that favor group harmony—potentially over individual freedom—accelerate.

Passing inequality down through the generations

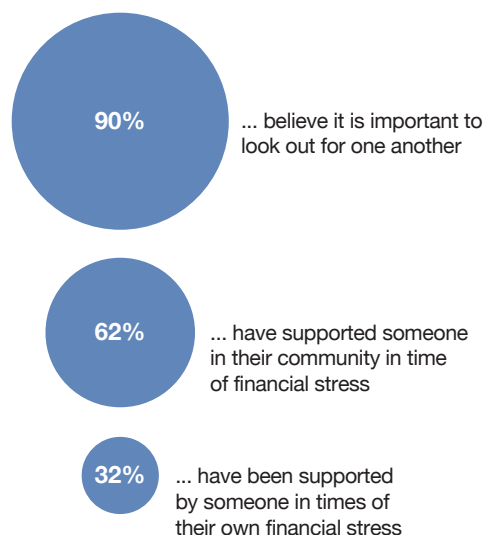
While in some sense, wealthy people typically have fewer family obligations and more autonomy, they still depend on family. Inherited wealth in the form of property, money, and exclusive networks are a huge driver of social inequality.⁹⁷ Wealthy and upper-middle-class parents, especially white families, have used strategies like zoning laws, college application procedures, and access to internships to ensure advantages for their children and to uphold white supremacy.⁹⁸ Whether or not we reckon with these issues of generational wealth and privilege will shape inequality over the next decade.



Obligation in communities of color

While African Americans in America have less wealth and income than white people, survey data indicates they also feel a greater sense of obligation to support family and community. This provides a critical safety net in the absence of state and generational wealth—but also creates a burden of reciprocation in an increasingly competitive and unequal economy.⁹⁹

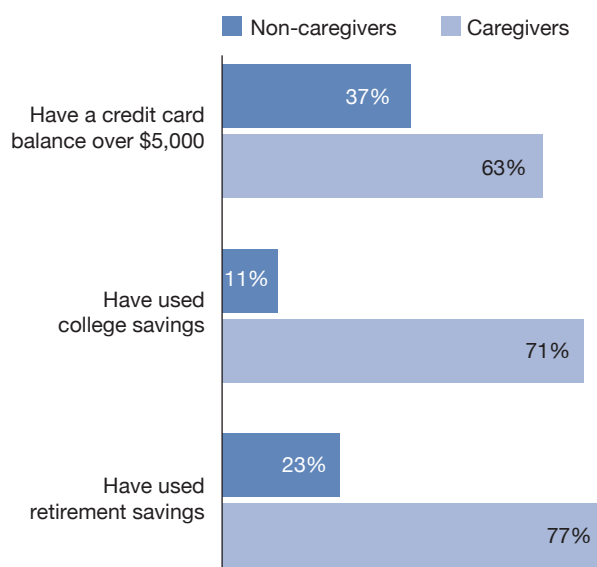
MassMutual survey of African Americans



Caregiving strain

Caregiving creates financial hardship for many families and this can be compounded with additional obligation. For instance, currently, a third of parents of children aged 8–14 are simultaneously taking care of an aging family member, most of them living in the same home (68%), according to a survey by T. Rowe Price.¹⁰⁰ Known as the “sandwich generation,” these dual caregivers are likely to be under greater strain in the next decades if inequality continues apace and their children, as they become adults, do not advance economically, and if they continue to lack support from the state in caring for their aging family.

Financial impacts of caregiving





LEGALITY

in an era of political divergence

Most modern societies use laws to uphold and enforce their shared cultural values. However, values are diverging along many lines, in particular between urban and rural areas. And while rural areas are depopulating, they're retaining disproportionate political power at the federal level, due to the design of the electoral system and the Senate.¹⁰¹ As such, legislation is becoming more contentious and families are likely to get caught in the crossfire.

Expanding legal definitions of family in specific geographic hotspots

When marriage equality became the law of the land, it was a significant civil rights victory—but accessing the benefits of marriage meant that many types of families were still left out of the equation. As family law expert Nancy Polikoff has shown, laws that restrict access to married couples are relics of a time when a husband was head of the household with a dependent wife at home, children born to unmarried women were considered “illegitimate” social outcasts, and nearly all marriages were for life, regardless of quality.¹⁰² Families today look radically different.

While LGBTQ families today are generally recognized as such and afforded some level of protection by federal law, how family is defined does vary state to state. For example, while some states still permit discrimination in adoption, others are expanding legal definitions to afford more rights and protections to more kinds of families. For instance, in California, more than two people can be recognized as the legal parents to a child.¹⁰³ Such laws normalize “alternative” family models and give them some measure of security in their relationships. As the number of unmarried adults increases and family structures continue to diversify, we might also see an approach to family law gain traction that Polikoff has advocated for—one that lets people identify for themselves which relationships they would like to give the unique legal weight that marriage currently holds.

Immigration at a crossroads

Immigration policy and anti-miscegenation laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were designed to import laborers from overseas, particularly Asia, while preventing them from having families and planting roots in the United States.¹⁰⁴ In the 1960s, the narrative shifted, and so did several policies, to highlight the idea that the United States is the land of opportunity to which people from all of the world journey. This dominant narrative held that if immigrants gained citizenship and assimilated, their families were as American as anyone else.¹⁰⁵ In recent years, though, this narrative has been contested, as open and explicit white nationalism makes a resurgence.¹⁰⁶ But despite the hateful rhetoric, the U.S. economy continues to rely on immigrant labor, so policies that significantly discourage immigrant workers in the United States, documented or not, are unlikely to be enacted into law.¹⁰⁷ However, a distinct possibility in the next decade is a return to older policies that specifically discourage families of immigrants from coming to or forming in the United States (the “public charge rule”)¹⁰⁸ — as well as an acceleration of the deportations that break up families we are currently witnessing.

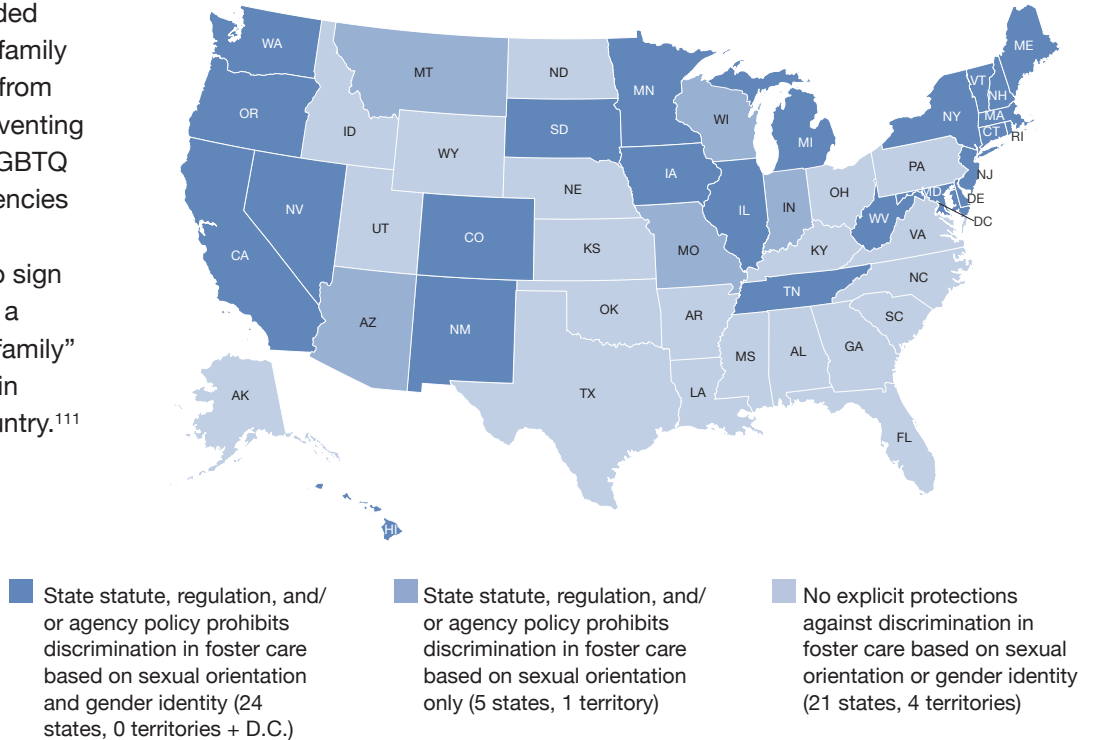
Biology and the legal definition of family in immigration cases

Although most Americans likely agree that a family can consist of people who are not biologically related, genetic kinship is still key to immigration law.¹⁰⁹ When people are looking to bring family from overseas, they often have to prove that they are a biological family. A case from 2018—in which there was a pair of twins born via a surrogate to an American citizen and a non-citizen, but one twin was granted U.S. citizenship and the other wasn’t because only one had the American citizen parent’s DNA—highlights how fraught and subject to contestation this framework is.¹¹⁰ In the next decade, it is very possible that other metrics to establish family relationships, such as behavior captured through electronic data, could become accepted.

Patchwork laws

The kinds of rights afforded to different families and family structures varies widely from state to state. (Laws preventing discrimination against LGBTQ couples by adoption agencies and officials being one example). This shows no sign of changing, suggesting a “future of the American family” that looks very different in different parts of the country.¹¹¹

Laws preventing discrimination against LGBTQ by adoption

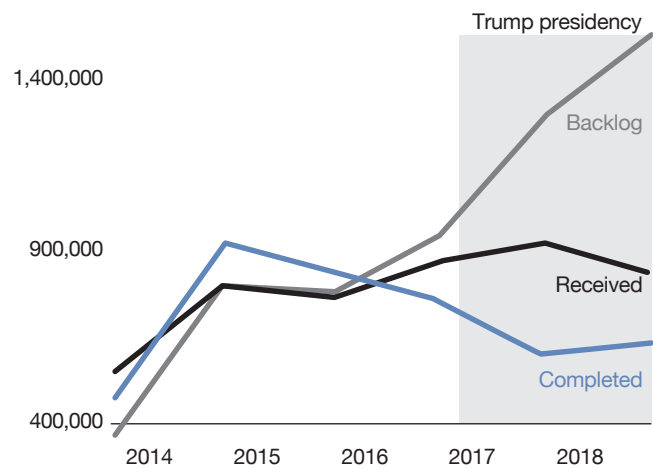


Returning to restrictive, anti-family immigration policy

The processing time for family immigration petitions has increased sharply over the years, in particular since 2016, ballooning the number of backlogged cases, according to data from the Department of Homeland Security. This marks an informal return to policies that restrict immigrants from bringing family to the United States. Though course may reverse with a different administration, it's notable that a seeming consensus around the importance of supporting all families, even if only through lip service, is breaking down.¹¹²

Number of family sponsorship petitions

Number of family sponsorship petitions (Form I-130)





ANCESTRY

in an era of DNA discovery

Common ancestry is part of the definition of family for many people, but assumptions about who is and isn't biological kin often go unexamined. In recent decades, DNA testing has become a new tool for understanding who we are and where we came from, allowing us to interrogate our ancestry. As testing drops in price and becomes more mainstream, we're likely to see genetic tests, and misinterpretations of their results, become an important factor for many in deciding who is and isn't family.

Discovering family in DNA

Consumer DNA testing for genealogical purposes first became available in 2000.¹¹³ It took until 2017 for the total number of tests to reach five million, but sales spikes in the last two years mean more than 26 million people have now had their ancestral DNA tested and stored in commercial databases.¹¹⁴ At costs that start at \$59, kits purport to give customers insights into their extended relatives and geographic heredity.

Since the growth of consumer DNA tests, we've seen headlines about secret adoptions, hidden paternity, and the discovery of many half siblings. These genetic "gotchas" that used to drive daytime TV have become commonplace and leave families to deal with the consequences largely alone. Online manuals for adoptees looking to find their birth parents have emerged, as have support groups for coping with results.¹¹⁵ Consumer genetic testing has challenged families to reconsider the meaning of genetics compared to family structures that they've cultivated publicly and secretly.

This type of testing has raised all sorts of privacy concerns. Some criticize genetic testing companies for the lack of sound privacy practices.¹¹⁶ Testing companies hold on to samples and may retest them without consumer disclosure.¹¹⁷ Investigators may access databases without your knowledge.¹¹⁸ These concerns may inform tighter controls over testing in the future and perhaps new ways that testing companies will define family for users.

Already, companies like 23andMe are providing "relative finder" features, which allow people who have taken their tests to connect with people who are likely to be family members. The role these companies play as the connector and explainer of the science put them in a powerful position to create new narratives and terminology for these discoveries and the relationships that grow out of them. Studies suggest that couples and friends are more genetically similar than random pairs of people (and one study suggests that even applies within a classroom—students who are more genetically similar are more likely to be friends with each other than other classmates).¹¹⁹ This opens a possibility for DNA tests to be used as a new kind of relationship broker in the future.



(Mis)understanding genetic heritage

The proliferation of direct-to-consumer genetic testing also creates new avenues for identity formation—based largely on misunderstanding or over-valuing the results of DNA tests. For instance, genetics have become a key way for white nationalists to try to define in-and-out groups, in sometimes surprising ways. Because a genetic trait that allows people to digest milk past childhood is more commonly found in people who identify as white than in other groups, lactose tolerance has become a new part of the identity of some white nationalists.¹²⁰ Similarly, while comparing someone to a Neanderthal has long been an insult, white supremacists have started taking pride in Neanderthal DNA now that it's been discovered that Europeans have more of it than people from other regions.¹²¹

At the same time, we're seeing others find new—potentially more innocent, but similarly based in placing disproportionate meaning on genetics—identities in their genetic ancestry. In particular, we've seen an upsurge in “heritage tourism”—people taking DNA tests and, based on the results, touring the paths of their genetic ancestors in a quest to discover identity.¹²² Going forward, an uptick in ideas of biological essentialism, ranging from the comparatively benign (people using some genetic marker similar to how many use horoscopes or personality tests to explain their behavior or relationships) to highly damaging (race science, genetic discrimination) is increasingly possible.

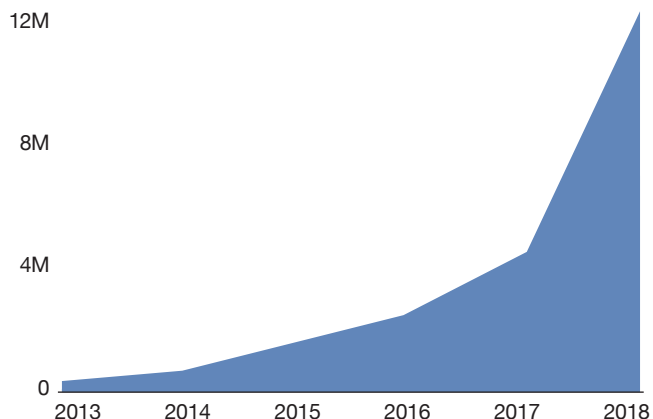


Information about genetic ancestry becomes massively accessible

The number of people who have taken direct-to-consumer genetic tests has expanded exponentially as costs have fallen, according to data collected from the International Society of Genetic Genealogy.¹²³ But while a growing number of people are doing such testing, its value may come into question over the coming decades. For instance, according to a 2018 study by researchers at Ambry Genetics Corporation, in a sample of 49 patients tested for previously identified genetic variants found in raw direct-to-consumer genetic testing data, investigators found a 40% false positive rate.¹²⁴

Total number of people tested by consumer genetics companies, in millions

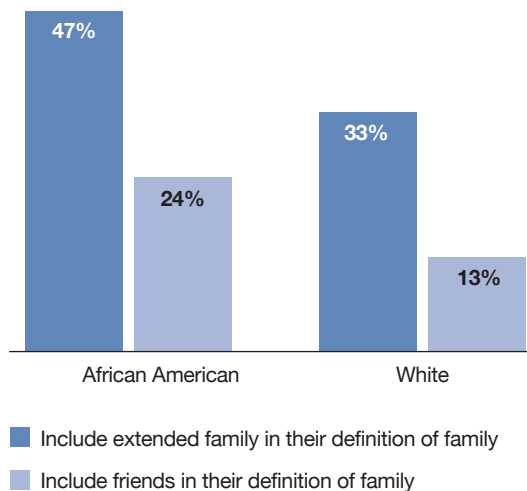
Total number of people tested by consumer genetics companies, in millions.



Definitions of family differ by race and culture

While most people overall consider their biological parents and children as family, there are substantial differences on the broader definition of “family” between people of different races and cultures. For instance, a MassMutual survey found that 47% of African Americans “consider extended family and 24% consider friends as part of their definition of family. This compares to 33% and 13% respectively for whites.”¹²⁵ In this way, black Americans could be ahead of the curve, if people become disillusioned with DNA testing and our understanding of family becomes less biologically-based and more about the people we care for and rely on.

Considers extended family and friends to be family



Stories of Future Families



To anticipate the evolution of family, and what “family” will look like in 2040 and beyond, we can imagine different paths and the external forces that are likely to drive them. Each of these paths is a different story, a different *scenario*.

A scenario is a plausible, internally consistent story of the future, based on a set of assumptions and an understanding of the dynamics of change. Here, in Part 2, we imagine four alternative scenarios, roughly following a classic scenario framework built on four archetypes of change:

Acceleration imagines a next generation of families caught up in the rapid growth of technology and a technology-driven economy, with a propensity to invent and adopt alternative family structures to keep up with new opportunities—and challenges.

Constriction envisions a future in which increasing inequality creates volatile conditions and cultural backlash tries to bolster the “traditional” family, even as a growing percentage of families are pushed to the margins.

Intervention imagines a reinvention of safety nets, as the value of the family becomes the common denominator in political discourse—and people scramble to adapt safety net legislation to a range of family types.

Revolution takes the furthest step into the future to anticipate a world of post-peak competition, where families across the economic spectrum tire of the pressure to get ahead or keep up economically and begin finding new and reestablishing old ways of using community as a way to support daily life.

Each of these scenarios of family in the year 2040 is driven by a different set of core assumptions about the world outside the family. In the parlance of social science, these core assumptions are the independent variables in the stories, while the eight facets of family are the dependent variables. They each tell a series of smaller stories within the larger scenario, depicting the way these external, independent variables shape the dependent variables—the facets of family.

Finally, each scenario is grounded in changes that are already visible in the real world today in the form of *signals*. Signals are small, specific innovations from the present day that have the potential to disrupt the status quo or grow in scale and scope. A signal can be a new product, a new practice, a new market strategy, a new policy, a new technology, or something that a child said. In short, it is something that catches our attention at one scale, which can point to larger implications. Each scenario features three such signals from today that give us clues of what the future could look like.

SCENARIO 1

Acceleration

Mony is just about done with the easiest part of her latest gig. Nine months of rest, gentle exercise, wonderful food, the works. She was lucky to have almost no morning sickness, although her reflux made eating dinner after 5 p.m. a very bad idea. And no amount of pampering eased some of her worst aches and pains at some points in the process. Now, it will culminate in the most difficult, even dangerous, part of her job: giving birth. There's a reason they call it "labor," you know?



Still, she knows how this all goes. It's her third contract pregnancy—*surrogacy* is the preferred term here—and it has been almost entirely without concern. Her body likes being pregnant; in fact, she's in the best health of her life. Her monthly checkups turned into weekly genetic and epigenetic screenings by the 24th week, and those have resulted in lists of the best foods to eat, optimal sleeping patterns, even what she'll need to be doing to get ready for the post-partum transition.



The post-partum thing. Mony's a little nervous about the next stage of this contract. With the previous two surrogacies, she gave birth and passed the newborns off to their families. This time around, the parents (all three of them) want Mony to stay with them for a few years and live as an Aunt to the child. Mony was ready to say *absolutely not*—until they told her how much they would pay.

So Mony lives with “the family”—Ayesha (who provided the egg), Martín (sperm, of course), and Sofie (they used her mitochondrial DNA), along with 8-year-old Asha. It's a wonderful place, to be honest. Ayesha is an African American tech executive who suffered several miscarriages and failed IVF implantations, hence the surrogacy.

Martín is a Latino film producer, and Sofie is an artist from Norway—and a famous one, at least so Mony is told. Mony realizes that this baby will technically have parents of every ethnicity, since she herself is Cambodian.

Mony has been in Los Angeles long enough to know not to blink when told there would be three parents. Although three-person households are even less commonplace than live-in surrogates, she recognizes that money makes all sorts of social difficulties disappear.

Mony moved from Cambodia to LA in the mid-2020s for grad school—she got her undergraduate degree in New Zealand, so everyone loves her accent. She was set to move back home for a bit after this surrogacy, but she simply couldn't say no to the offer. Her last two pregnancies alone paid off her remaining student fees and the entirety of her Ph.D.; this one should let her turn “building families” into a “family business.”

Mony's one condition was that her own mother, Sothy, live with them, too. Mony had been begging Sothy to move to LA for a few years now. As a trained nurse, she could give 24/7 attention to Mony's health during the pregnancy, and afterwards would have no problem picking up health care jobs. The family is considering asking Sothy to continue on as nanny and health care provider for Asha, who has an autism-spectrum disorder (at least until the AI nanny robot gets delivered in a few years, Sothy jokes).

Mony fully intends to become a surrogate again, once the contract ends. The family is adamant that Mony not bring an "outside natal event" into the home.

And "home" will be the biggest dilemma at that point. Los Angeles lost eight miles of coastline (and some very expensive housing) because of the big storms, and the Westside regularly sees big floods. No matter, California still has more people moving in than moving out, and housing prices—especially climate-safe housing—keep rising. The financial windfall from being a surrogate for the family would be enough to get something decent, but doing so would leave Mony and Sothy without the kinds of emergency funds people need these days.

Mony lies in bed, listening to the latest rainstorm, counting the handful of remaining days until the birth. ■



Acceleration: Family is big business

In this future, “family” is a growth industry. Most Americans are on one of two sides of it—either they’re providers or they’re purchasers. The family economy, as it’s commonly called, is an umbrella term for a wide range of products and services from surrogacy and fertility treatments to platforms for finding platonic partners and even live-in tutors. A highly competitive economy means that white-collar, salaried workers have money, but not a lot of time for pursuing “traditional” families. And many are open to breaking convention and trying models of connection outside the mainstream. At the same time, there are plenty of people with skills and education who toil in the gig economy. Their financial precarity makes them an eager workforce in new family-centered industries and open to experiments of their own. While there is some negative social reaction to people pushing the boundaries of how family is defined, for most people there is an air of excitement, innovation, and opportunity to this experimentation. Because of this, the expansion of what constitutes a family in the minds of most Americans that we saw in the 2000s and 2010s only accelerates in the years between 2020 and 2040.

HOW WE GET HERE

Social: More diverse representation in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation in industry, government, and media

Tech: Lots of innovation in reproductive science and caregiving services

Economy: The economy is strong but highly unequal

Environment: Major cities pursue adaptation strategies that keep them livable in the face of more frequent and severe climate events

Political: Highly polarized, moderate liberals nominally dominant

Families—more racially diverse, more stratified by class

Liberal immigration policies, particularly those designed to attract professionals from targeted countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, increase the percentage of people of color and immigrants in the United States. Interracial marriage continues on trend, but cross-class marriage continues to decline. By the mid-2020s, the upper and upper middle class look much less white, but people of color are disadvantaged by many policies and institutions and still disproportionately define the poor. In particular, undocumented families (whose precarity promotes their exploitation) remain critical to the functioning of the economy. And while poverty triggers continued disruption in family structures, such as skyrocketing state-mandated foster placements, these solutions continue to be seen as reflective of “the problem of poor families” rather than the result of anti-poor policies.

Innovation and disruption in the landscape of families

In the early 2020s, in response to the demands of a mobile, competitive workforce, upper-middle-class workers demonstrate a growing interest in exploring “alternative” family models. Their work lives are hectic, their career ambitions are considerable, and their local family connections and social ties are thin. With financial resources and access to communities that are comfortable with experimentation, these communities accept a range of family configurations: single person without kids but part of a community, single people with children, intimate couples with no children, people who partner platonically and do have children, and polyamorous families.

With their affluence and education, these families can advocate for their legitimacy, and indeed turn their “deviant” lifestyles into aspirational models to be emulated, a form of “trickle up respectability.” But while the mainstream press often celebrates these families, people in poorer communities who engage in these practices, and in many cases pioneered them, are not generally perceived as innovative.¹²⁶

The family services economy

Throughout the 2020s, service sector work and many white-collar professions continue on a rapid path to automation, and a new “family” economy emerges to absorb displaced workers.

Substantial caregiving needs for children and elders generate plenty of new models for assisted living, childcare, and early childhood education. These range from boutique and highly personalized services to more industrial, one-size-fits-all models that leverage technology and scale to provide services at a comparatively affordable price point. These startups create plenty of jobs, although the quality of the jobs varies greatly. Long shifts, instability, and exploitation by employers are common hallmarks of the new economy, and immigrant workers, who are in high demand, are particularly vulnerable to abuse.

A declining total fertility rate—due in part to the next generation’s delay in starting new families—combines with advances in reproductive technology to drive the rapid growth of new fertility clinics. In particular, surrogacy surges, with plenty of overseas clients. In many places, it is a lucrative career choice.

Intimacy on demand

Massage and bodywork, professional cuddling, informal talk therapy, and other tasks that require some form of intimate connection proliferate through the 2020s as the pace of work continues to disrupt traditional and nontraditional family life alike. Economic growth provides surplus funds in many households, fueling “quick intimacy” solutions.

The op-eds predicting that people will opt for paid intimacy services instead of forming families at all prove to be alarmist, and while many people who are single take advantage of these services, so do people who are part of both “traditional” and “alternative” families. In many cases, people find their family life actually improves when social connection and physical comfort are not exclusively obtained through family members. For others, however, these services come to be seen as “emotional adultery” which undermines already weakened emotional bonds, not to mention issues of burnout experienced by service providers.

DNA discoveries, speculative science, and snake oil

By the mid-2020s, half of Americans have taken direct-to-consumer genetic tests. People discover family they never knew they had through their DNA. These discoveries are a boon for people who feel isolated in rapidly expanding urban lifestyles: they form connections with people who are a combination of “family of choice” and biological relative. While many of these connections are successful, there are also plenty of awkward and painful interactions, with a new vocabulary arising to describe them, often in pejorative terms.

On the darker side, DNA tests become a strategy for desperate people looking for a wealthy relative to help them pay for medical and other bills. Applications of the tests that are not based on sound science proliferate, and unsubstantiated dating and compatibility advice proliferates, as do new forms of race science employed by hate groups and even people simply looking to form connections to new communities.

Genetic screening mainstreams into reproductive decision-making. Even though designer babies are not legal, some people travel overseas to get around regulations, while trait-selective abortion grows more common and more controversial at the same time. Reproductive intervention remains a political hot button.

Robotic caretakers

Across socioeconomic lines, people adopt digital assistants in the home—from smart speakers and appliances to robotic pets and humanoid helpers. By and large, the wealthiest Americans still rely on human caregivers, using digital assistants primarily for more routine tasks. Poor families, with unpredictable, inflexible, and unforgiving work schedules that demand physical presence on the jobsite, are, by 2040, forced to rely on some form of robot supervision for their kids, and robot caregivers for elder family members. A host of new legislation emerges to regulate this kind of caregiving—for example, making it legal to leave a 10-year-old unattended by humans or setting recording and reporting requirements for robotic caretakers. At the same time, the gray market offers up hardware hacks and software jailbreaks for workarounds that allow families to use devices and robotic nannies to give kids and elders endless access to games and other digital entertainment.

Signals from today

Daycare comes to the platform economy

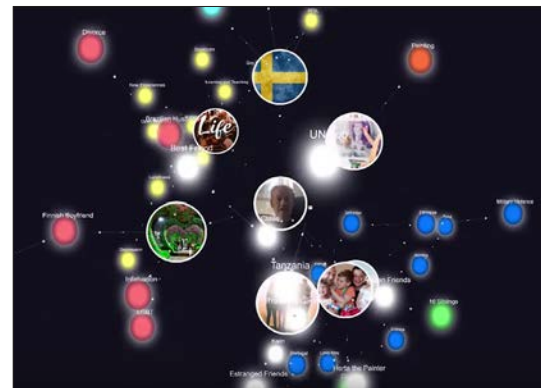
Wonderschool, a company dubbed the “Airbnb for schooling” by TechCrunch, lets qualified people set up daycare and school services on its platform.¹²⁷



Wonderschool

Bots for combating loneliness

The consultancy firm Accenture has developed a conversational AI project called Memory Lane to combat elder loneliness. Memory Lane asks its users about their life and captures the conversation for posterity.¹²⁸



Stockholm Exergi

ProDoula

ProDoula is a rapidly growing and controversial doula certification company that provides business skill training and support. Substantial research indicates that doulas provide an incredibly valuable service. But ProDoula’s focus on commercializing the practice has generated criticism from others within the doula community who see expanding access as the top priority.¹²⁹



ProDoula

SCENARIO 2

Constriction

Maria Reyes was not having a good day. Nor a good year, to be honest. Possibly not even a good life. But she had a family to support, so Maria Reyes kept her head down, avoided trouble, and kept going.



She lost her job today. Well, *one* of her jobs. It wasn't the one that paid the most, happily, but it was the one she enjoyed the most. She had wanted to be a hairdresser ever since she was a child. It was a small dream, but it was hers. But her supervisor at the salon told her that she was being replaced by a man who had a new wife and kids to support. "He has a *family*," she was told. Maria wasn't married, so having two jobless brothers living at home and a mother needing medical care didn't count as a family.



Technically, only one of her brothers was jobless. Hernando had a remote job as an editor, adding celebrities to home videos. Maria actually did that job for Hernando, while Hernando spent all of his time in VR with his "wife," Tsunade. Maria didn't care that there were people who wanted virtual personalities to have rights. As far as she was concerned, her brother was married to a cartoon. Hernando started to ignore his work because he was spending all of his time with Tsunade, but his job brought in the most income for the household. Maria had applied for the job, too, but apparently, they weren't hiring women. She could do the job, and do it well, so she took over to keep the money coming in.

Her other brother, Jorge, never had a real job. He was online all the time, too, but he was mostly attacking other people on social networks. He claimed he got paid for "trolling," but Maria never saw the money. She didn't know why anyone would pay for that. She had seen some of what he was writing one day and grew nauseated at the memory.

Maria and her brothers and mother shared the house with another family, the Garcias. They had gotten out of Manila before the revolution. Some of them, at least. Five kids and three grandparents. The parents were among the missing. They kept to themselves and paid the rent on time. Grandma Rosamie helped to take care of Maria's mother, so that was good.

Maria saw her bus approach, then pass without stopping—that's right, they shut down this line because of the budget. The bus was full of young women, probably more Dominican *novias climáticas*—NCs. Climate brides. For some reason, they came here instead of other cities. Or maybe they went to other cities, too. She had heard something about the DR becoming uninhabitable from one of her co-workers. Still, it added to her frustrations. Maria didn't particularly care about the NCs marrying the available men, but it was more competition for the jobs that were available to women.

Maria walked to the next bus stop to pick up a different line. She ignored the catcalls and preachers, drowning out their voices by listening to music from a different time. She heard one guy shouting at her. Must be a preacher—he called her a "harlot" for not being married. How did he know? She looked up. It was Jorge, but he had already walked away. ■

Constriction: Family is fighting for “tradition”

In this future, the traditional American family can either “adapt or die,” and the most powerful forces in the country think the latter is preferable to the former. People and institutions invested in protecting the patriarchy and a narrow definition of “traditional” family are able to make substantial gains in national politics. But without any real solutions to wealth inequality, class politics, and disruption of the workforce, the family structures they champion are less and less viable for most of the population. Renewed gender battles erupt as the jobs that remain most plentiful are for work that has traditionally been considered suitable for women, not men. Climate change drives migration, and a new class of “climate brides” reinforces the traditional family view that wives are meant to serve their husbands. People immerse themselves in digital worlds to escape a more volatile IRL social landscape. And while the “traditional family” is still upheld as ideal, many people find a nuclear household to be unattainable, so they come up with an alternative family arrangement. New forms of family proliferate, often in the form of “families of last resort” (unconventional families people create out of necessity more than choice).

HOW WE GET HERE

Social: Reactionary movements become more explicit and mainstream

Tech: Entertainment and law enforcement tech booms

Economy: Most of the country experiences precipitous economic decline, while a few big winners see unprecedented gains

Environment: Wealthy enclaves insulate themselves from frequent and severe climate events

Political: Highly polarized, conservatives dominant

A return to multigenerational, multi-family households

With a return to multi-family and multigenerational households already underway in the late 2010s, these families are even more common by the late-2020s. A lack of job availability and growing caregiving needs for both aging populations and children means that, even for people who are working, single nuclear family households are unaffordable in major urban centers. With rapid growth of even moderate-sized cities, multi-family housing dominates new construction and many older neighborhoods are being remodeled to accommodate extended households with duplexes, adjunct dwelling units, modular spaces (sometimes created with surplus shipping containers), and senior-friendly upgrades.

Women weather the employment downturn

The jobs that survive the decline fall into two categories: those that require exceptional specialization, innovation, and creativity, and those that depend on empathy, emotional intelligence, emotional labor, and often a fair amount of physical labor as well, such as caregiving. The latter are jobs that have mostly been held by women, and many men avoid these “devalued” female fields—jobs that require skills men have not traditionally been encouraged to develop. As a result, women generally do better in the economy of the 2030s, but many still struggle financially since these jobs often pay low wages. Some women are content to be the sole breadwinner, but they are not necessarily satisfied with a partner who neither works nor does unpaid domestic labor. Furthermore, in some regions of the country, men are still unwilling or unable to take on traditionally “female” work for cultural reasons.

“Leftover men” of America

A growing demographic in the 2020s is the new class of men who have had difficulty finding marriage partners, dubbed “leftover men” in popular culture (a term borrowed from China, which has experienced this phenomenon since the 2010s).

In the late 2020s, U.S. automation and its decimation of blue-collar jobs as well as many white-collar jobs have created a large cohort of NEET men—men who are Not in Education, Employment or Training. In vast swaths of the country where traditional gender roles are most closely upheld, men who cannot find work are considered unmarriageable by many in their community. Those who are unable to take on traditional family roles and are unwilling to find new roles or sources of identity often turn to reactionary movements driven by toxic masculinity. Once more closely associated with the political fringes, these movements inspire politicians to openly identify with the so-called “men’s rights movement.” They introduce laws that try to limit the participation of women in the workforce, particularly in the upper echelon of high-paying jobs. While the legislation itself tends to stall, public discourse has shifted in such a way that what is euphemistically referred to as bringing the labor market back to its “natural” state is seen as a legitimate issue for debate.

Coalitions split around gender politics

Activist coalitions in communities of color start to fracture around gender issues, though not necessarily along gender lines. For instance, the ways in which men of color lack some of the privileges that white men have (i.e., being given the benefit of the doubt when they are the subject of allegations of sexual misconduct, in the case of African American men in particular) become a divisive issue that people accuse each other of either overemphasizing or failing to recognize.

Battling single mom stigma

Throughout the 2020s, restrictions on reproductive services lead to a steady uptick in unplanned pregnancies and births for all ages, year by year, particularly teenage births, which had been on the decline. The same reactionary forces driving women to carry pregnancies to term also drive stigma against single motherhood. In an environment where the voices of “men’s rights” supporters are increasingly mainstream, unmarried women who get pregnant are prime targets of harassment and abuse, online and in real life, particularly by “incels” — involuntary celibates who are angry about their inability to find the romantic or sexual partners they want. This latter-day anti-feminist movement sparks a reinvigorated women’s rights movement, with a major focus on destigmatizing teen mothers—and single mothers, more generally—making this family form a key flashpoint in the culture war.

Climate brides

Although the early impacts of climate change have disrupted family lives across the country, three in particular combine to create a new family phenomenon: first, climate displacement is creating huge waves of people looking for refuge in the United States, most of which remains habitable; second, harsh, racist immigration policies are making it difficult for them to do so; and third, a lot of men do not have much in the way of marriage prospects.

The result is a surge in green card marriages. While some of these are healthy relationships, the power dynamics inherent in these arrangements can be toxic: the citizen spouse has legal leverage over their partner, while the non-citizen spouse may be the breadwinner in a caregiving job. The media has dubbed these women “climate brides.” They are largely women from Central America and the Global South who meet men online for green card marriages and then many find themselves working as indentured and sexual servants, supporting their nonworking spouse, but with the threat of divorce and deportation hanging over their heads. Some partnerships are between people of the same ethnic group, but, with white supremacy still very much alive, the many marriages between white men and “climate brides” are particularly prone to abuse.

Finding identity and companionship online and with artificial intelligence

While many people get a sense of identity from parenthood and/or work, a growing cohort without access to either has started to look for both meaning and connection, especially romantic connection, through communities in immersive digital media worlds.

The best of these communities allows people to form relationships and provide each other with support and meaning. New kinds of arts collectives also emerge in these spaces and their output forms a new kind of digital commons. In particular, user-generated immersive digital worlds provide new avenues for exploration and respite. These creative communities feel like families to many of their members and sometimes function like mutual aid societies, where people donate or loan funds to one another for medical bills and housing.

These communities also incorporate sophisticated humanoid bots. While it's not a mainstream phenomenon in 2040, increasing numbers of men (and some women) find romance and/or friendship with these AIs, expressing the cutting edge of new concepts of family. They anticipate that as AI evolves, their digital partners will become as key to their family aspirations as the many remote human partners that dot the family landscape.

Unexpected fulfilment from “families of last resort”

Although many people who had once hoped to create nuclear families find their ambitions thwarted, they nevertheless end up forming different kinds of families comprised of parents, siblings, children, friends, roommates, and even digital companions. In this way, family dynamics for the majority of Americans start to resemble the patterns that have been common for people of color and earlier generations of immigrants. Extended families live close together in neighboring homes, if not in the same home. Every family member who can find work does work. With intense and unpredictable work schedules, anyone with the time and capability is looking after kids, even if they're not their biological parents. Mainstream society still upholds the nuclear family as the ideal, but a lot of people are surprised to find that being an “aunt” or “uncle” to a sibling's or roommate's child largely fills the need they once felt to have their own kids.

Signals from today

Homes designed for multi-family occupancy

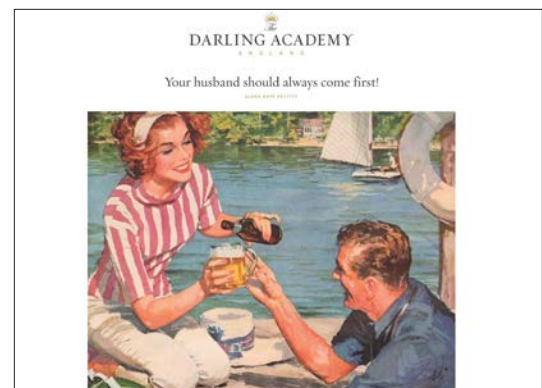
While single family homes renovated to accommodate multiple families are vastly more common, homebuilders are offering multigenerational and multifamily floor plans. Lennar, one of the nation's largest, has a suite of such floorplans that it dubs "Next Gen" housing.¹³⁰



Source: Lennar

Retreating to "traditional" gender roles

The "tradwife" movement in the United States and the United Kingdom advocates that women aspire to fulfill the "traditional" role of the wife and uphold "traditional" ideals of femininity. While there are certainly connections between various instantiations of the "tradwife" movement and anti-feminism and the racist alt-right movement, Catherine Rottenberg of the University of Nottingham and Shani Orgad of the London School of Economics and Political Science argue that the movement needs to be understood in the context of the increase in "always on" work cultures, the decline of government resources directed to supporting families and communities, and the expectation that women will contribute disproportionately to childrearing even while working full-time.¹³¹



Source: The Darling Academy

The herbivore men of Japan

In Japan, the term "herbivore men" can be used to refer to men who are indifferent to or unambitious in terms of finding sexual partners or advancing economically, or who are generally sensitive and not "traditionally" masculine. Perhaps because of this broad definition, one survey found that 70% of millennial Japanese men self-identified as "herbivores," suggesting that the loss of the economic opportunity required for men to fulfill "traditional" male gender roles doesn't necessarily always lead to toxic behavior.¹³²



Source: Pony Canyon

SCENARIO 3

Intervention

Everyone knew Omar's secret, or so they thought. Omar and his partner Diego lived in one of those permashelters outside of Jersey City, a tiny 300 square-foot cube that's part of a larger cube, with a total of about 200 residents. "We live in Legoland," Omar mused.



That Omar was gay wasn't particularly interesting to people, so that wasn't it. However, Omar was also undocumented, a refugee from the last revolution in Egypt. It was a low point in anti-refugee sentiment, fortunately, so as long as Omar didn't break any laws he could stay out of border detention while his case was processed. That Omar was undocumented was the "secret" that everyone knew.



But that wasn't what Omar kept truly hidden. Omar had a much more fundamental secret, one that could get him in all sorts of trouble if discovered. Omar was a girl named Ami when he was born—"assigned female at birth" the activists called it. This is what Omar kept quiet about. And one big consequence of this secret was now on the verge of kicking and screaming its way into the world.

Omar wanted to give up and just go to the detention center to give birth. Surely they had medical staff, right? Diego believed otherwise, and suggested that they use an augmented reality midwife—basically, someone who could see what Diego saw and could give him instructions in real time, even showing animatics of where he should put his hands. Diego

used AR all day in his gigwork as a heavy equipment operator; he knew his way around 3D representations and expert oversight. Using an AR midwife, Omar could give birth at home—and if something bad happened, the free clinic was just a mile away. They could get an Uberlance if they needed to.

To be honest, Omar wasn't especially enthusiastic about giving birth. It didn't worsen his dysphoria, fortunately, but he had to go off transition meds, and had to stay home when he started to show. But he knew that having a baby would completely change his and Diego's lives, and not just in the obvious way. They'd now be a "family" in the eyes of the law.

The "Omnibus Prenatal and Neonatal Support and Endorsement Act"—just "the Act" to most people—gave massive subsidies and material support to parents. With this birth, Omar and Diego's household income would double, they'd be short-listed for a larger permashelter space, and Omar would be fast-tracked for official refugee status. Everything would be better.

Better for everyone else, at least. In order to get the full family support funding, Omar might have to go back to being “Ami.” The laws that gave all of that support for families did a bad job of protecting the rights of transgender and nonbinary people. The language of the laws specified biological sex instead of social *gender* in many of the rules, unnecessarily so. The handful of lawsuits that resulted had mostly come out in favor of the trans person involved, but certainly not all of them.

It wasn’t just the laws. The permashelter cluster where they lived had a lot of recent immigrants and older folks, people who tended to take a more traditional view of gender and sex. The community cops drew from that pool. If a nosy critic from the community wanted to give them trouble, Omar and Diego would face investigations and “family monitors” — surveillance devices in their home to make certain what they did matched what they said. As long as Omar lived as Omar, the social spies and aid workers would see things they didn’t understand as things to criticize.



In the end, Omar and Diego would almost certainly not be discovered, which, given the circumstances, most people would consider a “win,” even if it didn’t feel like one. ■

Family is sanctified by the state

In this scenario, the state answers calls to “save the family” with a host of new government programs. In the past, “family values” were used as a wedge issue, linking widely popular economic policies like state safety nets and taxation of the wealthy to progressive social policies that a large segment of the population vehemently opposed. However, by the late 2020s, socially conservative yet economically progressive politicians and policies ascended. They used “prioritizing family” as a key part of their messaging and bolstered a new caregiving economy that attempt to create jobs and reduce income inequality at the same time. Racial tensions continue to flare, even as family strategies from communities of color and of immigrants (particularly climate refugees) help redefine resilient families. At the same time, benefits of safety nets are not equally distributed, and regulations still use embedded restrictions to discriminate against communities of color and families that fall outside of conventional definitions.

HOW WE GET HERE

Social: Groundswell of support for new and expanded social safety nets

Tech: State investment and regulation spurs innovation in medical and surveillance tech

Economy: Ambitious jobs programs and subsidies for caregiving create an economy that produces economic security for most of the population

Environment: Prevention efforts remain underfunded but recovery efforts are strong

Political: Realignment of political parties and factions, with a strong national consensus around economic issues, but substantial division around social issues

Family as common ground

In spite of 2020 declarations that “bipartisanship is dead,” just a few short years later, it’s clear that the country actually agrees on quite a lot. Party leadership may remain bitterly divided, but collapsing local economies across the country have led to an all-proposals-on-the-table stance in most cities, and significant safety net policies have slowly trickled up the political hierarchy to the nation’s capital—especially when it comes to issues framed as “family issues.”

Rhetoric about the importance of family is a key part of building this bottom-up consensus. With automation destroying entire categories of jobs, “Rescue the American family” has become a rallying cry, and a coalition of mayors, activists, and labor unions is targeting caregiving jobs—and childcare in particular—as a critical piece of the puzzle in regenerating employment. While universal basic income¹³³ laws are starting to take effect in some states, Americans continue to believe that labor is the basis of an economy of opportunity, and caregiving is the star opportunity.

An automation tax has generated revenues for increasingly popular policies that support universal free childcare (both at home and in professionalized centers), as well as pre-K education, maternity and paternity leave, and elder care, with legal benefits to both families and the caregiving labor force. These same funds support one-parent-at-home programs that aim to support one-income families—with the non-working parent receiving a stipend from the government equal to 50% of the regional average income. These programs explicitly support “one adult” per household—male or female, legally married, or biologically related.

The right to a family

By the late 2020s, pro-family policies seek to jumpstart the economy as well as provide a safety net for families who have lost their jobs to automation. They are also about forming new families to counter a precipitous drop in the American fertility rate, which undermines the social safety net for another group of citizens: the elders of society. Policies that subsidize matchmaking services and reproductive assistance technologies reflect a growing consensus that everyone has the right to start a family. Subsidies also remove fees for adoptions, creating incentives “to family,” as the noun is transformed into a verb. To support adoption of hard-to-place children, home integration counselor roles proliferate to help families build skills in family dynamics.

The color-blind language of “family”

Anti-racist activists are able to make progress on a set of issues by strategically appealing to the lionization of family in the zeitgeist, passing policies to help close the maternal mortality gap and successfully begin to reverse the trend of mass incarceration. In particular, they appropriate a conservative strategy of using race-neutral language to garner support for issues that have a disproportionate impact on people of color—for instance, making white families the face of the anti-mass incarceration movement when highlighting the devastation that incarcerating parents does to communities.

Fights over the meaning of family

Not surprisingly, with families at the center of rebuilding the economy, the legal definitions of family continue to be contested. Legislation privileges the nuclear family: two parents and their children. There are also federal protections for same-sex couples with children, friends, cousins, and aunts and uncles with significant childcare roles. But others, such as poly families and adults taking care of aging people who are not their parents, are not legally considered “families” in many states and thus are not entitled to family benefits or protections.

Rather than arguing the legal definitions, many activists take another route. They seek to declare household caregivers, regardless of legal relationship, to be childcare professionals, providing the same pay rate as would be given to so-called legitimate family members who are subsidized. This workaround doesn’t silence traditionalists who continue to be outraged at the idea that the recovery programs are being exploited by people they consider to be “sexually depraved” or merely “pretending to be family” to gain benefits.

Big brother on your body, on your streets, in your home

In fact, assuring that family benefits aren’t abused sometimes leads to punitive surveillance, especially in communities of color. Racial resentment gets weaponized to put conditions on family benefits, mirroring racist implementation of social programs in the past. Regulations require verification that the families receiving assistance are meeting those conditions—and are therefore “worthy” of assistance. These regulations do not explicitly target race, but they’re written in a way that discriminates against African American people, in particular, and people of color more broadly (in an ironic inversion of the policies proposed with race-neutral “pro-family” language intended to help people of color). Smart devices in the home, on the streets, and on people’s bodies become key surveillance tools for enforcing these regulations, and a whole set of illicit tools and hacks to subvert the state’s surveillance gains widespread adoption.

BirthStrikers strike back

By the mid-2030s, pro-family policies are beginning to reverse the aging of the population in the United States, as a new youth bulge begins to emerge. Not everyone, though, is pro-growth when it comes to population. Throughout the decade, BirthStrikers¹³⁴ have argued that having children is immoral when overpopulation, as they see it, is a major cause of climate change, and that bringing children into a world that is increasingly uninhabitable due to climate change is immoral as well—an argument that has had a lot of trouble gaining traction. But as pronatalist policies grow more aggressive and “pro-family” rhetoric is increasingly saccharine, even people who once mocked “birth strikers” are starting to join their ranks. Their dissent opens the door to debating the assumption that having kids is essential to having a “family.”

Signals from today

A family “bill of rights”

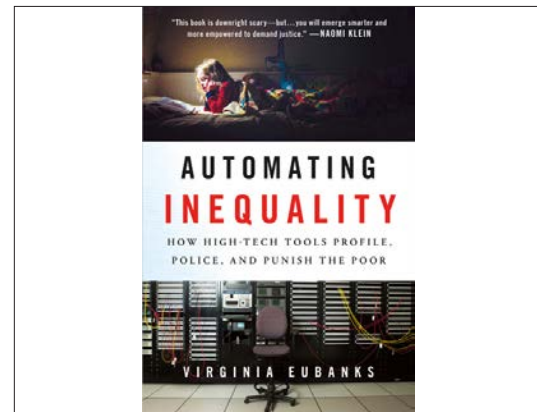
Former presidential candidate Kirsten Gillibrand had proposed “family bill of rights” legislation, which would include resources to fight maternal mortality, provisions to make adoption available to prospective parents regardless of religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class, “baby bundles” of supplies for new parents, universal pre-K, paid family leave, and making the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) universal and automatic.¹³⁵



Source: Kirsten Gillibrand/Medium

Requiring surveillance for benefits

In her book, *Automating Inequality*, Virginia Eubanks documents how recipients of government assistance programs are often surveilled in highly punitive and discriminatory ways. For instance, in 2014, Maine governor Paul LePage’s administration used data collected by federal and state agencies indicating Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients had withdrawn cash from ATMs in smoke shops, liquor stores, and out-of-state locations to suggest that TANF families were using their benefits to illegally buy liquor, lottery tickets, and cigarettes. The data in no way proved what LePage was suggesting, and those transactions only accounted for 0.03% of their transactions.¹³⁶



Source: MacMillan Publishers

Changing approach to drug enforcement

In response to the opioid crisis, some states are turning to “family recovery courts” which, unlike drug courts, involve a civil, not criminal process. They’re intended specifically to minimize damage to families and protect children.¹³⁷



Source: Children and Family Futures

SCENARIO 4

Revolution

Autumn doesn't want to move home. She's an artist, working in 3D spaces. She gets the occasional big contract (she did the virtual sculpture outside the federal building downtown), but mostly lives off the Basic, the universal basic income program started up a while back. She knows that the Basic is a better financial fit for a family cluster house in the periphery than a shared flat in the city, but she managed to make it work—until she couldn't.



She'll be moving back with her mother and, to her surprise, so many more! Dad has a space in the house, even though they divorced ten years ago. Mom's boyfriend Robert and his sister Jane moved in just before Autumn came home. Then along came Robert's two teenage kids and Jane's 10-year-old daughter. Now Jane is trying to get her partners to move in too.

If it sounds like they all live in a huge house, they do. Mom and Dad bought one of those abandoned McMansions in the exurbs about 20 years ago. They both worked at home, and there was enough space on the property to go fully self-reliant for power and mostly self-reliant for food. They were at the leading edge of the "cooperation generation" movement, and loved having a chance to live their ideals. They call it Rivendell.

Rivendell has four official bedrooms, a family room split up into two more bedrooms, and a big closet turned into a tiny room for Dad when he's around. When the McMansion next door went on a new bankruptcy sale, Autumn's folks bought that one too. None of them live in that house, though—it's used entirely as a location for work. Autumn hopes that she can convince her mother to let her take a room in the job house.



The area's sparsely populated. It's an exurban community, built originally on promises that home prices would always rise. Most of the other houses here are cluster homes as well. There's a real village feel. The distance from the actual (big) city isn't awful for anyone except Autumn, who

really wishes that she could have stayed in her midtown flat, or any flat within the city borders. Her old apartment building is undergoing resilience refits, so it can't be occupied for a year. The rent will probably triple when they're done.

What's most frustrating is that she has to move away from her other family. A bunch of friends with benefits, who became actual friends, then became much more. Autumn loved them all, and really thought that they'd be there for each other forever. But it was hard to find another place for all of them. Then Martina had to move back to Kansas, and then Max announced that they had decided to join an all-genderfluid cluster. Rivendell was the only real option left for Autumn at this point.

So she's back. Just the latest one to come home, her mother says. Autumn's brother, Xander, has one of the converted family room spaces. He works in one of those hive mind brain-to-brain systems, contributing to some kind of research—nanotech, Autumn remembers. He's in his room with a wire running from a weird bicycle helmet-looking-thing on his head to a small white box, completely oblivious to the world.

He's not the only one bringing in a financial stream. Robert does indirect management of urban inequality remediation teams. Mom still does the climate trauma counseling. Jane is between jobs, but nobody seems to mind because like Autumn, she lives on the Basic.



Jane's partners (her "husbandses," she calls them) are artists, too. As Autumn spends more time with them, they spend more time at Rivendell. Jane doesn't mind—she's happy to see her own family grow. Jane, Autumn, and their husbandses move into the job house. ■

Family is a force for justice

In this future, family is the key to a fundamental revolution in how we see society. How would you deal with a person suffering a drug addiction or unable to find work if they were part of your family? How would you think about military action or sanctions against a country that your family lived in? The idea that all of humanity is a global family has become the lens for how the United States thinks about our legal, economic, and social institutions. While it sounds nice on paper, the reality is that there is a lot of fighting within families, and there are plenty of people who make a solid argument that the United States is far from actually living out this ideal. But there is pretty widespread consensus that we should at least be trying, similar to the way that, by the end of the 1970s, most people, at least publicly, held the view that racial and gender equality were laudable goals. And in getting behind the idea of a global family, society has opened itself to rethinking the concept of family itself—basically any group of people, large or small, that wants to be considered a family is recognized as such by most of the population, at least publicly, and by law in most states. In short, when people say “my family,” the person they are talking to doesn’t make a lot of assumptions about what that means—instead, it opens up a whole host of possibilities of what they’re referring to.

HOW WE GET HERE

Social: A diverse spectrum of counterculture movements questions all hierarchies and institutions

Tech: Civic tech flourishes due to both bottom-up and top-down efforts

Economy: Reevaluation of the metrics used to measure economic health of the country and major wealth redistribution program

Environment: Climate change mitigation and climate impact response become a major priority

Political: Demands for transformed institutions and renegotiation of the social contract

Post-peak competition

With the automation wave of the early 2020s and a series of cascading climate disasters around the globe, the two decades turn out to be hypercompetitive for U.S. families. Insecurity is in the air, and without a strong social safety net, parents put tremendous pressure on their kids to excel academically to keep them from falling on the wrong side of an ever-widening income divide. However, at the same time, a coalition of activists is building a countermovement: it's better to use your energy and resources to make a more equitable world than to attempt to make your child one of the privileged few who "wins" in a global competition with a constantly moving target. The idea that increasingly ruthless competition is unsustainable resonates with enough people that, by 2040, a majority of Americans believes the country has reached "peak competition."

What comes next, though, is completely up for grabs. With a more revolutionary mindset defining the zeitgeist, the 2030s are full of questions about the validity of social constructs, pushing for a renegotiation of the social contract. By the late 2030s, many concepts that once seemed totally utopian and politically unimaginable, such as open borders, prison abolition, universal basic income, and job guarantees are up for discussion.

Neo-Bohemian rhapsodies

By radically expanding the definition of families and focus on communities as "lifestyle units," a surge in communal living of all kinds captures the imagination of a new generation. The majority is pretty unassuming—houses, rows of houses, or apartments where the inhabitants share benefits and responsibilities ranging from financial to caretaking. While these modest experiments focus mainly on providing security, more radical communities seek to redefine the infrastructure of daily life. For instance, many communities enjoy some degree of energy, Internet, food, and water independence from the larger world, using automation to reduce production costs to the point where they can be offered nearly for free to residents. While all of these communities resemble families to some extent, the more radical collectives identify much more explicitly as families, arguing that the larger society should see itself more as a family rather than a collection of atomized individuals pursuing their own self-interest.

On the whole, these communities are hypervigilant about the abuses that are sometimes associated with communal life—the tendency to cede power to one or more "petty tyrants" in the community or to over-control daily life. They are, after all, living under models they would like the rest of the society to embrace. However, some of the more isolated communities demonstrate cult-like tendencies. These are often recognizable by strong thresholds of belonging—hard to join and hard to leave.

Fighting the legacy of eugenics

On the cusp of peak competition, many parents still want their children to have every advantage, and clinics offer selective gene-editing services to create “smarter,” healthier, and “more capable” children. Although their marketing promises often exceed what science can deliver, some clinics even promise that their “edited” children will have traits in line with Western standards of beauty. These clinics, of course, use euphemisms (e.g., “physiological symmetry,” “reduced propensity to excess adipose tissue,” “orthodontic protection”) to obscure the procedures’ intentions.

Although the public is largely accepting of gene-editing interventions for certain clear cases—preventing devastating diseases, for example—the very concept of buying “better” babies provokes passionate public debates, with many citing the legacy of eugenics as a reason for caution. This debate ultimately expands and re-centers around issues of ableism and, more generally, the ways we assess human value and individual contributions to society. In particular, civic leaders openly advocate for the dignity and value of people who do not formally participate in the workforce. The right of people with disabilities to create and raise children without unreasonable state oversight and intervention becomes a key flashpoint, including debates over the right of disabled parents to assure that their children have the same disability.

New legal frameworks for the family

Throughout the 2020s, surrogacy remains controversial, and attempts to outlaw paid surrogacy spark and fade. However, the discourse around surrogacy gradually shifts, and in many places, it is not socially acceptable for people to use surrogates without also welcoming them into their family in some way. New legal frameworks provide a “surrogate’s bill of rights” that recognizes a surrogate as a family member who is not exactly a full parent, but bonded to the child they birth, and listed on the birth certificate, along with the biological parents. By the early 2030s, other groups emulate these frameworks for their own causes, enabling people in their community groups to take on partial parental legal rights. These legal frameworks are even used by communities in attempts to obtain legal personhood, then custody over natural resources.

Hive minds

At the extreme end of movements against individualism, people have begun, by the late 2020s, to experiment with brain-to-brain interfaces and other neurotechnology to create what some call “hive minds” and others call “peak collaboration” within families and communities. While hive-minding is a relatively fringe phenomena, a growing number of intimate couples, married or not, gives their partners access to their minds in new ways, and by the mid-2030s, these practices seem poised to go mainstream.

“The family” is dead, long live “the family!”

By the mid-2030s, the line between family and community has blurred for a substantial cross section of the American population. What scholar Sophie Lewis calls the “propertarian, biogenetic, nuclear private household that is our main kinship model”¹³⁸ is no longer at the center of American life, though culture hasn’t totally kept up. Advocates begin to call for a redefinition of “family” that centers around bonds of community and care.

Many of the people who initially serve as the face of this movement are white, but communities of color, who feel their traditions of polymaternalism are not sufficiently recognized, advocate for representation and recognition. Overall, by the end of the 2030s, communities look much more like families: community members share a sense of mutual responsibility for one another and organize their resources accordingly. At the same time, families expand and take on the more fluid and ever-evolving quality of communities.

Signals from today

Resurgence of intentional communities

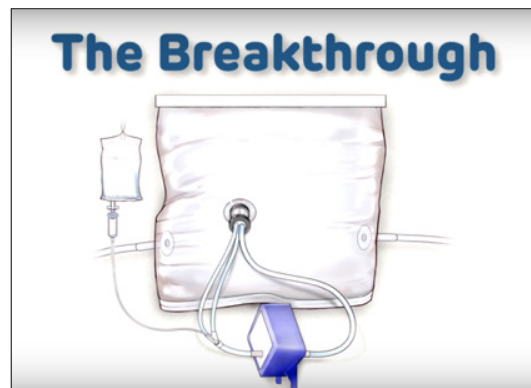
A recent article in *The New York Times* documents the resurgence of “intentional communities,” communes that people come to with the express purpose of living what they feel are more ethical, secure, and connected lives than what is generally offered in mainstream society. The Foundation for Intentional Community, a hub for resources for these communes, lists approximately 1,200 such communities in its last published directory.¹³⁹



Source: A Vision for Galway 2030

Artificial womb technology

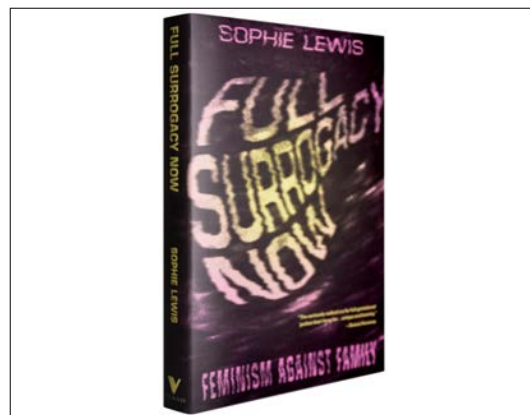
The technology to create an artificial womb to save extremely premature babies has seen some major advances in recent years—and points to a potential future in which gestation would be possible without a human host.¹⁴⁰



Source: The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

Family abolition

In her book, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*, scholar Sophie Lewis revisits the concept of “family abolition” that was once a significant part of Marxist discourse to explore commercial surrogacy arrangements and people who are not paid for their gestational labor (in other words, the vast majority of mothers). In particular, she sees surrogacy as a way to challenge assumptions and narratives about children belonging to parents, invoking the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers assertion that “children should belong to no one but themselves.”¹⁴¹



Source: Verso Books

KEY QUESTIONS

Working with the Four Scenarios

These four scenarios were created not just as provocative looks into possible futures, but as tools to help people and organizations anticipate opportunities and challenges in the coming decades. Some example questions to ask yourself:

Who benefits and who is vulnerable in each scenario?

Reading through the scenarios, each has its own “winners” and “losers.” Even in scenarios that seem more positive, there will be people and families who lose out in real or perceived ways. Likewise, even in scenarios that might seem bleak, some people will “win” in very explicit ways, while others might have an opportunity for smaller victories that can be built upon. Think about the people and populations you care about. How would they fare in each scenario? Which scenario would be best for them and which would be worst? What people or populations would be vulnerable in each scenario?

What is possible in this world that isn’t possible today?

Thinking beyond what’s on the page of these stories, imagine what else might be possible in the world of each of these scenarios. What new opportunities open up in each? What aspects of today’s world that you take for granted might be more difficult?

What future do I want?

These four scenarios were written specifically to contrast against each other in clear ways. While the actual future is likely to be some combination of elements of all of them, it will likely lean more in the direction of one or two of the futures and less in the direction of others. Think about what aspects you like from each of the scenarios and catalog outcomes you’d like to see and outcomes you’d like to avoid.

How do you know if we're headed toward this scenario?

These scenarios were written at a specific moment in time—mid-2019 and early 2020. As time goes on, you will see additional signals or signs for the future of the American family. These scenarios are a framework you can use to track, categorize, and interpret these signals. Are we moving more toward intervention or acceleration? Or toward a different future altogether?

How can I be ready for these scenarios? How can I make them happen?

Ultimately, all of these scenarios and example questions are designed to provoke action in the present. Think about how you can be ready to protect the people and populations you care about in each of these scenarios. Imagine ways you might be able to seize opportunities in each if you get started planning today. What resources do you need? What services might you provide? What messaging do you need to be ready with? Most importantly, what can you do to steer us toward your desired scenario?

Conclusion

The future is not set in stone. Nothing in this report represents “predictions” for the future, but rather, these should be seen as a series of likely outcomes that can be reshaped and influenced by actors such as communities, politicians, activists, and non-governmental organizations.

One thing seems clear: in the next generation, the survival, self-determination, and success of an increasingly diverse range of family types will depend on restructuring a system that has long benefitted and protected some forms of family while disenfranchising and discriminating against others—a phenomenon Family Story calls family privilege. By design, family privilege typically rewards white heterosexual, cis-gender, married families with biological children and in turn disadvantages families that look or manifest differently or have different needs.

When it comes to families, the one-size-fits-all model continues to grow increasingly outdated and burdensome. Retrofitting systems, piecemeal, to accommodate adults and families of the future, will likely prove insufficient.

However, people are always pioneering new models and advocating for their recognition, working to dismantle what doesn’t work about the old systems to forge a better future. We can draw inspiration from these efforts and push change in a positive direction—but only if we start now.

Family life *is* in flux, but its continued transformation is a natural and anticipated part of our future as a species. We owe it to ourselves to prepare for the next generation of American families now.

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