

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Family Diversity: The New Normal and Its Consequences

Anyone who is involved in education or in pastoral ministry has observed that over the last several decades the family has been undergoing enormous stress and change. And the children who attend school or get involved in the church or Sunday school manifest the consequences of these changes. I recently came across a briefing paper for the Council on Contemporary Families written by Philip Cohen of the University of Maryland. It is a masterful summary of the new normal for families in the United States. It is shocking but it is imperative that those involved in education and in the church understand this new normal. What follows is a salient summary of Cohen's paper.

1. **The dramatic rearrangement of children's living situations since the 1950s.** Cohen observes that at the end of the 1950s, 65% of children would have been living in a family with married parents, with the father employed and the mother not involved in the labor force. Only 18% would have had both parents working. Only one child in 350 would be living with a never-married mother. Today, only 22% live in a "married male-breadwinner family," compared with 23% who live with a single mother, only half of whom have ever been married. Seven out of every 100 live with a parent who cohabits with an unmarried partner and six with either a single father or with grandparents but no parents. About 34% live with married parents, both of whom work. Cohen concludes that "there is no single family arrangement that encompasses the majority of children." He goes on: "The children in America's classrooms today come from so many distinct family arrangements that we can no longer assume they share the same experiences and have the same needs. Likewise, policy-makers can no longer design family programs and regulations for a narrow range of family types and assume that they will pretty much meet the needs of all children."
2. **The decline of married couples as the dominant household arrangement.** The married-couple family peaked between 1950 and 1960, when this arrangement characterized two-thirds of households. This was likewise the peak of the nuclear family, because up until the 1940s, extended families were much more common than they became in the 1950s and 1960s. By 2010, the proportion of married-couple households had dropped to less than half (45%) of the total. The proportion of individuals living alone rose from 13 to 27% between 1960 and 2010, and single-parent households rose from 6 to 12%. Therefore, households composed of lone individuals and single parents accounted for almost 40% of all households by 2010. Cohen concludes: "In sum, the dominant

married-couple household of the first half of the 20th century was replaced not by a new standard, but rather by a general increase in family diversity.”

3. **How did we get here? Market forces, social welfare reform and family rearrangements.** Technological innovations made women’s traditional household tasks, such as shopping, preserving food, house-cleaning, and making clothes, far less time-consuming, while birth control technology enabled women to have greater control over the timing and number of births. Further, the shift to market work reinforced women’s independence *within* their families and in some case *from* their families. Women could now afford the risk of divorce, live with a man without the commitment of marriage, and even consider living singly—even with children if they chose to do so. In addition, after World War II, the US government widened the safety net for the elderly and the poor. These pension and welfare reforms offered more opportunities for more people to live their lives independently. Therefore, for younger adults, the combination of expanding work opportunities for women and greater welfare support for children made marriage less of a necessity. In addition, Cohen concludes, “Market forces were most important in increasing the ability of middle-class and more highly educated women to delay, forego, or leave marriage. . . . As a result of these and other social trends such as women’s increasing educational attainment, diversity of family arrangements increased dramatically after the 1960s.”
4. **Diversity and inequality.** Some of the new family diversity also results from economic changes that are less positive, especially the job loss and wage declines for younger, less-educated men since the late 1970s. Further, different families have different child-rearing challenges and needs, which means we are no longer well-served by policies that assume most children will be raised by married-couple families, especially ones where the mother stays home throughout the children’s early years. Cohen writes that “as we debate social and economic policy, we need to consider the needs of children in many different family situations, and how they will be affected by policy changes, rather than privileging one particular family structure or arrangement.”
5. **Cohabitation is a part of the new normal.** The online *Family Studies* periodical has also published some helpful insights about the growing practice of cohabitation and its effects on marriage. Sociologist Karen Guzzo of Bowling Green University highlights several important cohabitation trends:
 - The majority of people in their 30s have lived with someone outside of marriage.
 - Cohabitation, rather than marriage, is now the more common form of first union.
 - Fewer marriages than in the past start out with the couple having intentions to marry.
 - People are more likely than ever to cohabit with multiple partners in succession, what Guzzo calls “CohabiDating.”

- More children than ever before are born to cohabiting couples and this explains most of the rise in the number of children being born out of wedlock.

Indeed, Guzzo notes that cohabiting has become a normative experience in the romantic and sexual lives of young adults. As young adults put off marriage until later in life, cohabitation has inhabited much of the space that used to be made up of married couples. In fact, cohabitation is de-linked from marriage. It is fundamentally ambiguous. It seems to be moving toward being, unambiguously, a form of dating with no implications about the odds of marrying. Those who cohabit do not usually marry. Therefore, those who seek to take marriage seriously should be careful about cohabitation. People are increasingly cohabitating in ways that are associated with greater risks to the aspiration of marital success.

God's design for marriage is clear in His Creation Ordinance (Genesis 2:18-25). If humanity chooses to ignore that Ordinance, the results are devastating. We are now seeing those devastating results unfold with the new normal in family diversity and the increasing practice of cohabitation, which does not produce healthy marriages for the future. In addition, children are suffering immensely from the choices their parents are making.

See Philip Cohen, "Family Diversity is the New Normal for America's Children," Council for Contemporary Families; and Scott Stanley, "Moving in and Moving On," www.family-studies.org (6 August 2014).